Dealing with (Legitimized) Inequality: The Role of Ingroup Support to Resist Social Disadvantage

Enfrentando la Desigualdad que está Legitimada: El Rol del Apoyo Grupal para Confrontar la Desventaja Social

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Socially disadvantaged groups have to deal with diverse negative circumstances. We can expect that high status groups often legitimate and justify these disadvantages. However, when the low status group itself shares this perspective, it is more threatening: How do disadvantaged groups deal with social injustice when the ingroup itself frames it as deserved and legitimate? Previous studies have shown that under this circumstance, those individuals who highly identify with the ingroup reject the legitimacy norm and challenge their views instead by perceiving them as able to overcome and contest the disadvantage by collective means. In this work, we study the effect of a boundary condition, specifically the reliability of the norm of legitimacy. In one experimental study (*n* = 73), we expect high identifiers to contest the ingroup—as they frame their own disadvantage as legitimate—only if the reliability of the ingroup norm is weak, namely when a small (vs. large) ingroup sample supports it, as the chances to gather support amongst other ingroup members are better. However, when a large ingroup sample endorses the norm, high identifiers will accept this view, as the chances for success are low. We confirmed these hypotheses hinting that although high identifiers are expected to preserve ingroup interests, they might only do that when they can rely on ingroup support. This implies that, even though minorities are crucial to lead social change, the majority ingroup support is necessary in order to approach real changes.

Keywords: social disadvantage, legitimacy, ingroup support, collective action

Los grupos socialmente desfavorecidos enfrentan diversas desventajas que los grupos de alto estatus pueden legitimar y justificar. Sin embargo, ¿cómo se enfrentan los grupos desaventajados a la injusticia social cuando es el propio grupo quien la percibe como legítima? Estudios previos muestran que, bajo esta circunstancia, aquellos individuos que se identifican en gran medida con el grupo rechazan la norma grupal de legitimidad, y perciben al grupo como capaz de superar la desventaja a través de acciones colectivas. En este trabajo estudiamos una condición que podría limitar este efecto, específicamente la confiabilidad de la norma de legitimidad. En un estudio experimental (N = 73), esperamos que las personas altamente identificadas con el grupo desaventajado rechacen la norma grupal que legitima la desventaja, solo si la confiabilidad de dicha norma es débil, es decir, cuando únicamente una pequeña parte del endogrupo (frente a una grande) aprueba dicha norma, ya que las posibilidades de obtener apoyo entre otros miembros del grupo son más altas en estas circunstancias. Sin embargo, cuando una parte mayor del endogrupo respalda la norma, los miembros altamente identificados aceptarán esta opinión. Estas hipótesis fueron confirmadas, lo que indica que aunque las personas altamente identificadas con el grupo preservan los intereses de éste, es posible que solo lo hagan cuando pueden confiar en que recibirán apoyo grupal. Esto implica que, si bien las minorías son cruciales para liderar el cambio social, el apoyo mayoritario del grupo es necesario para generar cambios.

Palabras clave: desventaja social, legitimidad, apoyo grupal, acciones colectivas

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The fact that reaching social equality is one of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals shows that inequality is still present across the world, creating a power imbalance between high and low status groups. The emergence of social movements is one of the strategies that these disadvantaged groups use to cope with it. In order to take collective action, the situation has to be perceived as unfair (Tajfel, 1978; see also Van Zomeren et al., 2004). However, previous research has shown that even when the disadvantaged group frames their situation as fair and deserved, those who highly identify with the group still contest the disadvantage through collective action means. Thus, high identifiers seem to lead social change to restore equality regardless the ingroup norm of legitimacy (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). The aim of this work is to test one boundary condition that might prevent high identifiers from taking collective action against the disadvantage, namely the reliability of the legitimacy norm.

In previous years, a wave of social protest and movements have raised in many countries. In Chile, the the social outbreak took place in October 2019 which may serve as an example of the effectiveness of collective action given that protests forced politicians to make an unprecedented agreement, namely drafting a new constitution for the country. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), when intergroup relations are defined as legitimate, inequality will not foster social competition tendencies; that is, collective action aimed at changing the social hierarchy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, and according to previous literature (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2004), we can conclude that the perception that intergroup relations in the Chilean society—or any other society or situation in which social movements arise—were unfair and illegitimate was presumably necessary in order to take collective action. However, what is the source of the legitimacy perception? When it comes to taking collective action, who establishes whether social reality is legitimate or not?

The legitimacy ingroup norm and high identifiers' deviation

Most of the previous literature on this topic has not focused on the source of legitimacy (for exceptions see Hersby et al., 2011; Jetten et al., 2011; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). However, Spears and colleagues (Spears et al., 2010) distinguished between external and internal (il)legitimacy. The former defines an outgroup view regarding the ingroup disadvantage, whereas the latter refers to the ingroup opinion of their own disadvantage. That is, it describes the ingroup norm—what is valid and approved by other fellow members—(e.g., Schultz et al., 2007) towards their own disadvantage.

Although it might be expected that powerful groups justify the disadvantaged situation of lower status groups, the norm of internal legitimacy is especially interesting, as low status groups perceive their own position in the social hierarchy as deserved, accepting their inferiority (e.g., Jost et al., 2004). However, is the norm of internal legitimacy always followed by every ingroup member of a disadvantaged group? This question has crucial implications in terms of social equality. When a group conforms to their low status reinforcing the system justification (Jost et al., 2004), how do societies reach social change?

Those who highly identify with the group are generally more affected by its norms (e.g., McAuliffe et al., 2003); however, under specific circumstances, they can deviate from the group (e.g., Morton et al., 2007). According to this, the normative conflict model (Packer, 2008) establishes that high identifiers might deviate when they experience a normative conflict; that is, when they observe a conflict between their own ideals about the group's behavior and identity and the ingroup norm. In other words, albeit being motivated to follow the ingroup norm, they can also strategically deviate from it if they disagree with the ingroup standard. Specifically, high identifiers might deviate from it in order to enhance and protect the ingroup if the norm goes against the ingroup's interests and might harm it (see Packer et al., 2014; Packer & Miners, 2014). Therefore, they risk ingroup harmony and cohesion by challenging their norm when they perceive deviation might improve the ingroup status in the long term (see Johnson & Fujita, 2012). This way, they support a future-oriented view by fostering collectively-oriented dissent (Packer & Miners, 2014) aimed at replacing the current norm with one that might be better for the group's interests. This change might be understood as a minority influence process by which high identifiers affect the development of the ingroup norm. Their impact might be less visible at first, changing just the ingroup members' opinions, although it might also affect their behavior in the long term (see Bolderdijk & Jans, 2021). This might be especially relevant when the new norm becomes a trending norm endorsed by the high identifiers; that is, a norm in which the number of ingroup members engaging in a behavior increases (see Mortensen et al., 2017), and when ingroup members are interested in new and innovative norms (see Clarkson et al., 2020). In sum, a minority of high identifiers might become highly influential within the group, changing the norms accepted previously.

Strong and weak rules: The effect of norm reliability

As we described, previous research showed that when the ingroup legitimates and justifies the disadvantage they are experiencing, high identifiers contest their norm by perceiving them in a more positive manner, able to overcome the disadvantaged situation by endorsing social competition actions; that is, by showing their willingness to take collective action in order to fight for equality (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2012; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). Thus, according to the normative conflict model (Packer, 2008), high identifiers challenge the ingroup norm presumably in order to build a better future for the ingroup.

However, high identifiers might need minimum conditions to show dissent. In detail, we argue that high identifiers need to see that there is scope for social change; that is, the possibility that other ingroup members might follow them in their attempt to improve the ingroup's status (see Abrams & Grant, 2012; Spears et al., 2001).

In other words, if a large ingroup sample endorses the disadvantage legitimization norm, high identifiers may be less likely to show dissent, as the task of overturning a considerable ingroup consensus may be insurmountable. A broad lack of ingroup support will likely discourage high identifiers from starting an oppositional movement, presumably maintaining an uneasy conformity, in which they should be aware of the harmful ingroup norm but not contest it (see Packer & Miners, 2014). However, if the reliability of the norm is weak because just a small ingroup sample perceives disadvantage as legitimate, high identifiers could rely on the ingroup support when generating collective-oriented dissent (Packer & Miners, 2014).

The present research

The purpose of this study was to analyze the interplay between the internal legitimacy norm and the reliability of that norm, on participants' willingness to contest the ingroup norm in a context of disadvantage for the group. In an unequal intergroup context, deviating from the norm that legitimizes the disadvantage should be related to social change, going beyond the mere demonstration of dissent. In other words, deviation from the internal legitimacy norm might be expressed by intentions of ending the disadvantage through different means (see Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). Specifically, based on the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in the context of social inequality, we conceptualize deviation from the norm as social competition tendencies. Thus, we argue that if high identifiers contest the ingroup norm that legitimizes the disadvantage, they might do it through attitudes and behaviors aimed at ending the disadvantage. That is, through collective action tendencies that would enhance the ingroup situation (Wright et al., 1990). Importantly, following previous research, we also consider the collective action antecedents, namely social support and group efficacy perceptions (see e.g., Keshavarzi et al., 2021; Ochoa et a., 2019; Saab et al., 2015; Van Zomeren et al., 2004, 2008, 2012), in order to better understand participants' reactions towards the group disadvantage. Therefore, we test the internal legitimacy effect and the reliability of that norm on social support, group efficacy, and collective action tendencies against the disadvantage.

We expect high identifiers (vs. low) to contest the ingroup norm once the disadvantage is legitimized, by showing higher levels of social support, group efficacy, and collective action support. However, we expect this only if the ingroup norm reliability is weak, namely when a small (vs. large) ingroup sample supports it, as the chances to gather support amongst other ingroup members are better. A norm endorsed by a small ingroup sample will be easier to dispute as it might be seen as biased or unrepresentative (Doosje, Spears et al., 1995). Therefore, we expect a three-way legitimacy interaction, sample size and social identification, showing that high identifiers reject the ingroup norm when accepting the disadvantage by being supported by a small ingroup sample. We developed a fictitious scenario using a socially relevant issue to test these hypotheses: the Spanish Government's allocation of economic resources among regions. Participants read an extract from an alleged report about the distribution of regional economic resources, which stated that their own region (Andalusia) would receive less economic funding than others.

Method

Design

Participants were 73 Andalusian undergraduates (50 women; mean age 22.92), who received course credit for their participation. They were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions in a 2 (Internal

legitimacy: Legitimate vs. Illegitimate) × 2 (Sample size: Small vs. Large) between participants' factorial design. Andalusian citizens were framed as the ingroup at disadvantage. Social identification was measured by seven items ($\alpha = .92$, adapted from Doosje, Ellemers, et al.,1995, e.g., "I see myself as an Andalusian"), and included as a centered continuous predictor in the regression analysis.

Procedure

Participants were asked to read an alleged report on a socially crucial matter: the Spanish Government's allocation of economic resources among regions. Based on the planned regional economic resource distribution, the text stated Andalusia would receive less economic funding than other regions. It was also stated that a survey had been conducted to know Andalusians' opinion on this issue. In legitimate conditions, participants read that (Andalusians) citizens previously surveyed legitimized the ingroup disadvantage based on reasons related to the well-known Andalusian stereotype of high warmth and low competence (Morales et al., 2004; e.g., The budget cuts in Andalusia are understandable as Andalusian workers are less competent than those from other regions.) In illegitimate conditions, participants read that other Andalusians framed the situation as unfair, rejecting the stereotypic reasons (e.g., "Andalusians are as competent as workers from other regions; thus, we deserve the same investment as they do".) In addition, in the large sample participants were informed that a large sample of Andalusians was surveyed (a large sample of 2453 people from the eight counties in the region.) By contrast, in the small sample the information came from a small number of Andalusians (a small sample of 67 people from two main cities in the region.) Further, in order to make the ingroup character of the norm more salient, the text stated that citizens from a different region justified Andalusia's disadvantage (external legitimacy), and this was constant across conditions.

Note that we expected that this type of social disadvantage might be relevant for participants, as it implies important consequences and refers to the well-known history of intergroup dynamics among the different Spanish regions. In addition, the texts used in each condition were based on previous experimental procedures that turned out to be effective (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2012, 2015, 2017); therefore, this guaranteed the credibility of the manipulations.

After reading the text, participants spent approximately 15 minutes completing a questionnaire comprising the dependent variables.

This project followed the international ethics standards: participants signed an informed consent prior to the experiment and received a complete debriefing after their participation. They also received information regarding how to contact the main researcher of the experiment in case they needed more details.

Dependent variables

To check the effectiveness of the manipulations, participants rated the extent to which the in-group thought the situation was just (1 = *very unfair*, 7 = *very fair*), and the sample size of the in-group surveyed members (1 = *very small*, 7 = *very large*). We measured social support tendencies using opinion social support and action social support items (see Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). The former was measured with three items referred to the perceived ingroup appraisals of the shared disadvantaged situation ($\alpha = .53$, although reliability was relatively low, the analysis of the separate items showed similar effects, i.e., "I think other Andalusians disagree with this economic allocation"; "I think the current economic allocation for other Andalusians is fair (R)"; "I think other Andalusians are against the current economic allocation").

Action social support was measured with three items, related to the perceived willingness to contest the disadvantage in other ingroup members ($\alpha = .86$, i.e., "I think other Andalusians are willing to do something against the current situation"; "I think other Andalusians would agree with the idea of going on a demonstration against the current situation"; "I think other Andalusians would like to act against the unequal economic allocation").

We measured group efficacy perceptions with five items adapted from Van Zomeren et al. (2008) ($\alpha = .91$, e.g., "I think together we are able to change this situation"). Finally, we measured collective action tendencies with two scales, namely the extent to which participants would approve collective action against inequality (that is, to change the economic allocation), and the extent to which they would take part in collective action (see Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017). We argue that it is interesting to distinguish between these two concepts, given that taking part in social movements implies higher costs than just supporting and approving these actions. Therefore, by measuring both concepts we are able to better understand participants' responses

toward the disadvantage. Eight items were used to measure each concept (α = .83; α = .88, respectively, e.g., "I would approve the fact that other Andalusians would sign a petition to establish an equal allocation"; "I would sign a petition to establish an equal allocation"). Participants used a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) to answer the items, except for collective action items in which they used a scale up to 11.

We also measured radical collective action tendencies and the perception of the in-group stereotype. These results are not reported here, as they are not in line with the aim of this work; however, they are described in previous ones (see Jiménez-Moya et al., 2012, 2015).

Results

Manipulation checks

We ran separate ANOVAs with legitimacy and sample size as independent variables on the legitimacy and the sample size check (as dependent variables), showing that participants in the legitimate conditions reported the ingroup perceived the situation as fairer (*M* = 6.03) than individuals in the illegitimate conditions (*M* = 1.44, $F(1, 69) = 238.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .77$). Participants in the large sample size conditions perceived the surveyed sample size larger (M = 4.05) than participants in the small sample conditions (*M* = 1.58, $F(1, 69) = 31.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$). There were no others significant results (Fs < 1, ns).

Main results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among variables. In regression analyses, we entered the legitimacy and sample size as dummy coded (0 = *legitimate*, 1 = *illegitimate*; 0 = *small*, 1 = *large*) and social identification as a continuous predictor. Collinearity statistics for all regression analyses were within acceptable ranges (tolerance > 0.10 and variance inflation factors < 10; Cohen et al., 2003). Main effects are shown in Table 2 and interactions are reported below.

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Opinion social support	5.54(1.31)		.50**	.01	.22	.09
2. Action social support	4.84(1.41)			.26*	.28*	.31**
3. Group efficacy	5.07(1.34)				.19	.30**
4. Approval of collective action	7.71(2.03)					.65**
5. Inten. to participate in coll. action	6.73(2.33)					

Note. n = 73. Inten. to participate in coll. action = intention to participate in collective action.
* *p* < .05. **p* < .01.

Table 2
Main Effects

	Internal legitimacy	Sample size	Social identification
Opinion social support	.44***	-.08	-.03
Action social support	-.23*	.31**	.20†
Group efficacy	.19†	-.06	.30**
Approval of collective action	.20†	.07	.35**
Inten. to participate in coll. action	.13	.06	.32**

Note. Inten. to participate in coll. action = intention to participate in collective action.
†*p* < .10, * *p* < .05, **p* < .01, ***p* < .001.

Social support

As expected, we found a three-way interaction of legitimacy, sample size, and social identification on action social support ($β = .59$, $p = .02$, see Figure 1), that we decomposed by the legitimacy factor in order to further analyze it (Aiken & West, 1991). This analysis showed that social identification had a positive effect under legitimate conditions, but only when a small sample legitimized the disadvantaged ($β = .60$, $p = .02$). That is, high identifiers perceived higher levels of support when the reliability of the legitimate norm was weak (vs. large sample conditions, $β = -.22$, $p = .24$). The effect of identification was non-significant in the illegitimate conditions ($β = .27$, $p = .24$; $β = .39$, $p = .09$ for small and large conditions respectively).

We did not find significant results for opinion social support.

Figure 1
Perceptions of Action Social Support by High and Low Identifiers Participants in the Legitimate and Illegitimate Conditions, as a Function of Sample Size.
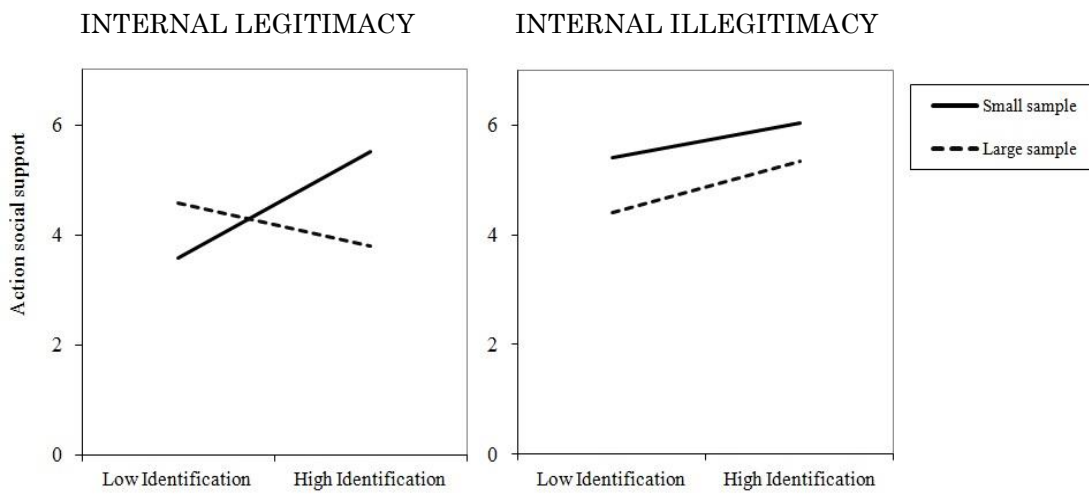
Group efficacy

We found a two-way interaction Legitimacy × Social identification ($β = -.50$, $p < .01$) showing that, under legitimate conditions, high identifiers (vs. low) perceived higher levels of group efficacy ($β = .73$, $p < .001$). This effect was not significant under illegitimate conditions ($β = .07$, $p = .69$).

Approval of collective action

Analysis showed the predicted three-way interaction on the approval of collective action ($β = -.54$, $p = .04$, see Figure 2). As before, we decomposed this interaction by the legitimacy factor, showing that social identification positively predicted the approval of collective action under small sample conditions, but this effect was stronger under legitimate conditions ($β = 1.04$, $p < .001$), compared to illegitimate conditions ($β = .50$, $p = .04$). In line with the results for action social support, high identifiers approve collective action to a greater extent when just a small ingroup sample framed the disadvantage as legitimate. This effect was not significant under large sample conditions ($β = -.13$, $p = .43$ for legitimate condition, $β = .30$, $p = .21$ for illegitimate condition).

Intention to participate in collective action

We found an interaction between sample size and social identification ($β = -.38$, $p = .03$), indicating that group identification had a positive effect on the willingness to take action only under small sample conditions ($β = .55$, $p < .01$; $β = .27$, $p = .62$ for large sample conditions).

In general, results were in line with our hypothesis, showing that high identifiers resisted the ingroup legitimization of the disadvantage when this norm was supported by a small ingroup sample and, therefore, dissent had more chances of succeeding.

Figure 2
Approval of Collective Action by High and Low Identifiers Participants in the Legitimate and Illegitimate Conditions, as a Function of Sample Size.
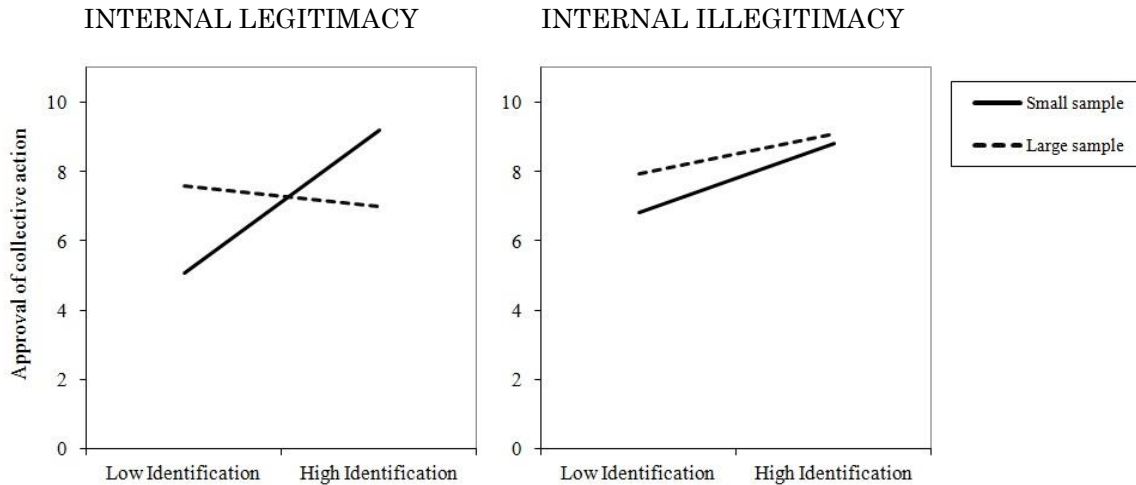
Discussion

Results showed that high identifiers perceived more scope for change (i.e., higher levels of social support and higher approval of collective action) than low identifiers when the norm implied ingroup legitimacy, but its reliability was weak (i.e., small sample condition.) However, when the norm was more reliable (i.e., a larger ingroup sample supported it), high identifiers did not differ from low identifiers. We argue that in this case, the possibility of gathering support is lower, as the norm is strong it is accepted by a large ingroup sample. That is, although they might be aware of the ingroup disadvantaged situation, high identifiers preferred not to show dissent (i.e., uneasy conformity), presumably because the opportunity to challenge the social order is low, due to the lack of ingroup support. Under small sample conditions, however, participants might see the norm as biased (Doosje, Spears et al.,1995); thus, easier to dispute. Note that participants were only told that a small ingroup sample legitimized (or not) the disadvantage; they had no information about how the rest framed the situation. This allowed them to perceive the norm as unrepresentative or even not normative, such that deviance implied less an act of dissent, if only a few members endorsed the norm. However, the fact that they contested the norm does not imply that they were insensitive about what others thought, despite disagreeing (see Hodges & Geyer, 2006).

Thus, in line with our predictions, high identifiers are willing to contest the in-group norm of legitimization when the reliability of the norm is weak, as it is supported by a small ingroup sample, so there are more chances to succeed in gathering other members' support. In this case, the future rewards for high identifiers (i.e., enhancing the group's position in the social hierarchy in the long term) should be more determining and valuable than the costs associated with weakening group harmony.

This result has crucial implications in terms of social change and equality. Even though, historically minority groups have led the way to social change—think, for example in social movements against racism and sexism—majority support is also necessary in order to challenge social hierarchies. Therefore, albeit those individuals highly committed to the disadvantaged groups are willing to fight for social equality even when the situation is framed as fair and deserved by the ingroup, they need some majority support in order to do so.

Although in line with previous studies (e.g., Jiménez-Moya et al., 2017; Packer, 2008), these results must be taken cautiously, as this research presents limitations. Firstly, these findings need to be replicated using larger samples and in other social groups, as the one used was probably too small to test three-way

interactions. Secondly, albeit we found support for our hypothesis, this was confirmed for two independent variables, namely action social support and the approval of collective action. Results for group efficacy and the intention to participate in collective action were in line with the rationale proposed, but we did not find the expected interplay among the three variables, legitimacy, sample size, and social identification. Further, we found non-significant results for opinion social support. Thus, future research should shed light on the effects of each of these variables which, even though related to collective action tendencies, might be playing different roles when it comes to social change. Thirdly, we did not measure current behavior but intentions to participate in collective action; therefore, it would be interesting to measure real participation in social movements. Finally, these results do not confirm the causal effect of social identification when it comes to resisting social disadvantage as we measured but did not manipulate this factor. Thus, future research might use experimental procedures in order to manipulate social identification in real or artificial groups.

In conclusion, this work shows that individuals who highly identify with the ingroup are willing to resist and contest social disadvantage by means of collective action, as the own ingroup accepts and legitimizes the disadvantage. However, this deviance from the ingroup norm of legitimacy only occurs when the reliability of the norm is weak; that is, when just a small ingroup sample perceives the disadvantage as legitimate. This shows that, albeit high identifiers are willing to challenge the social hierarchy, they also need to rely on ingroup support to act against the disadvantage.

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