



The day after an electoral defeat: Counterfactuals and collective action

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An intriguing question for scholars of collective action is how participants of unsuccessful actions become re-engaged in future collective activities. At an individual level, previous research has shown that after negative outcomes counterfactual thoughts ('if only . . .') may serve to prepare for future action. In the current research, we investigated whether counterfactuals may also prepare for future action at a collective level. After a defeat of their party at the regional elections, 163 political activists rated their agreement with *abstract* (as opposed to *concrete*) and *party-focused* (as opposed to *other-focused*) counterfactuals about how the elections outcome might have been better. Results showed that abstract counterfactuals, dealing with the core elements of the elections, supported collective action intention better than concrete ones. Consistent with the recent developments of dual-pathway models of collective action, counterfactuals predicted collective action intention through the mediation of group efficacy and group identification. In particular, while both party- and other-focused abstract counterfactuals increased group efficacy, only other-focused abstract counterfactuals increased group identification. Discussion focuses on how the investigation of counterfactuals can enlarge our knowledge of the socio-cognitive antecedents of collective action.

It is somehow surprising that after a failure of collective action many activists decide not to give up but, on the contrary, to commit themselves with even greater zest to a, hopefully, more successful action in the future. Understanding what happens in activists' mind after a failure is intriguing. What thoughts may induce activists to get involved in collective action again or, *vice versa*, to give up?

After a failure, for example an electoral defeat, activists will very likely ruminate on what happened, thinking about events, or their own and other people's actions, without which things might have been different. In the present research, we investigated this kind of reasoning. After an electoral defeat, we asked party activists to generate and evaluate counterfactual thoughts, that is, to imagine how different things might have been 'if only . . .' (e.g., 'if only we had believed in what we do more strongly . . .', 'if only we had campaigned more positively . . .', 'if only the media had been more balanced . . .'). For the first time, we connected research on counterfactual thinking

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and research on collective action, investigating whether counterfactuals generated after an electoral defeat would increase political activists' intention of getting involved in collective action again. In doing this, we aimed at enlarging our understanding of the socio-cognitive antecedents of collective action.

Previous research has shown that counterfactuals are often spontaneously generated after negative unintended events (e.g., Roese & Hur, 1997; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999) and that they can be useful for understanding how negative outcomes might have been prevented (e.g., Catellani, Alberici, & Milesi, 2004; Hilton, McClure, & Slugoski, 2005; Mandel, 2005). Counterfactuals also have a preparative function in that they can be used to plan more successful behaviours and improve subsequent performance (e.g., Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Smallman & Roese, 2009). However, so far research on the preparative function of counterfactuals has been focused on individual action only, while no attempt has been made to apply such a research to the study of collective action. That is what we did in the present research.

We expected that abstract counterfactuals dealing with the core elements of the elections would increase collective action intention more than concrete counterfactuals. We also expected that counterfactuals would predict collective action intention through the mediation of two powerful predictors of collective action, namely, group efficacy and group identification (e.g., Giguère & Lalonde, 2010; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2004; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach, 2008). In particular, while both party- and other-focused abstract counterfactuals would increase group efficacy, only other-focused abstract counterfactuals would increase group identification.

In the following introductory sections, we will first briefly review recent literature on how thinking counterfactually about past failures may favour individuals' preparation to deal with similar situations in the future. We will then focus our attention on how recent psychosocial models stress the importance of group efficacy and group identification as antecedents of collective action. Finally, we will consider how some types of counterfactuals generated after an electoral defeat may enhance collective action intention through the mediation of group efficacy and group identification.

The preparative function of counterfactuals

Several researches have shown that some counterfactual types can prepare future action (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Roese, 1994; Sirois, Monforton, & Simpson, 2010; Smallman & Roese, 2009). Counterfactual *direction* is a crucial dimension in this regard. While *downward* counterfactuals simulate how things might have been worse (e.g., 'If we had lost the vote of the working class, the electoral outcome might have been worse'), *upward* counterfactuals simulate how things might have been better (e.g., 'If our candidate had been younger, the electoral outcome might have been better'). After a failure, generating upward (instead of downward) counterfactuals has been shown to foster regret (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000), but at the same time to be functional to preparing future action (Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Roese, 1994; Sanna, Meier, & Turley-Ames, 1998; Sirois *et al.*, 2010; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). This is especially the case when people think that in the future they will confront situations similar to the one just experienced and that they can plausibly hope for future change (e.g., Boninger, Gleicher, & Strathman, 1994; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993, 1995; Roese & Olson, 1993, 1997; Sanna & Turley, 1996; Sanna *et al.*, 1999; Wong, Galinsky, & Kray, 2009). People with such a perspective are not prisoners of

what might have been. Instead, they project themselves into the future and think about what might be done the next time to improve subsequent performance, so that upward counterfactuals are a first step towards self-improvement and self-protection (Boninger *et al.*, 1994; Grieve, Houston, Dupuis, & Eddy, 1999; Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Markman *et al.*, 1993; Markman, Karadogan, Lindberg, & Zell, 2009; Sanna, Chang, & Meier, 2001). In other words, upward counterfactuals motivate people to try again in the future, because they indicate that, while past outcomes were negative, future outcomes may still improve (Johnson & Sherman, 1990; Sanna, 1997). Accordingly, such counterfactuals strengthen the intention to improve performance and they actually improve it (Markman *et al.*, 1993, 1995; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Nasco & Marsh, 1999; Roese, 1994; Roese & Olson, 1997).

The functionality of counterfactuals to regulate behaviour is also associated to their subtractive versus additive *structure*. *Subtractive* counterfactuals simulate the absence of antecedents, which were present in the real scenario (e.g., 'Things might have been better, if only our candidate had *not* been involved in a scandal a week before the election'). As such, they are restricted to what happened in reality (Kray, Galinsky, & Wong, 2006; Markman, Lindberg, Kray & Galinsky, 2007). On the contrary, *additive* counterfactuals postulate antecedents that were not part of the real scenario (e.g., 'Things might have been better, if only our candidates had participated in a talk show a week before the election'). In other words they add something new, they broaden the attention beyond the boundaries of what happened in reality and explore new and multiple possibilities. Consistently, additive counterfactuals have been shown to be more preparative to action than subtractive counterfactuals. They are more likely to activate behavioural intentions and to lead to performance improvement (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese, 1994; Roese & Olson, 1993; Sirois *et al.*, 2010).

So far, studies on the preparative function of *upward additive counterfactuals* have been concerned with individual behaviour only. In the present research, for the first time we investigated whether these counterfactuals may prepare action intention also at the collective level.

We also investigated whether the *abstraction* level of upward additive counterfactuals would make a difference. *Abstract* counterfactuals refer to a class of general behaviours, detached from any specific context (e.g., 'Things would have been better, if only we had said more left-wing things', '... if only we had addressed the safety issue more strongly') while *concrete* counterfactuals refer to specific behaviours, enacted in a precise time and place (e.g., 'Things would have been better, if only during the campaign we had proposed to earmark funding to help people that lost their jobs', '... if only we had paid more attention at the bomb attack at the airport one month ago').

Existing literature indicates that *concrete* counterfactuals have a preparative function because they provide precise and detailed action plans (Pham & Taylor, 1999; Smallman & Roese, 2009). However, the power of *concrete* counterfactuals to plan for future action has been studied mainly in the short term, when the context of future behaviour is close in time and space, and similar to the one just experienced. Smallman and Roese (2009) wonder whether counterfactuals might also play a preparative function in the long term, when the behavioural context is temporally and spatially distant and less similar to previous experience. Concrete level representations enable people to grasp the richness of the details of the immediate situation while abstract level representations enable people to grasp the general meaning of a situation that one could apply to a wide range of alternative scenarios. Accordingly, in the long term, *abstract* rather

than *concrete* counterfactuals would prepare future action better because they provide general action plans that can be applied to various scenarios.

For political activists, an electoral defeat is a short-term setback with the hope for long-term redemption. Therefore, after an electoral defeat, we expected that *abstract* counterfactuals would increase action intention more than *concrete* counterfactuals. We also expected this increase to be mediated by two powerful psychosocial predictors of collective action, namely, group efficacy and group identification.

Group efficacy, group identification, and collective action

Collective action has been defined as 'efforts by a large number of people, who define themselves and are also defined by others as a group, to solve collectively a problem they feel they have in common, and which is perceived to arise from their relations with other groups' (Tajfel, 1981, p. 244). This definition indicates that participation in collective action arises from two sources: decision making and group identity (Giguère & Lalonde, 2010).

Such a duality in collective action antecedents is reflected in the wide consensus that dual-pathway models of collective action have gained in psychosocial literature. Most research on the determinants of people's motivation to participate in collective actions suggests the existence of two paths: a strategic or instrumental path and an affective path (e.g., Giguère & Lalonde, 2010; Van Zomeren, Postmes *et al.*, 2008; Van Zomeren, Spears *et al.*, 2008).

The strategic path is based on group efficacy beliefs, which are appraisals regarding control, strength, and power of the in-group, as well as its ability to change the situation (e.g., Hornsey *et al.*, 2006; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004). Group efficacy stems from perceived consensus within the group in terms of both shared opinion and shared course of action, so as to include evaluations of the size and level of unity among in-group members as compared to relevant out-groups (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Postmes & Branscombe, 2002; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & ter Haar, 2002; Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2004). Group efficacy thus consists in beliefs that through joint effort the group will be able to respond to relevant events, overcome intervening obstacles, face opposing out-groups, and finally achieve its goals.

The affective path to collective action is based on group identification. Individuals are connected to groups thanks to their social identities, understood as the knowledge of belonging to certain groups together with the emotional and value significance of group membership (Tajfel, 1972). While individuals may identify with a variety of social categories or movements, the group identity that best predicts intended or actual participation in collective action is politicized group identity (e.g., Kelly & Breiling, 1996; Van Zomeren, Spears *et al.*, 2008). When people develop a politicized identification, group norms and goals are internalized and people feel an inner obligation to become actively involved, beyond any instrumental calculation of success (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Simon *et al.*, 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004, 2009). Politicized group identification develops in a context of power struggle and social change, when people become aware that the action of their group is very likely to be resisted by more powerful out-groups and that society at large is another important social group (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009).

The two pathways to collective action are not unrelated. Both quantitative and qualitative research (see Drury & Reicher, 2005; Van Zomeren, Postmes *et al.*, 2008)

has highlighted that group efficacy and group identification are positively correlated and that both factors play a crucial role among antecedents of collective action. Consistently, in the present paper, we expected that the effect of counterfactuals on collective action intention would be mediated by group efficacy and group identification. To explain the rationale of this expectation, we will now take into account how counterfactual thinking may be linked with group efficacy and, respectively, group identification.

Counterfactuals and group efficacy

Within research on collective action, the antecedents of group efficacy in terms of variables that can influence group coping potential are still a matter of investigation (Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2010). In the present research, we argued that upward additive counterfactuals about past collective failures can be included among these antecedents.

At the individual level, upward counterfactuals have been shown to affect subsequent behaviour via enhanced perceived control and feeling of being task-prepared, thus making one feel better equipped for future analogous situations (Johnson & Sherman, 1990; McMullen, Markman, & Gavanski, 1995; Markman *et al.*, 1995; Markman & Weary, 1996; Sanna, 1997; Sanna & Turley-Ames, 2000; Sirois *et al.*, 2010). For example, university students' counterfactuals about how they could have achieved a better grade in a past examination led to improved performance in a similar examination a few weeks later, and this effect was mediated by enhanced perceived control (Nasco & Marsh, 1999). Furthermore, whereas downward counterfactuals decrease feelings of self-efficacy, upward counterfactuals reinforce feelings of self-efficacy towards similar future events (Tal-Or, Boninger, & Gleicher, 2004). Consistently, regretful thinking is positively associated both with self-efficacy and with perceived control over adverse circumstances, which influences perseverance and resilience in contexts of obstacles and failures (Markman, Baron, & Balkin, 2005).

Moving from the individual to the collective level, we argued that upward counterfactuals generated after a collective failure would increase group efficacy. After an electoral defeat, counterfactuals about how the electoral outcome might have been better would foster the belief that the party would be able to achieve success at next elections.

Previous research has shown that simulating upward counterfactuals increases individuals' perceptions of their ability to succeed in future performance contexts (Markman & Weary, 1996; McMullen *et al.*, 1995; Nasco & Marsh, 1999; Roese, 1997; Sirois *et al.*, 2010; Tal-Or *et al.*, 2004). Accordingly, defeated activists would feel better equipped for future electoral contexts and better prepared to what may happen both when they think how their party might have achieved a better electoral outcome and when they think about how other factors might have determined a different outcome. Party-focused counterfactuals would suggest the means through which the party might have achieved a better electoral outcome, thus providing hints for future strategies. As to other-focused counterfactuals, they would stress the role played by other contextual factors in determining the final outcome, thus also increasing the feeling of being prepared to cope with analogous difficult contexts (Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Roese, 1994; Roese & Olson, 1993).

Thus, in the present research we expected that both party-focused counterfactuals (e.g., 'Things would have been better, if only we had been more sensitive to the safety concerns of ordinary people') and other-focused counterfactuals (e.g., 'Things would have been better, if only the electoral turnout had been higher') would fuel activists'

beliefs that their party would be able to overcome future obstacles and achieve a better electoral outcome in the future.

Counterfactuals and group identification

The effect of counterfactuals on group identification has never been investigated so far, and only a few studies have compared counterfactuals generated by high versus low group identifiers (Branscombe, N'Gbala, Kobrynowicz, & Wann, 1997; McCrea, 2007).

In a study by McCrea (2007, Study 2), participants with high versus low identification with a soccer team were asked to generate counterfactuals in response to an imagined defeat of their team in an important match. Results showed that highly identified participants generated more upward counterfactuals focused on external factors (e.g., the ability of the other team, the referee, the importance of the game, and media pressure) than on their own team. According to McCrea (2007), after a collective failure, other-focused counterfactuals can be motivated by a group-protective bias. Since they divert attention from the in-group to external factors, blame of the in-group is avoided and its positive image is restored. Research on collective action also suggested that attributing the disadvantaged condition of one's own group to political opponents or to other factors can be a way to foster group identification (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2009).

Accordingly, in the present research we expected that after an electoral defeat other-focused counterfactuals, besides increasing activists' group efficacy, would also increase group identification.

PRELIMINARY STUDY

Participants of both our preliminary and main study were activists of the *Democrats of the Left* party (*Democratici di Sinistra*, DS), who were contacted immediately after the regional elections in Lombardy, a big Northern Italian region with Milan as its capital. The Italian electoral system is a majority system, comparable to that of many other European countries that include two main coalitions competing both in the national and in the regional elections (De Sio, 2008). Regional elections are held simultaneously every five years in fifteen Italian regions, including Lombardy (the remaining five Italian regions have a special statute and different election times). Before elections, major national parties establish two broad coalitions in all the involved regions, so that everywhere the competition is held between a major centre-right coalition and a major centre-left coalition. The electoral campaign is also heavily directed by national parties, and media often focus their attention more on national party leaders than on regional candidates.

Regional elections taken into account in the present research ended with the victory of the centre-right coalition, who got 62.4% of votes against 31.5% of votes for the centre-left coalition (6.1% of votes went to minor groups or were annulled). In the five years before the investigated elections, Lombardy had been already governed by a centre-right council headed by a very popular governor, Roberto Formigoni. Consequently, a negative outcome at the regional elections for the left-wing coalition was largely expected.

With the aim of creating ecologically valid counterfactuals to be employed in the main study, we carried out a preliminary study in which we investigated counterfactuals spontaneously generated by political activists. A sample of 157 political activists of the Democrats of the Left party in Lombardy participated in the preliminary study

(males $n = 110$; aged 19–78 years, M age = 46.59 years, $SD = 12.39$ years). After the regional elections, participants were recruited at the local offices or get-togethers of the party and were asked to reflect on the recent electoral defeat of their party completing counterfactual stems of the type: ‘Things might have been . . . (better or worse) if only . . .’. Participants could complete as many counterfactual stems as they wanted. On average, they completed 2.74 counterfactuals ($SD = 1.95$), of which 95% were *upward* ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.84$) and 97% were *additive* ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.85$). A very large prevalence of upward and additive counterfactuals therefore was observed, namely, of counterfactuals that past research has shown to best serve the function of preparing future action. Some of the upward additive counterfactuals generated in the preliminary study were employed in the main study, which involved a different sample of political activists of the same party.

MAIN STUDY

In our main study, we asked activists to rate their agreement with upward additive counterfactuals focused on the recent electoral defeat of their party. The counterfactuals varied with regard to their being either abstract (e.g., ‘Things would have been better, if only we had paid more attention to the everyday problems of ordinary people’) or concrete (e.g., ‘. . . if only we had given more TV interviews in the last weeks before the election day’), and focused either on the party (e.g., ‘. . . if only we had made better use of the media’) or on other factors (e.g., ‘. . . if only the press had been more balanced’).

Consistent with the literature about the preparative function of counterfactuals (e.g., Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003; Roese, 1994; Smallman & Roese, 2009) and with recent developments of two pathway models of collective action (Van Zomeren, Postmes *et al.*, 2008; Van Zomeren *et al.*, 2010), we expected that abstract counterfactuals focused on the party or on other targets would increase defeated activists’ collective action intention, through the mediation of group efficacy and group identification. Had these predictions been confirmed, we would have offered a first experimental demonstration of how counterfactual thinking about unsuccessful collective action is related to the intention of getting involved into collective action again.

Method

Participants and procedure

A sample of 163 political party activists for the Democrats of the Left party in Lombardy participated in the main study (males $n = 124$; aged 18–81 years, M age = 47.23 years, $SD = 16.63$ years). Participants were recruited at the local offices of the party and asked to complete a questionnaire.

Materials

Counterfactual agreement task

Participants were given a booklet that first summarized the past elections’ outcome. After this summary, participants were told they would read and evaluate a list of other Democrats of the Left party activists’ post-election thoughts. Using a 2 (target: party vs.

other) \times 2 (abstraction: abstract vs. concrete) within-subject design, we presented participants with four different types of counterfactuals. Participants read a global number of sixteen counterfactuals, grouped into four different boxes: each box contained four counterfactuals of the same type. For each type, counterfactuals were selected from those most commonly generated by participants in the preliminary study. An example of each type of the presented counterfactuals follows here: 'Things might have been better, if only we had presented a simpler and clearer electoral program' (*abstract party-focused* counterfactual); '... if only the press had been fair and objective' (*abstract other-focused* counterfactual); '... if only we had spoken out against the health care system deficit in Lombardy' (*concrete party-focused* counterfactual); '... if only the referendum on the electoral reform had reached the quorum of voters' (*concrete other-focused* counterfactual). The order of presentation of the four counterfactual types was counterbalanced.

Participants then rated the extent to which each type of counterfactuals was similar to what they had thought following the election defeat on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all similar*) to 7 (*very similar*).

Group identification

Participants rated four items that measured identification with their party ('I identify with the Democrats of the Left', 'It is important for me to belong to the Democrats of the Left', 'I feel strong ties with the Democrats of the Left', 'I feel to be similar to other members of the Democrats of the Left') on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*do not agree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). A composite score for each participant was calculated by averaging over the four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Group efficacy

Participants rated three items that measured group efficacy ('I think the Democrats of the Left remain united in case of obstacles or difficulties', 'I think the Democrats of the Left may be committed to increase the consent of the voters', 'I think the Democrats of the Left have the skills necessary to increase the consent of the voters') on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*do not agree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). A composite score for each participant was calculated by averaging over the three items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Collective action intention

Participants rated their overall intention to participate in activities promoted by the party in the upcoming year ('How often in the upcoming year do you intend to participate in activities promoted by the Democrats of the Left?'), as well as how often they intended to join five specific party activities ('meetings on topics of particular interest', 'meetings with party leader', 'propaganda activities and leaflets distribution', 'party rallies', 'party demonstrations and marches'), on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*often*). For each participant, we calculated a composite score by averaging over these six items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations for, and correlations between, agreement with the four types of counterfactuals, group identification, group efficacy, and collective action intention

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Abstract party-focused/counterfactuals	4.99	1.62	–						
2. Concrete party-focused/counterfactuals	4.44	1.61	.24**	–					
3. Abstract other-focused/counterfactuals	4.20	1.61	.02	.43***	–				
4. Concrete other-focused/counterfactuals	4.26	1.92	.20*	.29***	.43***	–			
5. Group identification	5.45	1.47	.18*	.30***	.49***	.30***	–		
6. Group efficacy	5.67	1.19	.22**	.17*	.33***	.22**	.67***	–	
7. Collective action intention	4.85	1.62	.28***	.38***	.45***	.30**	.65***	.50***	–

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Results

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for, and correlations between, agreement with the four types of counterfactuals and the other variables.

As can be seen in the table, participants strongly agreed with all types of counterfactuals presented. In all cases, agreement was significantly higher than the midpoint of the response scale (*abstract party-focused* counterfactuals, $t(162) = 11.77$, $p < .001$; *abstract other-focused* counterfactuals, $t(162) = 5.55$, $p < .001$; *concrete party-focused* counterfactuals, $t(162) = 7.48$, $p < .001$; *concrete other-focused* counterfactuals, $t(162) = 5.08$, $p < .001$).

Correlations between agreements with different types of counterfactuals were all significant and positive, except for the correlation between abstract party-focused counterfactuals and abstract other-focused counterfactuals, which was non-significant ($r = .02$). The latter result suggests that abstract counterfactuals about how the party might have improved the outcome and how other factors might have done it, were two independent lines of reasoning. With regard to the psychosocial determinants of collective action, group efficacy and group identification were positively and strongly correlated ($r = .67$).

To test our hypotheses, we performed structural equation modelling using Mplus Version 3.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2004). Structural equation modelling consists of two parts: a measurement model and a structural model. The measurement model was tested in order to assess whether each of the 13 items measuring group efficacy, group identification, and collective action intention would load significantly onto the scales with which they were associated. The structural model was tested in order to evaluate to what extent agreement with the four types of counterfactuals would influence collective action intention through the mediation of group efficacy and group identification. The four types of counterfactuals were allowed to correlate with each other.

The structural equation model in Figure 1 summarizes the obtained results for the tested model. A χ^2 of 201.611 on 106 degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df = 1.90$) and other fit indexes (comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.93; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07; 90% CI for RMSEA: 0.059, 0.090; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.06) indicate that the model fitted the data well (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The multiple square correlation coefficients (R^2 s) for group efficacy, group identification, and collective action intention were 0.184, 0.602, and 0.505, respectively.

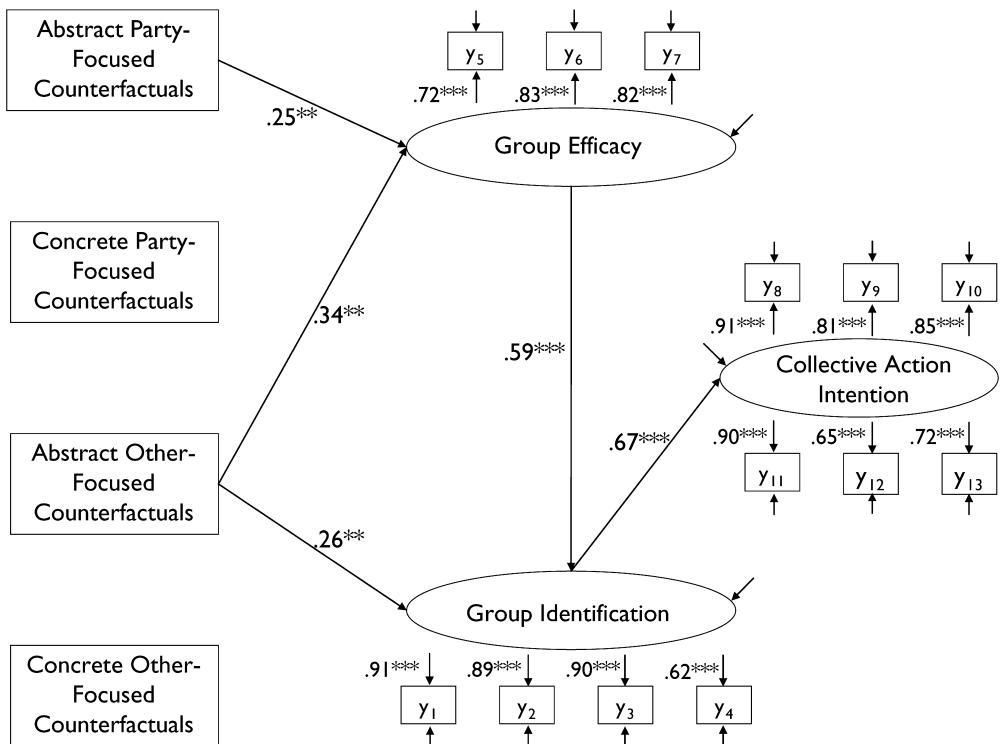


Figure 1. Effects of agreement with abstract and concrete party- and other-focused counterfactuals on collective action intention through group efficacy and group identification.

Note. Standardized coefficients are reported. Correlations between different types of counterfactuals, non-significant path coefficients, and error variances are not reported.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

With regard to the measurement model, all items loaded significantly onto their respective constructs (with the lowest t -value being 6.153). With regard to the structural model, it showed the expected relations between the variables. First of all, while abstract counterfactuals predicted both group efficacy and group identification (and, through this, collective action intention), concrete counterfactuals did not. This offered a confirmation of our first hypothesis regarding abstract counterfactuals supporting action intention through group efficacy and group identification. Second, both abstract party-focused ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and abstract other-focused counterfactuals ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$) increased defeated activists' group efficacy. This was consistent with our second hypothesis, according to which both party- and other-focused abstract counterfactuals would increase group efficacy. Third, other-focused counterfactuals also increased defeated activists' group identification ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$), thus confirming our third hypothesis regarding the role that other-focused counterfactuals would play in increasing group identification.

The specific indirect effect linking party-focused abstract counterfactuals and collective action intention, progressing first through group efficacy and then through group identification, was also different from zero (95% CI: +0.015, +0.222). Thus, the effect of party-focused counterfactuals on collective action intention was mediated first by

group efficacy and then by group identification. The same held true for abstract other-focused counterfactuals (95% CI: +0.032, +0.329). However, abstract other-focused counterfactuals were also found to be connected with collective action through group identification only (95% CI: +0.020, +0.373). Therefore, the effects of other-focused counterfactuals on collective action intention followed two paths, one through group efficacy first and then group identification, and one through group identification only. All the other specific indirect effects that progressed from counterfactuals through either group efficacy or group identification were not different from zero.¹

Discussion

By investigating counterfactual thinking in a sample of political activists after an electoral defeat, our research shed light on a so far rather neglected issue in collective action research, namely, what thoughts following a collective defeat may induce activists to further commitment to future collective action instead of growing discouraged and giving up.

We showed that thinking in abstract terms about how things might have ended better leads defeated activists to re-commit to the struggle and re-engage in collective action, thanks to increased group efficacy and group identification. This is true both when counterfactuals are focused on the actions of the party (e.g., 'Things might have been better, if only we had been more committed', '... if only we had been more united') and when counterfactuals are focused on the actions of other actors outside the party (e.g., 'Things might have been better, if only the press had been fair', '... if only people were more interested in politics'). However, the paths linking these two categories of counterfactuals with action intention are partially different. While the effect of both party- and other-focused counterfactuals on action intention progresses first through group efficacy and then through group identification, the effect of other-focused counterfactuals also progresses through group identification only. These findings contribute to the study of both collective action and counterfactual thinking in several ways.

First, as to the relation between counterfactuals and an important antecedent of collective action such as group efficacy, our findings show that both party- and other-focused abstract counterfactuals support defeated activists' group efficacy. However, they do it independently from each other, and thus they are very likely to support group efficacy for different reasons. Party-focused counterfactuals convey the idea that a better outcome might have been achieved if the party had acted differently. While re-activating relevant group goals, such counterfactuals suggest the means through which the party could have obtained them. These findings suggest that highly motivated and engaged people such as party activists may overcome the short-term drawbacks of internally focused counterfactuals (e.g., in-group blame) and profit from their long-term

¹ 95% CIs of the specific indirect effects progressing from abstract party-focused counterfactuals through group efficacy only: -0.069, +0.166; through group identification only: -0.087, +0.167. 95% CI of the specific indirect effect progressing from abstract other-focused counterfactuals through group efficacy only: -0.112, +0.219. 95% CIs of the specific indirect effects progressing from concrete party-focused counterfactuals through group efficacy only: -0.081, +0.036; through group identification only: -0.053, +0.214; first through group efficacy and then through group identification: -0.139, +0.069. 95% CIs of the specific indirect effects progressing from concrete other-focused counterfactuals through group efficacy only: -0.033, +0.146; through group identification only: -0.081, +0.136; first through group efficacy and then through group identification: -0.084, +0.116.

preparative function instead (see Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Roese & Olson, 1993; Sanna *et al.*, 1998; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). As to other-focused counterfactuals, they simulate how a better outcome might have been achieved if external factors had been different. They improve the understanding of how events unfolded and enlarge the knowledge of how contextual factors contributed to the final outcome (Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Mandel, 2003a; Roese, 1994; Roese & Olson, 1993). Both types of counterfactuals evidently support activists' beliefs that the party is able to respond to relevant events, overcome intervening obstacles, and achieve its goals successfully. These results extend to the collective level what previously found at the individual level regarding how upward counterfactuals contribute to behavioural planning thanks to the mediation of increased perceived control (Johnson & Sherman, 1990; Markman *et al.*, 1995, 2005; Nasco & Marsh, 1999; Tal-Or *et al.*, 2004). In doing this, they enlarge our knowledge of the mental processes through which participants of an unsuccessful collective action construe an image of themselves as effective collective actors (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Second, in our study, other-focused counterfactuals also supported another important antecedent of collective action, namely, group identification. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that attributing one's group disadvantaged condition to factors other than the group can be a way to foster group identification (McCrea, 2007; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2009).

Third, our findings contribute to the study of the preparatory function of counterfactual thinking. They show that counterfactuals can have a preparative function also at the collective level, that is, when the actor and action involved are collective, extending previous findings on the preparative function of counterfactuals at the individual level (Boninger *et al.*, 1994; Grieve *et al.*, 1999; Haynes *et al.*, 2007; Markman *et al.*, 1993, 2009; Sanna *et al.*, 2001).

Fourth, they also show that, in addition to supporting short-term action intention (e.g., Markman *et al.*, 1993, 1995, 2009; Roese, 1994; Roese & Olson, 1993; Smallman & Roese, 2009), counterfactuals support long-term action intentions, and that the latter effect is exerted by abstract rather than concrete counterfactuals. As a matter of fact, our research indicates that under certain conditions abstract counterfactuals can prepare future action better than concrete ones. As compared with detailed and specific concrete counterfactuals, abstract counterfactuals are schematic and de-contextualized representations of what might have been 'if only ...'. As such, they are likely to enable defeated activists to grasp the core elements and central meaning of the past election, and to apply them to distant electoral scenarios. This result is consistent with Construal Level Theory (CLT, Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), which distinguishes between lower or concrete level construals that are associated with specific context representations, and higher or abstract level construals that are associated with schematic and de-contextualized representations. According to CLT, psychologically distant objects (in time or in space) are construed at a higher (more abstract) level.

The link between counterfactual thinking and collective action, addressed for the first time in the present study, would deserve to be further investigated. Several research directions may be envisaged. For example, a deeper understanding of the role of counterfactual thinking within the collective action domain can be provided by addressing its affective side. Cognitive and affective dimensions are closely interwoven when explaining collective action (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Giguère & Lalonde, 2010), and we know from previous research that counterfactuals have a range of emotional correlates, from shame to guilt, from self-blame to anger (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Mandel, 2003b; Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Zeelenberg *et al.*, 2000).

Thus, future research could fruitfully explore how emotions contribute to the effect of different types of counterfactuals in the preparation of collective action. Anger might be a crucial emotion in this regard. On the one hand, research on counterfactual thinking at the individual level has shown that other-focused counterfactuals after a negative outcome are associated with anger (Dhimi, Mandel, & Souza, 2005; Mandel, 2003b). On the other hand, research on collective action has shown that group-based anger creates a potential for mobilization, in connection with group identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stürmer & Simon, 2009). While the present research has shown the link between other-focused counterfactuals and group identification, future research could investigate whether and how far both factors are related to anger. Counterfactuals could be one of the ways through which a negative emotion like anger is connected with group goals and turned into a politicized identification. Finally, under certain conditions upward counterfactuals might be also associated with positive emotions, like hope and enthusiasm. Analysing the role of these emotions in predicting group efficacy and group identification would also be worthwhile.

Future research could also investigate what variables can influence the generation of party- and other-focused counterfactuals, and what factors moderate their effect on psychosocial predictors of collective action. For example, factors related with the context in which counterfactuals are generated or evaluated might be relevant (Catellani & Milesi, 2005). The method we used in the present study, that is, asking participants to rate their agreement with various counterfactuals generated by other activists of the same party, resembles what happens in post-electoral gatherings in party offices, where party activists are exposed to comments on the electoral outcome both by party leaders and by other activists. When sources or reflection contexts are different than in-group ones, defeated activists' concerns about party face protection could be higher than their concerns about how to prepare more successful future party actions. This could affect their ratings of party-focused counterfactuals that potentially damage party image or modify their observed link with group efficacy. So, party- and other-focused counterfactuals could have different effects on group efficacy and group identification when they come from an in-group versus an external source (e.g., journalists' or political opponents' comments), or when defeated activists rate them during a private discussion rather than in front of an audience or of political opponents (e.g., in talk shows).

Finally, variables dealing with the historical context of the collective failure that is being reflected upon might also be taken into account. For example, as far as electoral outcomes are concerned, exceptional events during the campaign (e.g., a terrorist attack), the political status of the in-group (e.g., its being the incumbent rather than the challenger party), and expectations of success (e.g., a history of repeated electoral victories) could modify the observed effects for counterfactual focusing on the party rather than on other targets.

To conclude, the present study contributed to our understanding of what it means for political activists to lose and to recover from a defeat. Imagining counterfactual scenarios where past collective failure might have been avoided is conducive to imagining that a new world is possible and that together people can create it, thus re-committing defeated participants to 'the cause' (see Drury & Reicher, 2009). Generating given types of counterfactual thoughts, and sharing them with other activists, seems therefore one of the ways through which a movement's continuity but also renewal are guaranteed, both of which are essential to every movement's life. In consideration of the observed links between counterfactuals and collective efficacy, identification, and action intention, the addition of counterfactuals to recent models of collective action appears certainly

useful to enlarge our knowledge of the socio-cognitive processes that lead people to involvement in collective action.

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