Solidarity with those who hit the streets: Public opinion and support for protesters' self-defence actions when the right to protest is restricted

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Abstract

Previous social-psychological research has neglected the impact of public opinion's legitimisation of protests on non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions. In two experiments, involving English adults as participants, we combined vignettes describing various extents of public opinion legitimisation of protests with footage of police repression during a student protest in England (Study 1; $N = 151$), and against pro-independence demonstrators in Catalonia (Study 2; $N = 150$). Results demonstrated that solidarity with protesters mediates the relationship between public opinion's legitimisation of protests and non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police. However, we found distinctive patterns for each scenario. Whereas people showed solidarity with protesters when English public opinion delegitimised the student protest, the same happened regarding the protest in Catalonia only when English public opinion gave legitimacy to the pro-independence movement. Also, we found that own opinions about the right to protest play an essential role in feeling solidarity with victims of police repression and support for protesters' self-defence actions.

Keywords: legitimisation of protests, police repression, solidarity, public opinion, self-defence.

Street protests are routinized activities in most of the Western democracies (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Thus, people frequently choose to join massive demonstrations worldwide to have their say, defend their rights, or protest about diverse issues. Recent examples of this are the 'Stop

Brexit' protests in the UK (Otte, 2019); anti-Bolsonaro demonstrations in Brazil (Phillips, 2018); and women's marches in Chile ("Peaceful marches", 2019). Although mostly peaceful, from time to time protest violence occurs in Western countries, as was the case in the 2010 student protest in England (Coughlan, 2010), during the Catalonia referendum (Burgen, 2017), and for the yellow vest protests in Paris (Rubin, 2018).

Social-psychological research has tried to explain people's willingness to join non-normative actions (e.g., protest violence) through diverse factors such as injustice appraisals (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), group-based emotions (Tausch & Becker, 2013; Tausch et al., 2011), and implicit theories about social change (Shuman, Cohen-Chen, Hirsch-Hoefler, & Halperin, 2016). Moreover, the elaborated social identity model of crowd behaviour (ESIM; Drury, Ball, Neville, Reicher, & Stott, in press, for a review; Drury & Reicher, 2000) explains that people's involvement in protest violence can be due to changes in identity boundaries and the emergence of new norms of conflict as consequence of group-level interactions with the police. To put it differently, according to ESIM, violence becomes acceptable when protesters perceive police actions to be illegitimate and indiscriminate.

Drawing upon ESIM, recent research has explored how certain processes operating among protesters (e.g., empowerment) can be extended to those who are not taking part in collective action (see Selvanathan & Lickel, 2019). In line with this, Saavedra and collaborators have demonstrated that non-participants might support protesters' violence against police officers (as self-defence actions) due to the perceived legitimisation that public opinion gives to protests and the restrictions that authorities impose on the right to protest (Saavedra & Drury, 2019a; Saavedra, Drury, & Easterbrook, 2019). However, scholars have not yet examined how non-

participants' support for protesters' self-defence may change, depending on both public opinion approvals of protests and the specific mechanism operating behind this support. To address this gap, we designed two experiments that tested whether different extents of public opinion's legitimisation of protests predicts non-participants' support for protesters self-defence actions; and whether solidarity with protesters mediates this effect. In addition, we explored whether own opinions on the right to protest and social dominance orientation, influences this process.

Public opinion's legitimization of protests

Research on collective action has suggested that legitimacy of protests based on own opinions (Chayinska, Minescu, & McGarty, 2017) and de-politicized evaluative attributes (e.g., 'horrible', 'fabulous'; see Sweetman, Maio, Spears, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2019) are important antecedents of people's willingness to take part in collective action. However, Saavedra and Drury (2019b) have suggested these approaches only consider the legitimacy of protests at an individual level (i.e., personal preferences), and therefore, they should be complemented with a relational perspective that considers the perceived legitimacy that public opinion (i.e., collective level) may grant to these activities. As the same authors have claimed, this re-conceptualisation of legitimacy of protests draws upon two different approaches. First, Neidhardt and Rucht's (1991) ideas about considering public opinion as one of the reference groups which social movements and protests need to interact with. Second, the historical and relational conceptualisation of context for collective action proposed in ESIM (see Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2012; Reicher, 1996).

A critical aspect of the legitimacy given by public opinion to protests is its relationship with the perceived restrictions authorities impose on protesters' actions. On the one hand, Saavedra and collaborators (2019) have suggested that people may perceive that public opinion is aligned with these restrictions (i.e., *alignment hypothesis*). On the other hand, it is also possible that people perceive public opinion gives more legitimacy to protests against the authorities' restrictions (i.e., *resistance hypothesis*). However, to this date, evidence has only supported the first of these hypotheses.

Non-participants and protesters' actions

For many years, social-psychological research has highlighted the importance of non-participants to the success of collective action. Non-participants are a source for movements to find more people to join in their actions through politicized identification (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), emotional social support (van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004), and solidarity with disadvantaged groups (Saab, Tausch, Spears, & Cheung, 2015; Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). Conversely, only a few studies have explained the relevance and the reasons for which non-participants support protesters' actions (e.g., Stuart, Thomas, & Donaghue, 2018; Teixeira, Spears, & Yzerbyt, 2019) especially when these actions involve the use of violence (e.g., Bohler-Muller et al., 2017; Saab, Spears, Tausch, & Sasse, 2016; Thomas & Louis, 2014). It is worth noting that recent advances in social-psychological research have suggested that the perceived restrictions imposed by authorities and the perceived legitimacy given by public opinion to protests may explain non-participants' support for protest violence in the UK and Chile (Saavedra et al., 2019). Indeed, after conducting an interview-based study, Saavedra and Drury (2019a) argued that non-participants might face an ideological dilemma: 'protests should be peaceful' versus 'defend the right to protest'. This dilemma implies that

when non-participants perceive the government to impose arbitrary restrictions to the right to protest, and police actions are considered illegitimate, non-participants may change their norms regarding the use of violence and support protest violence against police officers as self-defence.

We suggest that Saavedra and Drury's study mentioned above is especially relevant for research on non-participants' role in collective action because of two reasons. First, it shows that like actual protesters (see Drury & Reicher, 2000; Drury & Reicher, 2018), non-participants may change their norms about the use of violence in protests depending on the political context for protests. Thus, it can be argued that non-participants' support for protest violence against the police is a dynamic process that depends on the perceived restrictions authorities impose on protests, and goes beyond the static categorisation (i.e., 'normative' and 'non-normative') scholars usually use to evaluate collective action (e.g., Sweetman et al., 2019; Tausch et al., 2011; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Consequently, non-participants can disagree with protesters' violence when authorities guarantee people's right to protest, while violence against the police may be supported as self-defence actions when protesters need to confront authorities' restrictive measures concerning this right. Second, because its focus is on the perceived political context protesters' need to face, Saavedra and Drury's (2019a) work challenges some recent arguments about the backlash effects that protest violence might have on protest public image, such as public opinion's lack of support (see Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2017; Simpson, Willer, & Feinberg, 2018).

Protests and mass media

Although some non-participants may get an impression of protesters' actions first-hand, most people form their opinions about protesters through the information displayed in mass media (e.g., newspapers, television, and the internet). Consequently, protesters' actions are mostly mediated by media and communications practices at different levels (Cammaerts, 2012). In particular, Chan and Lee (1984) suggest that media coverage of protests is biased according to media ownership and their closeness to political elites. Based on this, media communication scholars have developed the concept of 'protest paradigm' to account for a type of media coverage that systematically displays a negative and de-contextualized image of protest where protesters are demonised, their claims delegitimised, and public opinion is shown to be extremely critical to protests (McLeod, 2007; see Tan 2017, for a review). Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that one of the main reasons for protest paradigm emergence is the occurrence of violence during protests (Lee, 2014; McLeod & Hertog, 1992).

However, the fact that information about protests is mediated through mass media representations does not necessarily mean that people are passive receivers of this information. Instead, people continuously monitor what happens on the streets, and when they see images considered as a provocation or outrage (e.g., police use of tear gas against peaceful protesters), this situation can prompt people to take part in protests actively (e.g., Lee and Chan, 2018; Tang, 2015).

Solidarity with protesters

Psychological research on intragroup processes has demonstrated that solidarity is a component of identification with the in-group (Leach et al., 2008). Thus, those who identify themselves as a part of a group may tend to feel a bond of commitment towards fellow group members. Subsequent work in collective action has expanded the scope of intragroup solidarity to intergroup processes using two different approaches.

The first approach conceptualises solidarity to be the sympathy that members of the majority group may feel towards the disadvantages that minority groups suffer. Following this idea, several works have integrated solidarity into the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears, & Bettache, 2011) to explain how members of disadvantaged groups can find support or allies for their collective action in both the majority (Ochoa, Manalastas, Deguchi, & Louis, 2019; Saab et al., 2015) or third groups (Klavina & van Zomeren, 2018). Moreover, during recent years, some researchers have been trying to explain acting in solidarity with minority groups by integrating SIMCA with a construct based on a supposed ideological preference for keeping intergroup hierarchies and inequalities - social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). In short, SDO researchers have argued that general audiences (e.g., Stewart et al., 2016), as well as those members of advantaged groups (e.g., Stewart & Tran, 2018) that show low levels of social dominance (and therefore a preference for intergroup equality), might be more inclined to demonstrate solidarity with the minority group and join collective action on their behalf.

The second approach has suggested that solidarity is based on something other than pure sympathy towards disadvantaged groups. Thus, solidarity would be a political act (political solidarity) from members of the public audience aimed at collaborating with members of the minority groups to challenge authorities that have lost their legitimacy (Subašić et al., 2008). In line with this, people from majority groups (i.e., public opinion) may feel a bond of commitment with members of a minority (disadvantaged group) in their struggles against authorities to reach the expected social change. As subsequent works have demonstrated, this political solidarity bond would be crucial to mobilising members of the majority group on behalf of others in need through a process of self-recategorization (see Subašić, Hardacre, Elton, Branscombe, Ryan, & Reynolds, 2018). To put it differently, members of the majority expand the boundaries of their group to create a higher-order identity that allows collaboration between members of the minority and majority groups to fight against authorities.

Despite the fact the key advantage of the political solidarity approach is that it stresses the importance of third parties (e.g., public opinion) in the analysis of collective action, there are two issues that social-psychological research has not yet addressed. First, existing research has not considered the support that members of general audience (i.e., non-participants) may grant to specific protesters' actions (e.g., the use of violence against police officers) in solidarity with the restrictions that authorities impose on the right to protest. Second, there is the question of how non-participants' solidarity with protesters may be affected by the perceived legitimacy that public opinion grants to protests.

The present research

We designed two studies aimed at exploring the influence of public opinion's legitimization of protests on non-participants' support for protest violence against the police, and the role of solidarity as the main mechanism underlying this relationship. These studies were based on incidents that occurred in the 2010 student protest in London and the pro-independence movement in Catalonia, respectively. To better understand the design and results reported in the following sections, we provide a brief description of the London and Catalonia incidents.

The 2010 student protests took place in London from November to December that year to resist government plans for implementing a significant increment in university tuition fees and cut the higher education budget (Vasagar, Lewis, Taylor, & Gabbat, 2010). In this context, the National Union of Students (NUS) and the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) organised massive demonstrations, while the government and the police announced controversial measures such as kitting protesters and ensuring a heavy police presence in the streets to 'keep public order' (Travis, 2010; Walker & Paige, 2010).

Regarding Catalonia, we need to stress that, along with being one of the wealthiest regions in Spain, historically, Catalonia has enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy from the central government. However, in 2010, the Spanish conservative parliament decided to outlaw most of these privileges, allegedly to take advantage of the incomes coming from this region. As a consequence, the Catalanian pro-independence movement called for a symbolic referendum in

2014 and for a full referendum on 1st October 2017 aimed at getting full autonomy (“Catalonia’s bid for independence”, 2018). Although both referendums were declared illegal by Spanish authorities, the world was furious after international media showed that, in an attempt to prevent the 2017 referendum from taking place, Spanish police beat peaceful pro-independence protesters and voters at poll stations (Henley & Mason, 2017).

Having described the scenarios in which the critical events happened, we can briefly state the main objectives and hypotheses that guide both experiments. Mainly, we want to test the effect of the perceived legitimacy given by public opinion to protests on non-participants’ support for protesters’ self-defence actions against the police. For this, we used vignettes to present three different scenarios in which public opinion legitimise protests (i.e., people have the right to protest), public opinion delegitimise protests (i.e., people should not protest), or was indifferent to them (i.e., it does not matter whether protests happen or not).

In line with previous research (see Saavedra et al., 2019), we expect that when people perceive that public opinion legitimises protests, they would be more willing to support protesters’ self-defence actions in comparison to those who have to face an indifferent public opinion (H1). Thus, we expect that when public opinion legitimate protests, people feel a bond of solidarity with those protesters in the streets (H2), and this makes them more willing to support protest violence against the police as self-defence (H3). Conversely, we also suggest that people may be less willing to support protesters’ self-defence actions when public opinion delegitimise protests in comparison with those who confront an indifferent public opinion (H4), and therefore, it would be less likely for people to feel a bond with those protesters who face the authorities’ restrictions (H5). Furthermore, we suggest that own opinions about the right to

protest are likely to predict solidarity with, and support of, protestors' actions, and thus needs to be controlled for in our model. We made the same decision regarding SDO taking into account those arguments which suggest its direct relationship with solidarity, and more recently with the support for police officers' excessive use of force to managing non-violent demonstrations (see Gerber & Jackson, 2017).

We tested these hypotheses in two experiments. Study 1 uses a sample of English non-student participants. Study 2 was thus designed to explore potential differences between protester samples (English vs. Catalanian), and to additionally explore whether participants' familiarity with the motive of the protest affected the pattern of results found in Study 1. Also, it is worth noting that the recruitment processes for both studies were carried out in parallel, and therefore this impeded us from making any modification to the experimental design based on the results of any of them.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Ethical approval for Studies 1 and 2 was obtained from the Cross Schools Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sussex. Subsequently, for Study 1, we set Prolific to recruit our participants ($N = 150$; 50 participants per condition). We activated the recruitment filters available on this online platform to distribute the advert of our experiment only to those users who self-categorised as English citizens, residing in England, and were non-students. We decided to use these filters for two reasons. One was to ensure consistency

between participants' nationality and the place where they live with the characterisation of public opinion we manipulated (English public opinion). The second reason was to avoid participants of the study being in the same social category (i.e., students) as the fictional protesters presented in the manipulations, a shortcoming of previous works in this area (see Saavedra & Drury, 2019a; Saavedra et al., 2019). Consequently, only those users who met our selection criteria received an advert about a study on protests in England.

As a result of the data collection process described above, 151 English adults (80.13% Female; Age: $M = 36.73$, $SD = 9.84$) were recruited for Study 1. Regarding their previous experience as protesters, only 7 participants declared they had participated in marches or protests in the 12 months before this study.

Design and procedure. Participants received a link to an online survey comprising three stages. In the first stage, participants answered items aimed at measuring demographics, their own opinions about the right to protest, previous participation in protests, and social dominance orientation (SDO). In the second stage, participants had to read one of the fictional news articles (randomly assigned manipulation) where English public opinion legitimises (i.e., people argued that students had the right to protest), delegitimise (i.e., people claimed students should not protest), or was indifferent (i.e., people did not care) to the 2010 student protest in London (see all the vignettes in the supplementary materials). For this, we invoked public opinion using statements about general public reaction to protests (i.e., a pie chart simulating a poll results), and bystanders' comments regarding protesters' actions (see Mcleod & Hertog, 1992). It is worth noting that for all the vignettes we described a political context where authorities (i.e., the government and police) imposed restrictions to protests.

Once participants read the story about the protest, they watched two minutes of footage in which the police beat peaceful protesters in a rally organised by NCAFC at Parliament Square (see the link to the footage in the supplementary materials). In other words, along with the news article, we included images that might be considered as a public provocation (i.e., police repression) for non-participants. To ensure that participants read the entire story and watched the full footage before continuing to the next stage, we set the minimum time (two minutes) participants must stay in the sections dedicated to each, the vignette and the footage.

In the third stage of the experiment, after watching the footage, participants answered a set of items aimed at measuring their solidarity with protesters. Also, their support for various actions protesters could carry out against the police (e.g., fight the police back) were measured. After completing this stage, each participant received a £0.75 reward.

Measures. We included two questions as manipulations checks, ‘to what extent do people think students have the right to protest?’ and ‘to what extent people think protests are important for a democratic system?’ Both questions were evaluated on a scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a lot*).

To measure support for protesters’ actions against the police, participants indicated their support for eight different actions student protesters might carry out in response to the actions showed in the footage (e.g., ‘yell at the police’, ‘tackle mounted police officers’). Non-participants’ support for each action was evaluated using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly*

oppose) to 5 (*strongly support*). It is worth mentioning that some of these items (see all the items in the supplementary materials) draw upon the actions categorised as protesters' self-defence by Saavedra and Drury (2019a).

Solidarity with protesters ($r = .89$) was measured using two items (e.g., 'I feel a bond of solidarity with protesters') adapted from Leach et al. (2008) rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Using the same scale mentioned above, own opinions about the right to protest were measured with three items ($\alpha = .88$) that were specially adapted to be used in this study (e.g., 'I think that participating in protests is a valid political action').

Finally, we included the SDO-short scale (Pratto et al., 2013) comprising four items (e.g., 'Group equality should be our ideal') to measure social dominance orientation ($\alpha = .72$). Thus, participants evaluated each SDO statement on a scale from 1 (*extremely oppose*) to 10 (*extremely favour*).

Analytical procedure. We used Stata to get the descriptive statistics of all the variables included in this study; carry out exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the items aimed to measure the support for protesters' actions; as well as to calculate the internal reliability of the scales involved in the model.

To test our mediation model using a categorical independent variable (i.e., manipulations), we employed MPLUS 7. Thus, we created dummy variables to calculate the indirect effects of public opinion's (de) legitimisation of protests on both solidarity with protesters and support for protesters' actions assuming the indifference condition as the reference group. Because our mediation model included a categorical independent variable, we followed Hayes and Preacher's (2014) guidelines to calculate and interpret the 'relative' indirect, direct, and total effects using bootstrap with 10,000 re-samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Furthermore, this model was controlled for age, gender, previous participation in protests, own opinions about the right to protest, and SDO.

In a subsequent step, we explored the possibility of getting interaction effects between the experimental conditions (public opinion's legitimisation of protest) with own opinions about the right to protest in solidarity with protesters. In other words, we explored the interaction among different levels of legitimacy (i.e., individual and collective) on the bond non-participants might feel they have with those protesters suffering from police repression.

Results

Manipulation checks. We carried out ANOVAs to test the main effects of the manipulations. Thus, using a robust analysis of variance, we found that the experimental manipulations affected people's perceptions of general audience acknowledge students' right to protest (first manipulation check), $F(2, 126.17) = 74.04, p < .001$. In particular, people in the 'legitimised' condition ($M = 4.26$) perceived that public opinion would tend to recognise more the students' right to protest in comparison with those participants exposed to either the 'delegitimised' ($M = 2.27$) or 'indifference' ($M = 3.19$) condition. Also, Tukey's post-hoc

comparisons demonstrated that those participants in the ‘delegitimised’ condition perceived public opinion as more reluctant to recognise students’ right to protest in contrast with those who had to face an indifferent general audience.

Regarding the second manipulation check, we found that participants’ perceptions about the importance public opinion give to protests in a democratic system changed across experimental conditions, $F(2, 148) = 44.66, p < .001$. Thus, those in the ‘legitimised’ condition perceived that public opinion gave higher importance to protest ($M = 3.97$) in comparison with those participants who faced a public opinion that delegitimised ($M = 2.54$) or was indifferent to the student protest ($M = 2.54$). However, we did not find significant differences in the scores reported by those in the ‘delegitimised’ and indifference conditions. We suggest this taking into account that the indifference condition included a negative statement claiming that ‘people have to work hard instead of wasting their time in protests’.

Main results. To check whether all the activities protesters might perform against the police were part of a unique factor, we carried out an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using Maximum Likelihood as extracting method. The results of this analysis demonstrated that participants of our study identified two broad categories of protesters’ actions. Whereas the first category included three protesters’ actions (e.g., ‘pushing the police back’; $\alpha = .79$) people might label as self-defence (see Saavedra & Drury, 2019a), the second category involved five actions ($\alpha = .94$) aimed at inflicting direct harm on police officers (e.g., ‘throwing stones and other objects at the police’).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the main variables included in the analyses by experimental condition.

	Indifference		Legitimised		Delegitimised	
	condition		condition		Condition	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Solidarity with protesters	3.15	1.24	3.16	1.14	3.50	1.25
Support for self-defence actions	2.51	1.06	2.24	0.92	2.37	1.03
Support for actions to inflict harm on police officers	1.41	0.69	1.16	0.4	1.28	0.68
Own opinions about the right to protest	3.92	0.89	3.63	0.97	3.77	0.82
SDO	3.10	1.88	2.65	1.18	3.00	1.48

Once we got the descriptive statistics for all the variables mentioned in the measures section (see Table 1), we checked their zero-order correlations. Thus, we realised that none of the variables included in this study correlates with support for protesters' actions aimed at inflicting harm on police officers (see Table 2). Therefore, we decided to focus our analysis on testing the effect of public opinion legitimisation of protests (i.e., conditions) on the support for protesters' self-defence actions, including solidarity with protesters as the main mechanism. It is worth mentioning that this model was controlled for gender (coded 0 for male and 1 for female), and previous participation in protests (coded 0 for no previous participation and 1 for previous participation).

Table 2. Zero-order correlations among the variables included in the model.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Solidarity with protesters	1									
2. Support for self-defence actions	.52***	1								
3. Support for actions to inflict harm on police officers	.07	.41***	1							
4. Own opinions about the right to protest	.59***	.47***	.11	1						
5. SDO	-.27**	-.21**	-.06	-.35***	1					
6. Legitimised condition	-.06	-.09	-.12	-.11	-.12	1				
7. Delegitimised condition	.13	.00	.00	.00	.03	-.49***	1			
8 Age	-.07	-.06	-.14	-.01	.15	-.04	-.02	1		
9. Gender	.10	-.02	.07	.01	-.10	-.03	-.01	-.13	1	
10. Previous participation in protests	.18*	.18*	-.04	.18*	-.03	-.08	.04	-.05	.02	1

Note: Significance of coefficients is indicated * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Our mediation model (see Figure 1) accounted for 34.3% of the variance associated with people's support for protesters' self-defence actions. This model shows no direct effects of public opinion legitimisation of protests (manipulations) on people's support for self-defence actions. Also, public opinion's legitimisation of protests did not have any impact on solidarity with protesters. Nevertheless, contrary to what we expected, we found that only those who

faced a public opinion that delegitimises protests (i.e., alignment hypothesis) tended to support protesters' self-defence actions through feeling a bond of solidarity with protesters ($b = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.30], $p = .04$).

Another unexpected but important finding was the role of own opinions about the right to protest in the prediction of solidarity with protesters ($b = 0.79$, 95% CI [0.66, 0.92], $p < .001$). Taking into account this information, we decided to carry out an additional analysis to test the interaction between public opinion's legitimisation of protests and own opinions about the right to protest (see Figure 2.). In other words, we explored how, in a restricted political scenario, solidarity with protesters might depend on two different levels of legitimacy, collective (perceived public opinion) and individual (own opinions). Our results show that solidarity with protesters depends on the interaction between both levels (i.e., individual and collective) of the legitimacy of protests. Indeed, our analysis shows that the positive effect of own opinions on solidarity with protesters is slightly stronger for those who were allocated in the 'delegitimised' condition ($b = 1.10$, 95% CI [0.77, 1.07], $p < .001$) in comparison to those in the 'legitimised' ($b = -0.36$, 95% CI [-0.80, 0.60], $p = .096$) and indifference conditions ($b = -0.43$, 95% CI [-0.88, 0.00], $p = .055$). To put it differently, own positive views about the right to protest become especially important in feel solidarity with repressed protesters when public opinion is against protests.

Figure 1. Mediation model Study 1. The model is controlled for SDO, own opinions about the right to protest, gender, age, and previous participation in protests. Regression coefficients are the unstandardized estimates. Significance of coefficients is indicated † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Considering the results reported above and that, in the model, SDO had no effect on either the mediator ($b = -0.40$, 95% CI $[-0.12, 0.43]$, $p = .427$) or the dependent variable ($b = -0.27$, 95% CI $[-0.11, 0.05]$, $p = .593$), we suggest that people may feel solidarity with protesters and support self-defence actions against the police ‘in resistance’ to a general audience that is aligned with the restrictions authorities has imposed on protests. Also, we propose that this ‘resistance’ may be triggered because of the contextual circumstances non-participants (and protesters) need to cope with, and own opinions people have regarding the right to protest.

Figure 2. Interaction effects in Study 1. Interaction between experimental conditions and own opinions about the right to protest to predict political solidarity with protesters.

Discussion

Although our results did not show a direct effect of the news articles manipulation on non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police, we found interesting results regarding the role of solidarity with protesters in this process. Thus, non-participants may feel a bond of solidarity with protesters in the streets when news articles invoke public opinion aligned with the restrictions that authorities imposed on protests. In other words, non-participants may report higher levels of solidarity with protesters when the protest paradigm (i.e., negative media portrayal of protests) is aligned with the restrictions imposed by authorities in comparison to a scenario where media coverage depicts a general audience that is indifferent to protests. Despite being unexpected, these results may be useful to begin a discussion about the possibility that non-participants feel solidarity with protesters as an act of resistance against the restriction to the right to protest as well as against negative biased media coverage of protests. We suggest the evidence we reported about the role of own opinions about

the right to protest in the prediction of solidarity with protesters may help to support this idea. Also, we suggest that it is the violation of shared norms and beliefs (i.e., the right to protest), and not ideological orientations (SDO), that can lead non-participants to feel a bond with those who are in the streets having their say.

With respect to solidarity with protesters as a mechanism, we suggest that similar to what has been described for actual protesters (see Drury and Reicher, 2018), non-participants might identify the police as enemies from whom protesters have the right to defend themselves when authorities act to avoid protesters' actions instead of guarantee people's right to protest. This means that even though the media coverage was aligned with authorities' measures against protesters, non-participants should not be considered as mere receivers of information concerning protests. Instead, people can interpret what is going on during a protest event and support protesters' actions against the police, as a function of the measures implemented by authorities, public opinion's legitimisation of protests, and their own opinions about the right to protest.

Study 2

Method

Participants. We used the same procedure as in Study 1 to recruit English adult (non-student) participants using Prolific. However, we incorporated two changes to this process. First, in the advertisement, we told the potential participants that this study was about the pro-independence movement in Catalonia. Second, we activated an additional filter on the online platform to prevent those who took part in Study 1 from taking part in this new experiment. Thus, we recruited 150 English adults (59.33% Female; Age: $M = 37.11$, $SD = 11.07$), of which just a few (6%) had taken part in a protest.

Design and procedures. We used similar design and procedures to Study 1. However, two differences have to be mentioned. First, considering that in Study 1 neither experimental conditions nor solidarity with protesters predicted non-participants' support for actions aimed at inflicting harm on police officers, in Study 2 we tested our mediation model only to predict non-participants' support for self-defence actions. Second, both the vignettes and the footage referred to the pro-independence movement in Catalonia (see supplementary materials). Thus, the vignette described the legitimacy English public opinion gave to protests in Catalonia, whereas the footage showed Spanish police officers beating Catalan demonstrators outside a polling station. As in Study 1, participants received a £0.75 reward once they completed the survey.

Measures. We adapted the manipulation checks of Study 1 to the Catalanian context. Thus, participants had to rate the following: ‘what extent did people actively believe Catalans had the right to vote and protest against government decisions’; and ‘to what extent people think protests are important for a democratic system’ on a scale from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a lot*).

We used the same items as in Study 1 to measure support for self-defence actions against the police ($\alpha = .88$), solidarity with protesters ($r = .84$), own opinions about the right to protest ($\alpha = .82$), and social dominance orientation ($\alpha = .81$).

Moreover, considering that participants were going to be asked about protests that took place outside of their immediate context, we included an additional item to measure self-reported knowledge about the situation in Catalonia (‘how much do you know about the situation in Catalonia?’). This item was rated on a scale from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a lot*).

Analysis. To allow comparability with Study 1, we carried out the analyses using the same sets of items to measure support for protesters’ self-defence actions against the police. In addition, we tested a mediation model for this dependent variable in the same way as in Study 1, including people’s knowledge about the Catalonia pro-independence movement as an additional control variable.

Results

Manipulation checks. The results for our two manipulations checks were similar to each other, maybe because, as in Study 1, we included negative references to protests in both

the delegitimised (i.e., Catalans should not be allowed to protest) and indifference conditions (i.e., protests are a waste of time).

Regarding our first manipulation check, we found differences in how participants perceived UK public opinion on Catalans' right to vote and protest, $F(2, 121.42) = 48.15, p < .001$. Thus, those participants in the 'legitimised' condition perceived that English public opinion gave more legitimacy to protests in Catalonia ($M = 4.29$), in comparison to those in the 'delegitimised' ($M = 2.60$) and 'indifference' conditions ($M = 2.81$). However, and maybe because of the reasons mentioned above, we did not find significant differences between the other two conditions.

The results for the second manipulation check were similar to those described above. People perceived that UK public opinion gave different levels of importance to protests in a democratic system, $F(2, 121.64) = 24.15, p < .001$. However, as for the first manipulation check, only those in the 'legitimised' condition ($M = 4.15$) reported significant differences relative to the other two conditions (delegitimised condition: $M = 2.94$; indifference condition: $M = 2.91$).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the main variables included in the analyses by experimental condition.

	Indifference condition		Legitimised condition		Delegitimised condition	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Solidarity with protesters	3.68	1.06	4.04	0.95	3.97	1.18

Support for self-defence actions	3.15	1.21	3.35	1.16	3.07	1.22
Own opinions about the right to protest	4.01	0.85	4.00	0.90	3.90	0.84
SDO	3.04	1.52	2.91	1.63	3.14	1.93
Knowledge about Catalonia situation	2.06	0.87	2.19	1.05	2.58	1.10

Main results. The descriptive statistics for the key measures within all conditions are presented in Table 3. We noted the means for people's support for self-defence actions against the police were slightly higher than those obtained in Study 1. Even though the scores from both studies are not objectively comparable, we think this is a piece of interesting information to bear in mind considering it might be possible that people show higher support for protesters' self-defence actions when protesters are in a different political context.

Table 4. Zero-order correlations among the variables included in the model.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Solidarity with protesters	1									
2. Support for self-defence actions	.35***	1								
3. Own opinions about the right to protest	.36***	.36***	1							
4. SDO	-.28**	-.10	-.38***	1						
5. Legitimised condition	.09	.09	.02	-.05	1					
6. Delegitimised condition	.04	-.07	-.05	.04	-.50***	1				
7 Age	.14	.00	-.03	.08	-.08	.05	1			
8. Gender	.12	-.13	-.09	-.04	.03	.07	.04	1		

9. Previous participation in protests	.03	.04	.20*	-.13	-.06	.00	-.17*	.14	1	
10. Knowledge about Catalonia situation	.22**	.16*	.29***	-.14	-.05	.20*	.08	-.23**	.06	1

Note: Significance of coefficients is indicated * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

As in Study 1, we found that neither ‘legitimised’ nor ‘delegitimised’ conditions have direct effects on the dependent variable (see Table 4). However, as expected, when UK public opinion legitimises protests, it is more likely that non-participants feel a bond of solidarity with protesters, and this solidarity act as a mechanism that predicts the support for protesters self-defence actions against the police in a different scenario ($R^2 = .20$). Moreover, unlike Study 1, there was no significant effect of ‘delegitimised’ condition on solidarity with protesters (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mediation model Study 2. The model is controlled for SDO, own opinions about the right to protest, gender, age, and previous participation in protests. Regression coefficients are the

unstandardized estimates. Significance of coefficients is indicated † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

These results suggest that for protesters' actions carried out in a different political context than one's own, non-participants may feel solidarity with those protesters who suffer from the restrictions imposed on the right to protest only when their own (local) public opinion legitimises protests relative to a (local) general audience that is indifferent to protesters' actions ($b = 0.97$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.24], $p = .14$).

Regarding the role of own opinions about the right to protest and SDO, the results were similar to those of Study 1. Thus, own opinions about the right to protest was a good predictor of both solidarity with protesters ($b = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.55], $p = .02$) and support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police ($b = 0.39$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.58], $p = .01$). With respect to SDO, as in Study 1, it had no relationship with support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police ($b = 0.07$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.17], $p = .264$). However, in this study, SDO had a small effect on solidarity with protesters ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.21], $p = .03$). Considering these results, we tested again the interaction between the experimental conditions (public opinion's legitimisation of protests) and own opinions about the right to protest in solidarity with protesters (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Interaction effects in Study 2. Interaction between experimental conditions and own opinions about the right to protest to predict political solidarity with protesters.

As in Study 1, we found that the effect of own opinions becomes stronger when people are faced with a general audience that delegitimises protests ($b = 0.75$, 95% CI [0.42, 1.08], $p < .001$) in comparison to those conditions where the public opinion is either indifferent ($b = -0.40$, 95% CI [-0.87, 0.56], $p = .085$) or legitimises protests ($b = -0.45$, 95% CI [-0.90, -0.00], $p = .047$). In other words, own positive views about the right to protest become especially predictive of felt solidarity with repressed protesters when public opinion is against protests.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 are very similar to those obtained in Study 1 regarding the role of the solidarity with protesters as a mechanism that may predict non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police (i.e., pushing the police back, disobeying police officers' orders, or yelling at the police). As in Study 1, we found that non-participants

might feel solidarity with protesters according to the extent that non-participants perceived that public opinion legitimate protests. However, there is one main difference between Study 1 and Study 2 that needs to be addressed. In this study, it was public opinion's legitimisation of protests (not delegitimisation) that led non-participants to feel solidarity with protesters. This may imply that when protests take place in a different political context (e.g., Catalonia), people might feel solidarity with protesters only when their local public opinion (i.e., English general audience) explicitly legitimises protests at the foreign location and expresses its disagreement with authorities' restrictions on the right to protest. The latter opens the door to think about the different mechanisms that could explain non-participants' support for protesters' actions carried out in an alien political context. Although this may be considered an exciting and challenging idea, researchers need to bear in mind the cultural, political, and historical differences that can bias the reported support for protesters' actions. To put it differently, it would not be fair nor scientifically rigorous to analyse the support that people living in developed Western democracies may give to protesters' actions in other regions (e.g., Africa or East Asia) without considering the existence of divergent social norms regarding protests and the type of actions that can be supported (e.g., only peaceful actions).

Also, we confirmed the critical role of own opinions about the right to protest in predicting solidarity with protesters, as well as the minimal influence that social dominance orientation (SDO) has on this construct.

General discussion

Through two studies, we have demonstrated that solidarity with protesters may act as a mechanism to predict non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions against the police depending on the legitimacy public opinion grant to protests. In particular, we found that non-participants may feel solidarity with protesters due to the interaction between two levels of the legitimacy of protests, individual and collective. The latter means that non-participants' take into account their own opinions about the right to protest and the extent to which public opinion legitimises protests that take place in either a local or foreign political context before feeling solidarity with those who hit the streets to fight for a specific cause.

In terms of the theoretical advances, our studies offer two main contributions to the social-psychological research on protests and collective action. First, our work extends the scope of the political solidarity model considering that third parties (i.e., non-participants) may support protesters' self-defence actions against the police without necessarily being involved or have the intention to take part in collective action. Although this means non-protesters may remain 'inactive', we do not consider this inactivity to be a negative outcome considering that protesters and social movements always need the general audience to legitimate both their claims and actions to increase the odds of reaching the desired goals (see van Zomeren et al., 2004, for a discussion). Indeed, we suggest that when non-participants realise that authorities try to hinder the right to protest and the media spread images that cause public indignation (e.g., the police beating protesters), solidarity with protesters might lead to support for protesters' self-defence actions and also provoke non-participants to take action to complain

against authorities' measures, or to question the legitimacy of authorities. An excellent example of this can be found in a protest that took place during 2019 in Hong Kong. In that event, a large group of mothers hit the streets to complain about police repression against young protesters, the use of the label 'rioters' on those who participated in demonstrations and to demand the local political leader's resignation (see Ng, 2019).

The second contribution of this work is to consider non-participants as active readers of both the political context where protests take place and the dynamic of collective action. Thus, we hold that non-participants can actively monitor and interpret the information about protests they can get from the media. Consequently, aside from their own opinions about the right to protest, non-participants may consider three main factors before feeling a bond of solidarity with protesters and support protesters' self-defence actions against the police: the restrictions authorities impose on the right to protest, perceived public opinion legitimisation of protests, and police actions against protesters. The latter implies that instead of attributing the occurrence of violence to protesters alleged 'irrationality', non-participants (like actual protesters) can understand that protesters' actions follow a specific rationale based on both the political circumstances that set the stage for protests and the interaction between protesters and the police.

There are some limitations to the two studies reported that are worth reflecting on. Both experiments included footage that may cause public indignation (i.e., police repression during protests) just after the experimental manipulations. Although we intentionally adopted this design to give more realism to the experiments (i.e., online news and social media usually combines text, images, and footage), we suspect that confounding effects may be behind the

reported results. However, instead of suggesting that the impact of text articles and footages should be tested separately, we believe that future research should try to replicate our results using a similar design or combining different pieces of information (e.g., Wouters, 2018) to simulate what people usually see about protests on media outlets.

Regarding people's support for protesters' actions in a different political context, we need to acknowledge that in Study 2 the protesters (i.e., Catalans) could be considered as similar to those who decided to support (or not) protesters' actions (i.e., English adults). Thus, protesters and non-participants belonged to European democracies suppose a limitation because it assumes people in any of these roles share some higher-order category (i.e., being European), as well as values and beliefs about democracy that partially may explain the results reported above. To address this issue, we propose that future studies should focus on exploring non-participants' support for protesters with whom there are no explicit connections or a prior higher-order category (e.g., Europeans and Africans) that can facilitate solidarity.

Another limitation future research needs to address is the role of own opinions about the right to protest on the prediction of both solidarity with protesters and the support for protesters' self-defence actions. Although we found consistent effects in both studies, it is still necessary to further explore how these effects can change according to the legitimacy given by public opinion to protests, the political context in which protesters' actions take place and the type of protest (i.e., peaceful or violent) has predominated in a country's recent past (see Murdie & Purser, 2017, for a discussion).

Undoubtedly, more research is needed to better understand non-participants' support for protesters' self-defence actions through solidarity. Thus, we suggest that future research can extend our model, testing the role of co-victimization (e.g., victims of police repression) and inclusive identity salience as measures of solidarity with protesters (see Subašić, Schmitt, & Reynolds, 2011); integrating the violation of moral beliefs in relation to protests (van Zomeren, Kutlaca, & Turner-Zwinkels, 2018). Also, future research should explore how support for protesters' self-defence actions may be an antecedent of people's willingness to join protests. By examining the factors mentioned above, it might be possible to understand better non-participants' role as active readers of collective action and people's reasons to support protesters' self-defence actions against the police in solidarity with protesters.

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