



Research Article

Envisioning Change: An Empirical Test of the Social Psychological Model of Utopian Thinking and Collective Action

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Abstract: This article provides the first empirical evidence of the theoretical model by Badaan et al. (2020) that proposes social psychological mechanisms whereby utopian thinking, which activates the social imagination, could enhance collective action intentions geared toward progressive social change. We anticipated that imagining better societies via utopian thinking would (a) increase social hope, (b) promote an abstract mindset that bridges psychological distance between the status quo in the present and the imagined, better future, (c) attenuate system justification motives, and (d) enhance social change-oriented collective action intentions. Using a structural equation modeling approach, our study provides preliminary support for some postulates of the theoretical model, paving the way for future research to further disentangle the psychological mechanisms by which utopian thinking influences collective action geared toward social change.

Keywords: utopian thinking, hope, construal level theory, abstraction, system justification, collective action, social justice

1. Introduction

Global inequality has been rising rapidly, affecting 70% of the worldwide population (United Nations [UN], 2020a). This status quo, especially when it comes to global economic inequality, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as (1) citizens, the majority of whom depend on a daily wage in many underdeveloped countries, have had their only source of income halted due to pandemic lockdowns, and (2) access to digitally remote jobs has now been restricted to the percentage of the worldwide population that live in technologically progressive countries with accessible and reliable internet connectivity and electricity. Additionally, much of the progress in dismantling the gender pay gap has been lost, as women who now work from home have had to dedicate considerable amounts of their otherwise work time to domestic chores as a result of pre-existing unequal gender roles in household labor (Sen, 2020). Finally, a global force that continues to drastically exacerbate current global inequalities is the looming climate crisis that, as the UN's (2020b) recent report on global economy has explicated, places even more strain on the poorest and most exploited countries.

The United States mirrors these global trends. Overall economic inequality in the United States has been increasing

since 1980, including income inequality — that is, the gap in income between the rich and all other segments of society — with the upper-income households having the greatest share of the nation’s aggregate income (Horowitz et al., 2020). This is also the case for wealth inequality, insofar as the bottom half of families owns only one percent of the total household wealth in the United States (Kent & Ricketts, 2020). There is also a massive racial divide underlying wealth inequality between White households and households of color. In fact, a typical Black family’s median wealth in the United States is reported to be 12.7% of the wealth usually owned by a White family (Terry et al., 2019). Those are but a few statistics that highlight the state of extraordinary inequality and rampant injustices in the United States today; we have yet to mention health and education disparities, other forms of institutionalized sexism, racism, and classism, and existential threats such as hate crimes.

As elsewhere, socioeconomic inequalities in the United States have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of mortality risk and economic vulnerability. For instance, Clouston et al. (2021) found that the risk of COVID-19 mortality was higher for residents of counties in the United States that were lower (vs. higher) socioeconomic status. Economic vulnerability has also worsened. For instance, Perry et al. (2021) observed an increased economic vulnerability for women, young adults, Black adults, and individuals with lower levels of education in Indiana on a number of outcomes, even after taking into account pre-pandemic variation in material insecurity and unemployment. The current status quo of high and increasing levels of inequality is not promising. To counter this gloomy reality, some find it necessary to create a utopian response (Webb, 2013). We want to be able to imagine, and then work toward better societies that are marked by egalitarian considerations and better prospects for all swaths of society. This is where utopian thinking could play a vital role in prompting ordinary citizens to imagine a better future, and, in turn, to work towards achieving that future.

1.1 Utopian thinking: Imagining better societies

One of the ways in which we can imagine better societies is through utopian thinking. Utopias have been a prominent theme for philosophers, political and social theorists, and social scientists alike for hundreds (if not thousands) of years. As such, the history of utopian thought is long and rich. For instance, Voltaire’s ideas during Enlightenment focused on internalized utopianism to counter pervasive intolerance and superstition (Fokkema, 2011), a construction of utopianism as a psychological state that challenges the status quo. According to renowned sociologist and utopian theorist Levitas (2010), utopia can be broadly defined as a way to express “the desire for a better way of living” (p. 9). This way of life, which may include a set of social practices associated with a better possible society, is socially constructed and comes in different forms. One of the main criticisms of utopia has been its attempt to escape or eliminate politics by designing it according to the common good (Nendza, 1984), which ultimately tends to do away with politics. However, utopia is very much political. Different scholars, from Plato, Campanella, and Bacon, to Owen, Morris, and Bellamy, have used utopian thinking to present political solutions to political problems (Chrostowska & Ingram, 2017). Moreover, some theoretical distinctions have been made between utopia and wishful thinking. For instance, Geuss (2017) argued that while wishful thinking distorts reality, making us less capable of confronting it politically, utopia can project a path for us towards which we can strive.

Also, countering the misconception of utopianism as wishful thinking or irrelevant fantasies, Levitas (2000) argued that imagining an alternative society involves an idealized representation of the present. Accordingly, utopias can be conceptualized as visions for better societies that emphasize equality, progress, and social justice. More specifically, an active utopia fires up our social imagination of an open future, and generates hope in the possibility of a reimagined social world (Webb, 2013). Ultimately, a future-oriented reimagining of society is vital to energize action directed at social change. Interdisciplinary research has emphasized the transformational potentiality of utopian thinking as “a way of breaking through the barriers of convention into a sphere of the imagination where many things beyond our everyday experience become feasible” (Friedmann, 2000, p. 462), one that is “hopeful and imaginative” (Brown, 2015, p. 213).

Psychologists have also been interested in exploring the concept of utopianism. For instance, Eric Fromm, a psychoanalyst and pioneer of humanistic psychology, highlighted the dismal human condition from the mid-1950s onward and described society as “sick, alienated, and inadequate” (Pietikainen, 2004, p. 86). Fromm’s solution to the status quo of society came as a political utopia (namely, socialist humanism) that centered each individual’s capacity for self-realization, the flourishing of altruism and prosocial behavior, and the practice and dissemination of communitarian

ideals which include direct political participation (Pietikainen, 2004). These ideas of human actualization and flourishing, and the ideal utopian society, were also foundational to ensuing subdisciplines of thought in psychology (e.g., positive psychology) (see Rich, 2001).

Contemporary social and political psychologists are empirically examining the notion that perhaps utopian thinking counters complacency in the face of pervasive inequality and unjust social systems. In other words, the ability to imagine a better future society may reduce the (often unconscious need) to bolster systems of inequality, or what is referred to as *system justification* (Jost & Banaji, 1994; see also Fernando et al., 2018; Jost, 2020). That, in turn, will produce a stronger motivation to engage in collective action, defined as collective strategies of social change (Stürmer & Simon, 2004) including signing petitions, volunteering for organizations, and participating in protests to improve social conditions (see Wright et al., 1990). As Kashima and Fernando (2020) illustrate, whereas some political ideologies (namely, system-justifying ideologies such as political conservatism, see Jost & Hunyady, 2005) serve to preserve and support the status quo, utopia challenges current societal arrangements and aims to change them. Furthermore, Kashima and Fernando (2020) highlight that an individual's political ideology may influence the *content* of their utopian visions, such that some utopian visions may be more conducive to social change than others. Accordingly, when empirically examining the relationship between utopian thinking and collective action, it is important to account for the potential influence of political ideology.

Other functions of utopia have been explored in the psychological literature, including the ways in which utopian thinking motivates societal engagement (Kashima & Fernando, 2020). For instance, Fernando et al. (2018) found that mentally contrasting the imagined utopian society with current society mediated the association between utopian thinking and societal engagement. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that individuals were motivated to engage in pro-environmental social change behavior when thinking of utopias that contained pro-environmental, “green” content, because these utopias elicited perceptions of warmth and morality in society (Fernando et al., 2020).

As the beneficial potential of utopian thinking in motivating social change gains traction in social psychology, many questions remain open as to the mechanisms by which utopian thinking impacts action. Badaan et al. (2020) hypothesized two routes through which the relationship between utopian thinking and collective action unfolds: an emotional pathway (via hope) and a cognitive-motivational pathway (via abstraction). We review these potential mechanisms below, and then present the first empirical test of Badaan et al.'s (2020) social psychological model for the study of utopian thinking and collective action.

1.2 Hope for better societies

The social psychological literature on collective action has predominantly focused on the role of negative, rather than positive emotions in promoting intentions to participate in collective action (e.g., Adra, Harb, et al., 2020; Adra, Li, et al., 2020; Borders & Wiley, 2019). In general, social psychologists distinguish between two types of emotions — some that are avoidance-oriented and others that are approach-oriented; they emphasize that approach- (or action-) oriented emotions are central to collective action participation (e.g., Klandermans, 2015). Additionally, many social psychologists highlight negative emotions, such as anger, guilt, and fear, as opposed to positive emotions, such as hope, as central to social change action. Anger is one of the most heavily researched approach-oriented emotions that involved in protest behavior. According to the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA; van Zomeren, Postmes, et al., 2008), perceived injustice, through the experience of relative deprivation, invokes feelings of anger among members of disadvantaged groups, and this group-based anger in turn predicts willingness to protest and participate in collective action (Nguyen et al., 2021; Shepherd & Evans, 2020).

Few studies have explored the role that positive, approach-oriented emotions, such as hope, play in promoting collective action participation (e.g., Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019; van Zomeren et al., 2019). Despite the scant research conducted on hope, social psychologists have recently begun to fill this gap, generating some useful insights in this area. For instance, Włodarczyk et al. (2017) reported a direct link between hope and the intensity of participation, highlighting the key role hope plays in mobilizing individuals to participate in collective action. Other studies found that hope focused on equality was linked to stronger collective action intentions, whereas hope focused on harmony was linked to decreased motivation for social change among disadvantaged group members (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019). In four studies, Greenaway et al. (2016) documented a positive association between hope and support for social change;

this association remained, even after adjusting statistically for other future-oriented emotions with similar cognitive features (i.e., fear), positive emotions similar in valence to hope (i.e., happiness), and other negative emotions typically associated with collective action (i.e., sadness and anger). These studies demonstrated that hope does indeed have a place in social change research.

Conversely, Aubin et al. (2016) found that collective hopelessness — defined as “group members’ negative expectations about the capacity of their ingroup and its future” (p. 106) — was negatively associated with intentions to participate in collective action, especially for individuals in situations of low status and power. Thus, there is some accumulating evidence that hope promotes, and hopelessness inhibits, collective action. Nonetheless, much more research on the role of hope in social change is necessary. At the same time, it is important to distinguish between personal hope and social hope when it comes to the relationship between utopian thinking and collective action. While personal hope pertains to “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (Snyder, 2002, p. 249), social hope is rooted in an individual’s hope for society at large and their vision for the future of their entire society. Personal hope is concerned with personal outcomes, whereas social hope is concerned with societal outcomes. Albeit research has previously demonstrated that personal hope motivates societal engagement (see Greenaway et al., 2016), Badaan et al. (2020) argue that social hope is also crucial to motivate collective action orientations geared toward social change.

1.3 Social hope in utopian thinking

As a positive, future-oriented emotion, hope only emerges when an individual believes that there is still a chance to change the prevailing status quo (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Greenaway et al., 2016). In the context of utopian thinking, we suspect that hope acts as a mediator by which individuals imagining a better society will exhibit stronger intentions to participate in collective action. Social hope has also featured prominently in utopian thought and to some extent in Browne’s (2005) critical social theory. Aronson (2015) visualized a type of hope rooted in an anticipated future that we imagine happening. Such a notion directly relates to utopian thinking because of its potential to provide individuals with imagined future states, thus transcending, at least psychologically, the present state of affairs, and leading them to compare the current state of inequality and injustice with an imagined, equal, and more just utopian future.

Next, we turn to the cognitive-motivational route by which utopian thinking motivates collective action. In particular, we focus on the role that abstraction, or high-level construal, can play in bridging the gap between the status quo and an imagined future state of society.

1.4 Mentally construing better societies

Our ability to imagine a radically different future society — through utopian thinking — requires cognitive-motivational mechanisms that enable us to implement (social) goal-directed behavior and to psychologically transcend the current temporal moment and act on what could someday be. This transcendent, future goal-directed mechanism could be theoretically explained using Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010). A core premise of CLT states that the nearer an ‘object’ is — whether the object is a person, an event, a goal, a group, or an imagined society — the more concretely we will mentally construe it, whereas the further away it is, the more likely we are to construe it in an abstract manner. Thus, higher-level, abstract construal “will bring to mind more distant objects” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 444). High-level construal is essential for performing a number of cognitive tasks such as planning, integrating, and understanding different social perspectives, as well as considering hypothetical or alternative outcomes (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wening et al., 2016). Abstraction, via high-level construal, makes a future goal more cognitively salient, and thereby makes it seem more practically achievable.

Construal Level Theory has been applied to diverse domains of research, including the areas of behavioral decision-making and consumer research (Fiedler, 2007; Liberman et al., 2002; Trope et al., 2007), visual perception (Liberman & Foster, 2009; Wakslak & Trope, 2009), the psychology of self-control (Fujita et al., 2006; Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; MacGregor et al., 2017), and person perception (Libby & Eibach, 2002; Pronin & Ross, 2006). These applications have highlighted the utility of abstraction — which centers on *why* rather than *how* people are pursuing a goal — in improving self-control, goal-pursuit motivation and strategies, and goal valuation (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; MacGregor et al., 2017).

Some researchers have worked on extending the CLT framework to interpersonal and intergroup contexts such as negotiation and prejudice. For instance, Wening et al. (2016) showed that employing higher- (vs. lower-) level construal during interpersonal negotiations enhanced the outcomes of such negotiations, suggesting that abstraction promotes greater openness to views that are dissimilar to one's own. Analogous effects have been observed in the context of prejudice, where Luguri et al. (2012) demonstrated that conservatives who were prompted to adopt abstract rather than concrete mindsets exhibited greater tolerance and less prejudice toward non-normative, stigmatized groups such as lesbians, gay men, atheists, and Muslims. But how is abstraction related to utopian thinking and collective action? Perhaps, the key lies in considering imagined utopian societies as a mental construct.

1.5 Constructing utopian societies

Utopian thinking permits individuals to construct a mental image of an ideal — some would claim ‘unrealistic’ — society that is far from their current experiences in the present moment and with current society. These utopias, especially when drastically different from society in the here-and-now, are psychologically distant. In order to be motivated to work towards achieving these utopias, one needs to traverse this long psychological distance. This is where abstraction, as a cognitive construal strategy, comes into play. Two large meta-analyses of 106 papers and 267 studies conducted by Soderberg et al. (2015) showed a significant link between abstraction and reduced psychological distance, thus emphasizing the role that high-level construal plays in bringing to mind more distant mental objects. Badaan et al. (2020) hypothesize that utopian thinking, which entails mentally construing images of an ideal society (the mental object), induces an abstract mindset and formulates higher-level construal of the future, ideal society. This high-level construal, or abstraction, will in turn promote goal-directed behavior through greater collective action intentions. Because when engaging in utopian thinking the status quo is contrasted with the ideal, abstract future utopian society, we hypothesize that individuals who adopt higher-level construal will be less likely to justify the current status quo. To our knowledge, there has been no research that considered the system-level application of CLT within the field of collective action.

1.6 The present study

Our study seeks to provide initial empirical evidence bearing on the novel proposed pathways through which utopian thinking works to influence collective action and test the theoretical model proposed by Badaan et al. (2020; see Figure 1 below). Badaan et al. (2020) elaborated on the reasoning that generated the hypotheses presented in this article. For a more thorough understanding of the premises underlying the theoretical model tested here, we recommend that readers consult the original article. We hypothesized that utopian thinking would:

- (a) increase hope, a future- and action-oriented emotion.
- (b) induce an abstract mindset characterized by processes of high-level cognitive construal that reduce the psychological distance between the present status quo and cognitive alternatives to the status quo.

We anticipated that hope and abstraction would both predict stronger collective action intentions and that these associations would be mediated by a decreased motivation to justify, bolster, and defend current societal arrangements. We adopted a structural equation modeling approach to test the complete theoretical model illustrated in Figure 1 by introducing an experimental manipulation of utopian thinking, and measuring hope, construal level, system justification, and collective action intentions in the context of broad social change. Considering that most of the previous literature on hope and collective action centers the experience of *personal* hope (e.g., Greenaway et al., 2016), Badaan et al.'s (2020) theoretical model focuses on the experience of *social* hope as a potential outcome of utopian thinking. As such, in this empirical test of the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, we consider personal and social hope distinctly, simultaneously investigate the influence of a utopian thinking manipulation on both types of hope, and consider their individual downstream relationships with system justification and collective action.

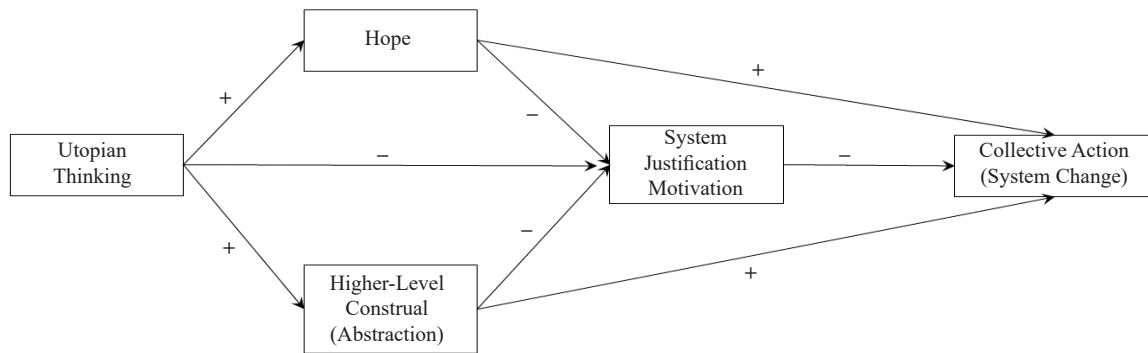


Figure 1. Badaan et al.'s (2020) theoretical model of utopian thinking and collective action

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Data for this study were collected on March 30-31 of 2020 (in the very early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, and prior to the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, both of which are pivotal events that could have influenced utopian thinking and social change orientations). We recruited 827 Mechanical Turk workers via Turk Prime for this study. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants needed to be residing in the United States, to have a HIT (Human Intelligence Task) approval rate between 98-100% (which means that the workers have had 98 to 100 percent of all the tasks they have completed on Turk Prime approved by requestors), and to have completed at least 500 approved HITs. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (utopian thinking vs. control condition). We retained data from a total of $N = 785$ participants who passed both the attention and manipulation checks. Of these participants, 59.7% identified as male ($n = 466$), 39.7% as female ($n = 310$), while two participants identified as “other” and two preferred not to answer (with five missing values). The age of our participants ranged from 20 to 73 years, with an average of $M_{\text{age}} = 37.14$ ($SD = 11.198$) years. Most of our participants identified as white ($n = 572$, 72.9%), followed by Black/African American ($n = 96$, 12.2%) and Asian ($n = 67$, 8.5%), and identified as atheist or agnostic (combined $n = 316$, 40.3%) followed by Protestant ($n = 165$, 21%) or Catholic ($n = 165$, 21%). In terms of socioeconomic status, 33.5% ($n = 262$) of our participants had a yearly household income of less than \$ 40,000, while 30.1% ($n = 236$) earned between \$ 40,000 - 69,999 yearly. Over half of the participants ($n = 474$, 60.1%) placed themselves in the middle of the subjective socioeconomic status ladder as compared to other people in the United States, and 42.3% ($n = 332$) had a bachelor's degree.

2.2 Procedure

We recruited participants through Turk Prime and offered them \$ 1.00 for participation. The study was set up through Qualtrics. Participants first completed the utopian thinking manipulation (or control) in which they read a 300-word article, and then completed the first manipulation/attention check, filled out self-report measures, completed a second attention check, and finally filled out a demographics questionnaire. Participants were debriefed and thanked for partaking in the study. Their participation took around 10 - 15 minutes.

2.3 Ethical considerations

The study and its protocol received approval from the principal investigator's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to completing the survey, participants read an informed consent form. Only if they consented to participate in the study (by clicking, “I consent to participate in this study”), could they proceed to the survey. Participants who did not consent to participate after reading the consent form were led to the end of the survey and thanked for their time. All participants received an electronic copy of the informed consent form to keep. In the consent form, participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study for any reason, and at any point, without penalty and without

losing their compensation. No identifying information was collected and participants were informed that their responses were completely anonymous.

2.4 Utopian thinking manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to either utopian thinking (final $n = 367$) or control condition (final $n = 418$). Participants in the utopian thinking condition read a short article (approximately 300 words) describing an ideal society. The utopia was described as one in which “we live in high-tech cities that are highly saturated with green and full of biodiversity,” and “diversity in people” and “clear general rules that are applied equally to *all* citizens,” and “in which democratic norms and values are upheld.” Meanwhile, participants in the control condition read a short Wikipedia article (also 300 words) about Spokane Valley, Washington. The article described the city and its social life in neutral terms and focused primarily on its location and geography. We chose Spokane Valley because it was rated as one of the top 10 cities in the United States according to political moderates in 2016 with respect to political representation, registered voters, and consumer habits. Participants in both conditions were instructed to read the article carefully because they would be asked questions about its content later in the study.

2.5 Manipulation/attention check

We presented participants assigned to the utopian thinking condition with a series of five statements, and asked them to select the statements that they had read in the article, three of which applied, namely: “Next to universality, free will is another important shared value”, “The ideal society upholds democratic values, the rights of people to choose their leaders, and choose to peacefully remove leaders from power if need be”, and “In general, a utopia embraces desires for a collective identity and a strong need for individual freedom.” The two other statements that were fillers/decoys and that were not present in the short utopian article were “Populism is on the rise in the world” and “A utopia is a closed, small community that has its distinct set of rules and regulations.” We had initially conceptualized this as a manipulation check, as participants would be able to identify the features of a utopian society as presented by the article. However, we also believed that this would serve as an attention check as well, since it would demonstrate which participants were actually reading the short article. We retained data from participants who identified at least one correct statement from the article they read. A total of 225 participants (60.2%) identified one correct statement, 49 participants (13.1%) identified two correct statements, and 100 (26.7%) participants identified all three correct statements. As we highlight in the limitations section, however, it is important to note that the method we employed here may be more useful as an attention check, and may not necessarily indicate whether participants were truly engaged in utopian thinking.

2.6 Measures

Following the experimental manipulation, all participants completed the below self-reported questionnaires.

2.6.1 Demographics

Participants completed a demographics questionnaire asking for sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, subjective socioeconomic status (MacArthur ladder), income, education level, and political ideology (measured via three items assessing general, social, and economic conservatism-liberalism, Azevedo et al., 2019).

2.6.2 Personal hope

We assessed general hope experience in the moment with a single-item measure by Greenaway et al. (2016): “Right now, to what extent do you feel hopeful?” Responses were provided on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

2.6.3 Social hope

We measured social hope through five items developed and validated by Jin and Kim (2019), based on Snyder et

al.'s (1996) measure of state hope. Sample items included "At the present time, our society is heading to a better future" and "People have the power to find solutions for whatever difficulties in our society," rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The measure had good internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .906$, 95% $CI = [.895, .916]$.

2.6.4 Construal level (abstract vs. concrete)

We assessed high (vs. low) construal levels by adapting 10 items from the Behavior Identification Form (BIF, Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). The items exhibited very good internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .850$, 95% $CI = [.834, .866]$. Scores were summed to obtain an index ranging from 0 - 10, so that higher scores represented greater abstraction, and lower scores represented more concrete (low-level) thinking. The BIF instructions required that participants report how they would describe a multitude of different behaviors by choosing one of two given choices for each item/behavior. Each of these choices provides a different description of how the behavior at hand could be identified by the participant. For instance, participants were given the behavior "reading" and asked to choose either "gaining knowledge" or "following lines of print" as identifications of reading. The instructions emphasized that the participant select the choice they personally believe is the most appropriate among each pair of choices and clarified that there is no correct answer.

2.6.5 General system justification (GSJ)

We used seven items from Kay and Jost (2003) to assess respondents' feelings that their society and its policies are fair and just. Sample items included "Our society is getting worse every year" (reverse-coded), "Society is set up so that people get what they deserve", and "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness." Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale showed good internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .798$, 95% $CI = [.775, .819]$.

2.6.6 Collective action intentions

We created a measure of collective action intentions specifically for the purpose of this study, and modeled it based on normative collective action measures used in the literature (e.g., Becker et al., 2013; Stathi et al., 2019; van Zomeren, Spears, et al., 2008). Participants indicated how willing they would be to participate in six collective actions geared toward "social change and equality" in the future. Items included participating in marches, protests, or donations, signing petitions, volunteering with organizations, and voting for representatives whose agendas are oriented towards equality and social change. The items exhibited excellent internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .909$, 95% $CI = [.899, .919]$

2.6.7 Attention check

We employed Stern's (2019) strategy of asking participants to read the following prompt: "People vary in the amount they pay attention to these kinds of surveys. Some take them seriously and read each question, whereas others go very quickly and barely read the questions at all. If you have read this question carefully, please write the word yes in the blank box below labeled other. There is no need for you to respond to the scale below" (p. 24). This prompt was followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale and an open-ended response box.

2.7 Data analysis

In order to test the theoretical model empirically, we employed a path analysis via Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). In this analysis, we considered condition (utopian thinking vs. control) as our independent variable, collective action intentions as our dependent variable, and hope (combined social and personal hope), abstraction, and system justification as our mediators.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for major study variables. On average, participants scored above the midpoint for general and social hope and tended to respond more abstractly to the BIF. Participants scored below the midpoint on the GSJ measure, at the midpoint for collective action intentions, and were slightly more liberal-leaning. More specifically, 52.5% of the participants ($n = 412$) identified as liberal (ranging from somewhat liberal to extremely liberal), 21.2% ($n = 166$) identified as conservative (ranging from somewhat conservative to extremely conservative), and 26.3% ($n = 207$) identified as moderate (neither liberal nor conservative).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Range
Hope	4.310 (1.698)	1.00-7.00
Social Hope	4.518 (1.226)	1.00-7.00
Abstraction	6.459 (3.021)	.00-10.00
GSJ	3.873 (1.348)	1.00-7.00
Collective Action Intentions	5.093 (2.159)	1.00-9.00
Political Conservatism	4.199 (2.216)	1.00-9.00

3.2 Correlations

Table 2 displays Pearson's bivariate correlations involving continuous variables. Personal hope and abstract thinking were positively correlated with collective action intentions geared toward social change and equality, whereas GSJ and political conservatism were negatively correlated with collective action intentions. Personal and social hope were highly positively correlated with one another. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the items for personal and social hope, considering the very high correlation obtained between both constructs. Using Maximum Likelihood Estimation, only one factor was extracted. An examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues demonstrated that one factor fit the data best. All items, including the personal hope item, had factor loadings of above .70. We include a table with the factor loadings from this analysis in Appendix A. Both personal and social hope were positively correlated with system justification.

It seems that the more hope participants expressed, and the more hope they had in society, the more likely they were to justify the current social arrangements. This could possibly stem from faith that the system is malleable and improvable. Another possibility is that trust in the system could be motivating greater hope, in line with the palliative function of system justification (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Participants who were more hopeful (personally, and in society) were more likely to think abstractly, and more abstract thinking was linked to higher scores on the GSJ measure, although the latter correlation was very small. Finally, political conservatism was positively associated with personal hope, social hope, and system justification.

Table 2. Pearson's bivariate correlations matrix

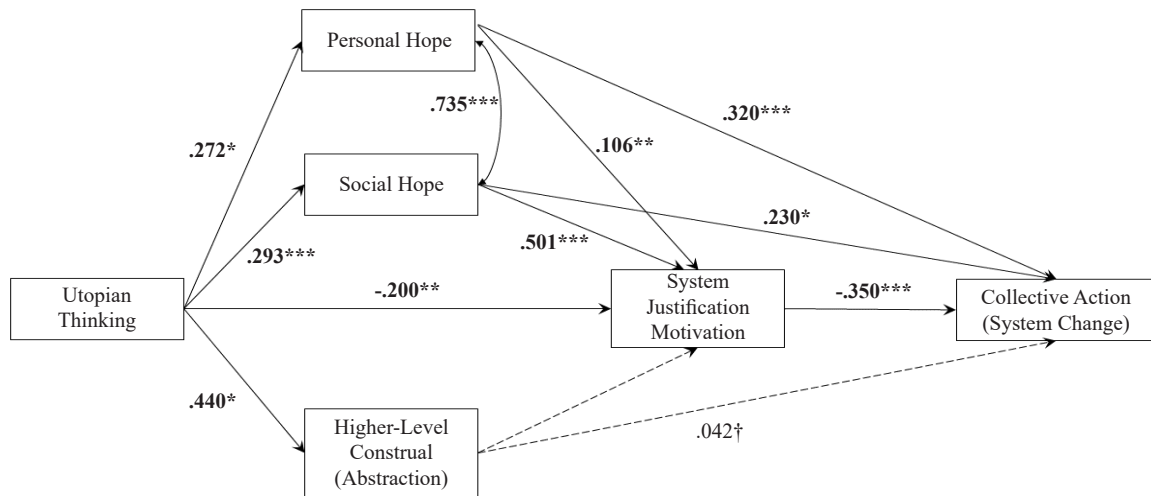
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Collective Action Intentions	1					
2. Personal Hope	.114***	1				
3. Social Hope	.060	.765***	1			
4. Abstraction	.113***	.166***	.169***	1		
5. GSJ	-.174***	.587***	.664***	.085*	1	
6. Political Conservatism	-.359***	.316***	.334***	-.028	.536***	1

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N = 785$

3.3 Hypothesis testing

To test our proposed theoretical model, we employed a structural equation modeling approach and ran a path analysis via Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). Figure 2 displays the results of this analysis. The analysis controls for political conservatism scores. The model fits our data well, RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) = .086 (90% $CI = [.06, .11]$), CFI (comparative fit index) = .983, TLI (Tucker-Lewis index) = .931, SRMR (standardized root mean squared residual) = .045, $\chi^2(5) = 33.93$, $p < .05$, and explained 21.1% of the variance in collective action intentions ($R^2 = .211$). Table 3 presents standardized, unstandardized, and bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals around the coefficients for each path specified in the model. Table 4 presents indirect effects, including their standardized, unstandardized, and bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals around those estimates.

As predicted, assignment to the utopian thinking (as compared to the control) condition increased personal hope, social hope, and abstract (vs. concrete) thinking, and it decreased GSJ tendencies. The relationship between utopian thinking and system justification relationship was mediated by personal (indirect effect $\beta = .011$, $p = .082$, marginally significant) and social hope (indirect effect $\beta = .055$, $p = .001$). Contrary to expectations, experiencing personal and social hope predicted higher (rather than lower) GSJ scores. This may be attributable to several factors considered in the discussion section. System justification, in turn, mediated the relationship between personal hope and collective action (indirect effect $\beta = -.029$, $p = .017$), and social hope and collective action (indirect effect $\beta = -.100$, $p < .001$), respectively. High-level construal (abstraction) was not significantly related to system justification. Additionally, personal and social hope both predicted collective action intentions geared toward social change, while abstract thinking only marginally predicted increased collective action intentions. Furthermore, GSJ — in line with previous empirical findings — negatively predicted collective action geared toward social change.



Note: $***p < .001$, $**p < .01$, $*p < .05$, $^\dagger p = .066$ (marginally significant). Solid lines represent significant direct paths. Dashed lines represent non-significant paths. The bidirectional arrow represents the correlated residuals between personal and social hope.

Figure 2. Path model represents the social psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between utopian thinking and collective action

Table 3. Path model coefficients

Outcome	Predictors	Unstandardized <i>b</i> [95% CI]	Standardized β	<i>p</i> -Value
Actions	GSJ	-.350 [-.503, -.182]	-.219	.000
	Personal Hope	.320 [.195, .422]	.252	.000
	Social Hope	.230 [.230, .429]	.131	.022
	Abstraction	.042 [-.003, .086]	.058	.066
GSJ	Personal Hope	.106 [.037, .172]	.134	.002
	Social Hope	.501 [.403, .596]	.457	.000
	Utopia	-.200 [-.328, -.079]	-.074	.002
Personal Hope	Utopia	.272 [.052, .503]	.080	.020
Social Hope	Utopia	.293 [.135, .453]	.119	.000
Abstract	Utopia	.440 [.004, .849]	.073	.046

Table 4. Coefficients for indirect effects in path model

Indirect Effect	Unstandardized <i>b</i> [95% <i>CI</i>]	Standardized β	<i>p</i> -Value
Personal Hope → Collective Action via GSJ	-.037 [-.072, -.011]	-.029	.017
Social Hope → Collective Action via GSJ	-.175 [-.263, -.089]	-.100	.000
Utopian Thinking → GSJ via Personal Hope	.029 [.004, .068]	.011	.082
Utopian Thinking → GSJ via Social Hope	.147 [.067, .235]	.055	.001

Finally, considering the high correlation and potential non-distinctiveness between hope and social hope, we also conducted the path analysis while combining personal and social hope into one index (combined hope). This analysis and its results are presented in Appendix B. Model paths are identical in both analyses.

4. Discussion

The present study attempted to empirically test the social psychological mechanisms in the theoretical model of utopian thinking and collective action proposed by Badaan et al. (2020). We hypothesized that utopian thinking would have (a) an affective consequence, which is increasing hope (both personal and social), a future- and action-oriented emotion, as well as a (b) cognitive-motivational consequence, which is inducing an abstract mindset characterized by processes of high-level cognitive construal that decrease the psychological distance between the present status quo and cognitive alternatives to the status quo (see also Tajfel, 1978). We expected that hope and abstraction would promote collective action intentions, which would be mediated by a reduced motivation to justify, promote, and defend current societal systems.

The majority of this study's results support the hypothesized mechanisms by which utopian thinking — i.e., imagining better societies — promotes collective action geared toward social change. In line with our predictions, utopian thinking increased both personal and social hope, promoted an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset, and decreased system justification tendencies. The latter result is in line with the reasoning that utopian thinking activates a critique function (Fernando et al., 2018), which lowers individuals' satisfaction with current societal arrangement and consequently their tendency to bolster, justify, or support the societal status quo. As such, utopian thinking may indeed serve as an antidote to the often pervasive system justification motive (Jost, 2020), tempering its influence on acquiescence to the status quo.

Hope, both social and personal, promoted collective action intentions, and this relationship was mediated by system justification. Although abstraction marginally predicted an increase in collective action intentions, it was not linked to system justification tendencies. This marginal influence of abstraction could be driven by the type of measure used to tap into concrete vs. abstract mindsets — the BIF — which may have assessed dispositional, rather than state-dependent mindsets. In the context of utopian thinking, we want to be able to measure a more malleable type of mindset, one that could be shifted based on our utopian manipulations. We may need to devise a new tool to assess for abstract thinking in the context of society and social change for future iterations of our experimental paradigm. It may be that a psychometrically stronger measure of abstract (vs. concrete) thinking about society in the future is needed to test the utopian thinking → abstraction → system justification → collective action causal chain.

However, it is important to note that some paths are worthy of further investigation as they were not as predicted. For instance, the experiences of personal and social hope were associated with an increase (rather than a decrease) in system-justifying tendencies. This could be due to many factors, both empirical and theoretical in nature. First, the measure we used for social hope includes items that resemble the items usually used to measure system-justifying beliefs. For instance, the first item of the social hope scale, "Right now I see our society as being pretty successful" (Jin

& Kim, 2019) could be interpreted as justifying the societal status quo in the present, a proxy for system justification. The fourth item of the social hope scale reads “At the present time, our society is heading to a better future” (Jin & Kim, 2019) also contains an optimistic assessment of both the current and future society as well as the belief that the future will only be better. Despite the strength of its psychometric properties, the social hope scale does not seem to theoretically tap into a hope that society will get better as compared to the current status quo. It is possible that the measure was highly correlated with system justification because the content of social hope reflected certain system-justifying attitudes, such as implicit trust and confidence in current society.

To overcome this limitation, future studies would do well to develop and employ a new measure of social hope — one that is multi-dimensional. On one hand, it should contain an element of system/societal critique, and on the other hand, it should contain items that measure hope in future society. Such a measure would center on *improvement* and *betterment* of society rather than the continuation of system that is already perceived as good, and employ more objective (non-self-report) indicators of social hope. These might involve implicit or behavioral measures, such as word-stem completion or word categorization tasks (e.g., see DeWall & Baumeister, 2007). Finally, it would be useful to employ more subtle measures of system-justifying attitudes, such as subjective ratings of actual and desired status quo arrangements (e.g., Barylka et al., 2015).

It is also possible that social hope was strongly related to system justification in our study because being hopeful for a better future may have psychologically induced participants to perceive the system as malleable and amenable to change (improvements *within* the system). It is possible, in other words, that participants perceived the system as reformable, and not entirely irredeemable. This would resonate with Richard Rorty’s theorizing around progressive liberal utopias — strictly within the liberal-capitalist tradition — that highlights incremental reform as means for social change that could amend inequality *within* existing societal arrangements (Box, 2012; Rorty, 1999). Rorty’s (1999) social hope stresses that current systems can be improved and do not need to be completely overhauled. Therefore, his version of social hope is system-justifying in the sense of maintaining support for the neoliberal/capitalist status quo.

In sum, this study provides empirical support to the social psychological model of utopian thinking and collective action proposed by Badaan et al. (2020). However, some of the associations in the model, such as the link between hope and system justification as well as abstract thinking and system justification require further unpacking through future research.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

There are a number of potential limitations in our study. First, our conception of utopian thinking includes an element of critique of the status quo. If this critique element is essential to our conceptualization, then it is possible that we are excluding some individuals’ utopian visions, such as conservative or right-wing images, that seek to maintain or extend elements of the status quo. Our normative stance on the best possible society, however, is one that applies to everyone (i.e., an ideal and just society for everyone in the sphere of moral concern) — it is not a competitive vision. But, this may not be everyone’s idea of utopian society. Historically, many utopian visions have been proposed that do not apply to everyone, including Hitler’s ideas about the Aryan Nation, and such exclusionary visions have damaging consequences, such as the Holocaust, the Spanish Holy Inquisition, and Stalin’s purges.

Along those lines, a second limitation lies in the utopian thinking manipulation itself. Our participants were required to read a short article describing a political utopia. They were then asked to identify statements from the article that are descriptive of the society they had read about. We intended to use this strategy as both manipulation and attention check; however, in reality, this check served more adequately as an attention check, capturing whether participants were in fact attuned to the content of the article. Yet, we could not really gauge whether participants were in fact engaging in utopian thinking, or building an image in their minds of the society they had very briefly read about. In future research employing a similar reading manipulation, a better manipulation check would be to measure utopianism via a utopianism scale (e.g., Fernando et al., 2018), and check whether scores on utopianism differ systematically between control and experimental groups. Another suggestion would entail using a different utopian thinking manipulation, such as prompting participants to envision and describe, via writing, their ideal society.

Third, our study hones in on a generic “social change” orientation, rather than pushing for social change on specific issues (e.g., economic inequality, racial justice in policing activity, environmental sustainability). The advantage this brings is that it tests the waters, so to speak, for Badaan et al.’s (2020) theoretical model of collective action by

examining mechanisms involved in social change orientations in general before tackling trickier and more challenging issues such as racial equality and justice, which are divisive and polarizing in the United States. Future research should test the model in various domains of activism and collective action, shedding light on whether utopian thinking influences collective action across the board, or whether there are limitations to its effectiveness as a mobilizing device across more contentious (albeit pressing) social problems.

This brings us to another important limitation to highlight: the context of our study and the sample employed. Our sample was comprised strictly of Mechanical Turk workers who are predominantly white and middle class. This makes our sample predominantly WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) and obviously unrepresentative of the world's population, limiting the generalizability of our results. Furthermore, although we used checks and balances (attention checks, shorter surveys, strict selection criteria for workers), Mechanical Turk workers are convenience samples, and we would want to replicate and extend our results with different samples (e.g., cross-cultural validation) and different recruitment platforms to ensure that our findings hold in diverse settings.

A final set of limitations need to be highlighted, one specific to this study itself, and another more general about experimental social psychology paradigms. Our study does not take into account potential moderating or mediating variables such as cynicism, optimism/pessimism, negative personal experiences, and anomia. Future research should include such individual-level variables to ensure that utopian thinking interventions would still be successful when accounting for such intervening variables. For instance, utopian thinking may be a more successful intervention for individuals low on cynicism, as compared to those who are high on cynicism. Such individual-level boundary conditions should be taken into account and investigated in future research on utopian thinking. Finally, it is important to note that the ecological validity of this study is limited considering that the manipulation was based on reading a short paragraph. How likely are the results of this intervention to generalize to real-life contexts? How long will the effects of such a small intervention last? This limitation is inherent to many experimental paradigms in social psychology. Perhaps, future studies could tailor more involved and extensive interventions, compound interventions, or field interventions that would be more ecologically valid and more likely to generalize beyond the scope of the study at hand.

5. Conclusion

In closing, we wish to emphasize that the potential for research on the social psychological model of utopian thinking and collective action is considerable: the application of the model is possible both across cultures and across several domains of social activism. The various relationships of the theoretical model — only one of which was investigated in this study — could be tested using multiple experimental paradigms. For instance, as in Fernando et al. (2019), participants could be induced to freely formulate their own utopian visions rather than reading about someone else's utopian vision. Furthermore, the theoretical model tested here opens up room for experimental research to further illuminate the pathways whereby utopian thinking influences collective action. This study's findings were informative for future research; they emphasized methodological successes and limitations as well as generated new empirical questions that could be addressed in future experimental work.

During the dystopic times we are currently living in — amidst a worldwide pandemic, a global rise in state repression and authoritarianism, and rampant socioeconomic inequality that harms society's most vulnerable members — it is essential to imagine alternatives to the status quo. These cognitive alternatives could serve as motivational fuel that drives citizens to pursue social change and to demand social, economic, and political equality. This makes the scientific study of the mechanisms by which utopian thinking could promote collective action geared toward social change a worthwhile pursuit — for psychological science and for society in general.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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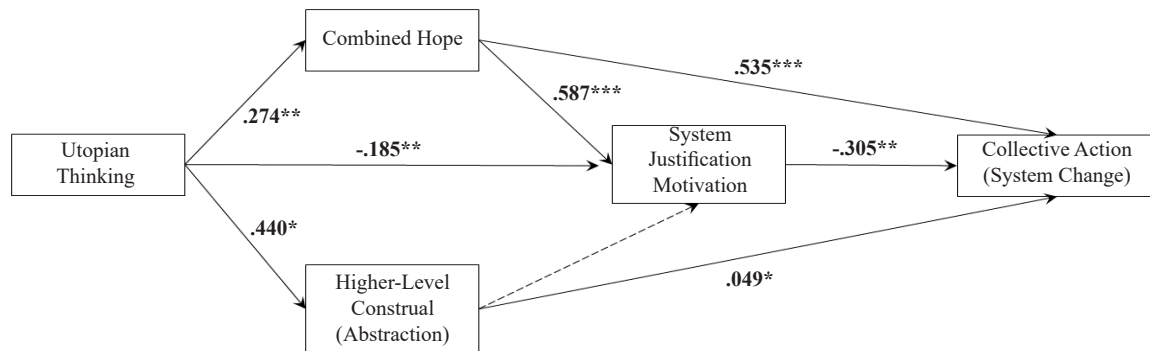
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Appendix A

Table A. Factor loadings of personal and social hope items on the hope factor

Item	Factor Loading
Our society is hopeful. [social hope item 5]	.868
At the present time, our society is heading to a better future. [social hope item 3]	.866
Right now I see our society as pretty successful. [social hope item 1]	.838
Right now, to what extent do you feel hopeful? [personal hope]	.803
Although we are having social problems at this time, we will resolve them by trial and error. [social hope item 2]	.779
People have the power to find solutions for whatever difficulties in our society. [social hope item 4]	.704

Appendix B



Note: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Solid lines represent significant direct paths. Dashed lines represent non-significant paths. Model fit indices: RMSEA = .092 (90% CI = [.06, .12]), CFI = .971, TL1 = .900, SRMR = .039, $\chi^2(4) = 30.37$, $p < .05$, and explained 19% of the variance in collective action intentions ($R^2 = .211$).

Figure B. Path model with personal and social hope combined