

PERCEIVED VIOLATION OF RIGHTS AND INTERESTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION PARTICIPATION IN CHINA

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We examined the relationship between individuals' perceived violation of rights and interests and their participation in collective action. In addition, we examined the mediation effects of perceived relative deprivation and political interest. We used data from the Chinese General Social Survey conducted in 2010, which resulted in a sample size of 11,121. Results showed that, after controlling for demographic variables, perceived violation of rights and interests significantly increased the probability of individuals participating in collective action. Further testing showed that perceived relative economic deprivation had a significant mediation effect. Although perceived violation of rights and interests also increased individuals' perceived relative social deprivation, the perception of relative social deprivation did not have an effect on collective action participation. Political interest, however, had a significant mediation effect. Practical implications for public administrators in China are discussed.

Keywords: perceived violation of rights, perceived violation of interests, perceived relative economic deprivation, perceived relative social deprivation, political interest, collective action.

Perceived violation of rights and interests is an important predictor of collective action participation in Western societies (e.g., Klandermans, 1997; Mazzoni, van Zomeren, & Cicognani, 2015). *Collective action* is generally defined as a specific form of political involvement during which an individual becomes a member of a group to strengthen the position of the entire group (Mazzoni & Cicognani, 2013; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

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Since Deng Xiaoping's market economy reforms and the opening up of China in 1978, the phenomenon of Chinese people expressing demands through collective action has become far more common (Wei, Zhou, Wei, & Zhao, 2014). Researchers have shown that the number of times that collective action was taken in China increased from 8,700 in 1993 to 180,000 in 2010 (Chan, Backstrom, & Mason, 2014). Yu (2008b, 2009) found that the people's goal in more than 80% of these incidents was safeguarding their rights and interests, namely, that ordinary citizens became protesters after their rights and interests were violated. For example, during the Wukan incident, which is named after the village in Guangdong Province where it took place in 2011, the villagers believed that local government officials were illegally selling land belonging to the villagers, who received insufficient compensation (Li & Jiang, 2013). Previous findings also confirm that violation of perceived rights and interests was an important reason for people to participate in collective action in China (e.g., Chen, 2010; Wu & Dong, 2014; Zhao, 2010).

Although violation of rights and interests is common in many societies, only a minority of people who perceive such violation participate in collective action (Klandermans, 2002). In China, especially, collective action is often perceived to be an illegal action to take when making a claim. The perception is that the government would not approve of people participating in collective action (Li, 2006). In comparison with collective action participation in Western societies, participation in collective action in China poses a greater risk of imprisonment or other government punishment and has a much smaller chance of success (Kuang & Göbel, 2013; Shi & Cai, 2006).

To our knowledge, no research has been conducted to establish which mechanism links perceived violation of rights and interests in China and active participation in collective action. However, there is empirical support for a direct link between perceived relative deprivation and collective action in general (e.g., Gurr, 1970; Østby, Nordås, & Rød, 2009; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that political interest is a strong predictor of participation in collective action (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; DiGrazia, 2014). Therefore, in this study, we examined whether or not perceived relative deprivation and political interest mediated the effect of perceived violation of rights and interests on collective action participation in China.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Perceived Violation of Rights and Interests, Perceived Relative Deprivation, and Collective Action Participation

American sociologist Samuel A. Stouffer was the first to propose the theory of relative deprivation in 1949 (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015). These researchers

define *relative deprivation* as a judgment that a person or a person's ingroup is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent, that is, another person or group, and that this judgment results in feelings of anger and resentment (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012).

Stouffer's relative deprivation theory has been applied to the analysis of various social phenomena (refer to Smith et al., 2012, for a review), such as collective action participation. For example, Gurr (1970) stated that collective action arises from people's discontent level, which has been brought about by their perceived relative deprivation. In other words, perceived relative deprivation stimulates people to participate in collective action through a mechanism of frustration resistance. In an analysis of data obtained from people in subnational regions in 22 African countries from 1986 to 2004, Østby et al. (2009) showed that relative deprivation differences had significant positive correlations with the risk of social conflict in these regions. Thus, it can be concluded that perceived relative deprivation motivates people to participate in collective action.

Perceived violation of rights and interests often involves perceived violation of personal material benefits and other personal rights (Mazzoni, 2012; Mazzoni et al, 2015). In general, when individuals perceive their rights and interests have been violated, they will experience loss, a situation that will generate perceived relative deprivation. Thus, it can be inferred that perceived violation of rights and interests will increase people's perceived relative deprivation, which will, in turn, lead to a higher probability of people participating in collective action.

According to Hu (2013) and Hu and Zhou (2013), relative deprivation has two main dimensions: *Relative social deprivation* refers to the comparison of an individual's own social status with the social status of others. The greater the perceived difference in social status, the greater is the perceived relative social deprivation (Hu, 2013; Xu, Shen, & Li, 2016). *Relative economic deprivation* refers to the comparison of an individual's economic status with the economic status of others. Again, the greater the perceived difference, the greater is the perceived relative economic deprivation (Hu, 2013; Xu et al., 2016). Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived violation of rights and interests will have a significant positive effect on collective action participation in China.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived relative economic deprivation will mediate the relationship between perceived violation of rights and interests and collective action participation in China.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived relative social deprivation will mediate the relationship between perceived violation of rights and interests and collective action participation in China.

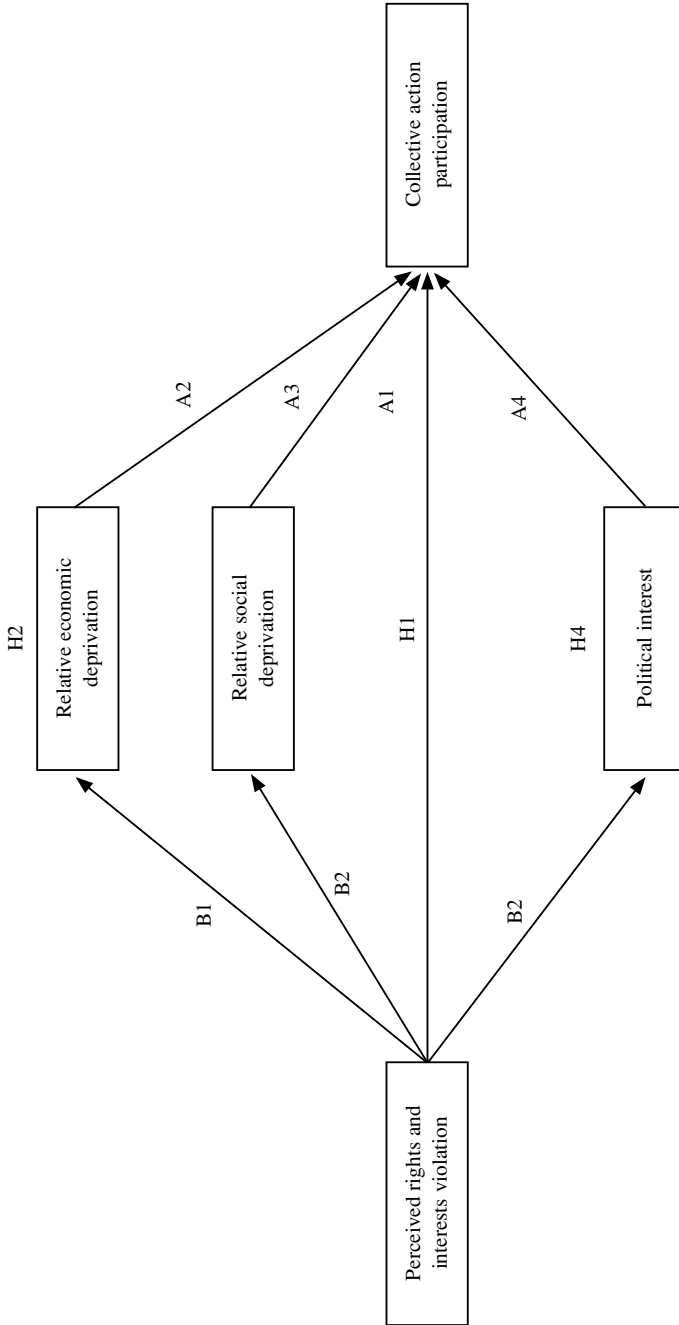


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Perceived Violation of Rights and Interests, Political Interest, and Collective Action Participation

Political interest is defined as “a citizen’s willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics” (Lupia & Philpot, 2005, p. 1122). Many researchers argue that if individuals are not interested in political behavior, they will not be involved in either conventional politics or protests (e.g., Brady et al., 1995; DiGrazia, 2014). At the same time, political interest has the important function of motivating individuals to obtain information on politics in general and political behavior in particular. If individuals are not informed about participation in collective action, obviously they will not participate (Brady et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Therefore, it can be inferred that an increase in political interest can also promote collective action participation.

But does perceived violation of rights and interests promote an individual’s political interest? O’Brien and Li (2006) introduced the theory of rightful resistance in their study on the struggles of Chinese farmers. When faced with violation of rights and interests, such as arbitrary charges, rigged elections, or corrupt local officials, Chinese villagers used state policies, laws, and commitments to fight local administrators who were ignoring those policies, laws, and commitments (O’Brien, 2013; O’Brien & Li, 2006). Thus, when the farmers perceived that their rights and interests were being violated, their political interest increased, they took the initiative to study relevant policies and laws, and they participated in collective action based on these policies and laws. Yu (2008a) also concluded that the leaders of the collective action often cited central government policy documents and quoted leaders’ speeches to mobilize the public to join the collective action.

Based on the findings in these previous studies, we inferred that when individuals perceive that their rights and interests are being violated, their political interest will increase, and this increase will, in turn, increase the possibility of these individuals participating in collective action. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Political interest will mediate the relationship between perceived violation of rights and interests and collective action participation in China.

The conceptual framework of this study is depicted in Figure 1.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We used data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS; 2010). The CGSS is the first national, comprehensive, and continuous large-scale social survey project conducted in China. Since 2003, Social Survey Project personnel

have carried out the survey annually among individuals from 10,000 families residing in 1,000 neighborhood (village) communities, 500 townships and towns, and 125 counties (districts) throughout China. More information regarding the CGSS can be found on the Project's bilingual website <http://www.chinagss.org>. The survey results are available online, after registration in the Chinese National Survey Data Archive, at <http://www.cnsda.org> (Chinese language only).

In 2010, a multistage distribution probability sampling method was used for the survey, with a sample of 12,000 individuals. For the convenience of statistical analysis and to ensure the accuracy of the data, we defined the variable values "I don't know," "Not applicable," and "Refuse to answer," as missing (Xie & Xu, 2012). After removal of missing observations through pairwise deletion, 11,121 valid samples remained.

Measures

Collective action participation. Collective action can take many forms, such as signing a petition, writing a joint letter, or participating in collective appeals or public demonstrations (Mazzoni & Cicognani, 2013; van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009; Xu & Shen, 2015). The following question was asked in the CGSS 2010: "In the past 12 months, have you participated in these activities in your community: participating in collective appeals, writing a joint letter, participating in a protest, or signing a petition?" (authors' translation). If respondents answered "yes" to one or more of these activities, we understood that the individual had taken part in collective action and set the dependent variable to 1; otherwise, we set it to 0.

Perceived violation of rights and interests. Perceived violation of rights and interests involves perceived injustice in regard to personal material benefits and/or other personal rights (Mazzoni, 2012; Mazzoni et al., 2015). In the CGSS 2010, the following request was made: "Please recall if in the past 12 months you have received unjust treatment from relevant government departments or officials" (authors' translation). If respondents answered "yes", we understood that they thought their rights and interests were violated during the previous year and set the independent variable to 1; otherwise, we set it to 0.

Relative economic deprivation. Perceived relative economic deprivation is often measured by income satisfaction (Hu, 2013; Hu & Zhou, 2013). Thus, we referred to the following question in the CGSS 2010: "Considering your educational background, work ability, qualifications, and other relevant factors, do you think your present income is fair?" (authors' translation). In general, the more that people consider their income to be unfair, the greater the perceived relative economic deprivation. The answer was given on a scale ranging from 1 (*fair*) to 5 (*unfair*), which we interpreted as the lowest/highest level of perceived relative economic deprivation, respectively.

Relative social deprivation. Perceived relative social deprivation is often measured by self-identification with a social class (Hu, 2013; Hu & Zhou, 2013). Therefore, we referred to the following question in the CGSS 2010: “In our society, some groups have a high social status and some groups have a low social status. What social status do you think you have?” (authors’ translation). The higher the social status that people perceive that they have, the lower the perceived relative social deprivation. The answer was given on a scale ranging from 1 (*top*) to 10 (*bottom*), which we interpreted as the lowest/highest level of perceived relative social deprivation, respectively.

Political interest. Political interest is often measured by the time spent on reading newspapers and participating in political discussions (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). Therefore, we used the answers to the following question in the CGSS 2010: “In the past 12 months, how often did you engage in the following two activities: reading about current affairs in newspapers, magazines, or books, and talking about current affairs with others?” (authors’ translation). For each activity, there were five answer options: *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *always*. We set the value of the variable from 1 to 5 accordingly, with 1 indicating *never* and 5 indicating *always*. We then used factor analysis to calculate the factor scores, and named the common factor *political interest*. In regard to the two activities, a variance of 81% was revealed, with a Cronbach’s α of .759.

Control variables. Previous results have shown that in China demographic variables, such as gender, age, marital status, education level, and Communist Party membership, have an effect on collective action participation (e.g., Rüdiger & Karyotis, 2014; Su & Feng, 2013). Therefore, we considered as control variables, gender (man = 1, woman = 0), age, marital status (married or civil partnership = 1, other = 0), education level (university = 1, other = 0) and Communist Party membership (member = 1, nonmember = 0).

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 17.0. We used binary logistic regression models A1 to A4 (see Figure 1) to analyze the effect of perceived violation of rights and interests, perceived relative economic and social deprivation, and political interest on collective action participation. Then, linear regression models B1 to B3 (see Figure 1) were performed to examine the effect of perceived violation of rights and interests on perceived relative economic and social deprivation, and political interest. To test the mediating effect of perceived relative economic and social deprivation, and political interest, we followed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) procedure. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the independent variables, the mediating variables, and the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

Hypotheses Testing

The result of the binary logistic regression model A1 showed that violation of rights and interests perceived by the participants had a significant positive effect on collective action participation, $B = 1.941$, $SE = 0.148$, $p < .001$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The result of the linear regression model B1 showed that perceived violation of rights and interests also had a significant positive effect on perceived relative economic deprivation, $B = 0.457$, $SE = 0.040$, $p < .001$. Also, the result of the binary logistic regression model A2 showed that perceived relative economic deprivation had a significant positive effect on the likelihood of collective action participation, $B = 0.266$, $SE = 0.059$, $p < .001$. When perceived relative economic deprivation was controlled for, perceived rights and interests violation had a significant positive effect on the likelihood of collective action participation, $B = 1.863$, $SE = 0.150$, $p < .001$. Therefore, these analyses complied with Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure for analyzing mediating effects as follows: (a) variations in levels of the independent variable (perceived violation of rights and interests) account for variations in the dependent variable (collective action participation) at a significance level; (b) variations in levels of the independent variable (perceived violation of rights and interests) account for variations in the presumed mediator (perceived relative economic deprivation) at a significance level; (c) variations in the mediator account for variations in the dependent variable (collective action participation) at a significance level; and (d) when perceived relative economic deprivation is controlled for, the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable is also significant. This indicated that perceived relative economic deprivation was a significant mediator. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

The result of the linear regression model B2 showed that perceived violation of rights and interests had a significant positive effect on perceived relative social deprivation, $B = 0.360$, $SE = 0.056$, $p < .001$. However, the result of the binary logistic regression model A3 showed that participants' perceived relative social deprivation had no significant effect on the likelihood of their participation in collective action, $B = 0.025$, $SE = 0.042$, $p = .546$. When perceived relative social deprivation was controlled for, perceived violation of rights and interests had no significant positive effect on the likelihood of collective action participation, $B = 1.946$, $SE = 0.148$, $p < .001$. Therefore, these analyses did not meet Baron

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	-	.04**	.03**	.05**	.18**	.02*	.00	.02	.23**	.01
2. Age		-	.04**	-.25**	.11**	-.04**	-.06**	.03**	-.13**	.00
3. Marital status			-	-.10**	.05**	.01	.01	-.05**	.01	.00
4. Education level				-	.30**	-.01	-.01	-.17**	.38**	-.01
5. Communist Party membership					-	-.03**	-.00	-.12**	.31**	.01
6. Perceived rights and interests violation						-	.11**	.06**	.02*	.14**
7. Perceived relative economic deprivation							-	.20**	.04**	.04**
8. Perceived relative social deprivation								-	-.19**	.01
9. Political interest									-	.06**
10. Collective action participation										-
<i>M</i>	0.49	47.46	0.82	0.15	0.13	0.09	3.13	6.9	0.00	0.02
<i>SD</i>	0.50	15.31	0.39	0.36	0.33	0.29	1.24	1.73	1.00	0.14

Note. *N* = 11,121. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.

and Kenny's (1986) criteria for analyzing mediating effects. Perceived relative social deprivation was not a significant mediator. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

The result of the linear regression model B3 showed that perceived violation of rights and interests had a significant positive effect on political interest, $B = 0.071$, $SE = 0.029$, $p = .014$. The result of the binary logistic regression model A4 showed that the political interest of the participants had a significant positive effect on the likelihood of their participation in collective action, $B = 0.465$, $SE = 0.073$, $p < .001$. When political interest was controlled for, perceived violation of rights and interests had a significant positive effect on the likelihood of collective action participation, $B = 1.921$, $SE = 0.149$, $p < .001$. Therefore, these analyses met Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for analyzing mediating effects. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

In this study we tested the effect of perceived violation of rights and interests on collective action participation, and the mediation effects of perceived relative deprivation and political interest. The results show that perceived violation of rights and interests had a significant positive effect on collective action participation, which supported our hypothesis. Perceived relative economic deprivation and political interest were mediators in the relationship between perceived violation of rights and interests and collective action participation. However, perceived relative social deprivation did not mediate this relationship.

Perceived violation of rights and interests increases people's perceived relative economic and social deprivation. However, in this study, although perceived relative economic deprivation affected people's willingness to participate in collective action, perceived relative social deprivation did not. This shows that the motivation of people participating in collective action is still primarily to maintain material benefits. They hope to protect specific material gains, but they do not pursue a change in social status or other social rights, such as the right to social security, education, and housing. In other words, we found that people's participation in collective action is economically motivated but not necessarily politically motivated. This finding is in line with previous findings (e.g., Chan et al, 2014; Yu, 2008a). However, these findings are inconsistent with those of research conducted in Western societies, where people have also participated in collective action, for example, to defend the public management of the water supply (Mazzoni et al., 2015), to fight for gender equality (Chant & Sweetman, 2012) and against neoliberalism (Ayres, 2004), and to support the gay and lesbian rights movement (Swank & Fahs, 2012). This inconsistency may be the result of the different stages of economic development in Western societies and China. As

Zhao (2012) observed, as an economy develops, people shift from basic material claims to the pursuit of other demands.

Some researchers have labeled collective action as social anger incidents, during which the participants mainly want to vent their anger (e.g., Yu, 2008b). From this perspective, the irrational characteristic of collective action is emphasized. However, our results show that people's perceived violation of rights and interests increases their political interest, which, in turn, has a significant positive effect on their collective action participation. Thus, the majority of people who perceive that their rights and interests have been violated are rational and want only to safeguard their rights and interests when they participate in collective action. As L. Li (2004) stated, Chinese people's participation in collective action is a fight in accordance with the law and central government policies. Therefore, Chinese people who perceive that their rights and interests have been violated by government departments or officials, want to increase their knowledge of relevant laws and central government policies, and then use this knowledge to safeguard their rights and interests through collective action within the legal limits.

Our findings have practical implications for public administrators in China. As perceived violation of rights and interests has a significant positive effect on collective action participation, this may affect social stability, especially in the Chinese context (Chen & Xu, 2012; Xu & Shen, 2015). This suggests that, as should be expected from a government, government administrators should take measures to protect citizens' rights and interests, and consequently, to reduce the likelihood of their participation in collective action.

Our results show that political interest mediated the relationship between Chinese people's perception of violation of their rights and interests and their collective action participation. This shows that the participants in collective action in China are not unreasonable. They want to fight for their rights and interests within the given legal framework (Li, 2004). Therefore, guaranteeing people access to, and guiding them to use, legal means or official channels to protect their rights and interests, can possibly reduce the likelihood of people participating in collective action and may also help maintain social peace.

There are some limitations in this study. Firstly, relative deprivation is often seen as a combination of individual and group relative deprivation. Smith & Ortiz (2002) and van Zomeren & Iyer (2009) stated that group relative deprivation can predict collective action but individual relative deprivation cannot. However, our results show that individual relative economic deprivation was a strong predictor of collective action in China. The CGSS 2010 did not include any questions that would enable us to access information regarding group relative deprivation. Therefore, we did not include the mediation mechanism of group relative deprivation in this study. However, sometimes it may be hard to make this distinction. For example, when a farmer is asked about his perceived social

status, how does the general perception of the social status of farmers influence his answer? Does social status exist outside groups? We hope that future researchers can take into account the mediation mechanism of group relative deprivation and shed more light on the differences between the dimensions of relative deprivation. Secondly, in addition to people being motivated to participate in collective action through a perception of relative deprivation and through political interest, various findings suggest that group efficacy, social identity, group-based anger, and moral convictions (van Zomeren, 2013), social networks (Siegel, 2009), and social media use (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy, & English, 2014) can also predict collective action participation. As these factors may also affect the relationship between perceived violation of rights and interests and collective action participation they should, therefore, be considered in future research.

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