

Employment, collective action, and satisfaction: the moderating role of acceptance of inequality

Valeria De Cristofaro¹  | Valerio Pellegrini¹  | Marco Salvati² | Luigi Leone¹ | Mauro Giacomantonio¹

¹Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

²Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, Italy

Correspondence

Valeria De Cristofaro, Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.
Email: valeria.decrisofaro@uniroma1.it

Abstract

The present work proposes that the relation of employment conditions (i.e., unemployment and precarious work vs. permanent employment) with participation in collective action and satisfaction with life depends on the extent to which acceptance of inequality is high or low, and that collective action mediates the association between employment conditions and satisfaction with life. We analyzed data from the European Social Survey (Round 8, 2016) and found that (1) when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high), employment disadvantage is positively related to engagement in collective action and, in turn, satisfaction with life; (2) employment disadvantage is negatively related to satisfaction with life, and this relation increases when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high). This study generates findings of interest to inequality researchers by showing the relevance of acceptance of inequality for collective action and life satisfaction in the context of employment.

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INTRODUCTION

A vast body of research has examined the relationship between employment conditions and personal well-being across Europe (for a review, see Virtanen et al., 2005). A typical (mainly cross-sectional) finding is that the decline in well-being is to a large extent due to unemployment (Shields & Price, 2005; Stam et al., 2016) or to being employed in a precarious position rather than on a permanent contract (Dawson et al., 2014; Quesnel-Vallee et al., 2010). Conditions of unemployment and precarious work—compared to the condition of permanent employment—are both argued to be detrimental to well-being, not only because they involve a lack of pecuniary benefits (i.e., income), but also because they impede the fulfillment of various psychological needs (Jahoda, 1982). The loss of income during unemployment leads to relative poverty, which has psychologically negative effects (Frver, 2013). Indeed, unemployed people have more difficulty participating in society and are more likely to feel socially excluded (Pellegrini et al., 2021). Similarly, precarious workers tend to perceive themselves as not “part of the corporate family” (De Witte & Naswall, 2003), a perception which has been related to heightened levels of stress and job dissatisfaction (Chadi & Hetschko, 2013; Green & Heywood, 2011). Precarious positions are also characterized by lower wages and worse working conditions, restricting workers from planning their future (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2005).

The current research investigates when and how unemployed people and precarious workers are motivated in improving their situation of disadvantage and their well-being (defined as life satisfaction). Specifically, we aim to investigate circumstances under which unemployed people and precarious workers may adopt behavioral strategies to cope effectively with their situation of disadvantage, and thus experience greater satisfaction with their life. To do this, we examined the interaction between employment conditions and acceptance of inequality on (a) collective action engagement and (b) feelings of life satisfaction. Below, we present constructs of interest and the proposed moderated mediation model. We then describe the empirical methodology and the results of the analyses; the last sections provide a final discussion.

ACCEPTANCE OF INEQUALITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Acceptance of inequality refers to people's preference for power structures and social stratification (Brandt & Reyna, 2017). Generally, people who are high in acceptance of inequality oppose policies aimed at redistributing resources to help lower-status members of society (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Conversely, people who are low in acceptance of inequality are more supportive of policies aimed at attenuating social hierarchy and helping those who are disadvantaged (Crawford et al., 2015). Relevant to the present research, Choma et al. (2020) provided evidence for a negative relation between acceptance of inequality and collective action participation. Specifically, the authors found that people with high acceptance of inequality are less willing to act collectively to balance race relations, improve their country's financial state, redistribute wealth, and fight climate change. Against this backdrop, some researchers used social dominance orientation (i.e., the ideological support for inequality and group-based hierarchy; Pratto et al., 1994) as an indicator of acceptance of inequality to demonstrate that people high in social dominance are less likely to act collectively in favor of egalitarian policies and social norms (e.g., Ho & Kteily, 2020; Meleady & Vermue, 2019; Panno et al., 2022). Also, literature on system justification, a motivation to legitimate the status quo, including existing inequalities (Jost & Banaji, 1994),

showed that endorsing system-justifying beliefs is negatively related to support for social change (Jost et al., 2017a; Osborne et al., 2019). Studies carried out in diverse settings demonstrated that as system justification increases, people are less likely to act collectively even if inaction implies crystallizing their disadvantaged condition (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; De Cristofaro et al., 2021, 2022; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013).

According to this literature, rather than inequality per se, *acceptance of inequality* is especially likely to be associated with collective action. In line with this, Van Zomeren et al. (2008) proposed that recognizing the existence of inequality in society as well as living in disadvantaged conditions may not always result in collective action and efforts to achieve greater equality. Based on the notion that objective inequality on its own may be not sufficient—albeit important—for motivating collective action, the authors focused on the subjective experience of inequality as a more powerful motivator. This perspective has been helpful to researchers interested in understanding the persistence of inequality across the world and reasons why people, even when disadvantaged, are reluctant to act collectively for social change. In examining socio-psychological (versus objective material) factors associated with collective action, *acceptance of inequality* has emerged as a primary barrier to social change (i.e., system justification, Osborne et al., 2019). There is evidence that acceptance of inequality undermines collective action not only among advantaged group members but also among disadvantaged group members and political activists (Jost et al., 2012).

In this research, we propose that the association of (objective) employment conditions with collective action may be a function of (subjective) acceptance of inequality. Based on prior findings, we specifically expect that conditions of employment disadvantage may motivate collective action engagement only when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high). In other words, the disadvantaged (i.e., unemployed people and precarious workers) are expected to be more motivated to act collectively only when they are low (vs. high) in acceptance of inequality.

ACCEPTANCE OF INEQUALITY AND LIFE SATISFACTION

According to the socio-psychological theories of collective action, individuals—including those who are disadvantaged in society—are less likely to pursue social change because of their acceptance of the unequal status quo. This means that, to the extent that inequality is accepted, the disadvantaged also contribute to the maintenance of inequality. This notion raises the question of why people would accept (and preserve) unequal living conditions penalizing themselves for being treated unequally and receiving unequal outcomes. The system justification theory's (Jost & Banaji, 1994) answer is that system justification, which is conceptually related to acceptance of inequality, makes people feel better by addressing their fundamental epistemic, existential, and relational needs (for a review, see Jost, 2019). That is, the tendency to accept the status quo provides individuals with a sense of certainty, security, and belongingness within society. On the contrary, challenging the status quo puts people at risk in terms of future uncertainty, ambiguity, and threat to personal (physical and psychological) safety and social inclusion (Jost et al., 2017a).

The palliative effects of system justification have been empirically demonstrated. Jost et al. (2008), for example, showed that system justification serves to cope with stressful situations and events. The authors found that system justification enables people to reduce uncertainty (i.e., epistemic need), manage threat (i.e., existential need), and uphold a sense of socially shared reality (i.e., relational need). It has been consistently found that accepting the status quo is associated with more positive affect and less negative affect, increased happiness, life satisfaction,

and perceived control over future outcomes (e.g., Jost, Pelham et al., 2003; Jost, Wakslak et al., 2008; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Rankin et al., 2009). Similarly, Hafer and Olson (1989) found that perceiving the world as a fair and just place leads people to tolerate misfortunes and to experience less indignation. This reduces stress and depression, while maintaining higher well-being and optimism (Littrell & Beck, 1999). Also, Napier and Jost (2008) found that conservatism, a system-justifying ideology, is positively related to indicators of well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction.

In this research, we propose that high (vs. low) acceptance of inequality would favor increased life satisfaction. Specifically, the negative relation of employment disadvantage (i.e., conditions of unemployment and precarious work) with life satisfaction is expected to be stronger when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high).

ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Collective action has been defined as an effort undertaken by a group of people to collectively improve a state of disadvantage (Toch, 1965). People who do not want to passively accept conditions of disadvantage—who are low in acceptance of inequality in this research—are motivated to adopt a variety of strategies to solve such conditions. These strategies include militant forms of collective action such as engaging in protest demonstrations, riots, and strikes, but also more moderate forms such as attending a group meeting and signing a petition (Simon et al., 1998). Defining what drives collective action intentions and behaviors is a task that has interested scholars for years. As anticipated above, some approaches assume that collective action derives from an objective state of disadvantage—that is, they focus on specific material conditions that produce disparity between a dominant group and a subordinate group (Hovland & Sears, 1940). In contrast, other more recent approaches are concerned with the social and psychological factors that foster mobilization—that is, they argue that collective action originates primarily from the subjective perceptions of disadvantage and group-related problems (Klandermans, 1997; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). In this article, we integrate these approaches by examining both objective (i.e., employment conditions) and subjective (i.e., acceptance of inequality) antecedents of collective action.

Additionally, we aim to explore whether and how collective action mediates the relationship between employment conditions and life satisfaction. As such, the current research extends previous literature by addressing the question of how people would feel after participating in collective action. Conceptually, collective action refers to a set of actions aimed at combating inequality by advancing the demands and interests of the victims of inequality (i.e., collective action for social change; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Therefore, collective action can be viewed as a channel through which disadvantaged people express their desire for changes in the unequal social structure, hence for greater wealth, status, and associated well-being. Disadvantaged group members can use collective action to redress existing intergroup status disparity, ameliorate their disadvantaged living conditions, and then enhance their well-being. Building on the argument that the intention behind collective action is to improve disadvantaged (social as well as psychological) conditions, we want to explore the association of collective action with life satisfaction in this research.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have investigated the consequences of collective action and existing results show a conflicting picture. On the one hand, some studies found that collective action is beneficial for well-being (Breslow et al., 2015; Friedman & Leaper, 2010). In the context of gender-based inequality, for example, women who participated in collective action

showed greater well-being relative to women who did not participate (Foster, 2014). Other studies, however, found that collective action is associated with decreased levels of well-being (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Cox, 2014). In the context of ethnic-based inequality, for example, collective action was associated with higher psychological distress and lower subjective health (Houkamau et al., 2020). An explanation for this is that acknowledging the existence of injustices and misfortunes—which is inherent to collective action—could make more salient the subjective experience of suffering.

Given these contradictory findings, we decided to use an explorative approach for the relationship of collective action with life satisfaction.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

The current research examined a moderated mediation model in which the association of employment conditions with life satisfaction is mediated by collective action, while the associations of employment conditions with (a) collective action, and (b) life satisfaction are moderated by acceptance of inequality. We predicted that employment disadvantage (i.e., conditions of unemployment and precarious work) would positively relate to collective action when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high). In turn, we explored the association of collective action with life satisfaction. At the same time, we expected that employment disadvantage would negatively relate to life satisfaction, and this relationship would be stronger when acceptance of inequality is low (vs. high).

We used the European Social Survey (ESS; Round 8) 2016 database¹, which is recognized as one of the highest-quality cross European surveys. Importantly, as the ESS includes a behavioral collective action measure, its data provide evidence for actual behavior rather than intentions to behave. Please note that this article comes with [Supplementary materials](#), in which we present the results of additional analyses.

METHOD

Participants

Data consisted of a representative sample of the European population who participated in the European Social Survey (ESS; Round 8, 2016). The survey involves 44,387 individuals coming from 23 nations of the European Union. Due to missing values in the variables of interest for the present research, we dropped out a portion of the sample available in the ESS and tested our model on the remaining participants. Thus, the sample was composed of 26,826 individuals (see Table 1 for participants' distribution across nations), 52.4% female, aged 15–100 years ($M = 50.33$, $SD = 17.46$). The educational level was distributed as follows: 6.8% had less than a lower secondary school diploma, 13.6% had a lower secondary school diploma, 36.8% had a high school diploma, 15.4% had an advanced vocational qualification, and the remaining 27.3% had a degree or a higher-level qualification. For income, participants were placed as follow: 8.6% 1st decile, 10.3% 2nd decile,

¹This research was not preregistered. Data and materials are available at <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=8>.

TABLE 1 Participants' distribution across nations.

	<i>F</i>	(%)
Austria	1241	4.6
Belgium	1293	4.8
Switzerland	988	3.7
Czech Republic	1351	5.0
Germany	2127	7.9
Estonia	1458	5.4
Spain	1022	3.8
Finland	1543	5.8
France	1468	5.5
United Kingdom	1213	4.5
Hungary	759	2.8
Ireland	1339	5.0
Israel	1339	5.0
Iceland	654	2.4
Italy	731	2.7
Lithuania	1156	4.3
Netherlands	1183	4.4
Norway	1259	4.7
Poland	834	3.1
Portugal	839	3.1
Russian Federation	1071	4.0
Sweden	1187	4.4
Slovenia	771	2.9
Total N	26.826	100.0

10.8% 3rd decile, 11.2% 4th decile, 11.4% 5th decile, 10.9% 6th decile, 11.3% 7th decile, 10.7% 8th decile, 8% 9th decile, and 6.8% 10th decile.

Measures

Employment condition. We coded the condition of permanent employment (i.e., employment advantage) as 0, and the conditions of precarious work and unemployment (i.e., employment disadvantage) as 1. Participants were distributed as follows across the two variable levels: 77.6% were in an employment-advantaged condition (i.e., the advantaged), and 22.4% were in an employment-disadvantaged condition (i.e., the disadvantaged).

Acceptance of Inequality was indexed through a single item: "Large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts" ($M = 3.02$,

$SD = 1.13$). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Collective Action. The measure of collective action was obtained using a composite score of eight items: “During the last 12 months, have you contacted a politician, government or local government official/worked in a political party or action group/worked in another organization or association/worn or displayed a campaign badge or sticker/signed a petition/taken part in a lawful public demonstration/boycotted certain products/posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?” Ratings were reported on a dichotomous scale (1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*). We computed the composite collective action index by averaging the responses to each item. Kuder-Richardson’s alpha was .70 ($M = 1.16$, $SD = 0.20$).

Life Satisfaction was measured with one item: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?”. Ratings were reported on a 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) scale ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 2.04$).

Covariates. To test the robustness of the results, we inserted five covariates into the analysis model. Specifically, the model’s effects were controlled for participants’ age, educational level, gender, political orientation, and income. Educational level was assessed through the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Political orientation ($M = 5.08$; $SD = 2.22$) was measured with one item: “In politics people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”. This item taps into the classical “left-right” dimension of political orientation. Income level was measured by asking participants to place their income between the lowest (1st) and highest (10th) decile. For a description of covariates, see the “Participants” section.

RESULTS

Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis revealed that employment conditions were not related to acceptance of inequality, $r = .01$, 95% *CI* [-0.006, 0.018], and collective action, $r = .01$, 95% *CI* [-0.003, 0.021]. Employment conditions were negatively related to life satisfaction, $r = -.05$, 95% *CI* [-0.062, -0.038], meaning that unemployed people and precarious workers were less satisfied with their life relative to people employed on a permanent contract. Acceptance of inequality was negatively related to collective action, $r = -.06$, 95% *CI* [-0.075, -0.051], and positively to life satisfaction, $r = .07$, 95% *CI* [0.060, 0.084]. Collective action and life satisfaction were positively related, $r = .11$, 95% *CI* [0.097, 0.120]. Intercorrelations are presented in Table 2.

The associations found were clearly small, and we acknowledge that there could be uncertainty on how these associations may be interpreted, and if they were relevant at all. Thus, we translated the emerged associations in terms of effect size to gauge their practical magnitude. We computed Cohen’s d for each of the interested relations and then transformed Cohen’s d into the *Number Needed to Treat (NNT)*. *NNT* is an index that more intuitively allows comparative impacts to be assessed (Altman & Andersen, 1999; Cook & Sackett, 1995): the ideal value is 1, meaning that there is a ratio of one individual who reports changes due to a tested model (e.g., after exposure to treatment) versus one who does not in a control group. The transformation was

TABLE 2 Intercorrelations ($N = 26,826$).

	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)
1)EC	–							
2)AI	0.01	–						
3)CA	0.01	–0.06***	–					
4)LS	–0.05***	0.07***	0.11***	–				
5)PO	–0.02***	0.16***	–0.13***	0.10***	–			
6)Education	–0.09***	0.02***	0.23***	0.12***	–0.01*	–		
7)Gender	0.01	–0.07***	–0.02***	–0.01	–0.03***	0.05***	–	
8)Age	–0.19***	–0.04***	–0.11***	–0.06***	0.02***	–0.19***	0.02***	–
9)Income	–0.15***	0.06***	0.16***	0.24***	0.04***	0.37***	–0.07***	–0.21***

Note: EC = Employment Conditions (Employment Advantage = 0, Employment Disadvantage = 1); AI = Acceptance of Inequality; CA = Collective Action; LS = Life Satisfaction; PO = Political Orientation; Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2).

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

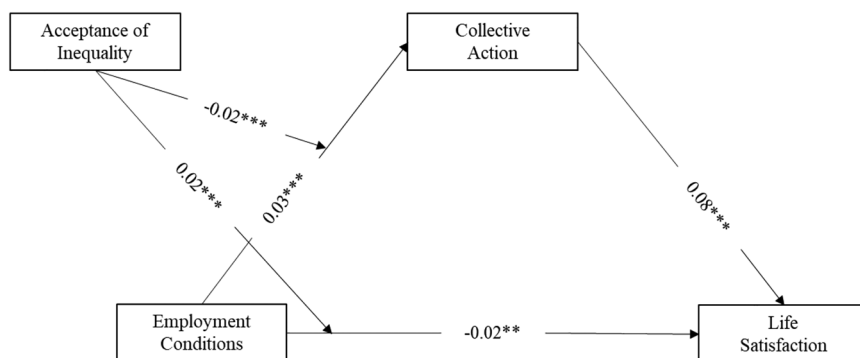


FIGURE 1 The Moderated Mediation Model ($N = 26,826$). Note. Employment Conditions (Employment Advantage = 0, Employment Disadvantage = 1). The effects were controlled for the covariates (i.e., age, educational level, gender, political orientation, and income). ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

operated following Kraemer and Kupfer's (2006) procedure, which allows the transformation of Cohen's d into a version of NNT that is invariant to the event rate of the control group. The correlation between employment conditions and life satisfaction implied an NNT of 17.7 ($d = 0.10$), indicating that, for 1 in every 18 individuals, employment disadvantage was related to decreased life satisfaction. As for the associations of acceptance of inequality with life satisfaction and collective action, we found an NNT of 12.7 ($d = 0.14$): for 1 in every 13 people, acceptance of inequality was related to increased life satisfaction and decreased collective action. Finally, the association between collective action and life satisfaction implied an NNT of 8.85 ($d = 0.20$). That is, for 1 in every 9 individuals, collective action was related to increased life satisfaction. The use of Cohen's d and, particularly, of NNT helped us to interpret the size of the reported associations more intuitively and to provide more direct evidence for their implications: even small correlations may imply non-negligible differences in outcomes.

Moderated mediation analysis

A moderated mediation model, using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 8) with 5000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals, was implemented to examine whether collective action mediates the association between employment conditions and life satisfaction, and employment conditions interact with acceptance of inequality on (a) collective action and (b) life satisfaction. The results of the moderated mediation model are reported in Table 3 and graphically represented in Figure 1. These results pertain to the model where the effects were controlled for the covariates.

Acceptance of inequality and collective action

As expected, the two-way interaction between employment conditions and acceptance of inequality on collective action was significant and negative, $b^* = -0.022$, $SE = 0.006$, 95% $CI [-0.0344, -0.0100]$. Specifically, simple slopes analysis (see Figure 2) revealed a positive association between employment disadvantage and collective action when acceptance of inequality

TABLE 3 The moderated mediation model ($N = 26.826$).

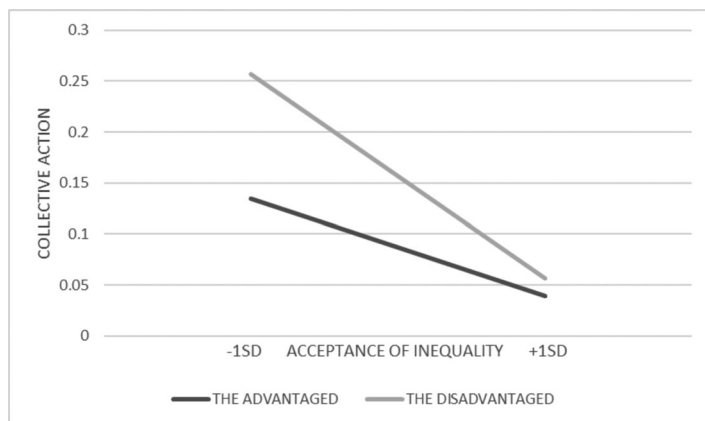
DV	IV	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		
						Lower	Upper	
CA	EC	0.029	0.007	4.626	<0.001	0.0173	0.0426	
	AI	-0.061	0.006	-9.813	<0.001	-0.0727	-0.0485	
	EC*AI	-0.022	0.006	-3.573	<0.001	-0.0344	-0.0100	
	PO	-0.129	0.006	-20.766	<0.001	-0.1412	-0.1168	
	Education	0.203	0.007	30.281	<0.001	0.1904	0.2168	
	Gender	-0.035	0.006	-5.703	<0.001	-0.0468	-0.0229	
	Age	-0.054	0.007	-7.842	<0.001	-0.0672	-0.0403	
	Income	0.094	0.007	13.765	<0.001	0.0808	0.1076	
	Conditional Effects							
		LOW AI	0.052	0.009	5.763	<0.001	0.0343	0.0697
	HIGH AI	0.008	0.009	0.861	0.389	-0.0098	0.0251	
LS	EC	-0.018	0.006	-2.864	0.004	-0.0296	-0.0056	
	CA	0.080	0.006	13.876	<0.001	0.0690	0.0917	
	AI	0.049	0.006	8.392	<0.001	0.0377	0.0607	
	EC*AI	0.024	0.006	4.019	<0.001	0.0121	0.0352	
	PO	0.091	0.006	15.260	<0.001	0.0790	0.1022	
	Education	0.025	0.007	3.792	<0.001	0.0119	0.0373	
	Gender	0.012	0.006	2.127	0.033	0.0010	0.0237	
	Age	-0.010	0.007	-1.556	0.119	-0.0229	0.0026	
	Income	0.205	0.007	31.432	<0.001	0.1919	0.2175	
	Conditional Effects							
	LOW AI	-0.041	0.009	-4.805	<0.001	-0.0580	-0.0244	
	HIGH AI	0.006	0.008	0.731	0.465	-0.0104	0.0227	
Conditional Indirect Effects								
	LOW AI	0.004	0.0008			0.0026	0.0059	
	HIGH AI	0.0006	0.0007				0.0020	
						-0.0008		
Index of Mod. Mediation								
	EC*AI	-0.002	0.0006			-0.0029	-0.0007	

Note: EC = Employment Conditions (Employment Advantage = 0, Employment Disadvantage = 1); AI = Acceptance of Inequality; CA = Collective Action; LS = Life Satisfaction; PO = Political Orientation; Gender (Male = 1, Female = 2).

was low, $b^* = 0.052$, $SE = 0.009$, 95% CI [0.0343, 0.0697], whereas employment disadvantage was not associated with collective action when acceptance of inequality was high, $b^* = 0.008$, $SE = 0.009$, 95% CI [-0.0098, 0.0251]². These findings support our prediction that acceptance of

²We also conducted a multilevel analysis with the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2007) using RStudio Team (2023) to examine whether this interaction is consistent across nations. The interactive fixed effect between employment conditions and

FIGURE 2 Employment Conditions X Acceptance of Inequality on Collective Action. *Note.* The Advantaged = people in conditions of employment advantage (i.e., people employed on a permanent contract); The Disadvantaged = people in conditions of employment disadvantage (i.e., unemployed people and precarious workers).



inequality has implications for the association of employment conditions with collective action: unemployed people and precarious workers (i.e., the disadvantaged) were more motivated to act collectively when they were low in acceptance of inequality.

As with correlation analysis, we were interested in assessing the practical magnitude of the effects that emerged from this interaction. We focused on practically quantifying the differences between advantaged and disadvantaged people in collective action under the condition of low acceptance of inequality. To this end, we computed standardized mean differences (i.e., Cohen's d) based on the contrast among the estimated marginal mean of the interaction tested³. We obtained that the standardized mean difference between advantaged and disadvantaged people on collective action engagement in the condition of low acceptance of inequality was equal to 0.12, which corresponded to an NNT of 14.8. Analysis based on NNT showed that, for 1 in every 15 individuals, employment disadvantage was related to increased collective action when acceptance of inequality was low. Making an approximative estimate on the sample of precarious workers and unemployed people in this study ($N = 6009$), when acceptance of inequality was low, an increase in collective action interested 406 people.

Consistent with traditional approaches to collective action (Hovland & Sears, 1940), employment conditions showed a significant and positive association with collective action, $b^* = 0.029$, $SE = 0.007$, 95% $CI [0.0173, 0.0426]$, indicating that being in condition of employment disadvantage related to increased collective action engagement. Consistent with socio-psychological approaches to collective action (Osborne et al., 2019), acceptance of inequality was significantly and negatively related to collective action, $b^* = -0.061$, $SE = 0.006$, 95% $CI [-0.0727, -0.0485]$.

acceptance of inequality on collective action was not significant, $b = -0.003$, $SE = 0.003$, 95% $CI [-0.010, 0.003]$. However, despite such non-significant interaction, simple slopes analysis revealed a positive association between employment disadvantage and collective action when acceptance of inequality was low, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.005$, 95% $CI [0.003, 0.025]$, whereas employment disadvantage was not associated with collective action when acceptance of inequality was high, $b = 0.007$, $SE = 0.004$, 95% $CI [-0.001, 0.015]$. Results of this additional analysis are reported in the supplementary materials.

³ Standardized mean differences were obtained by dividing the differences between the estimated marginal means by the square root of the mean square residual ($MSR = 0.9837$), which represent an unbiased estimator of the pooled standard deviation (Bodner, 2017). Following Kraemer and Kupfer (2006), standardized mean differences were translated into the NNT .



FIGURE 3 Employment Conditions X Acceptance of Inequality on Life Satisfaction. Note. The Advantaged = people in conditions of employment advantage (i.e., people employed on a permanent contract); The Disadvantaged = people in conditions of employment disadvantage (i.e., unemployed people and precarious workers).

Acceptance of inequality and life satisfaction

As expected, we found a significant and positive two-way interaction between employment conditions and acceptance of inequality on life satisfaction, $b^* = 0.024$, $SE = 0.006$, $95\% CI [0.0121, 0.0352]$. Specifically, simple slopes analysis (see Figure 3) revealed a negative association of employment disadvantage with life satisfaction when acceptance of inequality was low, $b^* = -0.041$, $SE = 0.009$, $95\% CI [-0.0580, -0.0244]$, whereas employment disadvantage was unrelated to life satisfaction when acceptance of inequality was high, $b^* = 0.006$, $SE = 0.008$, $95\% CI [-0.0104, 0.0227]$ ⁴. These findings confirmed that the relationship between employment conditions and life satisfaction depends on the extent to which acceptance of inequality is high or low: unemployed people and precarious workers (i.e., the disadvantaged) were less satisfied with their life when they were low in acceptance of inequality.

We were interested in assessing the practical magnitude of the effects that emerged from this interaction. We focused on practically quantifying the differences between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in life satisfaction under the condition of low acceptance of inequality. To this end, we computed standardized mean differences based on the contrast among the estimated marginal mean of the interaction tested⁵. We found a standardized mean difference of 0.10 in life satisfaction among disadvantaged and advantaged conditions at the specified value of low acceptance of inequality. Such standardized difference corresponded to an *NNT* of 17.7, indicating that, for 1 in every 18 individuals, employment disadvantage was related to decreased life satisfaction when acceptance of inequality was low. Among precarious workers and unemployed people ($N = 6009$), when acceptance of inequality was low, a reduction in life satisfaction interested 339 people.

⁴ We also conducted a multilevel analysis with the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2007) using RStudio Team (2023) to examine whether this interaction is consistent across nations. The interactive fixed effect between employment conditions and acceptance of inequality on life satisfaction was significant and positive, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $95\% CI [0.029, 0.170]$. Specifically, simple slopes analysis revealed a negative association of employment disadvantage with life satisfaction when acceptance of inequality was low, $b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.06$, $95\% CI [-0.398, -0.171]$, whereas employment disadvantage was unrelated to life satisfaction when acceptance of inequality was high, $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.05$, $95\% CI [-0.167, 0.029]$. Results of this additional analysis are reported in the [Supplementary materials](#).

⁵ Standardized mean differences were obtained by dividing the differences between the estimated marginal means by the square root of the mean square residual ($MSR = 0.8843$), which represent an unbiased estimator of the pooled standard deviation (Bodner, 2017). Following Kraemer and Kupfer (2006), standardized mean differences were translated into the *NNT*.

Consistent with previous findings on the negative effects of employment disadvantage (Jahoda, 1982), employment conditions were significantly and negatively related to life satisfaction, $b^* = -0.018$, $SE = 0.006$, $95\% CI [-0.0296, -0.0056]$, indicating that being in condition of employment disadvantage related to decreased life satisfaction. Consistent with previous findings on the palliative effects of system justification (Jost, 2019), acceptance of inequality was significantly and positively related to life satisfaction, $b^* = 0.049$, $SE = 0.006$, $95\% CI [0.0377, 0.0607]$.

The moderated mediation model

Interestingly, collective action (i.e., the mediator) was significantly and positively associated with life satisfaction, $b^* = 0.080$, $SE = 0.006$, $95\% CI [0.0690, 0.0917]$, suggesting that life satisfaction increased with the rise of people's collective action participation. Collective action may therefore function as a tool for enhancing personal well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life). Relevant to our expectations, we found a significant moderated mediation effect, $b^* = -0.002$, $SE = 0.0006$, $95\% CI [-0.0029, -0.0007]$, which revealed collective action as a mediator of the association between employment conditions and life satisfaction only when people were low in acceptance of inequality, $b^* = 0.004$, $SE = 0.0008$, $95\% CI [0.0026, 0.0059]$, in respect of when they were high, $b^* = 0.0006$, $SE = 0.0007$, $95\% CI [-0.0008, 0.0020]$. That is, precarious workers and unemployed people were more motivated to engage in collective action when they were low in acceptance of inequality, and, through such engagement, they were more satisfied with their life.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Work is one of the most important spheres of life through which people express their identity and self-worth (Bandura, 1995). In this respect, some could bring to mind the very old saying “work is ennobling” which contains a subliminal but very pervasive message: work elevates people in terms of personal dignity and morality. Previous research showed that besides its instrumental value, work plays a role in the self-construction process (Dutton et al., 2010). Work contributes to defining how people see themselves and how they feel about their lives (Ward & King, 2017). Empirical studies supported the importance of work in one's own life. These studies found, among other things, that people are motivated to continue working even when they do not need the income (Arvey et al., 2004; Highhouse et al., 2010). Being employed is indeed related to positive psychological functioning and well-being outcomes such as happiness and life satisfaction (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005).

On the opposite and negative side, the literature has demonstrated that being an unemployed or a precarious worker is psychologically taxing (Dawson et al., 2014; Quesnel-Vallee et al., 2010; Shields & Price, 2005; Stam et al., 2016). Such disadvantaged conditions are indeed associated with increased feelings of insecurity, inferiority, and unworthiness (Gunn et al., 2022; Stankunas et al., 2006). Specifically, in comparison to other challenging circumstances of life such as divorce, unemployment has more impactful and enduring negative consequences on well-being (Clark & Oswald, 2002; Clark et al., 2008). A longitudinal study (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004) found that the recovery process from unemployment is difficult: even after being employed again, people with previous episodes of unemployment continue to exhibit lower levels of well-being and appear relatively unsatisfied with their life. From a purely economic and financial perspective, the long-term adverse effects for the individual and the aggregate economic performance have

been clearly demonstrated (Shiro & Butcher, 2022): the adverse consequences of unemployment sometimes reverberate in lower income over at least a 10-year time-lag. It is then unsurprising that job insecurity and unemployment relate the life satisfaction.

The present research tested a model of the moderating and mediating processes through which employment conditions (i.e., unemployment and precarious work vs. permanent employment) are linked with life satisfaction among a representative sample of the European population (ESS 2016; Round 8). Building upon theories of system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994), we proposed that *acceptance of inequality* would moderate the association of employment conditions with (a) collective action engagement and (b) life satisfaction, while collective action would mediate the association between employment conditions and life satisfaction. The results of a moderated mediation analysis supported our predictions that unemployed people and precarious workers (vs. people employed on a permanent contract) were (a) more motivated to act collectively and (b) less satisfied with their life when acceptance of inequality was low (vs. high). Engagement in collective action was in turn related to increased life satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS

This research adds texture to the literature by showing the double-edged implications of acceptance of inequality in the context of employment. On the one hand, we found that acceptance of inequality was negatively related to collective action. This is consistent with previous findings showing the demotivating role of acceptance of inequality (Choma et al., 2020). Even among disadvantaged group members, it is only when acceptance of inequality is low that collective action is more likely to occur (Jost et al., 2012). Disadvantaged group members who strongly accept inequality minimize their conditions of disadvantage and thus they are demotivated to protest. This has important implications because it could produce social stasis (vs. social change), thereby making it unlikely to achieve a more equal distribution of societal resources.

On the other hand, we found that acceptance of inequality is positively related to life satisfaction. This is consistent with the palliative effects of system justification (for a review, see Jost, 2019). According to the system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), accepting inequality helps people to satisfy their fundamental (epistemic, existential, and relational) needs and to maintain higher levels of satisfaction with life. For the disadvantaged, acceptance of inequality increases confidence about the future and provide psychological benefits, at the cost of tolerating the disadvantage.

This article also explored whether collective action would mediate the relationship between employment conditions and satisfaction with life. Although collective action has been extensively studied over the years (for a review, see Agostini & Van Zomeren, 2021), the literature does not provide much information about its consequences, and existing results are mixed. This is unfortunate because participation in collective action requires time and effort from those who desire to ameliorate disadvantaged conditions. When people decide to engage in collective action, they also decide to invest substantial (physical and mental) efforts into pursuing equality goals and promoting increases in well-being. Therefore, it is important to know whether engagement in collective action may be worth such effort and result in beneficial changes in well-being. Consistent with Breslow et al. (2015), Friedman and Leaper (2010), and Foster (2014), in this research, we found a positive association between collective action and life satisfaction, suggesting that people may become more satisfied with their life after participating in collective action. According

with Friedman and Leaper (2010), collective action has the potential to buffer the negative impact of disadvantaged conditions on well-being—collective action seems indeed capable of positively contributing to the life satisfaction of unemployed people and precarious workers. On the theoretical side, these results provide new insights into the functions of collective action, raising new, additional questions and predictions. For instance, disadvantaged group members could find that their life satisfaction ameliorates through participation in collective action per se and regardless of whether the concrete goals of collective action will be achieved or not. This could be because participation in collective action fosters a sense of empowerment and connectedness with other activists which is related to increased well-being (Drury & Reicher, 1999). Practically, these results suggest the importance to voice emotions, interests, and desires instead of passively submitting to misfortunes and fate.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A limitation of the present study is its correlational nature. Although we tested our predictions among a representative sample of the European population (ESS 2016; Round 8), we cannot determine the direction of causation in the emerged relationships. We proposed a model where collective action is conceptualized as a predictor of well-being (i.e., life satisfaction). This conceptualization is well suited for our purpose to investigate the consequences of collective action. The results we obtained are consistent with previous findings (Breslow et al., 2015; Foster, 2014; Friedman & Leaper, 2010) that engaging in collective action may have beneficial effects on well-being. Alternatively, however, it could be that increased well-being leads to greater engagement in collective action⁶. Because well-being is associated with feelings of empowerment and optimism (Blackwell et al., 2013; Bouchard et al., 2017; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005), higher levels of well-being could motivate engagement in collective action. As noted above, collective action requires high demands on communication, planning capabilities, and coordination efforts. As such, engagement in collective action could be more difficult for people who feel they lack the resources, energy, and competencies for achieving important goals (i.e., poor well-being). Future studies should examine this possibility more thoroughly.

Future studies are also needed to strengthen the generalizability of these results. Additional research is needed to investigate whether the current results can be extended to other disadvantaged group members such as immigrants or non-heterosexual people (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2019; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Salvati et al., 2020). Moreover, better measures of acceptance of inequality and well-being could be used in future studies. For acceptance of inequality, future researchers could replicate the proposed model by using multiple items measures or situational inducements. For well-being, we used a general measure of life satisfaction in this research. As such, we cannot be sure whether the interpretation of the results can be applied to other

⁶ Because of the correlational nature of the present research, we also tested an alternative moderated mediation model (PROCESS Model 8; Hayes, 2013) where life satisfaction mediates the association between employment conditions and collective action, and employment conditions interact with acceptance of inequality on (a) life satisfaction and (b) collective action. We found a significant moderated mediation effect, $b^* = 0.002$, $SE = 0.0006$, 95% $CI [0.0008, 0.0032]$, which revealed life satisfaction as a mediator of the association between employment conditions and collective action only when people were low in acceptance of inequality, $b^* = -0.003$, $SE = 0.0009$, 95% $CI [-0.0051, -0.0015]$, in respect of when they were high, $b^* = 0.0006$, $SE = 0.0008$, 95% $CI [-0.0009, 0.0021]$. Results of this additional analysis are reported in the Supplementary materials.

indicators of well-being such as happiness or more context-specific outcomes such as social support and social inclusion.

Finally, we acknowledge that the effects we found are small if one considers conventional thresholds. In this regard, we want to highlight a few considerations. Recent work by Funder and Ozer (2019) suggests that it is not uncommon to misinterpret effect sizes because they are small. Attention needs to be paid to the way that researchers evaluate effect sizes because small effect sizes do not preclude important societal implications, especially if they are estimated in large samples. Other authors have indeed argued a cumulative science need primarily evidence on a collection of small, not average, or large, effect sizes (Götz et al., 2022; but see Primbs et al., 2022, for a different take on this issue). According to Funder and Ozer (2019, p. 164), small effect sizes from large N-studies are the most likely to reflect the “true state of nature”. In agreement with these considerations, although we recognize that caution should be taken in evaluating our results and future research is needed to examine them more thoroughly, we also argue that they are informative and important for the present case. If we extend them to the total European population, the proportion of 1 in every 22 individuals who had lower life satisfaction following employment disadvantage (*NNT* of 22.14), for example, suggests that conditions of unemployment and precarious work reduce life satisfaction for some three million EU citizens. The same reasoning can be applied to all the effects.

CONCLUSION

The present research shows that the disadvantaged (i.e., unemployed people and precarious workers) are (a) more motivated to engage in collective action and (b) less satisfied with their life when they are low (vs. high) in acceptance of inequality. These results add texture to the literature by providing evidence for the double-edged implications of acceptance of inequality in the context of employment. The present research also examined whether and how collective action would mediate the relationship between employment conditions and life satisfaction. We found that the disadvantaged with low (vs. high) acceptance of inequality may become more satisfied with life through collective action. Future research should continue to examine objective and subjective factors underlying collective action and life satisfaction to provide a deeper understanding of when and how disadvantaged living conditions and related poor well-being may ameliorate.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Data Availability Statement

Data and materials are available at www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=8

ORCID

Valeria De Cristofaro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4904-785X>

Valerio Pellegrini  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5735-9239>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Valeria De Cristofaro is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. Her theoretical and research interests concern stereotyping, intergroup relations, system justification, and collective action. As a postdoc, she is working on the antecedents and consequences of socioeconomic inequality.

Valerio Pellegrini is research fellow at the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. His research focuses on investigation of the multiple facets of populism and prejudice, as well as on development and implementation of advanced data analysis techniques.

Marco Salvati is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona. His main research interests focus on sexual prejudice and stereotyping towards gender and sexual minority people, internalized sexual stigma and positive LGBTQ+ identity. Currently, he is working on research projects on leadership, mindfulness, and conspiracy theories, involving both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Luigi Leone is professor of Psychometrics at the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. He is mainly interested in personality psychology, dispositional influences on political attitudes, and political psychology.

Mauro Giacomantonio is associate professor of Social Psychology at the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. His research examines self-regulatory processes, psychological distance and psychological processes involved in the reduction of inequality.