



## Where did inaction go? Towards a broader and more refined perspective on collective actions

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While injustice is widespread, *collective* action against it appears to be rare. This paper argues that this may be because research often focuses on a narrow range of outgroup-oriented actions, such as demonstrating, signing petitions, that are symbolic of a collective response to injustice. The present work takes a bottom-up approach to study a broad range of collective and individual actions that people undertake in response to collective injustice. Participants indicated actions they *felt they could take* (Study 1) and, via interviews, *actually had taken* (Study 2) in response to human-induced earthquakes. These studies revealed a broad range of actions, many of which are collective but ingroup- (e.g., helping ingroup members) rather than outgroup-oriented. Study 3 further conceptualized these collective and individual actions by including quantitative measures thereof in an assessment of responses to stressful life events that were collective or individual. Results revealed that, while traditional forms of collective action are rare, ingroup-oriented and individual level (e.g., social support) responses form distinct dimensions in response to both individual and collective events. This work extends our understanding of responses to collective injustice and suggests the need to broaden the scope of collective action research.

It is widely acknowledged that while injustice is widespread, collective action against it is rare (Klandermans, 1997; McAdam & Boudet, 2012). But almost no research examines this supposed lack of collective action. To illustrate, consider the ‘Arab Spring’. For a while, a wave of demonstrations and protests against oppressive regimes swept the region instigating dozens of academic studies (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014; Moghadam, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). Perhaps one of the reasons the Arab spring came so unexpectedly, also to social scientists, was that almost no one studied the way people coped with their grievances in the preceding decades. Studying what forms of action are taken in response to collective injustice, beyond highly visible expressions of discontent, may be crucial to advancing our understanding of collective action.

While studying the apparent ‘inaction’ prior to the Arab spring may be too late, there are many other cases of collective injustice which affect inhabitants of a region, but which do not lead to the types of collective actions generally measured (e.g., social protest). The present work examines the consequences of earthquakes caused by large-scale gas extraction in the north-east of the Netherlands that potentially affect 410,000 inhabitants.

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Local inhabitants feel unsafe as there is large-scale damage to homes and feel distrust and anger towards the government and gas company who mishandled the situation (Boelhouwer *et al.*, 2016; Boelhouwer & van der Heijden, 2018; Dutch Safety Board, 2015). Yet they also appear largely inactive – until recently there were only a few small-scale protests. The present manuscript asks whether those who feel collectively disadvantaged may be taking alternative forms of (collective) action.

### **Alternatives to collective action**

The apparent inaction of the Groningen population may not be unique: Collective action against injustice tends to be rare (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Klandermans, 1997; McAdam, 2017). It has been suggested that only about 5% of the disadvantaged may participate in collective actions oriented towards an outgroup, such as demonstrating or signing petitions (Jost *et al.*, 2017; Klandermans, 1997). While such findings may point to a widespread indifference towards injustice or grievances, it is possible that other forms of collective action *are* taken that research has hitherto not devoted much attention to.

Current approaches to collective action tend to focus on factors that motivate mobilization for protest. Powerful predictors of such behaviours are feelings of identification with one's own group, perceptions of collective efficacy to address one's low status position, anger, feelings of injustice, and perceptions of being collectively deprived (Klandermans, 1984; Smith & Ortiz, 2002; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). While these motivators predict mobilization well when it *does* occur, it is also clear that there are many situations in which some or all of these motivating factors are in place, but traditional forms of collective action are not happening. What could those who experience collective disadvantage but are not engaging in collective action be doing: Are they inactive or engaging in other forms of action?

Interestingly, explanations of why collective action may not happen emphasize that in many cases, systemic (societal) arrangements, ideologies, political opportunities, and organizational constraints make it impossible to translate collective interests into collective action or joint mobilization (Jost *et al.*, 2017; McAdam, 2017). Thus, there are constraints in the structural reality that make it pointless or impossible to do things such as demonstrate (Tausch *et al.*, 2011; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). This is also what we see in the current study, in which inhabitants feel powerless to influence the actions and decisions made by national government and oil industry acting in tandem – common sense would say that when facing an outgroup that has the full force of law *and* overwhelming resources on its side, they are in total control, and therefore, the ingroup lacks viable means of resistance. In many such situations, collective action in the traditional sense may not be an option (yet). Also, a lot of groundwork within the ingroup is required before collective action against an outgroup can be taken. Such groundwork, in response to a structural reality in which movement is impossible, could be the formation of positive perceptions of one's ingroup as opposed to the outgroup (Stott & Drury, 2004). Indeed, as Leach and Livingstone (2015) suggest, there may be more responses to disadvantage beyond either suffering disadvantage or fighting it.

Others have pointed to the need for broader perspectives on collective action (Becker, 2012; Van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). For example, to encompass more actors, such as other groups acting in solidarity towards a low status group, but also more actions oriented towards improving the position of one's group (e.g., individual level actions such as voting), or aimed at mobilizing others and promoting one's worldview (Fernandes-Jesus, Lima, & Sabucedo,

2018; Otjes, Stroebe, & Postmes, 2018; Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). In the present paper, we take an even broader perspective, by simply asking how people cope with collective grievances, without making strong *a priori* assumptions about what constitutes collective action.

### ***The importance of ingroup-oriented action***

When asking how people cope with collective grievances, a number of literatures point to the importance of *ingroup*-oriented actions that do not directly redress injustice. For example, within the emotion and coping literature there has been an increasing focus on the social sharing and communication of emotions as a way of coping with emotionally intense experiences (Páez, Basabe, Ubillos, & González-Castro, 2007; Rimé, Páez, Basabe, & Martínez, 2010). This enhances perceptions of solidarity. Drury and colleagues' programme of research reveals that experiencing acute disasters that are immediate and (life) threatening events (e.g., the 2005 London bombings) creates feelings of common fate and an emergent sense of a shared social identity in disaster victims (Drury, 2018; Drury, Brown, González, & Miranda, 2016). This in turn induces helping behaviour to ensure others in need survive. Similarly, work on 'the Social Cure' emphasizes connecting to groups, rather than just individuals, in dealing with a variety of stressful life events, such as depression or motherhood (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014; Jetten, Haslam, & Alexander, 2012). All these approaches stress the importance of the ingroup in coping with stressful life events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

In light of this evidence, we reasoned that ingroup-oriented responses could be a collective means of responding to injustice thus far not considered in the collective action or the stress-coping literatures. We define ingroup-oriented behaviours as 'behaviours directed at communication with others that experience the same injustice', as well as 'actual helping behaviour'. We consider ingroup-oriented behaviours – with their focus on providing help and support to the collective – as potentially distinct from other more individual level responses oriented towards initiating emotion and stressor-oriented help from others in the form of social support seeking (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). We also point out that such ingroup-focused actions may be a crucial step in the formation of a shared sense of 'us', the building of a shared understanding of grievances and responsibilities and in the development of movement organizations, all of which can be important preconditions to make other (more outgroup focused) actions possible.

To our knowledge, community-based actions 'for us' have not previously been documented in intergroup collective action situations. Yet they may help us explain the observed discrepancy between collective injustice and traditional forms of collective action.

### ***The present research***

The present research studied the prevalence of these ingroup-oriented responses to collective injustice by exploring the full breadth of actions and 'inactions' that people engage in in response to collective injustice. Because purely quantitative methods require predetermination and categorization of potential actions one could take in response to injustice (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003), we used a qualitative bottom-up approach in Studies 1 and 2: We asked people to indicate the types of actions they felt they *could* take, via open questions in a

questionnaire (Study 1), or *bad* taken, via in-depth interviews (Study 2), in response to collective injustice (the gas extraction in the north of the Netherlands). These were analysed via qualitative content analysis.

Based on the qualitative findings, we designed a quantitative questionnaire measure of potential responses to stressful life events, some of which referred to collective injustice (Study 3). Participants described a stressful life event of the past 12 months and indicated, via closed questions based on our categorizations of Studies 1 and 2, how they had dealt with this stressful life event. That is, Study 3 translated the actions outlined in Studies 1 and 2 into a quantitative assessment of these collective versus individual level (coping related) forms of action. In particular, we assessed whether ingroup-oriented collective actions are distinct from other coping responses, such as providing social support. The added value of studying stressful life events, some of which are individual (e.g., health issues, being a victim of crime), some collective level (i.e., gas extraction), lies in providing a conservative test of our hypothesis that ingroup-oriented actions are distinct from other coping responses.

To briefly preview the main result, this combination of qualitative groundwork with a quantitative follow-up broadens our understanding of how people respond to collective injustice, and points to the importance of considering ingroup-oriented actions as an alternative form of collective 'action'.

### **Data collection**

Studies 1 and 2 were conducted in the context of human-induced earthquakes due to gas extraction by the national Dutch gas company (NAM), a problem that affects the entire population of the north-east of the Netherlands. The earthquakes have increased both in frequency and in intensity over the past 25 years, from incidental light tremors to moderate but frequent earthquakes that, over time, cause a lot of damage. As mentioned earlier, this has raised many concerns among the local population, such as financial (e.g., fallen house prices), safety (e.g., lives endangered in case of heavier earthquakes), and communal concerns (e.g., the future of the region). Importantly, the population also feels they are treated immorally: Both the Dutch government and the national gas company denied that the safety of the local population was at stake, despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). There are strong collective perceptions of moral injustice that should affect both perceived (Study 1) and actual actions (Study 2/3) in response to the earthquakes. Study 3 more broadly considered responses to stressful life events.

## **STUDY 1**

### **Method**

Participants were 139 inhabitants of the province of Groningen (75 men, 59 women, five unknown) who were recruited via announcements on websites related to the earthquakes and via snowballing. The province of Groningen is fairly poor, characterized by low education levels and high age. In the present study, 45% of participants completed secondary or lower; 38% higher vocational; and 17% college degree education. Participants were comparable to the wider population in terms of age ( $M_{\text{age}} = 54.83$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.24$ ) and earthquake experiences: Participants lived both within or (just) outside the direct earthquake region. The average distance to the centre of the earthquake

region was 11.11 km ( $SD = 17.30$ ). 16% of participants had never, 27% had once, and 57% had felt more than one earthquake. About 31% reported having no damage to their home, 27% had damage once, and 42% had had damage multiple times.

The study was part of a larger questionnaire with closed questions. Of contextual relevance for the present study, an assessment of *moral injustice* (the way in which the local population is treated by the national gas company/national government violates my personal values and convictions,  $r = .86$ ) revealed strong feelings of moral injustice with a mean score of 4.01 ( $SD = 1.05$ ; scale range 1 = not at all; 5 = very much).

In the present manuscript, we focus on the answers to one open-ended question: 'What can the following parties do (*in response to the earthquakes*), according to you?', followed by two open-ended sub-questions: 'I myself can ...' and 'Groningers can...'. These questions were answered by 131 and 136 participants, respectively.

### **Data analysis**

The aim of the data analysis was to provide a bottom-up identification of potential actions mentioned in relation to the gas extraction. Moreover, we were interested in identifying the relative prevalence of these themes in order to gain insight into the types of activities most commonly mentioned. Thus, we adopted a content analysis approach to coding the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). In line with our goal to identify the variety of potential actions people might take, we wanted to describe actions without using preconceived categories and thus used a bottom-up analysis with the aim of identifying the variety of actions taken (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The content analysis consisted of four steps, each of which was increasingly interpretive. Steps were taken iteratively, with the aim of identifying meaningful categories of codes at the end of the analysis process (cf. Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 were conducted by the third author. Step 2 was in consultation with the second author, and steps 3 and 4 were discussed by all authors.

In step 1, transcripts were read and coded so that all action-related words and phrases were identified. These words were, in step 2, assigned unique codes via Atlas.ti. 31 and 27 unique codes were identified for self and Groningers, respectively. At this early stage of analysis, we stayed very close to the literal interpretation of the descriptions provided by participants. For example, codes such as 'let oneself be heard' could also be applied to statements such as 'making myself heard' or 'raising my voice', but a statement such as 'make my opinions known' was considered qualitatively different at this stage. In determining codes, we applied extra scrutiny to assessing the unique relevance of actions which were mentioned very infrequently (e.g., only once). In this way, actions that were theoretically or descriptively interesting could be retained, even though some of these were quite rare (e.g., exit). Because the aim was to identify codes that were relevant for both self and Groningers, both coding schemes were compared to see if amendments were required. Because comparison showed that there was a lot of overlap between codes, no greater amendments were deemed necessary. In the final stage (steps 3 and 4), we aimed to identify categories of codes (step 3) that reflected different qualities of the actions participants indicated taking in response to the gas extraction. In step 4, we asked ourselves if categories could be further grouped into overarching categories based on the apparent intention behind the actions. In this way, we retained six overarching categories, one of which with three subcategories (listed in Table S1).

## Results

In Study 1, we aimed to identify categories of action or inaction for individuals and for Groningers in general, in response to the earthquakes. We first present the overarching categories in bold (e.g., outgroup-oriented action) and then the individual codes, which are very close to the actual corpus of data. We also wanted to assess the prevalence of the different categories: We list the categories in order of frequency of mention for self and Groningers.<sup>1</sup>

Participants most frequently mentioned that they could take **outgroup-oriented action**, such as against the NAM, the national government, and also the rest of the Netherlands. Here, the need to *voice* one's dissatisfaction in the direction of the outgroup (e.g., NAM, national government) was most frequently mentioned, such as the option to 'cry out together with me. . .' (P105) or to put on the pressure: 'keep badgering national and provincial politics until an acceptable solution has been found' (P98). Others mentioned the reporting of damages of one's house to the NAM, jointly with other voice- or protest-related actions such as 'letting one's voice be heard' (P14). For this reason, we classified damage reports as a form of voice rather than action directed at the stressor (but see Study 2). Interestingly, while traditional forms of collective action such as *demonstrating or protesting* were mentioned too, be it infrequently, they were often mentioned as a last resort. For example, P90 wrote that he/she could do 'little, only demonstrate' and P17 stated: 'the only thing I can do is protest'. The idea that one could *cooperate with outgroup members* by participating in studies (such as ours) or thinking along: 'actively think along about solutions' (P159) was mentioned by some people.

Actions were not only directed at the outgroup but also **oriented towards the ingroup**, consisting of cooperative actions that were organized inwards, towards the own group of Groningers. Actions such as *joining organized collectives* (e.g., action or interest groups) or *connecting or uniting as Groningers*, the idea that one should 'unite as one block' (P81). Part of this ingroup orientation also consisted of the idea that people could provide support for each other: 'encourage each other' (P45). Some also mentioned that one could support the actions of others and help reinvigorate the region, such as by maintaining villages in the region.

Many participants indicated they felt they could do little to nothing, other than witness their own drama unfold: 'nothing, I am merely a puppet in this' (P112). Many responded with the simple 'nothing' to the question of what they could do. Interestingly, these forms of **inaction** were mentioned more frequently with regard to oneself than the Groninger.

Some actions, referred to as **stressor-oriented action**, were directly focused on dealing with the earthquakes themselves such as searching for information about earthquakes. These were actions such as 'follow the news' (P40) but also 'read the pieces and form an opinion' (P75). Others mentioned making sure one's house is safe: 'make my house safe' (P38). With regard to all Groningers, participants also discussed the need to make plans of action, such as 'take things into our own hands, especially where plans for the future are concerned' (P160). This category is similar to problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

**Self-oriented actions** were attempts to 'keep up *courage*' and to focus on what one has as a collective: to be *proud* of the region, 'being proud of the Groningers' (P23). Participants who reflected on what they themselves could do also mentioned feelings of

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<sup>1</sup> The frequencies of these categories largely overlapped except for inaction which was mentioned more frequently for self than for Groningers.

hopelessness, 'nothing else than wait and hope that the responsible do their work' (P110). A number of actions mentioned were also in line with emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) such as 'remaining calm' (P44) and 'put the problem in perspective (place it in a broader context)' (P119).

The wish to leave the region, an action we considered a form of **exit**, was only mentioned by a small minority of participants as a potential option: 'If all fails and I cannot handle it anymore, move'; P160).

## Discussion

Study 1 provided a first attempt to determine the range of actions, or possibly 'inactions', people feel they can engage in in response to collective disadvantage: Many people felt that collective protest was an action they themselves and other Groningers could take. Interestingly, whereas the collective action literature, more or less implicitly, considers social protest the ultimate form of action (Louis, 2009; Stroebe, Wang, & Wright, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 1990), participants often mentioned it as a last resort: Demonstrating was slightly better than doing nothing (e.g., '[Groningers can do] little, only through protest make themselves heard'; P18). This fits the reality of the Groningen earthquakes in which there was little collective protest.

Yet participants do not seem inactive: In line with the stress-coping literature (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), we see a wealth of individual *actions*, such as stressor- and self-oriented actions (e.g., search for solutions; remain calm). Importantly, ingroup-oriented, collective types of action such as connecting or uniting as Groningers, or supporting one another, were frequently mentioned. Such ingroup-oriented actions receive little attention in the stress-coping and collective action literatures.

The main aim of Study 2 was to gain more insight into and possibly replicate the actions evidenced in Study 1, especially ingroup-oriented action as an alternative form of collective action. In Study 1, we asked 'what can you do' and people often said 'very little' in response. In Study 2, we interviewed people asking 'what did you do'. Participants were asked to describe whether and how the gas extraction had changed their own lives and that of other Groningers. This focus on actions that *have been taken* by participants contrasts with many collective action studies which measure attitudes towards, or the behavioural intention of engaging in, such protest (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008).

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### *Participants*

Study 2 was an interview study among 20 inhabitants (five men, 15 women) of the north-eastern region of the province of Groningen. We strove to recruit a representative sample of participants. We recruited participants (*via* personal contacts) that were diverse in the earthquake region they lived in (seven lived at the epicentre, nine in the surrounding area, four in areas that suffered few earthquakes at the time) and representative of the region regarding level of education (nine secondary vocational, eight higher vocational, three university level education), and age ( $M = 46.75$ ;  $SD = 12.01$ ). Three participants were single, five had a partner, 11 had a partner and children, and one had children but no partner. Three

participants rented and 17 owned their house. All except two participants had earthquake-related damage to their house.

### **Interview procedure**

The interviews were held at a location of the participant's choice, usually their own home. Two trained interviewers conducted each interview which ranged in duration between 30 and 75 min. They interviewed one participant at a time, with the exception of one couple that wished to be interviewed together (P20 and P21). The interviews were semi-structured: The interviewers followed an interview protocol to make sure they covered all questions and topics but were free to follow up on comments made by interviewees. After indicating consent to be interviewed, each interviewee was asked about his/her personal experiences with the earthquakes, this was followed by questions about how the earthquakes had affected them and the people around them. Interviewers then asked participants how the earthquakes had affected daily activities: Are there things you do differently due to the earthquakes? Are there things you have started doing, or behaviours/actions you have stopped engaging in? The interviewers explained that any, even earthquake unrelated, activity that had changed was of interest. In addition, we had prepared a number of possible actions (e.g., talking with others about this situation; submitting complaints) people might engage in, these were also discussed with participants.<sup>2</sup>

### **Analytic procedure**

Each interview was fully transcribed. We then, as in Study 1, followed a qualitative content analysis. The analyses of Study 2 were conducted by two research assistants who identified actions and coded and categorized them, under supervision of the first author.

In a first step, we identified passages of text in which people outlined how their everyday behaviour had changed since the gas extraction. This meant that we located both activities that had changed, but also changes from engaging in activities to becoming 'inactive' (e.g., stopping the renovation of one's house because of the gas extraction). When different passages of text within a single interview referred to the same activity or inactivity, only one passage was identified.

We then conducted a preliminary analysis of the activities: What types of actions could we identify? Because we had identified codes for Study 1, we considered whether these codes were comparable to activities in Study 2. This analysis revealed that the Study 1 codes were very similar to those in Study 2 (see Table S2). The coders therefore coded with the codes and overarching categories of Study 1. At the same time, the coders left room for the identification of additional themes. Note also that the analysis of Study 1 did not provide input for the *design* of Study 2.

In a next step, the activities we had located were coded and assigned to categories.

To check for reliability, half the interviews were independently coded by both coders. The coders compared their coding of these interviews and discussed how to deal with the discrepancies they discovered. After this initial stage, the coders coded the same interviews independently again. The coders reached an agreement rate of 79% for these interviews (57 agreements on 72 observations).

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<sup>2</sup> For exploratory purposes, we also asked people about their feelings regarding the present situation.



## Results

Below we outline the codes and categories identified in Study 2 (see also Table S3). Due to the richness of the data, compared to the open questions in Study 1, we provide a more in-depth illustration of these codes.

As in Study 1, codes were the starting point of analysis, but we organized the results section in categories for ease of reading – again in order of frequency of actions mentioned.

Many **stressor-oriented actions** were reported by participants (30.7% of actions). As in Study 1, participants often mentioned ‘monitoring one’s safety’ as an action they themselves *could and did* engage in:

The only thing you should do is to take a look around the house every now and then to see whether there are no cracks. [...] That is the only thing you have to do every now and then. A walk around the house.(P2)

Also, safety-related activities, for fear of the impact of earthquakes, were mentioned. For example, P4 described how her children were not allowed to play upstairs anymore.

As in Study 1, ‘searching for additional information’ was a frequently recurring action. Many indicated that the earthquakes had become part of their lives, something they wanted to keep up to date with:

I just follow RTL news on the app and when there is something about the earthquakes, then I immediately read that, then I am interested in how this will evolve.(P5)

Reporting damages to one’s housing was also frequently mentioned. We considered this a stressor-oriented action, as, in contrast to Study 1, this was not mentioned as an act of voice but rather as something one had to do as part of life with earthquakes. As P11 put it: ‘Everyone reports’.

**Ingroup-oriented actions** were also often mentioned (29% of actions). Participants indicated they spent a lot of time communicating with others in the region: Because the earthquakes had become a part of their daily life, it was also a common topic of conversation, both in the neighbourhood and within families. Notably, many explained that these conversations are often practically oriented, not so much about the emotional impact, but concerning issues such as how to best deal with damages:

Yes of course there’s a lot of talk about it. [...] Very often it’s about practical stuff [...]. Your sense of security, no I don’t think that you talk about that much.(P17)

Yes, when there was one [earthquake] again, yes, then you talk about that: “Well, is everything still standing in your house?”.(P9)

Joining or taking part in collectives, such as gatherings of residents in the villages to receive or share information, was also frequently mentioned. As P11 explains:

Within the village we are now investigating whether we can set up a cooperation [...] And whether, [...] we can also generate our own energy [...] In the village we say: “we’ll handle it ourselves”. And that is also the Groninger nature [...] So we’re sorting out how to unite as a

village in such a way that we can stay positive in this, that you do something positive and not only grumble and rag and nag, because that doesn't make life easier, and it can bring us something too.

Some people indicated that they were cooperating with other ingroup members:

As a neighbourhood, we've called a lawyer who will help us handle things together. [...] May 19th there will be a meeting with all inhabitants. There we can express our wishes and what we all want. After all, we have to do something together as a neighbourhood.(P4)

In addition, 'helping others' was also mentioned:

If I notice around me that somebody is having trouble getting started [with the damage procedure], then I try to help. I think that is also the greatest strength here in North-Groningen. People are all set to help others who need assistance and are stuck – to then take a look and advise: 'oh have you tried this already'.(P5)

**Self-oriented action** (23% of actions) oftentimes centred on 'discounting of alternative actions' (e.g., deciding not to move) and 'controlling of emotions' (e.g., keep a clear head). A number of participants also mentioned actively trying to distract oneself:

Well, sometimes I go for a nice ride on my motorbike when I become too preoccupied with it. [...] I like going for a ride when my mind is restless. I also do that when something's going on or when I'm thinking about something [...] Or [I] just take an extra stroll in the woods.(P9)

In contrast to Study 1, in Study 2, when participants were asked what kinds of actions they had engaged in in relation to the gas extraction, few participants indicated **outgroup-oriented actions** (9.7% of actions). Nobody mentioned cooperation with the outgroup. Traditional forms of social protest, such as demonstrating or signing petitions, were named relatively little (three times). Participants did mention instances in which they had let themselves be heard. For example, P17 describes how his/her village made the following appeal to the government:

[...] We, as the village interest association just wrote a letter directly to the minister. [...] we sat down with a couple of people to discuss "what is our position?" [...] and we explained that [in our letter] and then we just made an appeal to minister Kamp, with the main conclusion that the government [...] has in fact the duty to care for the citizens.

There were few indications that this overall lack of outgroup-oriented action resulted in **inaction** (6.5% of actions). If mentioned, they were frequently motivated decisions not to act, such as people who actively decided not to protest, those who stopped voting or officially filing complaints, for example:

The only thing you can do is not vote. Politicians won't stand up for one.(P7)

These inaction responses fit with the general picture we get based on the interviews: One can sense a feeling in participants that little concrete action is possible (e.g., moving, the use of protesting), yet participants are 'active' in many alternative ways.

P9: I do not go demonstrating every week [...] I have better things to do, but all right, one should do this.

Interviewer: Do you think that when eventually more people would go demonstrate, this would change something?

P9: No, I don't think so. People can revolt, but yes, I don't think it has a lot of influence. [...] Those are such big corporations. It involves also large amounts of money. As a normal citizen you cannot influence that much. [...]

**Exit** was only mentioned by one participant who had to move because their house had to be demolished having suffered too much damage. This person also mentioned being ready to move:

My body and mind are drained too. It's just done and the bucket is full. So I just want to stop with it [i.e., attempting to stay in the house].(P4)

## Discussion

Like Study 1, Study 2 speaks to the added value of asking people how they respond to collective disadvantage. Again, we see a wide range of actions people engage in. Ingroup-oriented action stands out as being both collective and frequently engaged in.

Notably, in Study 2 both collective action in the traditional sense and inaction were rarely mentioned by participants as activities they had engaged in in response to the gas extraction. In Study 1, when we hypothetically asked participants what they could do, there appeared to be a lot of outgroup-oriented action, a fair amount of which could be classified as collective action in the traditional sense, as well as inaction. These differences may be due to a discrepancy between what people think they can/should do, and what they actually do. Interestingly, it is the former, action intentions and attitudes towards collective action that are most commonly studied (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Although beyond the scope of the present studies, our work does indicate a possible need to study the differences between intentions versus actual action (Kraus, 1995; Wicker, 1969).

This means that, in contrast to traditional forms of collective action, ingroup- and stressor-oriented actions are frequently engaged in – suggesting that when people are exposed to collective disadvantage, collective actions also focus on ingroups, rather than ‘just’ being directed at the outgroup. Of course, the finding that different kinds of action can be distinguished says nothing about the need to distinguish those kinds of action in quantitative research. Put quite simply: If all those ingroup-focused actions are highly correlated with outgroup-focused actions, then the qualitative analysis has yielded insights which may not make a quantitative difference.

In Study 3, we therefore examine whether ingroup-oriented actions are a *distinct* collective way of coping. To this end, we quantified our measures of coping, allowing us to study whether ingroup-oriented coping is a distinct dimension compared to other relevant measures of individual coping (e.g., social support) and collective action (e.g., social protest). In line with recent research stressing the distinction between social support of individuals versus the role of the collective in coping with stressful life events (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle, & Haslam, 2018; Swartzman, Sani, & Munro, 2017), we were particularly interested in distinguishing social support from ingroup-oriented coping. In addition, Study 3 moved beyond contexts of collective disadvantage to consider these individual and collective coping mechanisms more broadly in response to stressful

life experiences. This would be in line with research showing that stressful life events in general induce the need to socially share one's emotions (Rimé, 2009; Schachter, 1959).

## STUDY 3

### Method

#### *Participants and procedure*

A total of 2,912 participants (1,238 men; 1,674 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 54$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.75$ ) from a Lifelines panel took part in this study. Lifelines is a multi-disciplinary prospective population-based cohort study with a unique three-generation design that examines the health and health-related behaviours of 167,729 persons living in the north of the Netherlands. It employs a broad range of investigative procedures in assessing the biomedical, socio-demographic, behavioural, physical, and psychological factors which contribute to the health and disease of the general population with a special focus on multi-morbidity and complex genetics. The study was run among a selection of participants both within and outside the earthquake region and was presented as research on social contacts, feelings of security and health. The present study was part of a larger study financed by the National Coordinator Groningen to assess the impact of gas extraction on social cohesion and health. The sample size for this study was determined by requirements of this large-scale study which focused on comparisons of health-related measures over time for participants within and outside the earthquake region.

#### *Measures*

Participants were asked to think about how they had dealt with a stressful or impactful event in the past year, such as an important presentation at work, a conflict with someone who is important to one, problems due to gas extraction (Carver, 1997). It was mentioned that people deal with such events in different ways and that we were interested in hearing how they had dealt with this event. First, participants were asked to describe briefly the event they had experienced. They then completed the brief COPE which, somewhat more globally, measures the self- and stressor-oriented actions of Studies 1 and 2, as well as additional concepts relevant to individual coping (e.g., support; religion). Based on Studies 1 and 2, we constructed a measure of ingroup- (e.g., 'I talked a lot to others who also experienced this event') and outgroup- ('I demonstrated and took action'; 'I let myself be heard (e.g., by filing a complaint about what has happened to me)';  $r = .29$ ) oriented action. In addition, we administered a one item exit measure ('I made plans to leave the region'), one inaction item ('I thought a lot about the fact that you can actually do little or nothing in response to this event'), and an extra self-oriented item ('I tried to remain proud of the region I live in'). See Table 1.

### Results

We first analysed the events mentioned by participants. Because not all participants completed all coping items,  $N$  may vary between event description and dependent measures. Those who indicated not experiencing a stressful event ( $N = 473$ ) or who left their answers blank ( $N = 126$ ) were excluded from further analyses. Of the remaining participants, 2,210 reported an individual or interpersonal event (e.g., divorce, health, being a crime victim) and 103 reported the gas extraction, a collectively experienced

**Table 1.** Items, scale loadings and communalities of actions in response to stressful life events (Study 3)

	Structure	Communalities (after extraction)
<b>1. Social support/venting</b>		
I got comfort and understanding from someone	0.83	0.70
I got emotional support from others	0.82	0.67
I got advice and help from other people	0.79	0.64
I said things to let my unpleasant feelings escape	0.53	0.32
I expressed my negative feelings	0.52	0.33
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	5.76 (20.58)	
<b>2. Stressor-oriented/information search</b>		
I've been taking action to try to make the situation better	0.73	0.56
I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do	0.72	0.54
I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something so about the situation I'm in	0.71	0.54
I've been thinking hard about what steps to take	0.70	0.51
I have tried, as best possible, to understand what exactly happened or is happening – with regard to this event	0.60	0.50
I have searched as much information as possible about this event	0.49	0.33
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	2.15 (7.68)	
<b>3. Humour/positive reframing</b>		
I've been making jokes about it	0.79	0.60
I've been making fun of the situation	0.76	0.62
I've been looking for something good in what is happening	0.47	0.44
I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive	0.33	0.37
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	1.80 (6.42)	
<b>4. Ingroup-oriented</b>		
I talked a lot to others who also experience this event	0.82	0.69
I supported and helped others who are confronted with the same event	0.71	0.52
I united with others who experience the same event	0.58	0.36
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	1.61 (5.74)	
<b>5. Religion</b>		
I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs	0.94	0.88
I've been praying or meditating	0.92	0.84
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	1.38 (4.93)	
<b>6. Alcohol</b>		
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better	0.90	0.82
I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it	0.89	0.79
Eigenvalue (% variance explained)	1.19 (4.24)	

event, as stressful. See Table S4 for means and standard deviations of these scales for individual versus collective events.

In order to test our hypothesis that the collective versus individual level items are distinct from each other, we conducted exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) via Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation (Russell, 2002). EFAs were iterated with item reduction based on the following criteria for item retention (Hinkin, 1998): first, removing communalities below .30, and then removing those items which loaded lower than .40 on

the intended factor or that loaded with a difference of  $<.20$  on two factors. We retained six factors with an eigenvalue  $>1$  (see Table 1). Importantly, we found evidence for the value of including collective coping strategies: ingroup-oriented actions loaded on a separate factor compared to individual measures of coping (e.g., social support seeking, religion, problem-focused coping). Moreover, ingroup-oriented actions accounted for 6% of variance in coping strategies for dealing with stressful life events. This quantitatively confirms the suggestion based on content analysis that such collective forms of coping are distinct from individual level coping. The outgroup-oriented action items did not form a separate factor and had to be removed from the factor analysis.

Regarding the individual level coping items, we identified similar scales as in our qualitative analyses of Studies 1 and 2, with stressor- and self- (e.g., positive reframing and humour) oriented actions loading on separate factors. Exit and inaction were measured with one item and were not expected to form a separate factor.

## Discussion

Study 3 shows that a meaningful quantitative distinction can be made between individual and collective level actions/strategies in response to stressful life events. We discuss implications in more detail in the General Discussion.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

At first blush, collective action in response to injustice appears to be a rare phenomenon. The main contribution of this paper is that it shows that this may be because we are not measuring important alternative collective actions in response to disadvantage. The consistent evidence in favour of ingroup-oriented responses stresses the importance of taking a broader perspective on collective action that incorporates both ingroup- and outgroup-oriented actions. People are clearly not 'inactive' in response to collective injustice, even if they do not engage in social protest.

The most striking result was that many alternative forms of actions were taken that were collective, but unlike traditional forms of collective action almost exclusively focused on the ingroup: an increased need to 'stand up for the heavily affected', to communicate about what is happening and to help others. These actions potentially increase solidarity within one's own group, *without* directly aiming to change the situation at hand – in contrast to actions that have been central to the collective action literature (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). These actions are very compatible with the solidarity-oriented responses outlined in the disaster and emotion literatures (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; Páez *et al.*, 2007; Rimé, 2009). Central to such ingroup-oriented actions is, on the one hand, a form of collective 'sharing' of the experience of injustice that is likely to (further) forge a group identity and feelings of solidarity. On the other hand, to provide help and succour to others in need. Supported by findings in Study 3, we consider these responses to be collective, and conceptually distinct from individual level responses such as providing or seeking social support.

It is interesting to consider how these ingroup-oriented actions relate to outgroup-focused collective actions. Are they a form of social creativity in which group members are moving away from dominant groups by placing greater value on how they differ from these groups (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)? The pattern of results suggests otherwise. Ingroup-oriented actions in our studies are focused

on forming better collective understandings of the collective experience: We see that communication, the exchange of information, and helping each other are most frequently mentioned. Such group-based strategies can go hand in hand with the forging of new social identities that may be essential to solidarity-based actions (Drury, 2018; Páez *et al.*, 2007; Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001).

Future research should gain understanding of when and why collective disadvantage is likely to induce ingroup-oriented action and stressor-based coping. Is ingroup-oriented action a precursor of collective action, a way of mobilizing the group for outgroup-oriented action and social change (Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, 2015), or is it a last resort when the structural reality of the situation and feelings of powerlessness forego traditional forms of collective action (Tausch *et al.*, 2011)? Developments in the gas extraction region suggest the former: We ran our study a few years ago, when the gas extraction was just starting to receive political attention (focused on problem denial; Dutch Safety Board, 2015). Now, 3–4 years later we have witnessed a substantial increase in collective protest. This observation in the gas extraction context fits with different lines of research that suggest that the sharing of experiences and parallel formation of shared social identities can be an important precursor to mobilization by for example providing the emergent ‘communities of circumstance’ with a sense of agency and empowerment (Drury *et al.*, 2005; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2015; Stott & Drury, 2004). Overall this points to the importance of a dynamic approach in which we, over time, study both perceptions of the ingroup, grievances towards the outgroup as well as constraints of the system in which group members are functioning (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 2015).

The present study is not without limitations. Study 1 consisted of participants who responded to calls to take part in our study, possibly the more pro-active part of the population responded. Yet, our sample was varied (e.g., in education level; earthquake experiences). Study 2 consisted of a small sample of participants, common in interview studies. Here, we took a stratified approach to recruit a representative sample of participants for this region based on education level, age, and earthquake experience. Moreover, in Study 3 we were able to validate and quantify actions deduced in Studies 1 and 2 to a larger representative sample.

Another potential limitation of our study is that we can say little about either antecedents or consequences of the actions we studied. That will be for future research to determine. The advantage of the present approach is that it allowed us to move beyond ‘superficial’ responses. While almost all interviewees indicated up front that the gas extraction had not impacted their lives that much, it became clear in the course of the interviews that the earthquakes had a substantial impact. In our view, this is the strength of a qualitative approach. We were able to touch on categories of action we could not have established up front via closed questions.

## **Conclusions**

How do people cope with collective injustice, when we do not see them protesting in the streets? The present work took a bottom-up approach to this question by asking participants what actions they felt were available to them, or what types of actions they had actually taken in response to a collective form of injustice: the earthquakes in the north-east of Groningen. In addition, we quantified and validated these responses among a larger sample and within different contexts. Importantly, this work revealed that seemingly ‘inactive’ people respond in myriad ways to injustice and stressful life events.

The broad spectrum of actions found in our studies makes clear that we need to take a broader approach to *collective* action: one that encompasses ingroup-oriented action, but also one that asks people what they actually *do* in order to paint an accurate picture of the many potential alternative responses to collective disadvantage.

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### Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Table S1.** Actions in response to collective injustice for Study 1.

**Table S2.** Coding scheme description for Study 2 (based on Study 1).

**Table S3.** Actions in response to collective injustice (Study 2).

**Table S4.** Multivariate analysis of actions in response to individual (non-earthquake) and collective (earthquake related) life events (Study 3).