

## Original Research Reports

# A Field Study Around a Racial Justice Protest on a College Campus: The Proximal Impact of Collective Action on the Social Change Attitudes of Uninvolved Bystanders

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## Abstract

Social movements often use protests and other collective actions to draw public attention to their cause, yet the psychological reactions to such actions from their targeted audience is not well understood. This research investigates uninvolved bystanders' immediate responses to collective action using a quasi-experimental field study designed around a racial justice protest that took place at a large public university in the United States. We surveyed two student samples exactly one week apart at the same time and location, first in the absence of protest and then again at the time of a racial justice protest (Total N = 240). We found that participants who believed that racism was not a problem on campus had more negative attitudes toward racial justice protests and protesters, as well as lower support for anti-racist efforts on campus on the day of the protest, compared to the day without a protest. These findings provide initial evidence that a protest encounter may trigger a backlash effect amongst those who have the most resistant attitudes toward social change.

*Keywords:* collective action, social change, confrontation, discrimination, racism

## Non-Technical Summary

### Background

Racial justice movements often have a strong presence on college campuses. Since the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in 2013, a series of protests have occurred in universities across the United States to push for fair treatment of racial minorities.

### Why was this study done?

Protests typically aim to gain the attention of broader society and mobilize greater support for their cause. We can observe this from the range of tactics and contentious actions that protesters typically undertake to disrupt everyday life. Thus, being confronted by a protest might trigger backlash among some people. We therefore aimed to understand how people react when they directly encountered a protest in their social environment.

### What did the researchers do and find?

We surveyed members of a campus community exactly a week before, and during a racial justice protest that occurred at a U.S. university. The research distributed brief anonymous surveys to participants who happened to be at the location of the protest. We found that among people who had relatively weaker perceptions of campus racism, they reported more negative attitudes toward racial justice protests and protesters, as well as less support for anti-racist efforts on campus when they physically encountered a racial justice protest (compared to when they did not encounter a protest).

**What do these findings mean?**

Although protests are a means toward social and political change, it might trigger immediate backlash among people who do not perceive a strong sense of injustice. By focusing on the attitudes of people who encounter a protest, this study contributes to our understanding of how protests can influence the attitudes of broader society.

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Social movements employ many approaches for achieving their goal of social change. From holding mass street demonstrations requiring roadblocks, to occupying buildings with sit-ins, and organizing strikes that unite employees in work stoppages, collective action often challenges people to confront issues that they might otherwise not consider. This wide repertoire of tactics typically seeks to *disrupt* everyday affairs. To this end, social movements often organize actions that occur in highly-populated public spaces aiming to capture the attention of an audience (Benford & Hunt, 1992; McAdam, 1983; McCarthy & McPhail, 2006). Collective action may serve the performative function of persuading others to adopt specific attitudes or behaviors that will ultimately improve the conditions of the group in society (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007). Despite their importance for social movements, limited empirical research has examined how the public psychologically *responds* to collective action (see Louis, 2009 for a discussion). This is a crucial gap given that the confrontational nature of collective action calls for a direct response from the broader public.

Various models of social change have argued that the success of social movements relies on public support for the movement and its goals (e.g., Mugny & Perez, 1991; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). Societal members can be viewed as uninvolved bystanders, who may not themselves be perpetrators nor targets of injustice but are nonetheless crucial in providing support for a movement. Bystanders are embedded within the social context in which the protest occurs, and they may be potential sympathizers or opponents to the protest. There is growing interest in examining collective action undertaken by bystanders (sometimes also referred to as non-activists or third-party groups) in solidarity with an oppressed group (Chayinska, Minescu, & McGarty, 2017; Jiménez-Moya, Miranda, Drury, Saavedra, & González, 2019; Saab, Tausch, Spears, & Cheung, 2015; Stewart et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2019). The focus of this prior research has not been on how bystander groups *respond* to ongoing collective action as a target audience, but rather on how bystanders come to support or engage in solidarity-based collective action.

In the present research, we take a somewhat different approach by examining bystanders' attitudes in *response* to directly encountering a protest in their social environment. In this sense, we focus on bystanders who are themselves not participants of collective action but instead are the targeted audiences that encounter or witness

collective action organized by social movements. In fact, social movement scholars have noted that protests are often theatrical because they are designed to evoke a reaction from broader society (Benford & Hunt, 1992; McAdam, 1983; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). For example, protesters typically congregate in public spaces, give speeches, lead chants, and carry banners or posters during a protest. Further, when bystanders physically encounter a protest, their immediate perceptions are not filtered through the lens of the media (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Shoemaker, 1982), or biased by selective consumption of information and news sources in line with preexisting attitudes (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008). Thus, collective action has the potential to directly influence the attitudes of bystanders who encounter such actions.

Research from related disciplines, mainly political science, sociology and communication studies, provides indirect evidence that exposure to protests (via one's proximity to protest locations and media consumption) can influence public attitudes (e.g., Andrews, Beyerlein, & Farnum, 2016; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Social movement scholars have also written extensively about the tactics that social movements use to persuade the broader public (e.g., Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Sharp, 2005; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Collective action may therefore be construed as a persuasion attempt. Classic research on attitude change and social influence suggest that the source of a message can influence how an audience receives the message (Wood, 2000). In particular, research on minority influence argue that to be effective, minorities need to avoid being portrayed as deviant from the majority (Mugny & Perez, 1991). However, news reports of protests are often portrayed as deviant in the media, which can influence public support for the movement (Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012). Taken together, there is limited empirical evidence on how *direct* exposure to protests affects people's socio-political attitudes.

The question of whether and how protests may have a proximal impact on bystanders is especially important because related psychological research has suggested that the immediate experience of being interpersonally confronted with prejudice and discrimination tends to be negative (e.g., Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Further, people tend to hold negative stereotypes of activists and protesters (Bashir, Lockwood, Chasteen, Nadolny, & Noyes, 2013). Therefore, the present research aimed to examine whether a direct encounter with collective action against injustice (i.e., a protest) shapes people's perceptions of protests and those who participate in them, as well as their support for social change efforts, especially as a function of people's preexisting attitudes toward the status quo (i.e., perceptions of injustice). Specifically, we hypothesized that encountering a protest may promote more negative perceptions of the protests, more negative evaluation of the protesters, and lower support for social change efforts, especially among those that have low perceptions of injustice.

One challenge of studying the experience of directly encountering a protest is that the phenomenon is difficult to authentically capture in a traditional laboratory setting. However, even when it is not feasible to conduct randomized controlled experiments, it is sometimes possible to creatively use the timing of naturally-occurring real world events to examine or create "natural experiments" to assess the impact of such events (Dunning, 2012; Meyer, 1995). Although relatively uncommon in psychology, it is a prominent methodology in other social science disciplines (e.g., economics, political science, sociology). For example, in 2006, in response to proposed anti-immigration federal legislation in the United States, immigrant rights protests led by the Latino community erupted across the country, which coincided with the data collection for the Latino National Survey. This created an unexpected natural experiment which allowed researchers to compare the attitudes of Latino respondents surveyed before and after the protests occurred (e.g., Branton, Martinez-Ebers, Carey Jr., & Matsubayashi, 2015; Wallace, Zepeda-Millán, & Jones-Correa, 2014).

Taking inspiration from naturally-occurring events to study attitudes in response to protests, in the present research, we implemented a between-subjects quasi-experimental field study designed around a racial justice protest that occurred at a university campus in the U.S. Knowing the time and location of the protest in advance, we examined the social attitudes of the same population of people twice – once when there was *no-protest* present, and then (exactly one week later in the same location) *during* an ongoing protest. Viewing university life as a microcosm of broader society, the rise of anti-racism protests across universities in the U.S. provided a particularly timely and applicable setting to examine how uninvolved bystanders respond to a protest for social change (Wong & Green, 2016).

## Public Responses to Protests

Although little research has examined the impact of direct encounter with protests, past research in political science and sociology has indirectly linked protests to public opinion. This work has typically used geographical proximity to local protest events based on geocoded data as predictors of attitudes reported in public opinion polls (e.g., Andrews et al., 2016; Branton et al., 2015; Carey Jr., Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2014; Jones-Correa, Wallace, & Zepeda-Millán, 2016; Silber Mohamed, 2013; Wallace et al., 2014). For example, Andrews et al. (2016) found that the closer White Southerners' homes were to locations of sit-ins during the African American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s that aimed to desegregate the Southern U.S., the more they sympathized with the movement. However, this line of research has largely assumed that those who live closer to locations where protests occurred were also exposed to the protests in some way (e.g., through media coverage of protest events), without directly assessing whether and how the public came to learn about the protests.

In early attempts to study how members of the public directly respond to protests, Berkowitz (1970) found that more anti-war letters were mailed out during the day of an anti-war protests compared to a day without protests, suggesting that the anti-war protest had its intended effect on the public. Berkowitz (1974) also found that people were more likely to sign an anti-war petition and take a button supporting peace when approached during an ongoing anti-war protest, compared to a day without a protest. Berkowitz (1970, 1974) thus concluded that the nature of protests was to gain attention from onlookers and increase their compliance with the protest goals. However, Berkowitz also noted, research has shown that public behavioral compliance may not always reflect genuine changes in personal attitudes (Helson, Blake, & Mouton, 1958; Kelman, 1958).

To our knowledge, since this early work, there has been limited empirical research on people's proximal reaction to physically encountering protests. The one recent exception is Schwartz (2016)'s research, which found that direct encounter with protests promoted lower interest in political engagement (e.g., voting, discussing politics) compared to those who were surveyed at a location where no-protests occurred. Extending Schwartz's (2016) finding that direct protest encounters may have demobilizing effects on political activities, we propose that encountering a protest can have an immediate negative impact on perceptions of protests and protesters, as well as lower support for social change efforts, compared to those who do not encounter such a protest. We further suggest that the potentially demobilizing effect of directly encountering a protest will be moderated by prior attitudes toward the status quo.

For movement organizers and its supporters, the hope is that collective actions will shift public attitudes to move in line with the goals of a movement. Indeed, sociological and political science research has documented the power of sustained social movements in producing large-scale structural change (e.g., Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). While we certainly agree that the actions of social movements are

crucial for long-term social change, we nonetheless suggest that for some people, their immediate reactions to protests may be negative.

## Negative Reactions Toward Calls for Justice

Collective action for social change is often a confrontation about injustice. Past research has found that individuals who claim discrimination are typically negatively evaluated (Crosby, 1993; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). Similarly, people respond defensively when they are called out for harboring prejudices (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). In these studies, the confrontations are usually unexpected, which we argue mirrors the contentious nature of protests and the experience of encountering one. Even though bystanders are not directly targeted by a protest in the same way that individuals may be directly confronted for their bias (e.g., Czopp et al., 2006), protests do often aim to disrupt the routine of daily life to draw attention to issues of inequality and injustice. In line with this, prior work also showed that negative backlash can occur toward activists who strive for social change (Bashir et al., 2013; O'Brien & Crandall, 2005), even when activists seek to accomplish goals that are deemed desirable (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2007; Twenge & Zucker, 1999). For example, Bashir et al. (2013) found that harboring negative stereotypes of activists (e.g., viewing them as “militant”) reduced people’s willingness to adopt social change behaviors that were advocated by activists. The negative perception of protests may be further reinforced through the media (McLeod & Detenber, 1999), which tends to portray protesters in a negative light (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Shoemaker, 1982).

Given that challenges to the status quo can generally elicit resistance, we believe that directly encountering a protest may promote negative perception of protests and negative evaluation of protesters, as well as reduce support for social change efforts. Yet, not all bystanders of a protest are expected to react in a uniformly negative manner toward protests. Prior research has shown that perceived injustice is an important antecedent to being in solidarity with disadvantaged groups and engaging in collective action among bystanders (Saab et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2019). We therefore further propose that people’s preexisting levels of perceived injustice may shape their reactions toward encountering a protest.

## The Role of Perceptions of Racial Discrimination

Perceiving injustice, such as discrimination, is one of the critical first steps towards challenging the status quo, and thus, toward achieving social change (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). However, prior research has shown that people may fail to recognize systemic injustice due to a host of status-legitimizing ideologies. For one, people have a general desire to see the world as a fair and just place (Lerner & Miller, 1978), to the extent that people react defensively to evidence that threatens this worldview, such as social injustices (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). Relatedly, people tend to see existing institutions as legitimate (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), which then discourages participation in efforts to challenge unjust systems (Jost, Chaikalis-Petritsis, et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Stroebe, 2013; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007) and promotes negative evaluation of those who do (Kaiser et al., 2006; Kay et al., 2009; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012; Yeung, Kay, & Peach, 2014). People are also inclined to believe that status hierarchies should be based on people’s abilities, thus warranting blame towards those who are of lower social status (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001) and leading to the denial of inequality (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; McCoy & Major, 2007). Thus, various motivations can predispose people to *not* recognize injustices – which may be important in determining people’s proximal responses to protests for social change.

The present study focused on people's reactions to a racial justice protest on a university campus in the United States. A considerable number of Americans believe racism is no longer a problem (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Feagin, 2014), even though racial disparities remain rife (e.g., Krueger, Rothstein, & Turner, 2006) and there are ongoing efforts aiming to eradicate discrimination against people of color (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement). On college campuses, racial minorities have organized racial justice protests to push for diversity and inclusion efforts at their respective institutions (Chessman & Wayt, 2016). Thus, improving the racial climate of college campuses has become a priority for university administrators (Espinosa, Chessman, & Wayt, 2016). We propose that in response to encountering a protest for racial justice on campus (compared to when there was no such protest), people who believe racism is *not* a problem on campus will have a more negative perception of protests and negative evaluation of protesters for racial justice, as well as have lower support for social change efforts.

## Ideology and Morality as Stable Individual Differences

Given that we employed a quasi-experimental between-subjects design to examine whether encountering a protest would shift people's attitudes, it was important to test whether participants recruited on the day of the protest and on the day without the protest differed on relevant individual difference variables that are not explicitly related to racial attitudes, but are known to shape people's social and political attitudes more generally. Thus, in addition to our primary variables, we included ancillary measures of people's general ideologies and moral motives that are well-established in prior research as largely stable individual differences: system justification (Jost et al., 2004) and group-based moralities of social order and social justice (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013, 2016).

### System Justification

System justification refers to a motivation to defend and legitimize the status quo in a society, which can subsequently contribute to the stability of oppressive social systems. Prior research has shown that system-justifying motives promotes lower support for protests for social change that challenges systems of inequality (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012), and greater support for protests against social change that aim to defend the system (Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, 2019). We therefore expected that system justification will be generally related to more negative attitudes toward protests for racial justice. Further, given that system justification is largely conceptualized as a stable ideology that guides individual attitudes and behaviors, we expected participants recruited on the day of the protest and the day without a protest to report relatively similar levels of system justification – reflecting our conceptualization of this variable as a measure of individual differences.

### Moral Motives

People typically have intuitions that guide their moral judgments in everyday life. These intuitions are often experienced as absolute truths or rules that organize society. Two core motives that guide moral regulation of group-based behaviors are social order and social justice (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008). Social order involves adhering to societal rules, conformity, and norms. Social justice involves providing social, economic, and political benefits for others who are disadvantaged in society to uphold egalitarianism, social welfare, and equity. Prior research has shown that social order is associated with support for politically conservative social causes whereas social justice is associated with support for politically liberal social causes (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2008; see also Milesi & Alberici, 2018). We therefore expected that social order will be related to more negative attitudes toward protests for racial justice whereas social justice will be related to less negative attitudes toward protests for racial justice. Importantly, by viewing both moral motives as largely stable moral intuitions that influence people's judgements, we expected participants recruited on the day of the protest and the day without a protest to report relatively

similar levels of social order and social justice – reflecting our conceptualization of these variables as individual difference measures.

## Method

The present research employed a quasi-experimental between-subjects design to study the effect of an anti-racism protest on uninvolved bystanders at a university. Universities have long been a site of activism (Crossley, 2008), therefore making it an appropriate naturalistic context for studying responses to collective action. There were two waves of data collection: 1) the first wave occurred exactly one week *before* the scheduled protest, 2) the second wave occurred *during* the protest. In advance of the study, we consulted with protest organizers to obtain information about the date, time, and locations of the protest. Thus, we could survey campus community members exactly one week in advance at the same times and locations of the protest, and again during the ongoing protest. During both waves of data collection, we sampled participants by solely targeting the same crowded areas on campus (i.e., the student union and a café) that were included in the planned route of the protest. Since the organizers did not publicize the route of the protest, we believe participants were not intentionally waiting at these locations to observe the protest on the protest day. On both the protest day and non-protest day, we recruited participants who were engaged in typical everyday activities for these locations (e.g., studying, eating, meeting friends).

Three pairs of research assistants were stationed at the targeted locations during both sessions of data collection, each lasting about an hour. The research assistants introduced themselves as researchers from the psychology department, and asked participants to complete a brief anonymous survey on their attitudes toward activism in exchange for candy. During the day of the protest, research assistants began approaching participants as soon as the protesters made their way through the targeted locations. Given the short amount of time during which participants were exposed to protesters at these locations, we aimed to sample as many participants as possible. The protest itself unfolded as anticipated; the protesters marched around campus while carrying banners (e.g., “Stand against racism”), and chanting slogans (e.g., “Racism at [university name] has got to go”, “Black lives matter”) to draw attention to their cause. The stated goal of the protest was to raise awareness of racial issues on campus. Local media reports estimate that between 60 to 100 people, mostly university students and some staff members, participated in the protest.

## Participants

There were 162 participants recruited on the no-protest day and 78 participants recruited on protest day at a large public university in the Northeastern U.S. (total  $N = 240$ ).<sup>i</sup> There were 181 participants who self-identified as non-Hispanic Whites, five as Blacks, 14 as Hispanics, 30 as Asians, five as mixed race, two as Middle Eastern and three participants who did not specify their race. The average age was 20.45 years ( $SD = 1.81$ , range = 18 to 31 years) and two participants did not report their age. Most of the participants were undergraduate students ( $n = 230$ ), seven were graduate students, and one was an alumnus of the university. The survey questions were identical on the no-protest and protest day, with no specific questions about the event to ensure that the questions made equal sense on both days.<sup>ii</sup> The complete study materials, data, and analysis code are available at <https://osf.io/8q9hz>

## Measures

### Perceived Campus Racism

Participants were asked “How much of a problem is racism on the [name of university] campus?” on a scale from 1 (*not at all a problem*) to 5 (*serious problem*).

### Support for Anti-Racist Efforts on Campus

Participants were asked, “How much do you oppose or support anti-racist efforts on campus? (e.g., protests, discussion panels, workshops, diversity trainings)” on a scale from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 5 (*strongly support*).

### Negative Perception of Racial Justice Protests

Participants were asked: “People have different opinions on protests about racial issues. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following opinions? I think protest about racial issues are...” followed by 9 reaction items<sup>iii</sup> [i.e., “disrespectful, dangerous, counterproductive, silly, annoying, legitimate (R), important (R), justified (R), effective (R)”] measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring revealed that the items loaded onto one factor (based on scree plot and Eigenvalue > 1 criterion;  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### Negative Evaluation of Racial Justice Protesters

Participants were asked: “People have different opinions about racial justice protesters. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following opinions? I think people who are protesting about racial issues are...” followed by 4 items [i.e., “admirable, determined, troublemakers (R), hypersensitive (R)”] measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), (Bashir et al., 2013; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring revealed that the items loaded on one factor (based on scree plot and Eigenvalue > 1 criterion;  $\alpha = .80$ ).

### Individual Difference Variables

Given our quasi-experimental between-subjects design, it was important to test whether participants on the protest and no-protest day differed on relevant individual differences. Thus, in addition to our main measures, we included measures of people’s general ideologies and social motives that are well-established in prior research as largely stable individual differences: system justification (Jost et al., 2004) and the group-based moralities of social order and social justice (Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013, 2016).

To measure system justification, we used two items developed by Kay and Jost (2003): “In general, I find American society to be fair” and “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness in America” ( $r = .65, p < .001$ ). To measure social order, we used two items developed by Janoff-Bulman and colleagues (2008): “It is harmful to society when people choose radically new lifestyles and ways of living” and “In a decent society, people should strictly attend to the values and practices of the larger community” ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ). To measure social justice, we used two items also developed by Janoff-Bulman and colleagues (2008): “It is our responsibility, not just a matter of personal preference, to provide for groups worse off in society” and “It is important for those who are better off to help provide resources for the most vulnerable members of society” ( $r = .69, p < .001$ ). The items were measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

## Demographics

Participants were asked to report their age, race, and university affiliation (e.g., undergraduate student, graduate student).

## Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the main variables on the no-protest day and protest day are displayed in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively. Descriptively, we can observe that perceived campus racism was around the mid-point of the scale. Support for anti-racist efforts on campus was relatively high, and negative perception of protest and protesters was relatively low, suggesting that our sample had largely positive attitudes toward racial justice.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Variables on the No-Protest Day*

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived campus racism	2.99 (1.05)	–			
2. Support for anti-racist efforts on campus	4.20 (1.00)	.27***	–		
3. Negative reactions toward protests	1.96 (0.74)	-.33***	-.56***	–	
4. Negative evaluation of protesters	1.89 (0.75)	-.32***	-.53***	.75***	–

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Variables on Protest Day*

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived campus racism	3.15 (1.20)	–			
2. Support for anti-racist efforts on campus	3.88 (1.12)	.60***	–		
3. Negative reactions toward protests	2.17 (0.91)	-.53***	-.72***	–	
4. Negative evaluation of protesters	1.99 (0.93)	-.56***	-.71***	.86***	–

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Comparison Between Samples

First, we assessed whether participants recruited on protest day and the no-protest day differed on key demographics (i.e., age, race) and on individual difference measures that we expected to be largely stable (i.e., system justification, social order, social justice). We used a chi-square difference test for the categorical variable of race and independent  $t$ -tests for the continuous variables. We found that participants recruited on protest day were slightly older than participants recruited on the no-protest day (protest,  $M = 20.81$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ; no-protest,  $M = 20.28$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ;  $t(236) = 2.12$ ,  $p = .035$ ). Importantly, the samples did not significantly differ on race ( $\chi^2(6) = 3.34$ ,  $p = .766$ ), levels of system justification (protest,  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ; no-protest,  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ;

$t(237) = 1.44, p = .151$ ), social order (protest,  $M = 2.46, SD = .85$ ; no-protest,  $M = 2.51, SD = .94$ ;  $t(237) = -.36, p = .722$ ) and social justice (protest,  $M = 3.97, SD = 1.01$ ; no-protest,  $M = 3.93, SD = .94$ ;  $t(237) = .34, p = .731$ ).

## Individual Differences and Attitudes Toward Protests

As expected, system justification was related to more negative reactions toward racial justice protests, system justification was related to more negative reactions toward racial justice protesters ( $r = .40, p < .001$ ), more negative evaluations of racial justice protesters ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ), and less support for anti-racist efforts ( $r = -.44, p < .001$ ). Similarly, social order was related to more negative reactions toward racial justice protests ( $r = .21, p = .001$ ), more negative evaluation of racial justice protesters ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ), and lower support for anti-racist efforts ( $r = -.14, p = .03$ ). By contrast, social justice was related to less negative reactions toward racial justice protests ( $r = -.48, p < .001$ ), less negative evaluations of racial justice protesters ( $r = .48, p < .001$ ), and more support for anti-racist efforts ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ).

## Perceived Campus Racism

Participants on protest day and the no-protest day did not significantly differ in the extent to which they perceived racism to be a problem on campus (protest,  $M = 3.15, SD = 1.20$ ; no-protest,  $M = 2.99, SD = 1.05$ ;  $t(236) = -1.05, p = .296, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.4615, .1412]$ ). When potential moderators are influenced by experimental or quasi-experimental variables, it makes interpretation of interaction effects difficult. The lack of a difference by condition on perceived campus racism supports our rationale and the validity of testing perceived campus racism as a moderator of the difference between protest and no-protest day on participants' attitudes. In the analyses below, we first tested the difference between no-protest day and protest day on our outcome variables. We then tested the extent to which these differences are moderated by perceived campus racism. To account for the unequal sample sizes in conditions, we used the PROC GLM procedure in SAS 9.4 and used the LS MEANS statement to obtain marginal means that adjust for unequal cell sizes (Statistical Analysis System Institute, 1999). We decomposed each interaction by examining the marginal mean differences between condition when perceived campus racism was low (1  $SD$  below mean) or high (1  $SD$  above mean), and also by examining simple slopes of perceived campus racism in each condition. All estimates were unstandardized. In addition, supporting these analyses, we conducted non-parametric tests where appropriate, and we report the findings from these analyses in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

## Support for Anti-Racist Efforts on Campus

There was a significant difference in support for anti-racist efforts on campus between participants on protest day and the no-protest day,  $F(1, 230) = 8.70, p = .004, \eta^2 = .03$ . Participants reported lower support for anti-racist efforts on campus on protest day ( $M = 3.82$ ) compared to the no-protest day ( $M = 4.21$ ). There was also a significant link between perceived campus racism and support for anti-racist efforts on campus,  $F(1, 230) = 50.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$ , such that greater perceived campus racism predicts more support for anti-racist efforts,  $b = .47, SE = .07, t = 7.09, 95\% \text{ CI } [.3570, .5738]$ . The effects of condition and perceived campus racism were qualified by a significant interaction between condition and perceived campus racism in predicting support for anti-racist efforts on campus,  $F(1, 230) = 7.58, p = .006, \eta^2 = .03$  (see [Figure 1](#)). In line with hypotheses, when perceived campus racism was low, there was lower support for anti-racist efforts on protest day compared to the no-protest day,  $t(230) = 3.93, p < .001, M_{\text{protest}} = 3.17, M_{\text{no-protest}} = 3.92$ . By contrast, when perceived campus racism was high, there was no significant difference in support for anti-racist efforts between the protest and no-protest day,  $t(230) = .18, p = .854, M_{\text{protest}} = 4.46, M_{\text{no-protest}} = 4.49$ . Examining the interaction by testing the simple slopes within condition, there

was a stronger positive relationship between perceptions of campus racism and support for anti-racist efforts on protest day ( $b = .65$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = 6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.4731, .8190]) compared to the no-protest day ( $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 3.60$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.1542, .4154]).

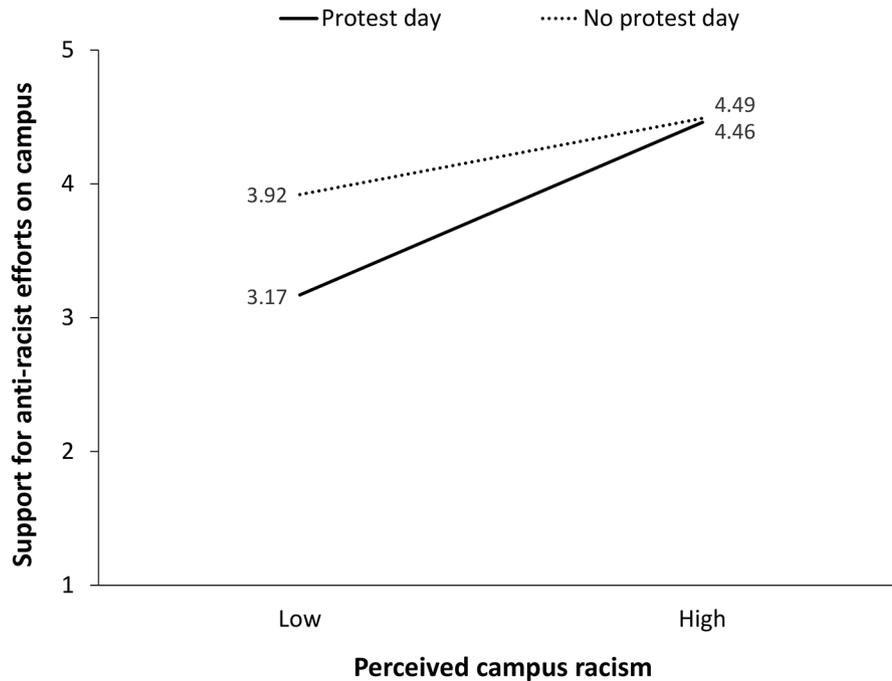


Figure 1. Support for anti-racist efforts on campus as a function of the interaction between perceived campus racism and condition (protest vs. no-protest day).

## Negative Perception of Racial Justice Protests

There was a significant difference in negative perception of racial justice protests between participants on the protest and the no-protest day,  $F(1, 234) = 6.35$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Participants reported more negative perceptions on protest day ( $M = 2.21$ ) compared to the no-protest day ( $M = 1.95$ ). There was also a significant link between perceived campus racism and negative perception of racial justice protests,  $F(1, 234) = 51.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ , such that greater perceived campus racism predicts less negative perception of racial justice protests,  $b = -.35$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -7.20$ , 95% CI [-.4329, -.2715]. The effects of condition and perceived campus racism were qualified by a significant interaction between condition and perceived campus racism in predicting negative perception of racial justice protests,  $F(1, 234) = 3.96$ ,  $p = .048$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$  (see Figure 2). In line with hypotheses, when perceived campus racism was low, there was more negative perception of racial justice protests on protest day compared to the no-protest day,  $t(234) = -3.13$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $M_{\text{protest}} = 2.65$ ,  $M_{\text{no-protest}} = 2.20$ . By contrast, when perceived campus racism was high, there was no significant difference in negative perceptions of racial justice protests between the protest and no-protest day,  $t(234) = -.44$ ,  $p = .659$ ,  $M_{\text{protest}} = 1.76$ ,  $M_{\text{no-protest}} = 1.69$ . Examining the interaction by testing the simple slopes within condition, there was a stronger inverse relationship between perceived campus racism and negative perception of racial justice protests on protest day ( $b = -.45$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = -5.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.5771, -.3220]) compared to on no-protest day ( $b = -.25$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t = -4.25$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.3539, -.1559]).

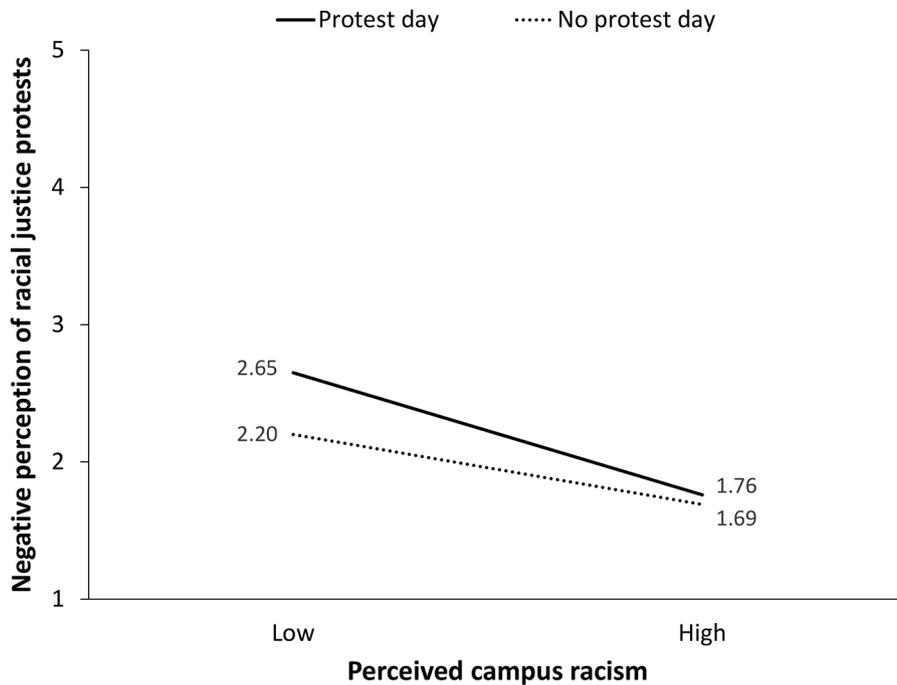


Figure 2. Negative perception of racial justice protests as a function of the interaction between perceived campus racism and condition (protest vs. no-protest day).

### Negative Evaluation of Racial Justice Protesters

There was no significant difference in negative evaluation of racial justice protesters between participants on protest day and the no-protest day,  $F(1, 233) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .232$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ ,  $M_{\text{protest}} = 2.00$ ,  $M_{\text{no-protest}} = 2.88$ . There was a significant link between perceived campus racism and negative evaluation of racial justice protesters,  $F(1, 233) = 54.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$ , such that greater perceived campus racism predicts less negative evaluation of racial justice protesters,  $b = -.37$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -7.41$ , 95% CI [-.4479, -.2846]. There was also a significant interaction between condition and perceived campus racism in predicting negative evaluation of racial justice protesters,  $F(1, 233) = 5.26$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$  (see Figure 3)<sup>iv</sup>. In line with hypotheses, when perceived campus racism was low, there was more negative evaluation of racial justice protesters on protest day compared to the no-protest day,  $t(233) = -2.40$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $M_{\text{protest}} = 2.49$ ,  $M_{\text{no-protest}} = 2.14$ . By contrast, when perceived campus racism was high, there was no significant difference in negative evaluation of racial justice protesters between the protest and no-protest day,  $t(233) = .75$ ,  $p = .454$ ,  $M_{\text{protest}} = 1.53$ ,  $M_{\text{no-protest}} = 1.63$ . Examining the interaction by testing the simple slopes within condition, there was a stronger inverse relationship between perceptions of campus racism and negative reactions to racial justice protesters on protest day,  $b = -.48$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = -6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.6080, -.3512], compared to the no-protest day,  $b = -.25$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t = -4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.3537, -.1521].<sup>v</sup>

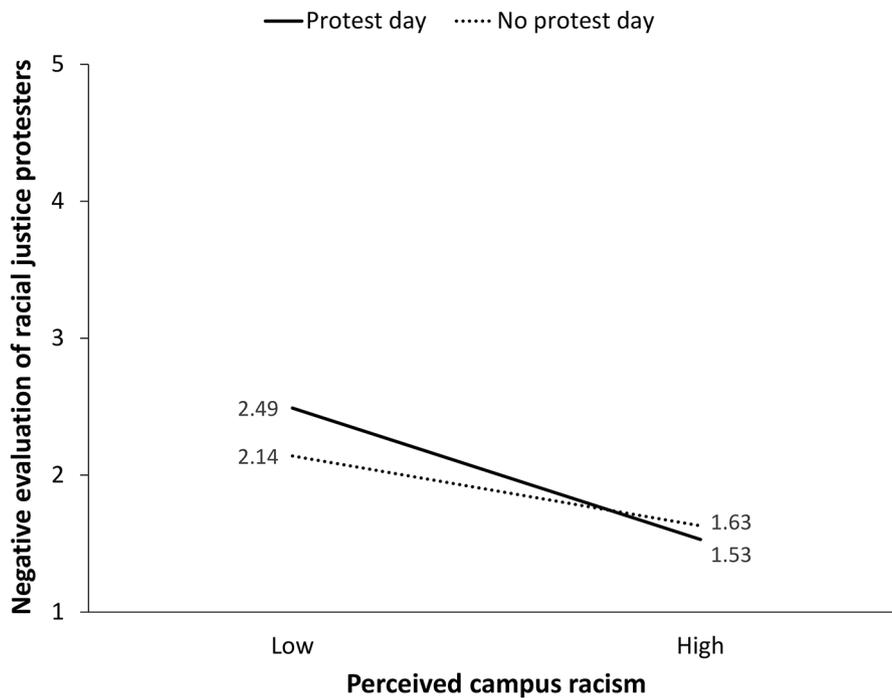


Figure 3. Negative evaluation of racial justice protesters as a function of the interaction between perceived campus racism and condition (protest vs. no-protest day).

## Discussion

Collective action is one of the tools that social movements use to engage broader society for social change. Yet, little data exists on people's immediate reactions to collective action. In the present research, we conducted a quasi-experimental field study around a real anti-racist protest that occurred on a university campus, which we suggest encapsulates the phenomena whereby collective action aims to incite a reaction from its audience. We found evidence consistent with a backlash effect amongst people who did *not* perceive racism to be a problem on campus. Specifically, compared to a day *without* a protest, *during* an ongoing racial justice protest, people with relatively weak perceptions of campus racism had more negative perceptions of racial justice protests and more negative evaluations of racial justice protesters, as well as lower support for social change efforts on campus.

Our findings are consistent with prior research showing that people typically have negative reactions to interpersonal confrontations of injustice (e.g., Kaiser & Miller, 2001) and toward those who challenge the status quo (e.g., Bashir et al., 2013), while extending this work to the collective-level, by conceptualizing collective action as an act of confrontation about injustice. In addition, while Schwartz (2016) found that direct encounter with a protest weakened general interest in political participation, we build on this work to show that perceived injustice is an important moderator in understanding how people react to protests. In particular, people who have weak (but not strong) perceptions of racism showed more negative reactions toward protest for racial justice. Given that prior research has shown that people who legitimize unjust systems are especially defensive toward challenges to the status quo (Kaiser et al., 2006), and that one way people may justify inequality is by reporting lower perceptions

of discrimination (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; McCoy & Major, 2007), the present research findings are consistent with this past research if we view low perceptions of campus racism as a system-legitimizing belief.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present research has several limitations, which we believe motivates questions for future research. For one, although the current research has the strength of external validity and applied relevance, we acknowledge that the inability in a quasi-experimental field design to achieve true random assignment to conditions precludes the strongest causal claims (Dunning, 2012; Meyer, 1995). We cannot discount the possibility that participants sampled on both waves of data collection may have different initial attitudes. However, by surveying people at the same time and location exactly one week apart, we sought to maximize the similarity of the population sampled on both days. Furthermore, individual differences and demographic measures suggest that participants recruited on the day of the protest and the day without a protest did in fact have largely similar characteristics. We nonetheless recognize that it is also important to control for other key measures which could influence people's attitudes toward a protest, which we did not collect in this study, such as prior protest participation and political orientation. A stronger design would be to collect data during the protest at a different location on campus (where there is no exposure to protests), or collect a third time point before the protest occurred, to serve as a second control group to test whether there is only a significant difference on attitudes among bystanders who encounter the protest.

Another limitation we wish to acknowledge is the uneven sample sizes collected on the day of the protest and the day without a protest. Our sample size was smaller on the day of the protest compared to the no-protest day because we were careful to only recruit participants who were directly exposed to the protest, which depended on the number of people who happened to be at the protest site. We attempt to address the problem of unequal cell size statistically by using general linear modelling and adjusted marginal means. We also conducted non-parametric tests where appropriate (see [Supplementary Materials](#)) to further qualify our findings and provide a more stringent test of our hypotheses.

It is important to note that the present study focused on understanding responses to collective action that is relatively normative and peaceful, in a largely non-repressive and low-risk context. However, people's responses to encountering collective action are likely shaped by the strategies used during collective action. Prior research found that people tend to be more supportive of normative, non-violent collective actions compared to non-normative, violent actions (Thomas & Louis, 2014). Our findings suggest that encountering even a normative collective action can elicit a potentially demobilizing effect amongst those who have relatively weak perceptions of injustice. Thus, it is possible that encountering non-normative actions would heighten these effects.

Further, the protest that we investigated was relatively small in size. The protest we focused on also occurred on a university campus and was relevant to the campus community members but not necessarily to the broader public. Thus, such a protest may be qualitatively different from large-scale national protests that occur in other public places and aim to influence public opinion. Prior work has shown that social causes with a critical mass of supporters tend to arouse greater support amongst the public (van de Rijt, Akin, Willer, & Feinberg, 2016). While our study examined collective action undertaken by a group that clearly represented a minority, future work could investigate how bystanders' attitudes toward protests vary by size of the protest. On the one hand, larger protests may elicit less of a backlash effect because it signals the normative acceptability of an issue; on the other hand, larger protests may also be more threatening of the status quo and therefore elicit a stronger backlash effect.

We did not find an empowering effect of encountering the protest on our outcome measures. There may be several possible reasons for this. First, descriptively we observed that participants who perceived high levels of racism on campus reported very low levels of negative perceptions of racial justice protests and negative evaluations of racial justice protesters, as well as very high levels of support for social change efforts on campus. This pattern creates a floor or ceiling effect respectively, which may conceal the potential mobilizing impact the protest had on this group. Second, it is possible that encountering an anti-racist protest may invigorate people who perceive a high degree of racism on campus, or it may promote complacency because it signals that action is already being taken. These divergent effects may cancel each other out and lead to the observed null effect. Third, the outcomes we measured may also not effectively capture an empowerment response. For example, people who were potentially empowered by the protest may report higher levels of efficacy and anger that could motivate future collective action (van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). Thus, this group may show greater behavioral intentions to engage in racial justice efforts on the day of the protest. They may also show greater positive emotions such as feelings of hope and excitement, which could promote higher identification with the racial justice protesters. Unfortunately, since we did not measure these outcome variables, we cannot conclude whether and how encountering a protest may empower bystanders.

Although this study identified the potentially demobilizing effect of a protest amongst those who had weak perceptions of injustice (i.e., low on perceived campus racism), we definitely do not suggest or expect that this will always be the case. Related research has shown that protests can spread and mobilize others, giving rise to protests in other geographical regions through various channels including news media coverage of protests and the social networks of activists themselves – what scholars have called protest diffusion (e.g., Andrews & Biggs, 2006; Strang & Soule, 1998). Research from political science and sociology has also clearly indicated that, in the long term, the actions of social movements are linked to favorable large-scale changes in public opinion and policymaking (e.g., Amenta et al., 2010; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Thus, an important direction for future research is to investigate and integrate the short and long-term effects of sustained collective action on broader social attitudes. We hope that this work will stimulate further research on the psychological outcomes of real-world collective action as they continue to be a part of our socio-political landscape.

## Notes

i) Our sample size was determined by the physical and time constraints around the protest event, thus we did not conduct an a priori power analysis. Post hoc power analysis calculated in G\*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) estimated power at .57 for the observed effect ( $d = .30$ ) of protest exposure on support for social change, using a t-test with a two-tailed  $\alpha$  of .05. This is close to the average power of .35 in a between-subjects study in psychology (Bakker, van Dijk, & Wicherts, 2012). There were relatively fewer participants recruited on protest day as we only surveyed those who had been exposed to the protest. No data were excluded; all analyses used list-wise deletion to handle missing data. Of the 240 total participants, there were 7 participants (2.92%) missing at least one data point.

ii) In addition to the measures reported, we also included exploratory questions about perceived importance of racial issues to students of color and to White students on campus. These perceptions did not differ between the protest and no-protest day ( $p_s > .366$ ). We also asked participants whether they noticed any protest for racial justice that just occurred in the past few minutes. Participants on protest day were much more likely to report noticing a protest compared to participants on no-protest day,  $\chi^2(1) = 149.26, p < .001$ .

iii) We also included “disruptive” as an item to measure negative perception of racial justice protests. However, the item was unexpectedly negatively correlated with the other items (e.g., the more people thought the protests were disruptive, the less

they thought the protests were annoying) which suggests that our participants may have interpreted disruptiveness as a positive feature of the protest. Thus, we excluded it from our scale.

iv) Given the strong correlation between negative perceptions of protesters and negative evaluations of protesters, we also combined the two measures to form a composite variable of negative reactions to protests. There was a significant interaction between condition and perceived campus racism in predicting negative reactions to protests,  $F(1, 234) = 4.50, p = .030$ . When perceived campus racism was low, there was more negative reactions to protests on protest day compared to the no-protest day,  $b = .41, SE = .14, p = .003, 95\% CI [.1390, .6779]$ . By contrast, when perceived campus racism was high, there was no significant difference in negative reactions between the protest and no-protest day,  $b = .01, SE = .13, p = .914, 95\% CI [-.2439, .2724]$ .

v) It was also possible that system justification, which is conceptually the reverse of perceived campus racism, could moderate the differences in attitudes on the day of the protest and the no-protest day. Indeed, higher perceived campus racism, which we conceptualized as our moderator, was related to lower scores on system justification ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ). There was not a statistically significant interaction between condition and system justification in predicting negative perception of racial justice protests  $F(1, 235) = 3.64, p = .058$ . However, descriptively we observed that when system justification was low, there was no significant difference in negative perception of racial justice protests on the protest and no-protest day,  $b = -.03, SE = .14, p = .819, 95\% CI [-.3161, .2501]$ . By contrast, when system justification was high, there was more negative perception of racial justice protests on protest day compared to the no-protest day,  $b = .34, SE = .14, p = .014, 95\% CI [.0694, .6052]$ . Although the patterns were consistent with what was found for perceived campus racism, the interactions between condition and system justification did not reach statistical significance in predicting negative evaluation of racial justice protesters,  $F(1, 235) = 2.25, p = .135$ , nor in predicting support for anti-racist efforts,  $F(1, 231) = 2.61, p = .108$ . Thus, using system justification as a moderator revealed consistent patterns in line with our expectations, but the weaker significance testing outcomes suggest that system justification is perhaps a more distal moderator compared to perceived campus racism.

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The authors have no funding to report.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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## Data Availability

For this study, the data is freely available (see the [Supplementary Materials](#) section).

## Supplementary Materials

The complete study materials, data, analysis code, and report of non-parametric tests are available at <https://osf.io/8q9hz>

### Index of Supplementary Materials

Selvanathan, H. P., & Lickel, B. (2019). *The proximal impact of collective action* [Study materials, data, analysis code, and report of non-parametric tests]. OSF. <https://osf.io/8q9hz>

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