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Exposure to Motivational Messages Promotes Meritocratic Beliefs and an Individualistic Perception of Social Change

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Abstract

Some critics claim that the self-help industry legitimizes inequality by enhancing individualism and meritocratic beliefs. The present research aims to provide experimental support to these assumptions by exploring the effect of motivational messages on meritocratic beliefs and the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action to promote social change toward equality and on collective action intentions. Across three experiments, 663 participants were exposed to motivational messages either by copying short quotes or watching a short video containing those same quotes. As compared with a control condition, exposure to motivational messages strengthened meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increased the perceived effectiveness of individual action in promoting social change and undermined the perceived effectiveness of collective action and subsequently collective action intentions. These findings fuel the debate on the individualistic bias and meritocratic orientation of the self-help industry and highlight the need to analyze its impact on social and economic justice.

Keywords

collective action, individualism, motivational messages, meritocratic beliefs, self-help industry

Motivational speakers, self-improvement books, and personal coaching are some of the most recognizable facets of the self-help industry. This industry encourages internal attributions and diverts attention from the structural factors that condition people's well-being and position in the social hierarchy (Adams et al., 2019; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Rimke, 2020). The vision of the individual as an omnipotent being, capable of transmuting problems into personal enrichment, may undermine social change toward equality by fostering meritocratic beliefs and encouraging the overestimation of the individual capacity to transform social reality. In the current research, we experimentally examine whether exposure to motivational messages influences the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs, the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change toward equality, and collective action intentions. We propose that exposure to motivational messages might reinforce meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increase the perceived effectiveness of individual action in promoting social change and decrease the perceived effectiveness of collective action and subsequently collective action intentions.

Individual and Collective Action as Catalysts of Social Change

Social change toward equality is often instigated by collective actions against the status quo that are sometimes organized and sustained by social movements (Wright, 2010). Recent meta-analytical evidence (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021) suggests that moral concerns and politicized identity are the main determinants of collective mobilization, and that the effects of these factors on collective action are partly explained by the emotional experience of injustice and perceived effectiveness. In this research, we will focus on the latter and examine to what extent people perceive

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that collective action, in general, is effective to promote social change toward equality.

Along with collective action, some authors claim that individual efforts can also contribute to social change toward equality (de Lemus & Stroebe, 2015; Stroebe et al., 2015). For instance, when low-status group members reach leadership positions, they may help dismantle negative stereotypes and initiate changes that improve the situation of their group. However, individual ascent in the social hierarchy may be accompanied by distancing from the original group (Derks et al., 2011; Faniko et al., 2021), leading to the legitimization of the status hierarchy by reinforcing the negative stereotypes about the group, denying discrimination, and opposing measures against inequality (Derks et al., 2015). Besides, individual actions by themselves may not be enough to solve major social problems (e.g., climate emergency) that require far-reaching structural changes (Marteau et al., 2021).

In short, although individual actions can contribute to social change toward equality in some cases, especially when internalized as part of one's social identity (Koppel et al., 2023), in others, they can also hinder it by drawing attention and support away for systemic solutions (Chater & Loewenstein, 2023). Collective action against the status quo seems to be a more reliable way to promote social change toward equality, but it can find a strong opposition (Napier et al., 2020). Here, we examine how exposure to motivational messages influences the perceived effectiveness of both individual and collective action in promoting social change toward equality and the potential mediator role of meritocratic beliefs.

Rise and Criticism of the Self-Help Industry

The self-help industry has experienced a spectacular growth, propelled by the scientific credibility provided by positive psychology (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). However, this new science of happiness and the self-help industry have also garnered significant criticism. Some scholars argue that positive psychology legitimizes the neoliberal agenda via ontological individualism and fortifies structures of domination that perpetuate inequality (Adams et al., 2019; Becker & Marecek, 2008; Binkley, 2011, 2014; Cabanas, 2018; Sugarman, 2015). Instead of changing the structural conditions that cause inequality and distress, positive psychology encourages people to modify the way they react to those circumstances by regulating their subjective feelings (see Allen & Leach, 2018).

According to Davies (2015), the call to regulate subjective feelings instead of addressing the external circumstances that cause distress deactivates critical politics and collective action. Indeed, the regulation of negative emotions may undermine engagement in collective action even among people who have a weak motivation to justify the system (Solak et al., 2021). Since participation in collective action and mass gatherings seems to enhance health

(Drury, 2020), the potential demobilizing effect of the self-help industry could adversely affect personal well-being. Moreover, its focus on resilience and positive changes can be an added burden (in the form of personal blaming) to the oppression that marginalized groups suffer (Yakushko & Blodgett, 2021) and may legitimize neoliberal politics that restrict social welfare programs (Adams et al., 2019). The emphasis on personal agency and self-determination conveys the idea that personal failures or even structural problems as poverty and inequality arise from poor choices and lack of motivation (Adams et al., 2019; Rimke, 2020). These discourses of individual responsibility increase the risk of blaming individuals for problems that they did not cause, favor competition in economically unequal systems, and exalt meritocratic beliefs (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019).

Meritocratic Beliefs and Collective Action

Meritocratic beliefs are a type of neoliberal ideology (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Girerd & Bonnot, 2020) based on the assumption that one's status in society depends on individual merit, that is, anyone can succeed through hard work and determination. These beliefs help rationalize and justify existing inequalities and underpin the conviction that the system is fair (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). They are associated with less support for redistribution (García-Sánchez et al., 2020), more negative attitudes toward the poor (Hoyt et al., 2021) and, among low-status groups, less perceived discrimination (McCoy & Major, 2007).

Meritocratic beliefs can also be a barrier to collective action aimed at challenging the status quo. For instance, Girerd and Bonnot (2020) showed that women who were primed (vs. non-primed) with meritocracy reported less interest in feminist collective action and perceived collective action as being less important to achieve gender equality. The same study revealed that the stronger the perception that society is meritocratic, the more participants believed that the advancement of women depends exclusively on individual responsibility. These findings suggest that meritocratic beliefs may decrease the perceived effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change toward equality and lead to overconfidence in individual actions to achieve it.

The Current Research

We propose that self-help messages can reinforce meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increase confidence in individual action as a driver of social change and undermine the perceived effectiveness of collective action and collective action intentions. To test these ideas, we conducted three experiments in which we assigned participants to a control condition or to an experimental condition in which they received motivational messages. Then, we measured meritocratic beliefs, the perception of the effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change and collective

action intentions (in Study 3). We expected that exposure to the typical motivational messages of the self-help industry would increase meritocratic beliefs which, in turn, would lead to more perceived effectiveness of individual action in promoting social change and less perceived effectiveness of collective action and collective action intentions.

Our measures of perceived effectiveness should not be equated with self-efficacy, defined as “judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). Our measures do not encompass self-evaluation, but rather participants’ confidence in the potential of individual or collective actions, in general, to bring about societal transformation. An individual might perceive oneself as highly effective (e.g., “I typically achieve successful completion of the tasks I establish for myself”), yet simultaneously believe that individual actions hold minimal power to impact the social structure (e.g., “the actions of an individual in isolation will not yield a substantial impact in society”). Conversely, someone might possess a negative self-perception of personal efficacy (e.g., “I never get anything done right”) but maintain a strong conviction in the potential of individual actions, including those of others, to effect transformative changes in reality (e.g., “societies progress due to the actions of remarkable individuals”).

The studies were conducted in two different countries, Ecuador and Spain, which share the language, Spanish, and some cultural characteristics due to the Spanish colonization of Ecuador. They have a recent history of migratory exchanges and a progressive increase in social inequality that has promoted massive social mobilizations in the last decade. Regarding the differences, Spanish culture is moderately individualistic, whereas Ecuadorian culture is collectivistic (scores 51 vs. 8 according to Hofstede Insights, 2022). Spain has a higher gross domestic product and lower levels of economic inequality than Ecuador (World Inequality Database, 2022). Self-help books are more popular in Latin America than in Spain (Librandia, 2022). Despite these differences, we expected that exposure to motivational messages would exert similar effects in both countries.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested how exposure to motivational messages affects meritocratic beliefs and the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change. Participants were either exposed to a neutral topic or to motivational messages, and then we measured the dependent variables. We tested whether, as compared with the control condition, exposure to motivational messages would lead participants to show more meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, greater perceived effectiveness of individual action and less perceived effectiveness of collective action.

Method

We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies. The data, materials, code, codebook, and Supplemental Materials are available at: <https://osf.io/ejc26/>.

Participants. One hundred twenty-one Ecuadorians (83 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.41$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.76$) were recruited by a snowball technique. Graduate university students pursuing human rights training invited two of their acquaintances (non-students) to participate on an online study for course credits. In the absence of previous evidence, we did not estimate sample size a priori. A sensitivity power analysis using G*Power (Erdfelder et al., 1996) revealed that, with an $n = 121$, an $f \geq .257$ ($d = 0.514$) would be enough to reject the null hypothesis assuming an alpha level of .05 and 80% power in a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Procedure. Participants were invited to participate in a study about social change. They were randomly assigned to the control ($n = 64$) or to the experimental condition ($n = 57$). Participants in the *control condition* explained how they had known the study. Participants in the *experimental condition* copied in capital letters six messages extracted from a motivational video (https://youtu.be/VbxHS-D_s0M), such as “Your will has an unsuspected power.” Then, participants completed the dependent variables that, unless otherwise specified, ranged from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*).

We measured *meritocratic beliefs* by means of the eight-item Personal Wherewithal subscale of the Neoliberal Beliefs Inventory (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015), $\alpha = .94$. An example item was: “Any goal can be achieved with enough hard work and talent.”

Then, we developed two different scales to assess the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change, $\alpha_s = .82$. In all experiments, factorial analyses with Oblimin rotation including all items yielded two factors (see Table 1).

To register participants’ *Self-Help consumption*, they indicated how often they read books, watched internet videos, attended talks or activities, and shared contents on social networks related to self-help, $\alpha = .84$, from 0 (*Never*) to 5 (*Daily*). Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Preliminary Analyses. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics and correlations between the dependent variables. Meritocratic beliefs, effectiveness of individual action, and consumption of self-help were positively correlated. The perceived effectiveness of collective action correlated negatively with these variables.

Table 1. Factorial Analyses on the Scales Developed Ad-hoc to Measure Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action in Promoting Social Change

Scale	Item	Study 1 component		Study 2 component		Study 3 component	
		1	2	1	2	1	2
Effectiveness of Individual Actions	Societies progress thanks to the courage of extraordinary individuals	.75	-.11	.18	.67	.12	.64
	The actions of a single person can change the world	.74	-.16	-.11	.67	-.06	.67
	The contributions of unique people are what make societies progress and achieve rights	.85	-.25	.14	.78	-.01	.78
	If a person makes good use of his/her personal resources, he/she is able to change the world around him/her for the better	.83	-.09	.04	.76	.01	.70
	When everyone pursues their individual goals no matter what others say, it makes society move forward	.66	-.13	.05	.64	-.06	.61
Effectiveness of Collective Actions	Collective actions and protests are effective in generating social change	.01	.80	.79	.04	.77	.05
	Without collective actions and protests it is impossible to achieve social rights	-.13	.73	.81	.08	.76	-.01
	Societies progress thanks to the pressure exerted by collective movements	-.21	.88	.88	-.01	.82	-.05
	Collective actions are essential to achieve greater social justice	-.23	.84	.87	.06	.86	-.03
	Societies advance when people organize and make collective efforts to change the status quo	-.16	.56	.65	.15	.80	.02

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study 1

Variable	M	SD	2	3	4
1. Meritocratic beliefs	2.58	1.72	.61***	-.32***	.28***
2 Effectiveness of individual action	3.36	1.50		-.20*	.26**
3. Effectiveness of collective action	4.64	1.17			-.18*
4. Self-help consumption	1.53	0.95			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

An ANOVA on self-help consumption showed no differences between the experimental and control conditions, $F(1,119) = 0.20, p = .889, d = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval (CI) $[-0.34, 0.38]$.¹

Main Analyses. We conducted a series of ANOVAs to check whether the control and experimental conditions differed.²

The ANOVAs on meritocratic beliefs and on perceived effectiveness of individual action revealed significant effects of condition (see Table 3). Participants in the experimental condition had stronger meritocratic beliefs and perceived

individual actions as more effective than those in the control condition (see Figure 1). However, the effect of condition on the perceived effectiveness of collective action was not significant.

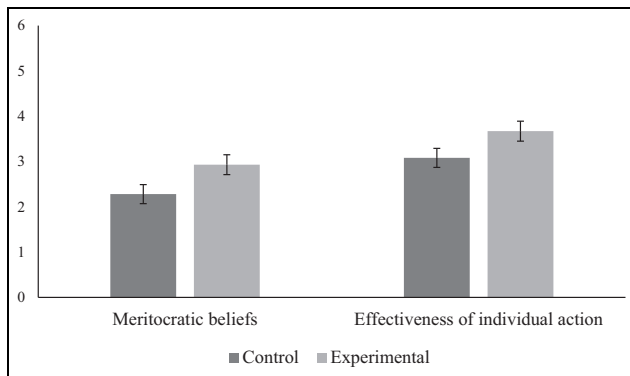
Mediational Analyses

To explore whether the effects of condition on the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change might be mediated by changes in meritocratic beliefs, we used the module jAMM in Jamovi using bias corrected confidence intervals (5,000

Table 3. Results of the ANOVAs on Meritocratic Beliefs, Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action in Study 1

Dependent variable	$F(1,119)$	p	D	95% CI	Control M (SD)	Experimental M (SD)
Meritocratic beliefs	4.37	.039	.38	[0.02, 0.74]	2.28 (1.56)	2.93 (1.83)
Effectiveness of individual action	4.99	.027	.41	[0.05, 0.77]	3.08 (1.54)	3.68 (1.39)
Effectiveness of collective action	0.07	.787	.05	[-0.41, 0.31]	4.67 (1.19)	4.61 (1.15)

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance; CI = confidence interval.

**Figure 1.** Exposure to Motivational Messages Increases the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 1

bootstraps) in all studies. As Figure 2 shows, the indirect effects of condition via meritocratic beliefs were significant for the perceived effectiveness of both individual and collective action.

Discussion

Exposure to motivational messages increased the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, fostered the perception that individual actions can promote social change and reduced the perceived effectiveness of collective action. Exposure to motivational messages influenced the perceived effectiveness of collective action only indirectly via meritocratic beliefs. Since these effects were not moderated by participant's consumption of self-help content, we did not include this variable in the next studies. Nonetheless, to reliably identify such moderation effects, a sample size four times larger than the current one would be necessary (see da Silva Frost & Ledgerwood, 2020).

Interestingly, those participants who consumed more frequently self-help content showed stronger meritocratic beliefs, more perceived effectiveness of individual action, and less perceived effectiveness of collective action than those whose consumption was low. These results suggest that the frequency of self-help consumption might cause changes in the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action and meritocratic beliefs, but it is also possible that people with certain ideologies are more attracted to self-help content.

It could be argued that the manipulation was unrealistic because this type of message is received through videos on social networks or through books in the case of the interested public. To increase the realism of the manipulation and replicate the results in another cultural setting and with a bigger sample, we conducted another experiment with Europeans.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate the results of Study 1 with a more realistic manipulation by exposing participants to a short video. As in Study 1, we tested whether exposure to motivational messages would reinforce meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increase the perceived effectiveness of individual action and reduce the perceived effectiveness of collective action as compared with the control condition.

Method

Participants. We calculated the sample size a priori considering the smaller significant effect of Study 1 ($f = .192$, $d = 0.384$). This analysis indicated that 216 participants would be necessary to detect such an effect with an alpha level of .05 and 80% power in a one-way ANOVA. We recruited 203 Spaniards (137 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.41$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.76$) by a snowball technique. Non-Spanish participants were diverted to a different study. Psychology undergraduates from a distance learning university invited four of their acquaintances (non-students) to participate on an online study about social change. As we just missed the minimum sample, we performed a sensitivity analysis, which indicated that (with an $n = 203$) an $f \geq .198$ ($d = 0.396$) would be enough to reject the null hypothesis.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the control ($n = 102$) or to the experimental condition ($n = 101$). Participants in the *control condition* explained how they had known the study. Participants in the *experimental condition* watched a short motivational video (https://youtu.be/VbxHS-D_s0M) including the same messages used in Study 1. Then, participants completed the questionnaire containing our dependent variables. All scales ranged from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*).

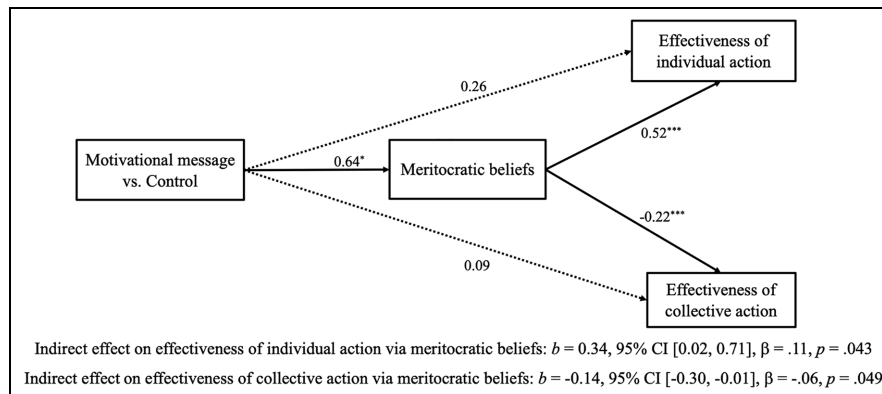


Figure 2. Indirect Effects of the Exposure to Motivational Messages on the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual and Collective Action Via Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 1

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study 2

Variable	M	SD	2	3
1. Meritocratic beliefs	2.87	1.20	.19**	-.18*
2. Effectiveness of individual action	3.55	1.22		.08
3. Effectiveness of collective action	4.34	1.16		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

We measured *meritocratic beliefs*, $\alpha = .85$, and the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change as in Study 1, $\alpha_s = .71$ and $.86$, respectively.

Results

Correlational Analyses. Table 4 contains the descriptive statistics and correlations between the dependent variables. Meritocratic beliefs correlated positively with effectiveness of individual action, and negatively with effectiveness of individual action. The two measures of effectiveness were not significantly associated.

Main Analyses. We conducted a series of ANOVAs to check whether the control and experimental conditions differed.³ The ANOVAs on meritocratic beliefs and perceived effectiveness of individual action revealed significant effects of

condition (see Table 5). Participants in the experimental condition had stronger meritocratic beliefs and perceived individual actions as more effective than those in the control condition (see Figure 3). However, the effect of condition on the perceived effectiveness of collective action was not significant.

Mediational Analyses

As in Study 1, we explored whether the effects of condition on the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change might be mediated by changes in meritocratic beliefs. As Figure 4 shows, the indirect effects of condition via meritocratic beliefs were significant (none of the confidence intervals contained zero) for the perceived effectiveness of both individual and collective action.

Discussion

Study 2 showed that exposure to motivational messages increased the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs which, in turn, increased the perceived effectiveness of individual action and decreased the perceived effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change. As in Study 1, the effect of exposure to these messages on the perceived effectiveness of collective action was only indirect via meritocratic beliefs. These results replicate those of Study 1 in a different cultural context, with a bigger sample, and with a more realistic manipulation. Nevertheless, it could be

Table 5. Results of the ANOVAs on Meritocratic Beliefs, Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action in Study 2

Dependent variable	$F(1,201)$	p	D	95% CI	Control M (SD)	Experimental M (SD)
Meritocratic beliefs	5.61	.019	.33	[0.05, 0.61]	2.68 (1.10)	3.07 (1.27)
Effectiveness of individual action	6.57	.011	.36	[0.08, 0.63]	3.34 (1.15)	3.77 (1.26)
Effectiveness of collective action	0.52	.470	.10	[-0.18, 0.37]	4.29 (1.15)	4.40 (1.73)

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance; CI = confidence interval.

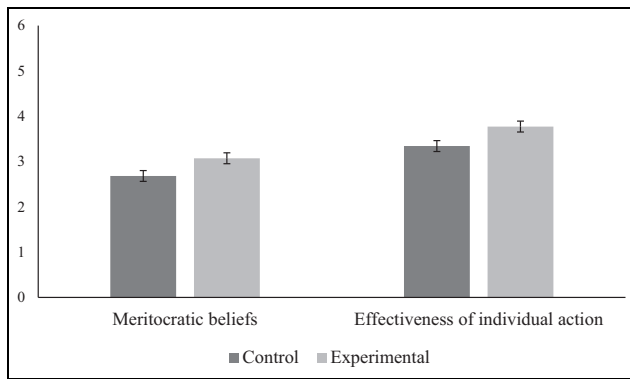


Figure 3. Exposure to Motivational Messages Increases the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 2

argued that there is a mismatch between the control condition and the experimental condition in terms of the manipulation format (written task vs. video), potentially influencing the results. In addition, it remains uncertain whether exposure to motivational messages also influences behavioral intentions. In response to these limitations, we conducted and pre-registered a third experiment.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate the results of Studies 1 and 2 with a bigger sample and matching the formats of the two conditions by exposing participants of the control and experimental conditions to a short video. The pre-registration of the study is available at: <https://osf.io/gn8f5/>. We tested whether exposure to motivational messages (vs. neutral messages) would reinforce meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increase the perceived effectiveness of individual action and reduce the perceived effectiveness of collective action. As perceived effectiveness is a robust

antecedent of collective action cross-culturally (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021), we also tested in an exploratory manner, whether exposure to motivational messages (vs. neutral messages) would undermine collective action intentions by reinforcing meritocratic beliefs and reducing the perceived effectiveness of collective action sequentially.

Method

Participants. We determined the sample size a priori considering the smallest effect obtained in the previous experiments, $f = .151$. Considering an alpha level of .05 and 80% power, the minimum sample size required to detect such an effect in a one-way ANOVA would be 348. We recruited 360⁴ participants (162 women, $M_{age} = 36.56$, $SD_{age} = 13.99$) that had previously participated in different, non-related studies at the request of psychology students and who desired to collaborate in future research. They received an email inviting them to participate on voluntary basis in an online questionnaire on social change. Twenty-one of them were excluded for not meeting the pre-registered inclusion criteria: three did not have Spanish nationality, one had problems loading the video and 17 took more than 10,000 s to complete the survey. The final sample consisted of 339 participants (148 women, $M_{age} = 36.55$, $SD_{age} = 14.06$).

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the control ($n = 174$) or to the experimental condition ($n = 165$). They watched a short video with identical characteristics (images, music, length, etc.) that only differed in terms of the content of the 10 sentences that were displayed: motivational in the experimental condition (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Jd3GYsxDIU>) or focused on household appliances in the control condition (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vuBt4A13k>). Then, participants completed the dependent variables. All scales

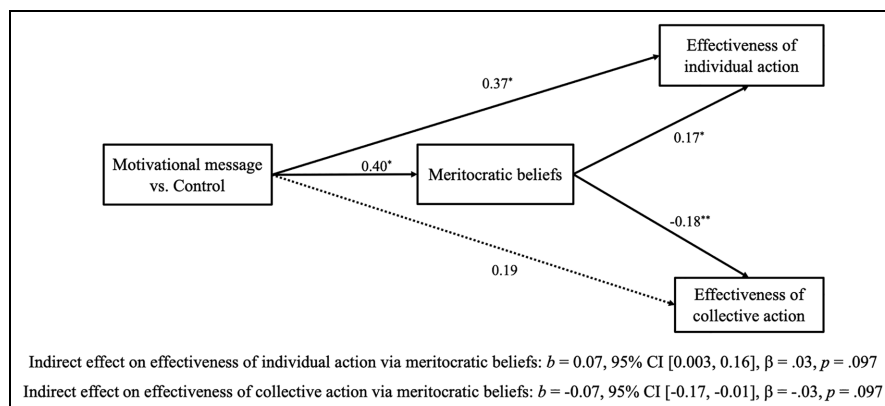


Figure 4. Indirect Effects of the Exposure to Motivational Messages on the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual and Collective Action Via Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 2

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study 3

Variable	M	SD	2	3	4	5	6
1. Meritocratic beliefs	2.92	1.25	.42***	-.22***	-.22***	.13*	.48***
2. Effectiveness of individual action	3.43	1.25	—	-.01	.03	.07	.13*
3. Effectiveness of collective action	4.45	1.14	—	—	.43***	-.22***	-.36***
4. Collective action intentions	4.13	1.29	—	—	—	-.16*	-.34***
5. Socioeconomic status	5.73	1.41	—	—	—	—	.16*
6. Ideological orientation	3.46	1.26	—	—	—	—	—

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Results of the ANOVAs on Meritocratic Beliefs, Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action, Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action and Collective Action Intentions in Study 3

Dependent variable	$F(1,337)$	p	d	95% CI	Control M (SD)	Experimental M (SD)
Meritocratic beliefs	7.83	.005	.31	[0.09, 0.52]	2.73 (1.22)	3.11 (1.26)
Effectiveness of individual action	10.27	.001	.35	[0.14, 0.57]	3.23 (1.16)	3.63 (1.10)
Effectiveness of collective action	0.07	.795	.04	[-0.18, 0.25]	4.43 (1.10)	4.47 (1.18)
Collective action intentions	0.01	.946	.01	[-0.21, 0.22]	4.13 (1.29)	4.14 (1.29)

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance; CI = confidence interval.

ranged from 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified.

We measured *meritocratic beliefs*, $\alpha = .86$, and the *perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action* as in Studies 1 and 2, $\alpha_s = .71$ and $.86$, respectively. Then, participants reported the social/political cause that was most important to them. To assess *collective action intentions*, they indicated their willingness to participate in seven collective actions (e.g., demonstrating, going on strike) to promote said cause, adapted from the work of Vázquez et al. (2021), $\alpha = .88$. The scale ranged from 0 (*Not willing at all*) to 6 (*Completely willing*). At this point, participants completed an exploratory measure of individualistic decision-making that did not yield significant results and is not reported for the sake of brevity (see pre-registration).

Finally, participants indicated their *subjective socioeconomic status* using the MacArthur scale (Adler et al., 2000) ranging from 0 (the lowest status) to 10 (the highest status). We also assessed participants' ideological orientation with two items focusing either on economic issues (e.g., taxes) or social issues (e.g., abortion) and ranging from 1 (*extreme left*) to 7 (*extreme right*). As the two items were substantially correlated, $r(337) = .74$, $p < .001$, we averaged them to create a single indicator.

Results

Correlational Analyses. Table 6 contains the descriptive statistics and correlations between the dependent variables, socioeconomic status, and ideological orientation. Perceived effectiveness of individual action only correlated significantly (and positively) with meritocratic beliefs and

very weakly with ideological orientation. Perceived effectiveness of collective action was positively associated with collective action intentions and negatively with meritocratic beliefs, socioeconomic status, and ideological orientation.

Main Analyses. We conducted a series of ANOVAs to check whether the control and experimental conditions differed.⁵ The ANOVAs on meritocratic beliefs and perceived effectiveness of individual action revealed significant effects of condition (see Table 7). Participants in the experimental condition had stronger meritocratic beliefs and perceived individual actions as more effective than those in the control condition (see Figure 5). However, the effects of condition on the perceived effectiveness of collective action and on collective action intentions were not significant.

Mediational Analyses

As in Studies 1 and 2, we tested whether the effects of condition on the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action in promoting social change might be mediated by changes in meritocratic beliefs. As Figure 6 shows, the indirect effects of condition via meritocratic beliefs were significant for the perceived effectiveness of both individual and collective action.

We also explored whether the manipulation could have an indirect effect on collective action intentions via meritocratic beliefs and perceived effectiveness of collective action sequentially (see Figure 7). The sequential indirect effect via meritocratic beliefs and perceived effectiveness of collective

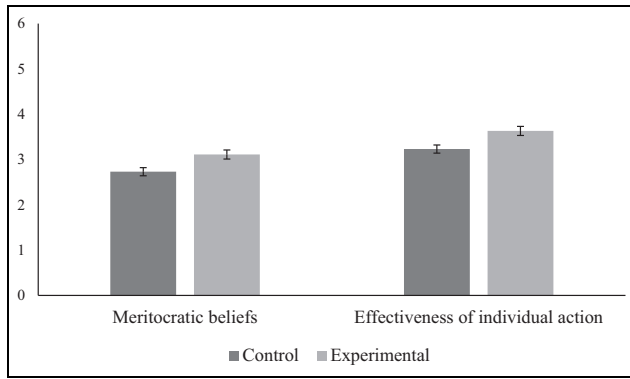


Figure 5. Exposure to Motivational Messages Increases the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual Action and Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 3

action was significant, as well as the indirect effect via meritocratic beliefs alone. However, the indirect effect via perceived effectiveness alone was not significant.

Discussion

Study 3 showed that exposure to motivational messages increased the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs which, in turn, increased the perceived effectiveness of individual action and decreased the perceived effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change. This decrease in the perceived effectiveness of collective action through meritocratic beliefs appeared to reduce participants’ intentions to engage in collective action on behalf of the cause they considered most important. The effects of motivational messages on the perceived effectiveness of collective action and collective action intentions were only indirect. These results replicate those of Studies 1

and 2 and shed light on the impact of motivational messages on behavioral intentions.

General Discussion

In the last two decades, the self-help industry has experienced an extraordinary growth, but it has also been criticized based on its ideological foundations and social impact (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Davies, 2015). The present research offers experimental support to some of the critical reflections on the social consequences of the self-help industry, specifically, in relation to meritocratic beliefs and collective action.

Three experiments revealed that a brief exposure to motivational messages increased the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, the perception that individual action is effective to stimulate social change as compared with a control condition. Motivational messages did not influence the perceived effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change directly, but they did reduce it indirectly by increasing meritocratic beliefs. Although the mediational evidence is correlational, the indirect effects were consistent in two different countries and with two different methodologies—video versus writing messages. Study 1 also suggested that the exposure to motivational messages was not moderated by participants’ self-reported consumption of self-help, although this study was underpowered to reliably detect moderation effects. Importantly, Study 3 also suggested that motivational messages might undermine collective action intentions for an important cause by reinforcing meritocratic beliefs and in turn reducing the perceived effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change. While one could argue that motivational messages could enhance optimism about the effectiveness of any type of action, our findings dismiss this alternative explanation. Motivational messages only

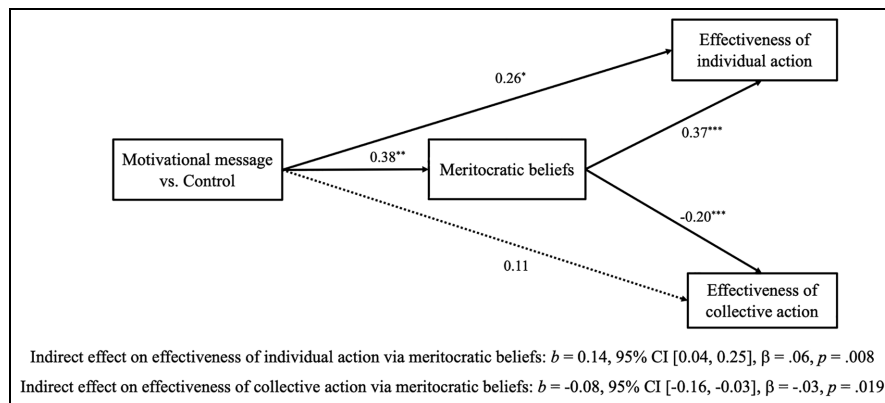


Figure 6. Indirect Effects of the Exposure to Motivational Messages on the Perceived Effectiveness of Individual and Collective Action Via Meritocratic Beliefs in Study 3

Note. CI = confidence interval.

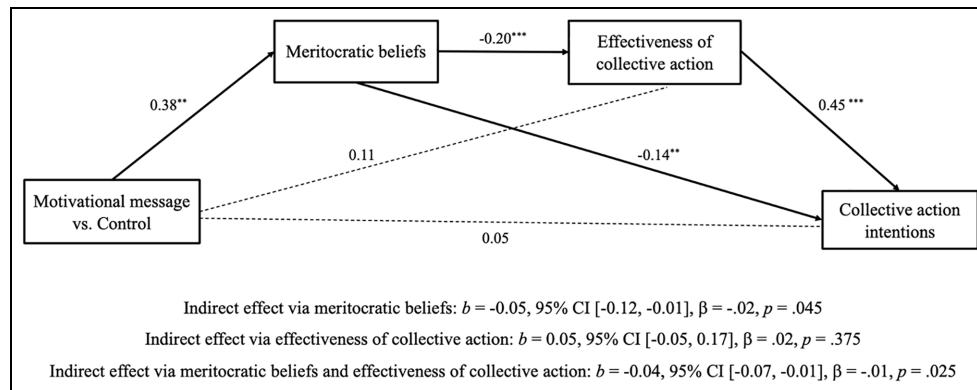


Figure 7. Indirect Effects of the Exposure to Motivational Messages on Collective Action Intentions Via Meritocratic Beliefs and Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action

Note. CI = confidence interval.

increased the perceived effectiveness of individual actions but not collective ones.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

These findings provide empirical support to the criticism that the self-help industry promotes individualism and meritocratic beliefs (Binkley, 2011, 2014; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), and raise questions about its impact on social change toward equality. If a mere 1-minute exposure to motivational quotes can cause changes in meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, the perceived effectiveness of individual and collection and on collective action intentions, the daily emission of self-help messages in the media might have a remarkable effect on the way we relate to others and explain the world. Meritocratic beliefs may help justify power and income inequalities and the social exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Bettache et al., 2020; McCoy & Major, 2007) and living in an unequal society can promote tolerance for inequality (Trump, 2018). The discourse of individualism and meritocracy that the self-help industry endorses might be instrumental in legitimizing neoliberal policies and perpetuating structures of domination (Adams et al., 2019; Binkley, 2011, 2014; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Davies, 2015).

An overconfidence in the effectiveness of individual over collective action can deactivate the emergence of social movements aimed at challenging the status quo. The self-help messages can fuel some of the concerns that discourage participation in collective action, like the fear of losing autonomy and personal agency (Stuart et al., 2018). The associations between the frequency of self-help consumption and the perceived effectiveness of individual and collective action that we detected in Study 1 might reflect the cumulative effects of frequent exposure to self-help content on worldviews. Longitudinal studies would help to disentangle the effects between self-help consumption and ideological beliefs and examine potential reciprocity.

Our findings align with prior evidence suggesting that ideologies grounded in individualism can give rise to

adverse societal outcomes. Notably, recent research highlights the ramifications of the “follow-your-passions” ideology, which prompts individuals to base their academic and occupational decisions on their passions and positive emotions. This ideology contributes more significantly to gender inequality than alternative ideologies, such as those rooted in resources (Siy et al., 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

The current research presents some limitations. First, Spain and Ecuador have medium and low levels of individualism, respectively (Hofstede Insights, 2022). To have a more complete understanding of the effects of motivational messages, it would be convenient to include samples from highly individualistic countries, rare in Spanish-speaking countries. Looking at the bright side, our samples come from countries that have been inadequately represented in psychological research, where English-speaking and/or Western countries tend to dominate participant pools (Thalmayer et al., 2021). Our studies actively contribute to the ongoing endeavor to enhance the representativeness of psychological science, aiming to better encompass the diverse facets of the human experience (Rad et al., 2018).

We did not include behavioral measures (only behavioral intentions in Study 3). Moral dilemmas, such as the dictator game (see Van Lange et al., 2014), could reveal if exposure to motivational messages encourages competition. The influence of possible moderating factors should also be considered. For instance, those individuals who experience more status anxiety (De Botton, 2004) or endorse stronger material values (Richins, 2004) might be more receptive to self-help messages.

Conclusion

Consistent with the criticism that the self-help industry promotes individualism, in three experiments we showed

that a brief exposure to motivational messages strengthened meritocratic beliefs and, in turn, increased the perceived effectiveness of individual action in promoting social change toward equality and reduced the perceived effectiveness of collective action and subsequently collective action intentions. The exaggerated view of the ability of individuals to shape their environment and the underestimation of the structural factors that influence one's living conditions could lead to the blaming of people for their adverse circumstances and to the legitimization of inequalities. Despite the good intentions of improving people's well-being, some postulates that have permeated popular culture through the self-help industry could have disastrous consequences for social cohesion and justice.

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Ethics and Consent Statements

The data were collected in a manner consistent with APA ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects. All participants provided informed consent prior to enrollment in the study. Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the corresponding author's university (Ref. 22-PSI2021).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We also conducted regression analyses to test whether consumption of self-help content moderated the effect of condition on the dependent variables. We did not obtain evidence for moderation effects, $ps > .302$ (see Supplemental Materials).
2. The results were virtually similar even after controlling for the effects of gender and age.
3. The results were virtually similar even after controlling for the effects of gender and age.

4. We set 370 participants in pre-registration, but we could not reach that number.
5. The results were virtually similar even after controlling for the effects of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ideological orientation.

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