



# Vision thinking for collective action



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# Vision thinking

Positive prospection about the future of a collective that one identifies with.



**Vision thinking is about the future of a collective and is uniquely defined by four components.**

## Unrestraint

- The thinker transcends the current reality to simulate a more positive or ideal future; the thinker is not restrained by assessments of the feasibility of this future.

## Mental representations

- The thinker forms mental representations of the future (an image, a idea, a sense of the future).

## Creativity

- The thinker *creates* something—the mental representations. Greater creative input represents greater engagement in vision thinking.

## Positiveness

- The nature of the thinking is wholly positive.



# Research context

Vision thinking concepts are valued for transforming organisations and societies.

But research on the processes and effectiveness of vision thinking is limited.

## Collective action research

Collective action research has typically focussed on negative emotions. Although recently, hope, positive cognitive alternatives, and utopian thinking have been considered.

Utopian thinking is about whole of society ideals. Vision thinking applies to any size collective and focuses on whole of society ideals or just a single goal. Vision thinking emphasises the form of the thinking, whereas utopian thinking to date has focused on the content.

## Leadership and organisation research

The focus has been on leaders projecting a vision to followers, or the role of the vision itself, rather than the thinking processes of the followers.

## Prospection research

The published empirical research on collective prospection is minimal or non-existent.

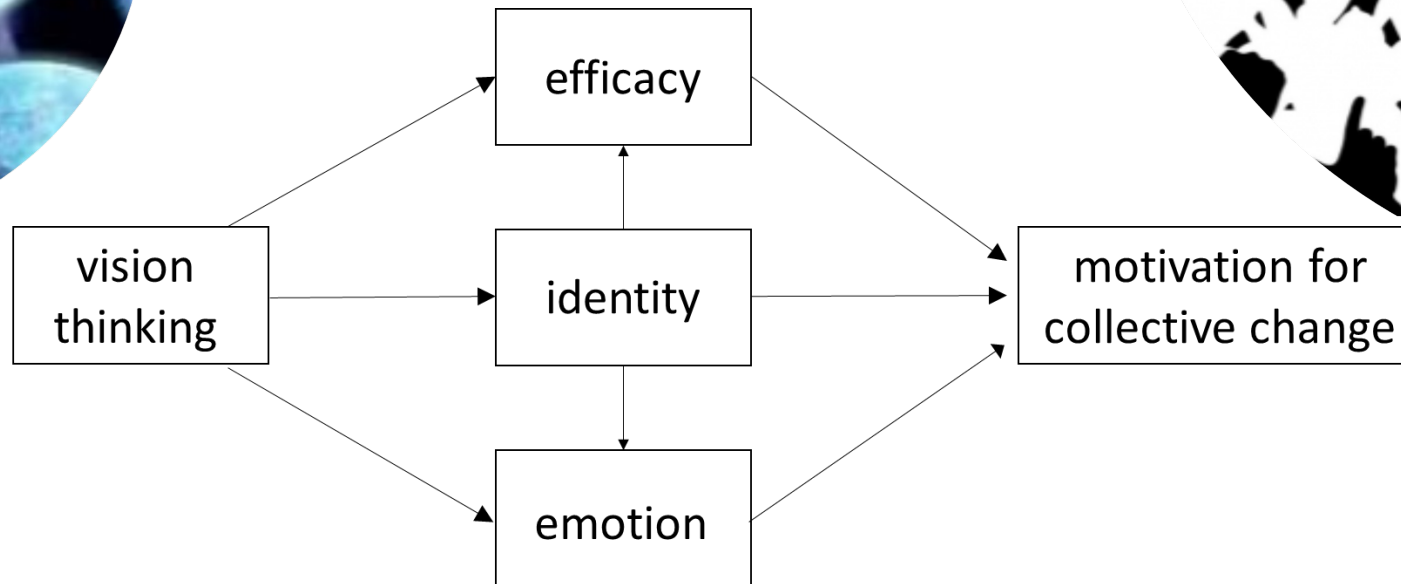
This research:

- 1) Defines and operationalises vision thinking.
- 2) Considers
  - ⇒ How vision thinking might motivate members of a collective to improve their circumstances.
  - ⇒ How vision thinking might be applied by leaders to get followers to pursue a collective goal.





# Vision thinking collective action model



The established Social Identity Model of Collective Action has social identity, efficacy and emotions (traditionally a sense of injustice) as separate but jointly contributing predictors of collective action.

The proposal is that vision thinking evokes each of these collective action predictors, leading to motivation for collective change.

**Efficacy.** The unrestrained nature of vision thinking means the thinker overrides barriers to achieving the imagined end state. Consequently, accomplishing the vision seems more possible.

**Identity.** Vision thinking aligns with the self-categorisation account of how individuals form group member identities. As per social identity theory people seek to establish positive identities. Vision thinking generates a positive representation of a future that implicates one's collective—an assumed consensus about a future that would be valuable to the group.

**Emotions.** Positive and negative emotions act simultaneously.

Anger/outrage. Creation of a vision of a more positive alternative to the current reality provides a comparison condition. Where discontent about the current reality already exists, the comparison may evoke anger/outrage.

Hope. Imagining a positive future can elevate hope.



# Model confirmation

Six studies confirm the model, although the role of hope is uncertain.

## Study 1

Permanent employees within a state government department.  $N = 105$ .

Vision thinking theme: Gender equity in leadership.

Correlational study (one condition) that assessed the relationship between vision thinking and collective action predictors and motivation.

## Study 2

Online via M-Turk, US citizens.  $N = 209$ .

Vision thinking theme: Environmentally clean and sustainable cities.

2 conditions: imagine a perfect state of things; think about what is currently being done (control).

## Study 3

Online via M-Turk, US citizens.  $N = 182$ .

Vision thinking theme: Gender equity in politics.

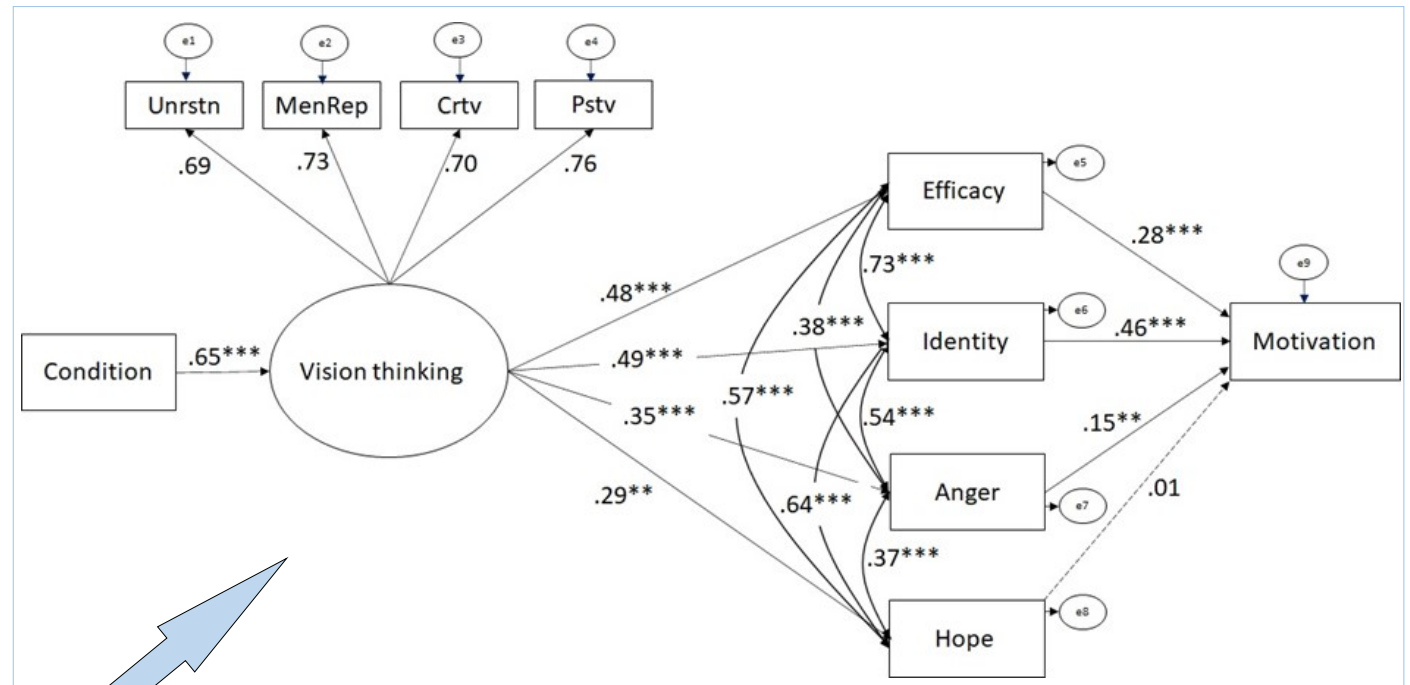
2 conditions: imagine a perfect state of things; think about what is currently being done (control).

## Study 4

Online via M-Turk, US citizens.  $N = 354$ .

Theme: Universal access to education.

2 conditions: imagine a perfect state of things; think about what is currently being done (control).



(typical results)

## Study 5

Online via M-Turk, US citizens.  $N = 297$ .

Theme: Combatting climate change

2 conditions: imagine a perfect state of things; think about what is currently being done (control).

## Study 6

Online via M-Turk, US citizens.  $N = 590$ . Group member interaction.

Theme: Combatting climate change

2 conditions: in groups imagine a perfect state of things; in groups discuss what is currently being done (control).

# Group vision thinking

Essentially, individual vision thinking and group vision thinking are equally effective at forming a social identity (associated with greater motivation for collective action).

## Group vision thinking

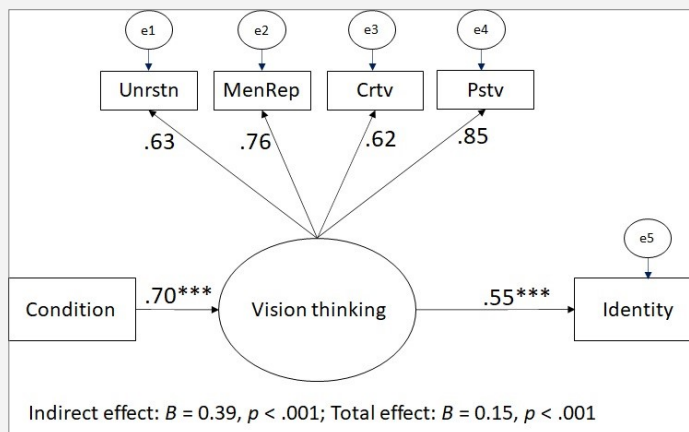
Group vision thinking: simulation by individuals, in interaction with others, of a positive or ideal future for their group/collective.

In group vision thinking the vision and vision thinking processes are influenced by others.

## Unique attributes of vision thinking promote self-categorisation

Study 6 showed higher identification with the group for group vision thinking (condition = 1) compared with group discussion (condition = 0), mediated by engagement in vision thinking.

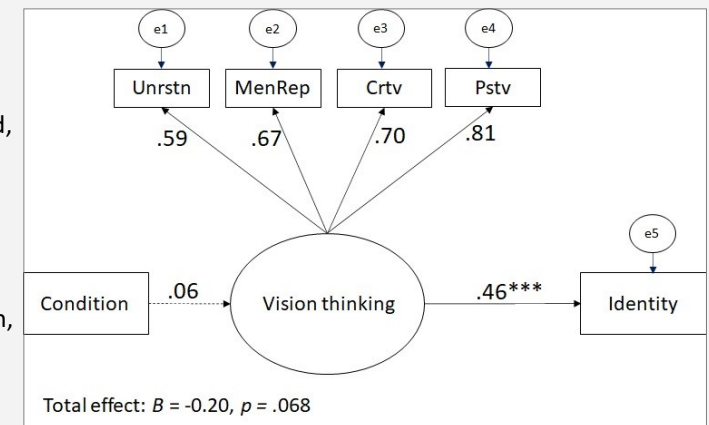
So, vision thinking offers more to the self-categorisation process than established mechanisms such as proximity, social contact, communication, group interaction, working on a shared task.



## Group vision thinking versus individual vision thinking

Engagement in vision thinking occurs to the same extent for individual versus group vision thinking.

In Study 6 there was a marginally significant positive effect on social identity for group vision thinking (condition = 0) compared with individual vision thinking (condition = 1). Given the level of engagement in vision thinking was the same, the difference was most likely due to the established, non vision thinking specific, self-categorisation mechanisms that are present in group interaction (e.g., social contact, communication, group interaction) that promote social identity.



In terms of the vision thinking specific effects, the findings imply that a *perception* by the thinker that they are connected to the collective via their vision (i.e., in individual vision thinking), supports the self-categorisation process just as well as concrete interaction with members of the collective (i.e., in group vision thinking).

# Further findings

## Vision thinking lifts perceived possibility and efficacy.

Vision thinking increases perceived possibility, which is associated with higher efficacy and in turn, motivation.

Vision thinking is about a complex collective issue, and it may serve to simplify the issue, by removing and making a solution seem more possible.



## Prescribing vision thinking aids engagement

Prescribed vision thinking is where the thinker follows instructions that direct their vision thinking so that they imagine specified outcomes relating to the vision thinking theme.

More prescription benefits engagement in vision thinking (which is associated with higher motivation for collective action). This is especially so for thinkers with high interest in the vision thinking theme, or for those whose beliefs clash with the theme, or those who are threatened by the theme.



## Vision thinking can be induced.

Vision thinking can be induced, which is fundamental to its utility—it can be inspired or prompted by others.

A tool for leaders to inspire followers towards collective change.



# Conclusion

- This research on future thinking contributes to the collective action, collective prospection and leadership research.
- The research confirms a model that explains how unrestrained positive simulation about a collective's future connects the thinker to the collective and connects to the thinker's motivation to improve the circumstances of the collective, via the collective action predictors (social identity, efficacy, emotions).
- This research shows the capacity of unrestrained thinking about overcoming collective issues
  - to increase the perceived possibility of resolving such issues, and
  - to develop social identification relating to improving the issue, so that people want to work together for change.

