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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Theorizing collective action—Instrumental collectivism as a key concept for explaining workplace collective action

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Abstract

This article addresses workplace collective action. Through a discussion of instrumental and norm-driven motivations for workers' collective action, it is argued that most workers are driven mainly by instrumental motivations—meaning, that they aim to achieve certain outcomes. Consequently, the theoretical concept of instrumental collectivism from Alan Fox is utilized to explain and understand collective action. Finally, six conditions facilitating workplace collective action, including an ideational and hence constructivist element, are identified and discussed providing a more nuanced theoretical framework of workers' collective action that allows for workers' agency and refutes that instrumentalism per se leads to individualized behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Workers' collective action remains a core issue for theorization in industrial relations studies. Collective action (or the lack thereof, often resulting in more individualized approaches) has strong implications for societal outcomes such as wage inequality, the labor share, and precarity at work, which in turn explains a significant share of societal inequalities. Workplace collective action moreover often provides the foundation for more aggregated or institutionalized types of collective action. Workplace collective action is, therefore, an important topic to understand and explain, which has been at the center of analysis of work from Marx to Gouldner and Burawoy and up to present-day studies of work and employment. In addition, repeated calls for further theorizing on work, employment, and industrial relations have been put forward; for instance, for better analytical grasping the growth of precarious work (see Doellgast et al., 2021 for a recent

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call). This article seeks to contribute to developing the theoretical foundation of industrial relations analysis by providing a theoretical framework for explaining *collective action at work*.

Collective action in the workplace or at more aggregated levels is often described as either driven by norms (like solidarity) or by economistic, rational choices made by workers, echoing two classic motives for human action from Weber (1922), namely Zweckrationalität—instrumental–rational motives—and Wertrationalität, motives based on values and norms.[1] However, the assumption of inferred motivations *applicable for all workers*—whether from a rational choice/economistic viewpoint or from the viewpoint of inherent (class-based) solidarity—seems unfeasible, analytically unjustified, and accordingly problematic. Nevertheless, it appears well established in the industrial relations literature that workers (for the larger part) are mainly instrumental rather than normatively driven in their labor market behavior (Crouch, 1982; Fox, 1985; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kelly, 1998). Hyman (1992: 160) sums it up concisely: "While trade-union activists and ideologues may have traditionally viewed collectivism as a moral value in its own right, it is perhaps realistic to assume that – apart from moments of enthusiasm of mass mobilization – most union members have adhered to collective organization for instrumental reasons: the most effective means of realizing individual needs and aspirations."

Yet, this does not mean that workers are per se best understood as utility maxing, and not least *individualized* actors when analyzing collective action. For this, there are at least three reasons. First, as stated by Fox (1985: 6): "Individualism is not necessarily to be opposed to collectivism," and an instrumental approach does not automatically translate into individual utility-maximizing behavior. Indeed, it can also result in what Fox (1985) termed *instrumental collectivism*, where workers as a *group* seek to improve their own position when certain conditions are present (wherefore it becomes important to identify these conditions). Second, motives are typically mixed in the real world where workers may have both elements of individualized, utility-maximizing behavior, and elements of norm-based behavior (Elster, 1990; Etzioni, 1988). Third, motives and rationales are not constants that can be deduced from one's position in the production system or from assumed normative attitudes; rather, they are shaped by societal factors, including norms, ideas, and ideology, as well as by everyday life and community experiences (Cumbers et al., 2010; Fantasia, 1988; Kelly, 1998). Accordingly, emphasizing instrumental motives does not preclude that norms, ideas, and ideology play an important role in *shaping* the instrumental perception of workers (Hay, 2011; McLaughlin & Wright, 2018).

The theoretical research questions which this article is accordingly concerned with are as follows: Why workers act collectively, hence seeking to understand and explain workplace collective action, and secondly, how applying the concept of "instrumental collectivism" from the work of Alan Fox can help to improve our understanding and analysis of workplace collective action. In doing so, the article also identifies key conditions that explain when and why collective action occurs.

INSTRUMENTAL COLLECTIVISM

An important starting point for the line of argument presented in this article is an observation of the uncritical use of the notion of *solidarity* in much sociological literature on work and working life. Solidarity is often understood as the omnipresence of unified, normative, or ideological beliefs of the working class, and hence also of individual workers. If solidarity is not present, it is occasionally argued that workers are not aware of their "real interests," or that they simply have false consciousness. Yet, the term solidarity remains ambiguous and contested in the sociology of work literature (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2015; Morgan

[1]Weber, in his original work, operates with four different motives for human action – the two left out here are the emotional and the traditional motives.

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& Pulignano, 2020). It has additionally been argued that solidarity, which Wilde (2007: 171) defines as “the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support,” is “confined to the realm of rhetoric” (Wilde, 2007, p. 171) and that the gains for analytical purposes remain limited. The use of the term solidarity often results in neglecting internal conflict between workers, and between unions, and hence falsely assuming that workers and the working class as such can arrive at coherent solutions that are the right solutions for *all* workers. History has proven that this is wrong as well as being close to an impossible task. I, therefore, argue that collective action is better suited analytically for grasping the dimensions often subsumed under the term solidarity (cf. Morgan & Pulignano, 2020), as this leaves the normative assumptions about reciprocity aside. On the other hand, economists assume that workers are rational actors who seek to maximize their own utility, and while most economists acknowledge that the assumption that workers (and human beings in general) are utility maximizing is problematic—and often not met—they still analyze the real world as if this is the case. Although it may seem reasonable to assume that many workers share interests, at least in regard to wages and working conditions, nevertheless this does not mean that these interests a priori translate into patterns of collective action (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024).

The concept of *instrumental collectivism* offers a strong analytical and heuristic prism for understanding workers' collective action. I use Fox's (1985) definition of instrumental collectivism as a starting point for my assessment of collective action. Fox (1985, p. 192) defines instrumental collectivism as follows: “… in which individuals, while still using perceived self-interest as their criterion of judgement and action, find it expedient to concert with others on those issues where collective action yields better results.” Fox distinguishes this from “atomistic individualism” where workers not only pursue their own enlightened self-interest, “… but do so with no concerted action between them, each acting as an atomistic, independent and self-responsible unit and being treated as such.” (Fox, 1985: 192). As stated above, it has repeatedly been put forward in the literature that we must understand workers' collectivism as instrumental collectivism (Crouch, 1982; Fox, 1985; Goldthorpe et al., 1969; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Healy et al., 2004; Kelly, 1998; Roberts et al., 1972; Waddington & Whitston, 1997). Instrumental collectivism accordingly acknowledges the instrumental current among most workers, stressing that this may lead to collective behavior (or to individualistic behavior), depending on the setting and the situation. Thus, the individual workers become a collective factor in labor relations and accordingly in societal development (although they may not be aware of this (Hobsbawm, 1998, p. viii)), since work remains essentially a collective endeavor (for the vast majority of workers at least), as originally pointed out by Marx (Stewart et al., 2020).

However, the instrumental starting point does not exclude that (some) workers may hold important norms of collectivism as well; as already stated, motivations are often mixed in real life, so the individual worker may have elements of both, hence bridging some of the gaps between instrumental and normative motives or—in Weberian terms—*Zweckrationälitet* and *Wertrationälitet*, with the latter here associated with normative-driven motivations, often within the sociology of work literature aligned with “solidarity.” While acknowledging the potential relevance of understanding human behavior (and hence also behavior in relation to work) as either rational or norm based, I argue that these often co-exist, as Elster (1990, p. 866) reasons: “Often, norms and rationality coexist in a parallelogram of forces that jointly determine behaviour.” Most sociologists agree that motives for social action are complex (for instance, due to bounded or limited rationality) and embedded in the social context; consequently, we expect real-life motives to be mixed (Elster, 1990; Etzioni, 1988; Granovetter, 2017; Simon, 1955). Moreover, norms, identities, interests and ideas are not static but can change and be effected by industrial relations actors (McLaughlin & Bridgman, 2017).

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Accordingly, some workers may have strong norm-based values, while others may have atomistic individualistic values (to reference Fox again (Fox, 1985) for the latter). For instance, unionists and local union cadres are likely to be more concerned about ideas of solidarity than are "common workers" (Hyman, 1992). Nevertheless, most research finds that the share of workers with strong normative viewpoints on egalitarianism or altruism, who see collectivism as a genuine commitment following from their position as wage laborers, is minimal compared with the share of workers who have a more instrumental approach. Even in what has often been described as the height of solidaristic/norm-based unionism—the Swedish metal workers' union in the 1960s and 1970s—there was a large share of union members who were more instrumental than solidaristic. In Walter Korpi's (1978, p. 171) classic study of Swedish metal workers, only 41% of the workers stated that they "think that one should be solidaristic with the labour movement." A total of 37% stated that they "personally benefit from being member of a union", another 9% were not very interested but joined anyway, and 8% felt obliged to join. A large Danish survey among workers shows that 83% of union members wanted their interests secured through union membership, while only 58% stated that solidarity with co-workers was important (Caraker et al., 2014, p. 23). These empirical examples illustrate the main argument that unions based solely on solidaristic norms are an anomaly rather than the standard occurrence.

In sum, instrumentalism is an important component of worker collectivism, and workers must be able to see how engaging collectively—for instance, through the union—can improve their position for collectivism to become a part of their strategy (cf. Crouch, 1982; Kelly, 1998). Hence, workers with a strong self-centered (or egoistic, cf. Granovetter, 2017) viewpoint may very well still arrive at collectivism as the best strategy for achieving their goals in the workplace. These workers may still have a strong focus on workplace collectives, but without necessarily sharing any collective ideals or norms. This may be an important insight for union movements and workers (and scholars doing research on workers' collectivism) to acknowledge if the current downward trend of decline and weakening of workers' organizations are to be reversed. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that individual and collective work-based struggles are often intimately linked[2] with individual grievances spilling over to collective grievances, so it does not necessarily make sense, analytically, to separate them (Martinez Lucio & Stewart, 1997; McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2011). Norms about collectivism and collective action are, however, far from constant, but can be changed, for instance, by ideas; they may also be shaped and influenced by local workplace settings and social customs (Caraker, 2011) which may even be affected by the "culture of collectivism" at the regional (MacKenzie et al., 2006; McBride, 2006) or national level (Gallie, 1983). This means that calls for collective action resonate more easily with workers in certain contexts. Accordingly, I argue that there are conditions—which I discuss in detail below—that may hinder and facilitate collective action, and that these may alter the *perception* of what is best for the worker from an instrumental point of view. Arguably, this provides us with a more constructivist framework, which also allows for both agency and structural influence on collective action.

The aim here is to contribute with a more nuanced, sociological understanding that moves beyond, on the one hand, the approach that assumes all workers are (or should be) acting according to their place in production, and on the other hand, the game-theoretic/rational choice approaches, assuming that workers are rational and calculative, which dominated much of the literature in the last part of the previous century (Crouch, 1982; Olson, 1965). Moreover, this theoretical framework should allow for both structural factors and individual factors (in

[2]However, grievance systems based on individual worker rights, rather than on collective, union-based rights of cause, do facilitate more individualized approaches to struggles at work. See the discussion below on how institutions condition collective action.

line with Giddens, 1984), and the aim is to contribute to bridging norm-driven and instrumental reasoning by acknowledging the parallel existence of both types of motives (Elster, 1990), through a constructivist element where collective action is both situated in the lived experiences of work life and where ideas, norms and ideology contribute to shaping collectivism. This contributes to a theoretical framework underlining *both* the instrumental and ideational elements, as well as the conditions that may shape collective action and alter the workers' perception of collective action.

COLLECTIVE ACTION: A DEFINITION AND SOME THEORETICAL NOTES ON A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

The core aim of this article is to explain why some workers act collectively in the workplace, while others do not. Therefore, it is imperative to establish some theoretical clarity on what is meant by collective action. I offer the following definition: Collective action is workers acting together collectively to directly *improve* their working conditions (despite potential internal incoherencies). This definition underlines the direct elements of collective action, which relates intimately to a conflictual dimension at the workplace as direct actions obviously also are picked up by the employers. This definition moreover makes a theoretical distinction from various other forms of discontent—such as absenteeism or quitting the job altogether, which may be rooted in unsatisfactory working conditions, but are not, as such, meant to lead to improvements in conditions (Edwards & Hodder, 2022) or organizational misbehavior (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) which results in the workers "getting by" or "coping" but without any active resentment. The theoretical emphasis is on the collective action itself and the more direct, conflictual shapes it may take, and accordingly less on indirect actions, in particular collective bargaining, which may follow certain "scripts" that in some contexts reduce tensions and lower the likelihood for collective action (Hansen, 2023). Accordingly, the emphasis is on *the workplace level* and the relations at the place of production and not within society itself. Consequently, more aggregated dimensions of collective action (including collective bargaining)—for instance, at sector or regional level—are not the focus of the ideas developed in this article, although this is not to argue that these do not matter. While other types of collective action may also connect to the capitalist–labor relation, none are as intimately entangled with capitalism as the labor relation, which remains the defining feature of the modern capitalist system; hence, workplace collective action requires a particular model of theorizing.[3]

The most traditional means of collective action is the strike (Hyman, 1972), while other types of collective action, such as go-slows or "work to the rule," resembles the strike by affecting the company's output/production. Other types may include articulating collective demands, putting pressure on companies (for instance, via social media), resisting or countering employers' actions, calling for help from external actors (such as labor inspectorates, police or other authorities, or unions), and supporting co-workers, for instance, being fired or otherwise sanctioned. An important argument here is that we must understand collective action as a dynamic and hence changeable phenomenon that may look and develop very differently under diverging institutional, economic, and cultural settings, and under a range of conditions

[3]As opposed to the social movement theory within sociology, which seeks to explain social movements in general. While there have been attempts to bridge these traditions, social movements literature often distances itself from previous research on workplace action and the labour movement in general (della Porta, 2020). The article will therefore only sporadically make references to the social movement theory. For a thorough discussion of the potential gains from engaging with social movement theory when explaining collective action and unionism, see Gahan and Pekarek (2013).

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influencing the actual collective action. Accordingly, collective action may occur in ruptures when the conditions are right (Fantasia, 1988).

While this article stresses how workers come to act collectively, employers do obviously have an important role in shaping collective action. While some national contexts have more favorable settings for positive union–employer relations, the standpoint of the individual companies does also matter. Some big, well-renowned companies like Amazon and Tesla have a fierce antiunion stance, which obviously makes collective action more difficult in these companies. Employer's antiunion stands also influence workers' decision to join the union or not (Freeman et al., 2007). This I argue informs workers' assessment of the likelihood of success (see the discussion of facilitators below) which affects the collective action. Next, I discuss some dimensions with important implications for collective action—namely interests, unions, and class—in greater detail.

A note on collective interests

The concept of instrumental collectivism entails workers being aware of their interests, which in turn implies that there are some sort of (at least perceived) shared interests, which prompt the workers to take collective action. This raises the question famously posed by John Kelly (1998, p. 4); "…how do workers come to define their interests in collective or individual terms?". While this remains a key question in the sociology of work, the emphasis on *instrumental collectivism* in this article challenges Kelly's famous question, since I argue that the distinction between collective and individual terms is oversimplified. Since most workers have an instrumental (and hence often an individual) starting point, I argue that the question should rather be: How do workers come to define *the means* to achieve their interests in collective or individual terms?

If we are to understand behavior as derived from interest, it requires some prior understanding of how these interests are formed (Etzioni, 1988), and to understand workers' interests we must move beyond the static assumptions that all workers hold the same interests. Assessing workers' interests, however, is a highly complex and multilevel matter, as pointed out by Edwards (1986), and as Meardi (2011) has convincingly argued, collective interests "… *need to be recognized, defined and expressed*." Yet, we may reasonably assume that workers, for instance, strive for better wages and better working conditions; however, there are trade-offs. For example, working for piece-rate payment may increase wages but may see a deterioration in working conditions. Accordingly, interests (whether they are collective or individual) cannot be deduced from the position in production, as they are also partly social constructed and accordingly eclectic (Fantasia, 1988; Hay, 2011; Thompson, 1968) and difficult to assess empirically (Edwards & Hodder, 2022, pp. 232–233). Consequently, unions (Korpi, 1978), union organizers (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016), shop stewards (Beynon, 1973), and workers themselves (Kelly, 1998) contribute to the recognition and definition of collective interests. Moreover, acknowledging shared interests, *and* identifying collective means to achieve these, does not per se lead to collective action.

A note on unions and collective organization

Collective action generally requires at least some—temporary and potentially less formalistically structured—kind of collective organization. There is a need for coordination and potential for decision-making. This may be a simple assembly among the workers, but it may also take the shape of a more formalized collective organization. Trade unions have been the major form of collective organization among workers over the last century and a half; nevertheless, the importance and scope of trade unionism have declined across most of the globe (Baccaro &

Howell, 2018; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Visser, 2019). While acknowledging that unions, despite their loss of influence, remain important (more so in specific contexts such as the Northern European, in particular, the Nordic countries), this article deals more specifically with workplace collective action. Unions may take different roles in workplace collective action, for instance, by initiating or substantiating local action; however, in other instances, collective action occurs without the involvement or presence of a union (or even counter to the wishes or advice of the union) (Han, 2023). Collectivism and collective action may, for instance, stem from networks or workers without union presence (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2011). Obviously, a framework for understanding collective action among workers must consider what the most prevalent form of collective organization is in each context studied. Yet, *collective organization* and *collective orientation* are not the same (Edwards, 1986; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980), and we might find one without the other. A potentially important contribution of unions may be in interest formation, where union ideology and ideational influence can lead to workers perceiving their interests in collective terms (Korpi, 1978; McLaughlin & Wright, 2018).

Relating collective action to class and class identity

Class remains important in contemporary society (see, e.g., Savage, 2015), the overall argument in this article, however, is that we cannot predict patterns of collective action based on a certain worker's (objective or subjective) position in the class structure. “The notion a working class was always an abstraction,” Hyman (1992, p. 165) convincingly reminds us. Nor do classes have an interest as such, but “class interests” (to the extent that we can meaningfully talk about them) are formed by the interests of those individuals making up a certain class (Edwards, 1986; Wright, 2000, p. 962). Class concepts other than the traditional Marxian understanding of the relationship to production have gained in importance; neo-Weberian class accounts emphasize the occupational structure and organizational hierarchy (Goldthorpe, 1996), while the class perspectives inspired by Bourdieu emphasize cultural traits (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage, 2015). We must therefore conceptualize class as a more complex phenomenon than one solely derived from the workers' place in production, especially when analyzing collective action.

Although we cannot deduct behavior from ascribing individuals to certain class positions, I argue that the diminishing of working-class identity and collective identities (Hyman, 2004) has made it more challenging to mobilize workers to take collective action. This results in less antagonistic worldviews, which may translate into a decreasing willingness to take part in workplace collective action. This is important insofar as the argument here is that the will to collective action is shaped by everyday experiences and relations as well as by working-class identification (Fantasia, 1988; Gallie, 1983; Healy et al., 2004; Lockwood, 1966). Moreover, identities beyond that derived from work are growing in importance, which calls for theoretical development of the concepts applied to understand work, class, and employment (Bradley, 1996; Doellgast et al., 2021; Piore & Safford, 2006). While workers may have multiple sources of identity formation, this does not per se reduce the incentive for collective action, as these different identities also connect to work and class. However, it may contribute to reducing the vitality of working-class identity, which is important for workplace collective action.

COMBINING INSTRUMENTAL COLLECTIVISM AND CONDITIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION—A DYNAMIC FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLAINING COLLECTIVE ACTION

While understanding collective action through the concept of instrumental collectivism is helpful, it does not in itself answer the question of *why and when* workers act collectively.

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Certain conditions facilitate or hinder collective action and it is therefore important to identify these conditions when explaining collective action. I put forward six conditions, which in combination with the concept of instrumental collectivism provide the theoretical framework of workplace collective action. These conditions can be understood as the embeddedness of the collective action in the social context. The conceptual framework offered here can hence be said to bridge the two different understandings of human behavior, one where humans are rational and utility maximizing (Zweckrationälitet) and one where norms, ideology, and culture shape human behavior (Wertrationälitet). I argue that they both are influential, as social motives typically are mixed in the real world (Elster, 1990), we might find combinations of instrumental *and* normative motives when explaining collective action. The concept of instrumental collectivism provides a starting point, which emphasize the instrumental dimension of workers' collective action. However, when we analyze actual collective action through the conditions offered here, it becomes clear that ideas and norms (and hence norm-based motives) also impact, for instance, the assessment and willingness to collective action.

I think it is important to underline that we need to be eclectic in applying these conditions, and I do not suggest that the theoretical model offered here can and will explain *all* instances of collective action. We might find cases where all the conditions are present but without collective action. There may also be other, more unlikely cases where the presence of a few of the conditions is sufficient to facilitate collective action. We may also find cases where other conditions, such as leadership, employer attitude, and group psychology, determine collective action (or the lack thereof). This is a matter of empirical investigation and of theorizing as to why some conditions may be more important than others in certain cases and contexts. However, the conditions presented here are the ones that I—based on theoretical and empirical considerations—find to be the most convincing factors in shaping collective action among workers. The first two conditions—shared interests and the perception of a likely successful outcome—are necessary ones. If these are not present, then collective action appears very unlikely. The other four conditions (workplace size, organization, institutions, and ideology) enhance or impede the development of collective actions but are not necessary as such. For instance, we may very well find collective action in a small workplace, but I argue that it is more likely to be found in larger workplaces.

Workers are, of course, different—certainly in terms of interest and collective action—with some being easily convinced and others much more skeptical (see, e.g., Fantasia, 1988), and collectivism is also both personal and *context* dependent (McBride & Martínez Lucio, 2011). Yet, the impact of the context can be strong and may, in extreme cases, overcome (virtually) all individual preferences, for instance, in workplaces where collectivism is highly institutionalized and the only option for not joining the "collective" is quitting the job (Wagner & Refslund, 2016). Since collective actions are shaped by the context, this may also rapidly change, and we may expect collective action to occur in spurs, when the workers come to define the means to achieve their interests in collective rather than individual terms. We must accordingly underline the situational and temporal dimensions of collective action (Fantasia, 1988). Here, the macro-economic context may also play a part, so that collective action is more likely to occur when unemployment is low, and hence the likelihood of finding another job is good.

Insights into inter-person and inter-group dynamics can also contribute to shaping collective action (supplementing the conditions suggested later). Here, I will accentuate two effects from these strands of literature. The first is the group dynamic, where some workers may be hesitant to participate in collective action (for calculative reasons) until they are certain that enough workers are joining in, at which point it may become rational for actors to imitate the behavior of others (Hedström, 1998). This suggests that thresholds for collective action occurs; however, specifying these thresholds is very difficult since it is situational (Granovetter, 1978). The second is an intergroup effect that can be influential beyond the workplace; for instance, strikes historically often occur in waves, where

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one strike inspires other workers to strike (in different places or even in different sectors) (Biggs, 2005; Knudsen, 2011). These two aspects may influence whether or not the collective impulse will lead to actual collective action, but these aspects are shaped by the conditions that I discuss below.

Other scholars have engaged in the same exercise of identifying the most important conditions for collective action; most notable, at least within the sociology of work, is John Kelly's (1998) mobilization theory.[4] Kelly, however, has a broader scope of explaining “mobilization” in general (of which collective action is an element) and how responses to mobilization become politicized. He emphasizes “injustices” by the employers, common identity, collective organization, as well as leadership when explaining mobilization. My contribution is inspired by Kelly's work but departs from it by adding other key dimensions; in particular, a more explicit constructivist element by emphasizing the role of ideas and norms in collective action and collectivism, as well as putting less emphasis on certain dimensions highlighted by Kelly, particularly identity and leadership, which Kelly strongly stresses. He argues directly: “This whole process of collectivization is heavily dependent on the actions of small numbers of leaders or activists” (Kelly, 1998, p. 44). Nevertheless, for the leadership to be able to “lead” the collective action, the workers still need a perception of shared interest and a perception that collective action may result in a successful outcome. Moreover, union leadership may be more important in institutional contexts, where ballots and other issues of union recognition are important in the first place (Kelly, 1998, p. 49).

Next, I turn to discuss in greater detail the conditions that shape collective action. Some of these resonate with the discussions above, in particular the collective interest formation and collective organization. I argue that the conditions of shared interests and a perception that the outcome of the collective action can be successful are necessary, while the rest contribute to shaping the collective action. All six conditions obviously deserve more detailed examinations than it is possible here, hence the discussions here serve as initial reflections rather than comprehensive assessments.

Shared interests

From an instrumental collectivism perspective, it is emphasized that the workers must (at least momentarily) have some shared *and* identified interests in improving their working life, and the acknowledgment of these interests is a necessary condition for collective action. Interests are partly constructed, and as discussed above they are fluid, heterogeneous, and must be recognized (Meardi, 2011). We may reasonably assume that workers in general are interested in better wages, better working conditions, decent treatment, and employment security. However, these interests need to be negotiated and acknowledged and certain factors may facilitate this, which in turn may be affected by norms and ideas. A factor often highlighted in the literature is what Kelly (1998) terms injustice; a wrongdoing perceived by the workers as attributional to the employer. It is typical in accounts of strikes that a certain action (or a series of actions) by the employer was the tipping point for the workers to take on collective action (Gouldner, 1954). However, without an acknowledgment of some underlying shared interest, such as decent treatment or better wages, these injustices do not per se lead to collective action—we find multiple injustices on a daily basis that do not result in collective action. Hence, these “injustices” (which, in some instances, may to the outside observer seem minor or even irrelevant) should ontologically be seen as triggers rather than the actual cause for collective action, with the underlying shared interests being

[4]Kelly draws on social movement's theory, in particular Charles Tilly's work. Other attempts to construct frameworks for collective action and collectivism include Lilja (1987) and O'Sullivan and Turner (2013).

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the cause that may materialize for the workers due to the "perceived injustice." This process must be seen within the broader frame of interest formation, which again is situated in the capitalist–labor relation. The latter shapes the "structured antagonism" at work, which may produce and highlight different interests for workers and management (Edwards, 1986; Edwards & Hodder, 2022; Stewart et al., 2020).

The construction of shared interest is therefore an important process in itself. Workers may not agree on their actual interests, or on the employment relation itself, for instance, whether it is seen as an antagonistic relation—or the workers may see the employer as a benefactor creating job opportunities. Finally, there may also be trade-offs between different interests among the workers. For some workers, there seems a lot to be gained through collective action, while others are in the position of having a lot at stake—for instance, migrant workers may lose their work or residence permit as a consequence of collective action. Generally, most workers have an interest in keeping their jobs, which provides common ground with the employers (Edwards, 1986), basically reducing the willingness to take collective action (as this directly or indirectly threatens the continuation of the job).

Likelihood of success

Another necessary condition for collective action is whether the workers believe that it may lead to a successful outcome (Korpi, 1978), in other words, whether they assess they have the power to achieve their interests. Workers may agree on shared interests—for instance, a specific issue such as a wage demand—but still have the perception that collective action will not be successful, or that the employers are too powerful for their action to be successful (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024). This illustrates the importance of an instrumental dimension, which does not have to be rational as such (full human rationality is most likely also an illusion (Etzioni, 1988)), but rather builds on certain assumptions; or it may be partially rational ("bounded rationality"), where one can only be rational up to a certain degree. In sum, it may be more relevant to discuss the *perceived likelihood of success*, and hence the *assumed power balance* between the actors (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024; Beynon, 1973; Korpi, 1985). Here, a prevailing narrative of unions as an actor with declining powers can contribute, along with deregulation and liberalization, to the perception of a lower likelihood of successful outcomes of collective action, further stressing a constructivist element of collective actions. Likewise, the perception that collective action may be successful can be created and amplified through union influence, co-workers, and ideology (Han, 2023; Jiang & Korczynski, 2016; Korpi, 1978; Lysgaard, 1967), as well as through previous experience (successes and failures) of collective action. The widespread decline in industrial action (in particular, strikes) and in collective organization (particularly, unionization) has often been linked with a decline in workers' collective orientation. However, this could be an oversimplification, and it may be that *the perceived likelihood of a successful outcome of collective action*, rather than collective attitudes themselves, has been weakened under deregulation, and increasing global competition (Peetz, 2010), and accordingly changing power balance, where workers have been losing out to employers (Baccaro & Howell, 2018; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013).

Even when these two necessary conditions (shared interests and likelihood of success) are met, they do not *automatically* translate into collective action. Other factors condition the collective action, and it is to these that I now turn.

Workplace size

Marx and other early observers found that worker collectivism flourishes more easily in larger work sites, with closeness to other workers contributing to a stronger worker identity and to worker unity, as well as enhancing the antagonistic impetus toward the employers (Lysgaard, 1967; Millward et al., 1992). Historically, large companies often facilitated strong, spatial worker communities (for instance, in certain neighborhoods or a "big plant in a small community" setting) (Kerr & Siegel, 1954; Knudsen, 2011). This, however, runs counter to a core argument from social psychology that larger groups have more difficulties in enforcing norms because the social networks are less dense (Granovetter, 2017, p. 16). However, it may be that "the dense social network" in smaller companies increases cohesion with the employers, rather than the categories of worker, and concurrently blurs potential conflicts with owners/employers, in turn leading to more informal industrial relations in small companies (Rainnie, 1989). Nevertheless, collective resistance may also arise in dispersed settings, for instance, for platform workers where digital technology offers an alternative to strong workplace ties (Stewart et al., 2020) or through networks (Apitzsch et al., 2023), although these remain exceptions. Overall, larger workplaces with a higher concentration of workers (and often more concentrated labor processes) increase the likelihood of collective action.

Collective organization and the impact of unions

Organizational structures enable collective action. These may be very momentarily and loosely knit, but they may also be more permanent structures, with trade unions being the most important permanent organization. Unions can be active facilitators of collective action (for both unionized and non-unionized workers), by structuring and planning such action or by facilitating it through communication, deliberations, and convincing workers of their (shared) interests, and of the potential successes of collective action (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Han, 2023; Hyman, 1994; Kelly, 1998). Unions have always used agitation to create collective action, as illustrated by the key role of agitators in the formative years of most union movements (Knudsen, 2011). The workplace setting is also important for the construction of collective identities, and the union can have a strong impact on this. Yet Caraker (2011) finds, in a comparison of two industrial sites, that the character of the "workers' collective" is equally important, and this may not necessarily be aligned with the union. Hence, it is not only unions as such that are decisive but also the local "workers' collective" and initiatives (Caraker, 2011; Han, 2023; Lysgaard, 1967). However, these "workers' collectives" or communities often overlap with, or ultimately integrate into, the unions, at least where unions are still predominant. In other national contexts—such as the USA—labor struggles are often about union recognition in the first place. Finally, previous experiences with unions play an important role in explaining why some workers are more inclined toward collective action than others. In some settings, unions remain strong and legitimate actors, while in others, their role is rather seen as an anachronism (Gallie, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1976; Wright & McLaughlin, 2021).

Institutions

Institutions embedded in the political economy may hinder or facilitate collective action through the instrumental assessment of collective action and hence shape the outcome of these. Some national contexts have institutional settings that are much more supportive of workers' collective action, and the institutions may act as power resources in themselves (Madi, 2023; O'Brady, 2021; Refslund & Arnholtz, 2022). These institutions include labor

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law, industrial relations regulation—for instance, regulations on unionization and strikes—collective bargaining systems, arbitration, unemployment benefit systems, and conciliation institutions, as well as more general state traditions and state regulation (Crouch, 1993; Gallie, 1983; Howell, 2021). These institutions may directly hinder or facilitate collective action, but may also contribute to shaping, for instance, the workers' perceived likelihood of success, and hence the workers' repertoire of potential actions. One obvious example is strike regulations, which still vary greatly across national settings, while another is generous unemployment benefit systems, which make industrial conflict less risky for the individual worker. While the impact of institutions has changed and in many instances declined (Streeck, 2009), they remain important scoping conditions for collective action (O'Brady, 2021). Obviously, the impact of institutions on collective action merits a longer and more thorough discussion which is beyond the scope of this article (but see, for instance, the work of O'Brady for greater details).

Ideology, ideas, and norms shaping collective action

Overall, this article seeks to bridge instrumental and constructivist explanations for collective action, and ideology, ideas, and norms have a key role in this, as ideational elements shape the workers' (instrumental) assessment of whether collectivism pays off or not. A key element in explaining workers' collective action is the distinction between the *ability* to collective action and the members' *willingness* to engage in collective action (Korpi, 1978; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980). If the workers are not willing to engage in collective action (and the employer may be aware of this), the threat of collective action has no real value. This willingness is obviously influenced by other factors with ideational elements—such as the two core conditions mentioned above: the perceived likelihood of success and shared interests—but also by dimensions such as the degree of working-class identity, employers' antiunion stance, collectivist narratives of labor, and hence the overall strength of “worker collectivism” in each setting. These ideational factors are not constant and can be impacted by workers, unions, employers, and collective discussions, norms, and ideology (Hyman, 2001; Korpi, 1978; Steinberg, 1999).

Hence, the instrumental reasoning associated with instrumental collectivism does not preclude an important role for norms and ideology in collective action, and the role of ideas in work and employment studies is also gaining increasing attention (Carstensen et al., 2022; Doellgast et al., 2021; McLaughlin & Wright, 2018). Since interests are not given, but constructed (Hay, 2011), ideas, norms, and ideology can affect how workers perceive collective action and also their interests in engaging in such (Steinberg, 1999). Furthermore, it is evident from the historical experience of the working class across countries and periods of time that there is a constructivist and situated element to workers' consciousness, struggles, and formation of collective action,[5] whether at the workplace level or more aggregated levels (Gallie, 1983; Thompson, 1968). Here, ideology and unions play a key role in developing the workers' understanding of, and willingness to engage in, collective action (Korpi, 1978; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980), and unions can, for instance, create a sense of shared interests and identities (McLaughlin & Wright, 2018) or a “collective action frame”—as advocated by the social movements literature (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gahan & Pekarek, 2013)—or they can engage more directly in struggles over discourses (McLaughlin & Bridgman, 2017; Steinberg, 1999).

Yet, norms and perceptions vary across workers. Historically, some workers, such as miners, steel workers, railway workers, and dockers, were renowned for their industrial militancy,

[5]This also refers to Marx's terms of a class “an sich und für sich”, underlining much of the same argument.

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strong collectivism, and strong beliefs in the workers' movement, whereas other workers, such as clerical and white-collar workers, were less prone to collective action (Lockwood, 1966; Turnbull, 1992). While working-class identity is important for collective action, the importance of workers' identity and communities is diminishing (Hyman, 2004). Other identities beyond that of the worker are gaining in prominence and the intersectionality of traits is important, for instance, for female and migrant workers (Bradley, 1996; Doellgast et al., 2021). This decline in working-class identity would theoretically yield a decline in collective action; however, this may not be so straightforward as contemporary changes illustrate, with white-collar workers and public employees (such as nurses and teachers) increasingly engaging in collective action, as well as workers in more precarious jobs, despite the latter still being exceptions (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016; Stewart et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

It is a complex and ambitious endeavor to explain collective action, but this should not, of course, stop us from trying—the world is complex. At the same time, we should strive for analytical parsimonious, and clear-cut frameworks, for instance, by cutting out some of the complexities and nuances (Healy, 2017); hence, the theoretical framework on workplace collective action offered here should be seen in this light. It should equally be clear that such a theoretical framework *cannot* capture all situations, nonetheless, I assert (perhaps boldly) that it can help explain the majority of workplace collective actions.

A core argument here is that the concept of "Instrumental collectivism" derived from the work of Alan Fox can help capture some of the complexity of collective action and further help illuminate the considerations by which workers come to define their own position. The overall question of preference for, and formation of, collective action in many ways mirrors the grand debate about human nature between the perspective of homo economicus and that of homo sociologicus. However, it may not be so black and white in terms of collective action, which can be seen as a continuum ranging from calculative, self-interested instrumentalism to pure ideological, normative value-based collective action. The workers' positions on the scale are most likely as manifold as the number of workers, particularly since motives for human behavior are mixed. Nevertheless, based on findings from the literature and on theoretical reflections, I argue that most workers have a mainly instrumental *starting point* when defining their labor market interests and, hence when assessing possibilities for collective action. Accordingly, the theoretical framework put forward here emphasize how the instrumental starting point of workers' interest formation is important for collective action, yet it introduces a constructivist or norm-driven element, by underlining how various conditions can shape and ultimately alter the worker's assessment of and willingness to take collective action. Hence, we may find that norms and rationality as argued by Elster exist in "a parallelogram of forces" where both effect the formation of collective action.

Therefore, we cannot deduct individualized behavior, and hence reject collective action, from the instrumental starting point, as this may very well result in *instrumental collectivism*. The concept of instrumental collectivism is hence useful for understanding and explaining collective action. This furthermore implies that we likewise cannot assume that workers will carry certain collectivistic norms about, for instance, reciprocity among workers; rather, we should make an analytical distinction between instrumental collectivism and altruistic solidarity, with the latter being the exception rather than the rule. Motives and impulses for collective behavior are not constants and a range of factors may influence when workers come to perceive that the best way to achieve their interests is through collective action. Hence, we must understand the phenomenon of collective action as being situational and complex. Of the conditions identified as affecting collective action, two—shared interests

and perceived likelihood of success—are necessary conditions, while the other four—workplace size, ideational influence, unions, and institutions—shape the collective action to various degrees. Of these however, I suggest the ideational elements are the most important, as it bridges the instrumental approach with a constructivist position, where norms and ideas shape both the lived experience of work life as well as the instrumental assessment of how workers can achieve improvement in their working life. Instrumental collectivism can accordingly be seen as a subset of instrumental or rational behavior, where the workers *try to* assess what is in their best interests and conclude that collective action is the (contemporary) answer. However, assessing each situation is very difficult for the individual worker, as well as for the group, and a fully rational calculus is most likely not achievable in the real world, due to social complexity and bounded rationality. Consequently, it is important if the workers *think* that collective action is the best way to achieve their interests: this assessment can be affected and altered by actors, the employers' position, and the conditions, hence underlining the importance of a constructivist element in the framework of collective action. Applying the framework of instrumental collectivism can provide a better understanding of the decline in collective behavior in the workplace and the labor market. This decline is not necessarily explained by a decline in workers' collective values, but rather by a changing political and economic context where employers' power has been increasing due, for instance, to internationalization, deregulation, and diminishing working-class identities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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