

**The Moderating Role of Political Self-efficacy in the Relationship of Moral Conviction
and Collective Action**

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate whether and when moral convictions (i.e., fundamental beliefs about right and wrong) influence collective action tendencies in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution. Particularly, we propose that political self-efficacy may moderate the relationship between moral convictions and willingness to engage in collective action. We conducted a cross-section survey study and sampled 227 students at the University of Groningen. Participants reported their moral conviction on gender equality, collective action tendencies and self-efficacy beliefs, in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution. We hypothesized that strong moral convictions are positively associated with collective action tendencies and that collective action tendencies are positively associated with high perceived political self-efficacy. We found support for both hypotheses, conceptually replicating previous research. Additionally, we investigated the role of political self-efficacy as a possible moderator in the relationship between moral conviction and collective action tendencies. We found preliminary evidence that there is a trend of high political self-efficacy being associated with high moral conviction and higher collective action tendencies. Theoretical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: moral conviction, collective action, political self-efficacy, gender equality, Iran Revolution

The Moderating Role of Political Self-efficacy in the Relationship of Moral Conviction and Collective Action

‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ — this is one of the main slogans of the 2022 Iranian protests (Vital Voices & For Freedom, n.d.), which started after the arrest and death of the young Iranian woman Mahsa Amini¹. This case, while not an isolated incident (Vameghi et al., 2014), gained major media attention through different platforms. For instance, #MahsaAmini has reached over 2,1 billion clicks on the social media platform Tik Tok (Akhundzada, 2022) and news all over the world covered her story (e.g. Mc Grath, 2022; Reuters, 2022). A question that may arise is what motivates people to engage in these forms of collective action (i.e., any action undertaken by individuals to better and change the group’s conditions; Wright et al., 1990). Research suggests that such collective actions are oftentimes driven by notions of morality, such as *moral conviction* (i.e., absolute beliefs about right and wrong; Skitka et al., 2005; Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Indeed, it seems that the death of Mahsa Amini motivated people to undertake collective action as an expression of their moral convictions (De Hoog & Morresi, 2022).

Therefore, in this research, we aim to answer the following question: Does and when does moral conviction relate to collective action? Indeed, recent research has shown that moral conviction is a key predictor of collective action participation (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2021; Zaal et al., 2011) as people undertake collective action to support what they stand for (i.e., moral conviction) and who they are (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). However, we know very little about the condition under which moral conviction relates to

¹ The Iranian Guidance Patrol (Gasht-e-Ershad) reinforced the mandatory coverage of hair for women in Iran and arrested Mahsa Amini on the 13th of September 2022 for violating this rule (Gobadi, 2022). According to her brother, who was with her during the arrest, she was supposed to be returned after an hour, however, after allegedly being tortured and abused by the Guidance Patrol, Mahsa Amini lost consciousness and fell into a two-day coma which resulted in her death (France 24, 2022).

collective action. To further study the underlying moderators, this research aims to investigate whether moral conviction is associated with collective action, and whether political self-efficacy plays a moderating role in this relationship.

Moral Conviction

Attitudes grounded in moral conviction can be defined as strong and absolute beliefs a person holds about issues in terms of right and wrong (e.g., “I support gender equality because it’s a matter of moral principle”; Skitka et al., 2005). Moral convictions are experienced as objective truths that are independent of authority and resistant to outer influences (Skitka et al., 2005). They are deeply tied to one's emotions, therefore others’ opinions dissimilar to one’s convictions can be perceived as a direct attack (Wittwer, 2011). Since moral convictions represent intra-individual attitudes and are perceived as almost completely context-independent (Skitka et al., 2005), people from different groups (societal, religious) can come together, as long as they share similar moral convictions to fight for one goal (van Zomeren, 2013). On the other hand, moral convictions can also influence our behavior towards people who do not share the same ones, leading people to socially distance themselves from people with different moral convictions (van Zomeren et al., 2012). This illustrates the impact of moral convictions on an individual's behavior towards their social environment.

Hereby, it is relevant to highlight how moral convictions differ from other related attitudinal concepts such as strong attitudes grounded in conventions or preferences. Conventional attitudes represent opinions grounded in societal norms and coordination rules (e.g., “I support gender equality because everyone else does it”), and attitudes rooted in preference are based on personal taste and the individual is usually tolerant of other opinions on the matter (e.g., “I support gender equality because I feel like it”). Therefore,

attitudes grounded in moral conviction are strong attitudes but not all strong attitudes are rooted in moral conviction (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka et al., 2021).

Importantly, moral convictions can predict important social behaviors that drive social change, such as voting behavior, volunteerism and protests (e.g., Kende et al., 2017; Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Zaal et al., 2011). Especially, if one's moral convictions are violated (e.g., public displays of gender inequality), people feel the need to express their disapproval by publicly stating their convictions (Mazzoni et al., 2015). Once people with similar moral convictions come together and create groups, their collective activist behavior can influence the individual's and group's environment and create societal and political change (Archibong et al., 2022).

Moral Conviction and Collective Action

Indeed, research has demonstrated that moral conviction motivates people to undertake collective action (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2021; Van Zomeren et al., 2012; Zaal et al., 2011). Collective action is best described as any action undertaken by individuals to better and change the group's conditions so that they align with their personal beliefs (Wright et al., 1990). Agostini & Van Zomeren (2021) found moral convictions to be one of the strongest predictors of collective action behavior. Thus, when people are exposed to violations of personal moral convictions (e.g., the death of Mahsa Amini in Iran), they feel triggered to do something about it and engage in behaviors to defend and support their convictions and moral identity, expressing who they are and what they stand for (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Lodewijckx et al., 2008; Van Zomeren et al., 2018). In other words, people feel morally obligated to act upon their moral convictions to be consistent with who they are and what they stand for (Sabucedo et al., 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2018).

According to the literature on self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance, people

have a strong need to act in line with their attitudes and desired behavior. Both concepts describe how the discrepancy between a desired behavior and actual behavior creates discomfort and guilt in the individual, thus motivating active behavior (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019; Higgins, 1987). For instance, if the moral conviction of gender equality is publicly challenged, people with a strong moral conviction regarding gender equality will feel the need to act upon their beliefs, since they see it as morally right to do so. If they were not to engage in active or supporting behavior, they would indirectly behave morally wrong, creating cognitive dissonance. The individual's 'actual self' would not behave in line with the individual's 'ought self' leading to discomfort and self-discrepancy within the person. To avoid this process and find balance, people feel motivated to engage in collective action, supporting their moral convictions (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Sabucedo, 2018). In this study, we aim to conceptually replicate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action.

The Moderating Role of Political Self-efficacy

Although there already is some evidence showing that moral conviction can drive collective action participation (e.g., Agostini & Van Zomeren, 2021; De Cristofaro et al., 2021; Van Zomeren et al., 2012; Zaal et al., 2011), we know little about the conditions under which this effect can occur. We propose that political self-efficacy may moderate this relationship. Self-efficacy refers to the belief someone has in their ability to create outcomes based on their actions. Therefore, high self-efficacy beliefs describe that a person has great confidence in their ability to influence their surroundings through their behavior. If an individual feels that they can achieve their goals through their behavior, they are then

more likely to act on them (Bandura, 2004)². Since people act in several different situations, self-efficacy beliefs can differ based on the context. We refer to political self-efficacy as the individual's belief to influence and change political events based on their actions (Campbell et al., 1954). Several studies have shown that high political self-efficacy beliefs are associated with a greater willingness to engage in active political behavior (e.g., Finkel, 1985; Madsen, 1987; Morrell, 2003). Therefore, in this study, we also expect that self-efficacy is associated with collective action.

We propose that political self-efficacy may enhance the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. Indeed, efficacy has been linked to the relationship between moral conviction and collective action (e.g. Matthieu & Carbone, 2020; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). This is because people who hold strong moral convictions on an issue and perceive themselves as efficacious to change the situation of political injustice are more likely to engage in collective action on behalf of their convictions (Yaakobi, 2018). Stronger political self-efficacy has been linked to more activist behavior, in students who represented their personal values and moral convictions (i.e. racial equality; Leath & Shavous, 2017). Morgan (2012), argues that people are especially likely to engage in collective action, when moral beliefs are high, and they expect their behavior to be highly efficacious. We, therefore, predict that strong moral convictions are linked to collective action through the moderating influence of self-efficacy beliefs in a political context. Thus, we investigate the role of perceived political self-efficacy as a possible moderator in the relationship between moral conviction and collective action in a political context.

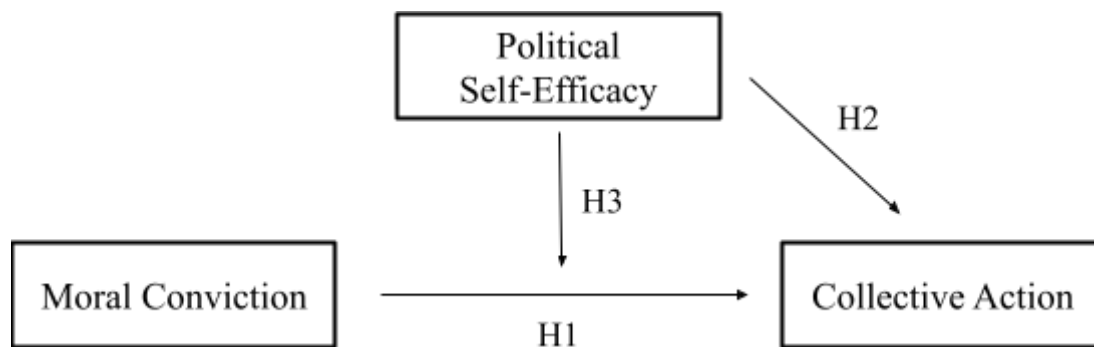
Hypotheses

² We note that self-efficacy is different from group efficacy. Group efficacy refers to the belief that the *group* has ability to change the group situation, and is often studied as a classic antecedent of collective action (Kende et al., 2017; van Zomeren et al., 2012).

The goals of this research are to (1) replicate the relationship between moral conviction about gender equality and collective action in the context of the 2022 Iranian protests, and (2) investigate the moderating role of perceived political self-efficacy in the relationship between moral conviction and collective action. The hypotheses of this paper are (H1) moral convictions are positively associated with collective action, (H2) political self-efficacy is positively associated with collective action, and (H3) perceived political self-efficacy moderates the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, such that the relationship between moral conviction and collective action is stronger for people who perceive political self-efficacy as high (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Study Model: The Relationship between Moral Conviction and Collective Action and the Moderating Role of Political Self-Efficacy



Method

Participants and Design

The sample consisted of 227 first-year psychology bachelor students at the University of Groningen who participated in an online study via Qualtrics. Participants received 0.4

SONA credits for participation. In our sample 52 participants identified as males, 171 as females and 4 people indicated ‘other’. They ranged in age between 17 and 35 ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 2.11$) with three participants not indicating their age³. Of the 227 participants that took part in this study, 139 were from the Dutch bachelor program, 83 were from the English bachelor program and 5 people belonged to a different program. This study was a correlational study design with moral conviction being the independent variable, collective action as the dependent variable and political self-efficacy as the moderator.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Social and Behavioral Science of the University of Groningen. Participants were recruited via SONA, an internal participant database of the University of Groningen. All questions were in English and collected and analyzed according to General Data Protection Regulations after consent was given by the participants.

In the first part of the study, participants filled out a self-reporting questionnaire on their general attitudes and moral convictions regarding gender equality, racial inequality, and human-made climate change. Since our study investigated the moral conviction of gender equality in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution, the questions about racial inequality and human-made climate change were filler questions and not used in our analysis. In the second part of the study, the context of Mahsa Amini’s death and the 2022 Iran Revolution was briefly described to the participants. They were told about the suspicious circumstances of Mahsa Amini’s death and the ensuing protests that demand change in regard to the imposition of Islamic law, freedom of expression and women’s rights in Iran. Afterwards, participants were asked to state their willingness to engage in

³ One participant’s age data was removed, as they indicated their age as over 200.

collective action. In the third part of the study, participants were asked to complete a measure of political self-efficacy and other measures that were not relevant to the hypotheses of this study. After completing all questionnaires, the students were asked for some basic socio-demographic information (i.e. gender, age) and debriefed about the intentions of the study.

Measures

Moral Conviction

We first assessed the participants' general attitudes toward gender equality. Participants indicated to what extent they “support or oppose gender equality” by using a 7-point Likert scale (*1- strongly oppose 7 - strongly support*). To measure moral conviction, participants indicated how much their opinions on gender equality were “a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?”, “connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong?”, “based on moral principle?” (Skitka et al., 2005), by using a 7-point Likert scale (*1 = not at all, 7 = very much*). Cronbach's alpha for moral conviction was .88 ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.17$).

Collective Action

To assess collective action, we used four questions to indicate participants' willingness to engage in collective action in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution. The questions were adapted from Leal et al. (2023). Participants answered how much they would be willing to “participate in an upcoming protest to support gender equality for Iranian women”, “share some information about ongoing gender inequality issues in Iran on my social media”, “change my profile picture on my social media to raise awareness about women's rights in Iran” and “sign a petition to support gender equality in Iran” by using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Cronbach's alpha

for collective action was .83, ($M = 4.32$ and $SD = 1.45$).

Political Self-efficacy

To measure perceived political self-efficacy, we used six questions from the Perceived Political Self-Efficacy scale (Caprara et al., 2009). Participants stated their perceived confidence to perform political behaviors on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*): “I feel confident in my ability to...” “state my own political opinion openly, even in clearly hostile settings”, “promote public initiatives to support political programs that I believe are just”, “carry out an effective information campaign for the political movement or party with which I concur”, “actively promote the election of political candidates in which I trust”, “promote effective activities of information and mobilization in my own community (of work, friends, and family), to support political programs in which I believe” and “collect a substantial amount of money to support a cause I believe in”. The Cronbach’s alpha for the perceived political self-efficacy scale was 0.81 ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.82$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We first checked and confirmed that the assumptions for (multiple) linear regression were met. To test for possible outliers in our data we conducted an analysis of standard residuals and found no outliers (*Std. Residual Min* = -3.35, *Std. Residual Max* = 3.09). We investigated normality by creating a normal P-P plot and found it to be present (see Appendix, Figure 1). The assumptions of homoscedasticity and linearity were analysed through the use of a scatter plot of the regressions standardized residuals (see Appendix, Figure 2) which showed that both assumptions were met. In our data, there are no concerns for multicollinearity between the variables of moral conviction (*Tolerance* = 0.95, *VIF* =

1.05), political self-efficacy (*Tolerance* = 0.95, *VIF* = 1.05) and collective action. Finally, no evidence for autocorrelation of the residuals was found (*Durbin-Watson* = 1.76).

All means, standard deviations and correlations between study variables are presented in Table 1. The bivariate correlation analysis showed that all variables were significantly and positively correlated with each other ($ps < .001$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Moral Conviction	227	5.70	1.17	—		
2. Collective Action	227	4.32	1.45	.48**	—	
3. Political Self Efficacy	227	3.09	.82	.22**	.50**	—

Note: Moral conviction and collective action were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, and Political Self-Efficacy was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale; ** $p < .001$

Hypothesis Testing

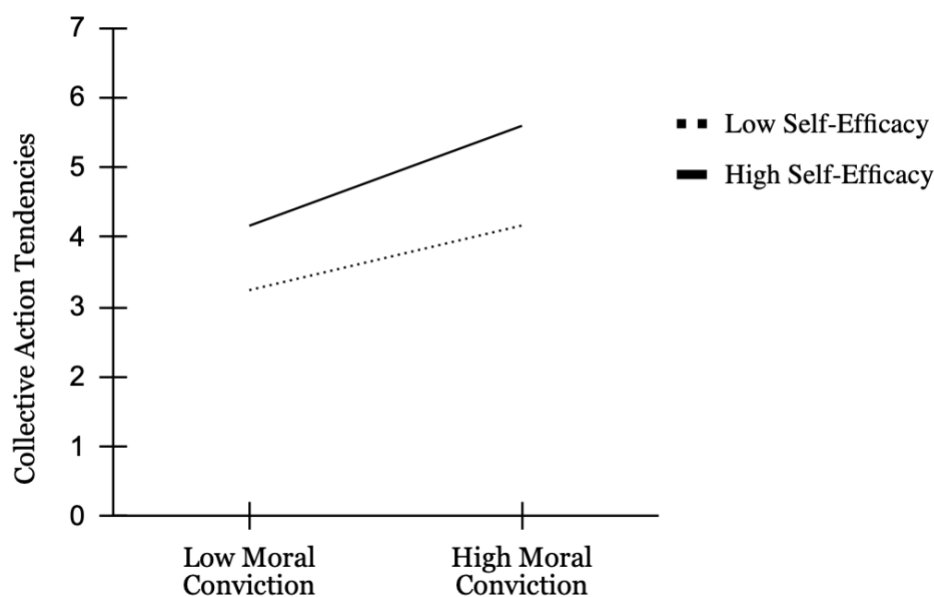
We centered the independent variable of moral conviction and the moderator political self-efficacy and computed an interaction between them. We conducted a multiple linear regression to investigate the relationship between moral conviction and the dependent variable collective action, the relationship between collective action and the moderator political self-efficacy and, finally, the interaction of political self-efficacy and moral conviction with collective action.

The overall model was found to be significant with $R^2 = .40$, $F(3,223) = 50.33$, $p <$

.001. We found that moral conviction was significantly and positively associated with collective action ($\beta = .50, t(223) = 7.55, p < .001, 95\% CI [.37, .63]$). Furthermore, we found a significant and positive association between political self-efficacy and collective action, ($\beta = .71, t(223) = 7.59, p < .001, 95\% CI [.53, .90]$). However, the interaction between moral conviction and political self-efficacy was only marginally significant ($\beta = .13, t(223) = 1.75, p = .08, 95\% CI [-.02, .28]$). Still, we ran simple slope analyses to gain further insight into the interaction (see Figure 2). We found that, for people who score highly on perceived political self-efficacy, the association between moral conviction and collection is marginally significant ($\beta = .49, t(227) = 1.73, p = .09$). For people who score low on perceived political self-efficacy, the association between moral conviction and collection was not significant ($\beta = .47, t(227) = 1.38, p = .17$).

Figure 2

Simple Slope Analysis of the Interaction Effect between Moral Conviction and Political Self-Efficacy on Collective Action Tendencies



Discussion

The goals of this study were to examine the association between moral conviction and collective action and the moderating role of political self-efficacy in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution. Specifically, the hypotheses were (1) moral conviction is positively associated with collective action, (2) collective action and political self-efficacy are associated positively and (3) political self-efficacy positively moderates the relationship between moral conviction and collective action, such that the relationship between moral conviction and collective action is stronger for people who score highly on political self-efficacy. Our findings show that moral conviction and collective action tendencies are positively associated, supporting the first hypothesis. Additionally, we found support for our second hypothesis with collective action tendencies and high perceived political self-efficacy being positively associated. Contrary to our expectations, we found that political self-efficacy did not moderate the relationship between moral conviction and collective action (even though there was a trend toward the hypothesized relationship).

Theoretical Implications

This research offers some theoretical contributions. First, we replicate existing research showing that moral conviction is a driver of collective action tendencies but in a different and novel context, namely the 2022 Iran Revolution. Indeed, previous studies have shown that moral convictions positively influence collective action tendencies (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2021; van Zomeren et al., 2012; Zaal et al., 2011). Our research shows that moral convictions about gender equality were related to willingness to engage in collective action in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution. This means that in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution moral convictions do seem to be a driving force in people's willingness to

participate in collective action behavior, such as protests, that is consistent with who they are and what they stand for (Sabucedo et al, 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2018).

Research has shown that people experience a sense of self-discrepancy and discomfort when they do not act in line with their ideals and morals (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Sabucedo, 2018). This discrepancy can motivate active behavior to avoid feelings of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019; Higgins, 1987). Our findings suggest that people whose moral convictions include gender equality are more willing to act in a collective manner to change a system that violates this conviction. Adding to the generalizability of our results, other research has focused on different contexts such as refugee crises (i.e. Kende et al., 2017) or specific movements (i.e. 2017 May Demonstrations; Sabucedo et al, 2018). This demonstrates the relative context independence between moral convictions and collective action.

Second, we found an association between collective action tendencies and perceived political self-efficacy. The association is supported by previous research finding similar results, that linked collective action with self-efficacy in political contexts (Matthieu & Carbone, 2020). Based on our results, participants who perceive their political behavior to be efficacious are more likely to be willing to engage in collective action. Indeed, previous research has shown that people are more likely to engage in political behavior when it is perceived as potentially successful (Shalley & Oldham, 1985). In the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution, we find support for this reasoning.

While we did not find significant results for the hypothesis of political self-efficacy moderating the relationship between moral conviction and collective action tendencies, the results provided us with preliminary evidence of a trend towards this association.

Participants who indicated high levels of political self-efficacy were more likely to be

willing to engage in collective action when the moral conviction of gender equality was strong. This indicates that there appears to be evidence for a trend of openness to engage in collective action based on moral conviction in individuals with feelings of high political efficacy. Previous studies have shown that people are more likely to engage in political action and stand up for their moral beliefs when they perceive that action to be of influence (e.g., Leath & Shavous, 2017; Morgan, 2012). Therefore, we theorize that using a bigger sample to increase power, in turn, increases the possibility of significant results for the role of high political self-efficacy in the relationship between moral conviction and collective action tendencies.

We based this study on a real-life political event. It is possible that the participants were already familiar with the issue and had already established beliefs and convictions, instead of only creating them after encountering them in a hypothetical context. While this adds to the ecological validity of the results, future research should focus on replicating these findings in different contexts to investigate generalizability.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

One limitation of our study is the sample we used to assess our data. The sample consisted of mostly female first-year psychology students in Groningen. Since we only questioned a limited population of participants the generalizability of the results could be influenced by the lack of diversity in our sample. For future research, we suggest replicating the findings of our study with different samples to increase the external validity of the effect. Due to the fact that our study was conducted in the Netherlands, it would be informative to study the effects in different countries and cultures.

For our study, we used the 2022 Iran Revolution as a real-life political event to assess participants' willingness to engage in collective action behavior. While we found

results in line with previous research, using a specific context still limits the generalizability of our findings. The real-life context we used included a movement that is primarily set in Iran, while some participants might have a personal connection to the movement we did not control for the information participants had before the study regarding the event, which could influence the results. If real-life political events will be used in future studies, a prior assessment of knowledge and attitude might provide further insight into the influencing factors on the found association.

Finally, since our study was only conducted using self-reported questionnaires, we were not able to assess actual behavior, but a willingness to engage in the behavior. The results showed a willingness to engage in behavior and possible tendencies, but no concrete data of collective action. Additionally, we did not question the families or peers of the participants but solely relied on the accuracy of the reported values of the individuals. Future research might focus on the accuracy of our findings by conducting experiments, through the measurement of actual behavior. This measurement can possibly be conducted by extending the questionnaire to include questions that ask about past behaviour (e.g. ‘I have participated in protests concerning this issue’) or more creative research designs that question individuals on their moral convictions and perceived political self-efficacy. Afterwards, they could be introduced to situations where they are confronted with a violation of these moral convictions and given the opportunity to take action. The results of such an experiment could greatly contribute to the understanding of collective action behavior, based on moral convictions and political self-efficacy beliefs.

Conclusion

Moral convictions have the power to create social change by directly influencing collective action behavior. Our study aimed to conceptually replicate previous research that

investigated the link between moral conviction and collective action, now in the context of the 2022 Iran Revolution sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini and repeated violations of women's rights in Iran sparked collective action behavior. We found evidence in support of willingness to engage in collective action behavior indeed being influenced by moral convictions, such as gender equality. Fighting for their moral convictions appears to be one of the reasons why people engage in protests and other active political behavior.

Additionally, we found support for the theory that political self-efficacy beliefs are connected to collective action tendencies. Thus, showcasing the willingness of people to engage in collective action if they are perceived as politically efficacious. Ultimately, we uncovered a trend that strong beliefs of gender equality being morally right and willingness to engage in collective action are higher when perceived political self-efficacy is strong.

This concludes that moral convictions and political self-efficacy beliefs appear to indeed be among the driving factors for political change behaviour in the context of the 2022 Iran revolution.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residuals

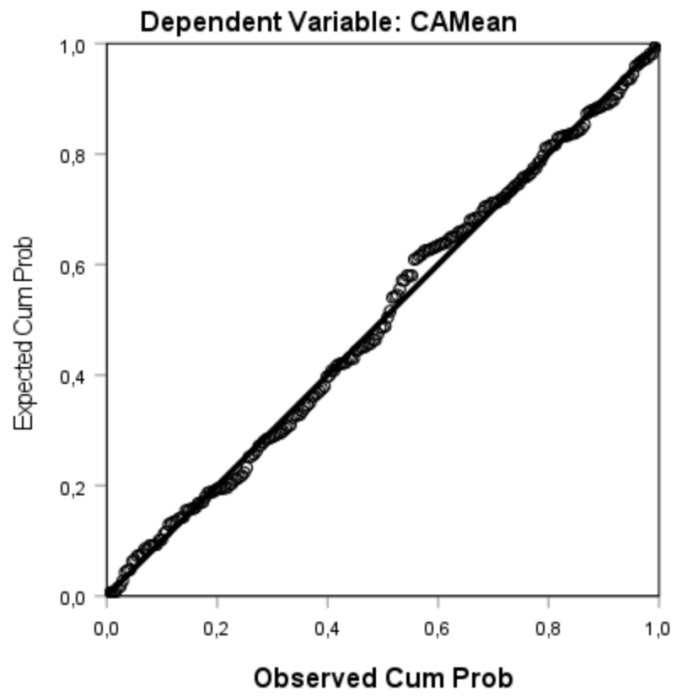


Figure 2

Scatter Plot of Regression Standardized Residuals

