

## **A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government**

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*In an attempt to explain the stability of hierarchy, we focus on the perspective of the powerless and how a subjective sense of dependence leads them to imbue the system and its authorities with legitimacy. In Study 1, we found in a nationally representative sample of U.S. employees that financial dependence on one's job was positively associated with the perceived legitimacy of one's supervisor. In Study 2, we observed that a general sense of powerlessness was positively correlated with the perceived legitimacy of the economic system. In Studies 3 and 4, priming experimental participants with feelings of powerlessness increased their justification of the social system, even when they were presented with system-challenging explanations for race, class, and gender disparities. In Study 5, we demonstrated that the experience of powerlessness increased legitimation of governmental authorities (relative to baseline conditions). The processes we identify are likely to perpetuate inequality insofar as the powerless justify rather than strive to change the hierarchical structures that disadvantage them.*

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**KEY WORDS:** power, inequality, legitimacy, system justification, hierarchy, authority

What is there in certain situations of social deprivation that prevents issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, or interests from being recognized?

—John Gaventa (1980, *Power and Powerlessness*, p. 3)

It is routinely assumed that the legitimation of authority and hierarchy is an activity that is engaged in more or less exclusively by the powerful. Past approaches have emphasized the role of elites' superior resources, propaganda, and access to state power in explaining why systems of inequality emerge and are endured by the powerless (e.g., Domhoff, 1979; Jackman, 1994; Mills, 1956). Our approach complements previous work on power and legitimacy in society by focusing on the perceptions of the powerless as well as the powerful. In addition to "top down" factors such as coercion and manipulation on the part of elites emphasized in theory and research in sociology and political science, we identify a social psychological process of legitimation from the "bottom up." In particular, we focus on system justification, which may be defined as the motivation to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Our approach is distinctive in suggesting that hierarchies possess a legitimacy advantage simply by virtue of the fact that they produce power differentials, that is, asymmetries in outcome dependence that exert a wide range of subjective and objective effects (see also Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

In focusing on system justification motivation as a contributor to the perceived legitimacy of hierarchy, we build upon and extend previous studies that have documented the phenomenon of enhanced system justification among members of disadvantaged groups, but without precisely identifying the causal mechanisms responsible for these effects (see Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). In the current research program, we propose that the subjective experience of powerlessness, which often accompanies the objective state of disadvantage, fosters system justification in that it motivates individuals to perceive the system and its representatives as relatively legitimate. A well-known historical case study of coal miners in the Appalachian Valley, for instance, yielded the conclusion that "A sense of powerlessness was instilled which could lead to an introjection of the values of the controller or a loyalty to the powerholders" (Gaventa, 1980, p. 93). The theoretical and practical implication is that hierarchies, once formed, may become self-reinforcing through bottom-up processes of ideological justification, thereby rendering efforts to change unequal systems more difficult.

### *Power, Legitimacy, and the Stability of Hierarchy*

Power is typically defined as asymmetric control over valued resources in the context of social relations (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007). Its presence guarantees greater access to rewards and less interference from others in pursuing those rewards (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). Power holders process information, approach goals, and make decisions in ways that generally help them to maintain their position in the hierarchy by sustaining or increasing their degree of control over resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Kipnis, 1976). Because they are in a position to control the flow of information, power holders are also better able to manage the impressions others have of them. Thus, to some extent, they can establish their own legitimacy. In addition, the possession of power is associated with an increased reliance on stereotypes and the derogation of subordinates (e.g., Fiske, 1993), both of which help to keep the powerless in their place and to reinforce the hierarchical status quo.

The powerless, by definition, possess limited means to improve their situation and find themselves highly dependent on others to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Emerson, 1962; Molm & Cook, 1995). Because of their state of dependence, the powerless frequently fail to speak up on

their own behalf. Formal and informal evidence exists to suggest that those who are worst off in society are often surprisingly uninterested in challenging the status quo (e.g., Gaventa, 1980; Henry & Saul, 2006; Hochschild, 1981; Jost et al., 2003; Lane, 1962; Memmi, 1965; Moore, 1978). For instance, using his home state of Kansas as an example, Frank (2004) recounted the glaring absence of protest on the part of poor citizens and wondered why so many vote against their economic interests.

In an attempt to explain the stability of hierarchy, we focus on the perspective of the powerless and propose that it is precisely their subjective experience of dependence that explains why they sometimes legitimize the inequality that affects them. This is broadly consistent with a hypothesis derived from system justification theory: insofar as the disadvantaged have the greatest psychological need to reduce ideological dissonance, they should also be the most likely to support, bolster, and justify existing social arrangements, at least when individual and collective self-interest is relatively low in salience (Jost et al., 2003). While enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged is one of the most distinctive predictions of system justification theory (Jost, 2011), the social psychological process linking disadvantage and justification has not been clearly identified or directly tested. This theoretical account has been challenged forcefully by Brandt (2013), who analyzed public opinion data and concluded that those who are objectively lower in socioeconomic status are neither more nor less likely than other citizens to express trust in societal institutions (averaging across numerous different institutions and samples from diverse countries).

#### *Powerlessness and the Motivation to Justify the System*

According to system justification theory, individuals are *motivated* to defend and rationalize the societal status quo (Jost et al., 2010; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). This motivation is thought to stem from basic epistemic, existential, and relational needs, including needs to reduce uncertainty, manage threat, and uphold a sense of socially shared reality (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). Those in society with limited power also have limited control over their material and social circumstances. As a result, power inequalities may lead their lives to be less predictable, thereby intensifying the motivation to justify the system (Jost et al., 2010; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay et al., 2009). System justification may help defend against the unpredictability associated with powerlessness as well as the disconcerting belief that a system that wields considerable control over one's welfare is illegitimate or unfair (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). Thus, to the extent that people feel highly dependent on or powerless within a given social system, they should be strongly motivated to defend and justify it (van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011).

This system justification argument is counterintuitive because it is clearly not in the interest of the powerless to endorse a system in which they are powerless. Theories of material and symbolic self-interest suggest that the experience of relative disadvantage should lead to resentment and reactance (e.g., Bobo, 1988; Gurr, 1971; Reicher, 2004). The powerful, by contrast, should be highly satisfied with the current state of affairs and strongly motivated to maintain the system (e.g., Jackman, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, Jost and colleagues (2003) observed in five studies that individuals who occupy disadvantaged positions in economic and social hierarchies justified the status quo to a surprising extent and legitimized the very system in which they were disadvantaged (see also Henry & Saul, 2006). Unfortunately, the nonexperimental nature of all previous studies in this area—including the elaborate critique by Brandt (2013), which measured objective rather than subjective status and (like Jost et al., 2003) relied on indirect proxies to measure system justification—make it impossible to draw confident conclusions about the causal relationship between a subjective sense of powerlessness and legitimation of the status quo. Another shortcoming of previous work in this area is that status and power have often been

confounded, so it is not clear which aspect of disadvantage (if any) is linked to system justification motivation.

Although status and power are highly correlated and often taken to indicate the same things, they are conceptually distinct (e.g., Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Whereas status refers to an individual's standing in terms of respect and prestige, power refers to an individual's relative control over resources. Here we argue that powerlessness, because it involves a lack of control and a feeling of dependence on others for access to valued resources, is likely to foster support for the status quo as part of an "adaptive" process of coping and ideological dissonance reduction. Given that previous studies linking low status to system-justifying outcomes focused on bases of disadvantage that were associated with low respect and limited control over resources (e.g., poor people and racial minorities), it is possible that those effects were driven, at least in part, by subjective feelings of powerlessness (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost et al., 2003).

### *Powerlessness Shapes the Perceived Legitimacy of Authority*

People may justify the current (unequal) system by endorsing stratification as an appropriate method of social organization and rationalizing each individual's or group's position in the hierarchy, including their own. The powerless may, therefore, not only endorse systems that are inherently unequal but may also legitimize the standing of those occupying positions of higher power (Haines & Jost, 2000; van der Toorn et al., 2011). The legitimation of authority figures manifests itself in terms of subordinates voluntarily deferring to and obeying the decisions and rules made by authority figures (e.g., French & Raven, 1959; Jost & Major, 2001; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Tyler, 2006).

## **Overview of Present Research**

In this article, we present data from two cross-sectional surveys and three experiments to examine the effects of powerlessness on the legitimation of authority and hierarchy. Study 1 was conducted to examine whether powerlessness would be related to the legitimation of authority figures in the workplace and, if so, whether the influence of powerlessness could be distinguished from previously identified antecedents of perceived legitimacy. We hypothesized that dependence on one's supervisor for financial resources would be associated with increased perceived legitimacy of the authority, even after adjusting for the favorability of the outcomes received and the perceived fairness of the procedures enacted by the supervisor. In Studies 2 and 3, we investigated the relationship between a sense of powerlessness and system legitimation. Our hypothesis in these studies was that participants who felt a greater sense of powerlessness (Study 2) or who were assigned to a condition of low (versus high) power (Study 3) would be more likely to justify the social system. In Study 4, we examined whether the effect of powerlessness on system justification would obtain even in the context of blatant inequality, when the possibility of discrimination as an explanation was made salient. We hypothesized that participants who were relatively low (versus high) in power would be more likely to legitimize the unequal distribution of wealth in society, the gender wage gap, and racial disparities in incarceration rates. In Study 5, we focused even more specifically on the political domain and tested whether low power within the political system would increase the perceived legitimacy of that system, compared to high power and control conditions.

### **Study 1: Office Politics—The Effect of Financial Dependence on Legitimation of Authority**

In our first study, we investigated whether powerlessness would predict system justification processes in the workplace. We analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of U.S.

employees who answered a series of questions about their own work-related attitudes and behaviors and explored the role of powerlessness in shaping employees' judgments of the legitimacy of managerial authorities. Specifically, we investigated the effect of outcome dependence on the perceived legitimacy of employees' direct supervisors. We have suggested that occupying a position of relative powerlessness can foster the motivation to justify the overarching social system. When dealing with hierarchical relationships between a supervisor and subordinate, however, it is reasonable to assume that legitimation is affected by the quality of one's treatment by the authority or the fairness and valence of the outcomes one received. That is, when people find the outcomes they have obtained to be favorable<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Rogowski, 1974) and evaluate the procedures by which leaders exercise their authority as fair (e.g., Tyler, 2003, 2006), they tend to view those leaders as having greater legitimacy and are subsequently more willing to comply with their directives. For these reasons, we adjusted statistically for the favorability of the outcomes received and the quality of treatment in our analyses. Powerlessness reflected the degree to which employees were dependent upon the financial rewards obtained from their jobs, and we measured the legitimation of a power differential that was personally relevant for the participant. That is, perceived legitimacy was measured in terms of the perceived obligation to defer to workplace rules and policies set by one's supervisor. The focus of this study, in other words, was office politics.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were drawn from a panel study of U.S. employees conducted by Knowledge Networks. Participants were screened to ensure that they worked at least 20 hours a week and had a primary supervisor. Our final sample included 1,530 participants who had had the same supervisor for at least a year (49.1% female; mean age = 44.08,  $SD = 11.29$ ; 67.1% earned over \$35,000 a year; and 39.2% completed a college degree or higher). In terms of race/ethnicity, 84.4% identified themselves as White, 10.1% as Black or African American, 3% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, .1% "Other," and .5% refused.

### *Procedure*

Participants answered structured questions in their homes via WebTV in exchange for a cash payment. Data presented in this study were collected as part of a larger study of cooperation in groups (see Tyler & Blader, 2008).

### *Measures*

*Outcome Dependence.* Three items assessed participants' perceptions of their financial dependence on the job: (1) "I depend heavily on the money I make where I work"; (2) "If I lost even one week's pay, I would have a difficult time making ends meet"; and (3) "I really need every dollar I make" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ). Responses were provided on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). As expected, lower income was associated (albeit modestly) with a stronger sense of outcome dependence,  $r(1525) = -.25, p < .001$ . Black respondents reported feeling slightly more dependent on their supervisor in comparison with White respondents,  $t(1437) = -1.68, p = .09$ .

<sup>1</sup> Outcome fairness and outcome valence are clearly distinguishable, but they are conceptually and empirically related (Brockner, 2010). We use the term "outcome favorability" to capture both (see also van der Toorn et al., 2011).

*Procedural Fairness.* Five items assessed participants' views about the fairness of their supervisor's treatment and of the procedures she or he used to make decisions. Responses were given on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). Each item began with the same stem: "Would you agree or disagree that your supervisor . . ." The specific items ended as follows: "Treats you with dignity"; "Is polite and respectful to you"; "Has a desire to do what is best for employees like yourself"; "Meets your views regarding appropriate ethical standards"; and "Provides you opportunities to appeal decisions that you disagree with" (Cronbach's alpha = .92).

*Outcome Favorability.* Three items assessed outcome fairness and favorability: "I am fairly paid at work" (1 = *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*); "How favorable is your pay?" (1 = *very unfavorable*, 5 = *very favorable*); and "How favorable are the benefits that you receive?" (1 = *very unfavorable*, 5 = *very favorable*; Cronbach's alpha = .76).

*Perceived Legitimacy.* Three items assessed employees' views concerning the legitimacy of their supervisors by measuring the perceived obligation to defer to them (cf. Tyler, 2006). Responses were made on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). The items were: "I feel I should accept the decisions made by my supervisor, even when I think they are wrong"; "I think that it hurts my work group when I disagree with my supervisor"; and "I feel that it is wrong to ignore my supervisor's instructions, even when I can get away with it" (Cronbach's alpha = .67).<sup>2</sup>

*Demographics.* Education was measured by asking participants to indicate the highest level of education they had obtained on an ordinal scale ranging from 1 (*less than High School*) to 9 (*Doctorate degree*). Participants reported their incomes as 1 (*below \$35,000*) or 2 (*\$35,000 or more*).

## Results and Discussion

In this study, we investigated whether employees who feel more financially dependent on their job perceive their supervisor as more legitimate. We conducted multiple regression analyses, with all variables entered simultaneously, including the demographic variables of sex, age, income, and education. We also adjusted for main and interactive effects of procedural fairness and outcome favorability judgments, because this allowed us to investigate our general hypothesis that outcome dependence is significantly related to legitimacy appraisals, above and beyond the effects of perceptions of procedural fairness and outcome favorability.

We included an interaction term for outcome dependence and outcome favorability, because it is conceivable that outcome dependence would have an effect on legitimacy only when outcome favorability is high. If so, our theoretical argument would be weakened, because we are suggesting that the effect of outcome dependence on perceived legitimacy is due to system justification rather than self-interest motivation. Other interaction effects are also possible. Procedural fairness and outcome favorability have been shown to interact in predicting support for decisions, decision makers, and institutions in two different ways: high (vs. low) procedural fairness has been found to both increase and decrease the positive effect of outcome favorability on decision support (Brockner, 2010). In this study, we considered the possibility that either of these patterns might emerge with respect to the perceived legitimacy of authority figures. Finally, we included an interaction term for outcome dependence by procedural fairness; this enabled us to ensure that the effect of dependence on perceived legitimacy of authority was not contingent on any of our other focal variables. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations are shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis.

<sup>2</sup> The first item was intended to measure perceptions of the supervisor as legitimate even when she or he makes debatable decisions, but it is possible that it assessed inaction caused by fear of being reprimanded. Therefore, we replicated the analysis using only the mean of the second and third items as the dependent variable. Results were nearly identical to those reported in the text.

**Table 1.** Summary of Variable Descriptives and Intercorrelations—Study 1

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Outcome dependence	3.68	1.10	—						
2. Procedural fairness	3.60	0.97	-.13**	—					
3. Outcome favorability	3.13	0.95	-.17***	.34***	—				
4. Legitimacy	3.64	0.84	.07*	.22***	.10*	—			
5. Age	44.08	11.29	-.11**	.02	.03	.09*	—		
6. Sex	0.51	0.50	-.09*	-.03	.02	-.07 $\wedge$	-.11**	—	
7. Income	0.67	0.47	-.28***	.11**	.22***	.04	.13**	.06	—
8. Education	4.36	1.64	-.11**	.05	.07 $\wedge$	-.01	-.03	-.06 $\wedge$	.19***

$\wedge p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; two-tailed tests.

**Table 2.** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Legitimacy—Study 1

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Outcome dependence (A)	.08	.03	.11	2.98**
Procedural fairness (B)	.18	.03	.21	5.54***
Outcome favorability (C)	.02	.04	.03	0.66
A $\times$ B	.01	.03	.02	0.51
A $\times$ C	-.02	.03	-.03	-0.76
B $\times$ C	.10	.03	.12	3.16**
Age	.01	.00	.08	2.18*
Sex	-.03	.03	-.04	-1.05
Income	.04	.03	.04	1.09
Education	-.02	.02	-.03	-0.83

*Note.* Entries represent standardized coefficients. Sex was dummy coded with female as the reference group; Income was dummy coded as 0 (below \$35,000) and 1 (above \$35,000). All other variables were centered at their means.  $\wedge p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; two-tailed tests.

*Perceived Legitimacy.* Results revealed that, as hypothesized, outcome dependence was significantly associated with perceptions of supervisor legitimacy,  $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $t(718) = 2.98$ ,  $p < .01$ , even after adjusting for procedural fairness, outcome favorability, and the demographic variables. Perceived procedural fairness was significantly related to legitimacy perceptions as well,  $b = .18$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(718) = 5.54$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas judgments of outcome favorability were not,  $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $\beta = .03$ ,  $t(718) = .66$ ,  $p = .75$ .

The analysis also yielded a significant interaction between procedural fairness and outcome favorability,  $b = .10$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $t(718) = 3.16$ ,  $p < .01$ , suggesting that the positive association between procedural fairness and perceived legitimacy was greater when outcome favorability was high (vs. low), which differs from the patterns that are typically obtained (see Brockner, 2010). It is conceivable that for employees who interact with their supervisor on a daily basis both procedural fairness and outcome favorability communicate information about their standing in the group and therefore serve to reinforce one another. Importantly, the interaction terms involving outcome dependence did not reach significance,  $t$ 's  $< 1$ . The current findings suggest that the effect of powerlessness on the legitimization of inequality occurs simply as a function of the power difference itself, insofar as legitimization occurred *regardless* of whether participants felt fairly treated or perceived the outcomes they received as highly favorable.

In this first study, we observed that financial dependence within an employment context predicts legitimization of one's supervisor, providing initial evidence that powerlessness is associated with

the legitimation of authority. However, financial dependence on the job is a very specific type of dependence, which may not generalize to other domains, including more explicitly political domains. Therefore, in Studies 2 and 3 we examined the effects of a more general sense of powerlessness on beliefs about the legitimacy of the economic system and society as a whole.

### **Study 2: The Relationship between “Sense of Power” and Economic System Justification**

We administered an online survey to 535 undergraduate students at the University of California at Berkeley (67.5% female; mean age = 19.21,  $SD = 2.15$ ). Three-quarters (78.4%) were born in the United States. To measure socioeconomic status, participants were asked: “Where would you place your family on the following spectrum for social class?” Fifteen and one-tenth of 1% of respondents indicated that they came from “lower class” backgrounds, 12.3% from “lower middle class,” 32.9% from “middle class,” 37.6% from “upper middle class,” and 2.1% from “upper class” backgrounds.

Participants completed the Generalized Sense of Power Scale (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012; Cronbach’s alpha = .84), which measures how much power respondents believe that they have in their relationships with others. Lower socioeconomic status was indeed associated with a decreased sense of power, although the effect size was fairly modest,  $r(533) = .16$ ,  $p < .001$ . Next, participants filled out the Economic System Justification Scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Cronbach’s alpha = .77) which assesses the tendency to legitimize economic inequality in the United States. Sample items include: “Most people who don’t get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame” and “Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people’s achievements.” Multiple regression analyses were conducted with economic system justification as the dependent variable, sense of power as the independent variable, and participant sex and self-reported socioeconomic status (ranging from “working class” to “upper class”) as adjustment variables. As hypothesized, results revealed a significant, negative relationship between the subjective sense of power and system justification,  $b = -.10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t(531) = -2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ . The more participants reported feeling powerless, the more they believed that economic inequality was fair and legitimate.

We recognize that this study is limited in terms of what can be concluded, but these data are suggestive of the notion that feelings of psychological dependence in general are associated with increased system justification motivation. In the research that follows, we offer a more thorough test of our hypothesis and present additional evidence that powerlessness leads to the legitimation of an unequal status quo.

### **Study 3: The Effect of a Sense of Powerlessness on General System Justification**

Our second study demonstrated that a subjective sense of powerlessness in general, as assessed in terms of individual differences, was associated with the tendency to justify the economic system. In Study 3, we experimentally manipulated individuals’ sense of power to investigate the causal relationship between subjective powerlessness and system justification (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Participants were either asked to recall a time in which they had power over someone else or a time in which someone else had power over them. Priming power—or the lack thereof—is thought to activate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations of power differences, which are presumably stored in memory (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). In other words, reminding people of a time when they were low in power actually makes them think, feel, and act like a powerless person. In prior research, this power prime produced no effects on mood (e.g., Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012), thereby casting doubt on negative mood as an alternative explanation for the effect of powerlessness on system justification.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and forty undergraduate students enrolled in a sociology course at the University of California at Berkeley participated online for extra course credit (63.6% female; mean age = 21.42,  $SD = 3.73$ ). In terms of race/ethnicity, 27.1% identified themselves as European American, 2.1% as African American, 24.3% as Asian-American, 15.7% as Latino, and 30.7% as “Other” or missing.

### *Procedure*

Participants were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-power condition. Specifically, they were asked to write an essay about an actual event in their lives that made them feel high or low in power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Afterward, participants completed the general (or diffuse) System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) which assesses the perceived legitimacy of society as a whole rather than specific aspects or dimensions (e.g., the economic system, as in Study 2).

### *Materials*

*Power Manipulation.* Participants who were assigned to the high-power condition were given a sheet of paper and the following instructions: “Please recall a particular incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, we mean a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Please describe this situation in which you had power—what happened, how you felt, etc.” In response to this prompt, participants typically mentioned instances in which they had occupied leadership positions in Greek societies, committees, or summer camps; held mentoring, tutoring, and teaching roles; or possessed decision-making power in interview situations. Participants assigned to the low-power condition were instructed to recall an incident in which someone else had power over them and either had control over their ability to get something they wanted or was in a position to evaluate them. Common responses focused on participants’ feelings of powerlessness in interviews for jobs or apartments, dependence on managers, professors, or coaches, or experiences with pledging Greek societies.

*System Justification Scale.* The System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) gauges participants’ perceptions of the existing social system as legitimate and fair. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of eight items, on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Example items are: “In general, I find society to be fair” and “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.” The internal reliability for this study was relatively high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Power Manipulation Check.* To check for the effectiveness of the power manipulation, three independent coders who were blind to the study’s hypotheses rated the power and dependence content of the essays by answering the following questions on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “a great deal”: “In your opinion, how much power does the participant report?” (interrater reliability = .84), and “In your opinion, how dependent on another person does the participant seem?” (interrater reliability = .90). Coders’ ratings of the two items correlated negatively and significantly with each other,  $r(135) = -.90, p < .001$ , suggesting that powerlessness and dependence are highly related constructs. As expected, participants who were asked to write about an occasion on which they had power over someone were judged as having more power ( $M = 4.95, SD = .76$ ).

than were participants asked to write about an occasion on which someone else had power over them ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .76$ ),  $t(135) = 17.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . Coders also perceived more dependence in the low-power condition ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) than in the high-power condition ( $M = 1.75$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $t(135) = -20.76$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Results and Discussion

To test our hypothesis that perceived powerlessness leads to system justification, we compared levels of system justification between the two conditions. Results revealed that participants primed with low power scored significantly higher on system justification ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SE = .11$ ) than did participants primed with high power ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $t(138) = -2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, contrary to what one might expect based on self-interest motivation, but in line with our hypothesis, participants who were relatively powerless were *more* likely to perceive existing societal arrangements as fair and legitimate.<sup>3</sup>

### Study 4: The Effect of a Sense of Powerlessness on the Legitimation of Race, Class, and Gender Disparities

The purpose of Study 4 was twofold. First, we sought to replicate and extend the findings of Studies 2 and 3 by investigating the effect of powerlessness on system justification in a situation in which examples of significant inequality within the system were made explicit to participants. Second, we wanted to examine whether powerlessness would lead to increased system justification even when a system-challenging explanation for the inequality was made cognitively available. The strongest form of our hypothesis was that it would.

#### Method

##### *Participants*

One hundred and one undergraduate students enrolled in a sociology course at the University of California at Berkeley (67.3% female; mean age = 21.16,  $SD = 2.85$ ) participated in the study for extra course credit.

##### *Procedure*

Participants were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-power condition as in Study 3. Following the manipulation, participants completed a questionnaire that included three short paragraphs on societal inequalities in three different domains: one regarding racial disparities in incarceration rates, one regarding the unequal distribution of wealth in society, and one regarding the gender wage gap. The paragraphs not only described each type of inequality in some detail but also provided two explanations for how this inequality may have come about—with the first always placing blame on the system (i.e., the inequality is due to bias or discrimination) and the second placing blame on the victim (i.e., the inequality is due to characteristics of African Americans, the poor, women). Scales assessing participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of each situation followed these paragraphs. The order in which the three domains were presented was counterbalanced across participants.

<sup>3</sup> One could argue (however counterintuitively) that powerlessness may elicit a general tendency to cast the world in a positive light, thereby interpreting this result as reflecting a general optimistic bias. This seems unlikely given that past research suggests that powerlessness is *negatively* associated with optimism and confidence (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007).

### Materials

*Incarceration Rates.* Participants were told: “While African American men represent 14% of the population of young men in the U.S., they represent over 40% of the prison population. Some reasons why this might be the case: (1) There is discrimination in society and in the criminal justice system against African Americans. (2) The African American family unit has fallen apart, with the majority of African American males growing up in fatherless households and without any viable role models.” They were then asked to answer the following three items using 6-point response scales: (a) “How much do you believe that the higher representation of African Americans in prison is due to legitimate reasons?” (b) “How much do you agree with the following statement: The criminal justice system treats African Americans fairly?” and (c) “How much do you agree with the following statement: African Americans in prison earned the prison sentences they receive?” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ). The first question was answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*a whole lot*); the second and third questions were answered on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

*Wealth Distribution.* Participants were told: “Currently, the richest 1% of the American population owns as much as the combined wealth of the bottom 90%. Some reasons why this might be the case: (1) The market system is unfair and favors the rich to get richer. (2) The wealthiest families have shrewdly invested their money in real estate, the financial markets, and in savings over the years, whereas most of the rest of America has not.” They were then asked to answer the following three items (using the same 6-point response scales): (1) “How much do you believe the distribution of wealth in America is legitimate?” (2) “How much do you agree with the following statement: The richest 1% of America have earned their place at the top?” and (3) “How much do you agree with the following statement: The bottom 90% of America have earned their place beneath the richest 1%” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .62$ ).

*Gender Wage Gap.* Participants were told: “Working women’s salaries are about 17 percent less than working men’s salaries in the United States. Some reasons why this might be the case: (1) There is discrimination against women in the workplace. (2) Women are more likely to leave the workforce for a few years to raise and care for a family.” They were then asked to answer the following three questions: (1) “How much do you believe the gap between women’s and men’s pay is legitimate?” (2) “How much do you agree with the following statement: Men rightfully earn the higher pay they get,” and (3) “How much do you agree with the following statement: Women rightfully earn the lower pay they get” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .56$ ).

*Power Manipulation Check.* As in Study 3, we asked three independent coders to rate the essays for reported power and three other coders to rate the essays for dependence. As expected, the power manipulation was effective, insofar as participants who were asked to write about a time in which they had power over someone were coded as having more power in the essay ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = .66$ ) than were participants asked to write about a time in which someone else had power over them ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .58$ ),  $t(98) = 13.74$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants primed with low power were also judged as expressing more dependence ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than participants primed with high power ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = .90$ ),  $t(98) = -17.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . As before, interrater reliabilities were high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$  for reported power and  $.87$  for reported dependence). As in Study 1, judgments of power and dependence were negatively and significantly correlated with each other,  $r(98) = -.84$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Results and Discussion

A mixed-model ANOVA with the power manipulation as the between-subjects factor and inequality type as the within-subjects factor was used to test our main prediction. See Table 3 for means and standard errors. The analysis yielded a main effect of the power manipulation, as

**Table 3.** Perceived Legitimacy of Three Types of Inequality in the Low- and High-Power Conditions—Study 4

Condition	<i>n</i>	Incarceration Rates		Wealth Distribution		Gender Wage Gap	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Low power	52	3.14	.14	2.48	.13	2.31	.13
High power	49	2.67	.15	2.12	.13	2.08	.14

hypothesized,  $F(1,99) = 5.73, p < .05$ . Participants who were assigned to the low-power condition perceived inequality as *more* legitimate ( $M = 2.64, SE = .10$ ) than did participants assigned to the high-power condition ( $M = 2.29, SE = .11$ ). In addition, the analysis yielded a significant main effect for inequality type,  $F(2,198) = 25.59, p < .001$ , indicating that participants perceived the disproportionate incarceration rates of African Americans as more legitimate ( $M = 2.90, SE = .10$ ) than inequality in the distribution of wealth ( $M = 2.30, SE = .09, p < .001$ ) and the gender wage gap ( $M = 2.20, SE = .10, p < .001$ ), whereas the latter two did not significantly differ from each other ( $p = .35$ ). The interaction term did not attain significance,  $F(2,198) = .67, p = .51$ , suggesting that powerlessness increases system justification tendencies in general. Therefore, these findings support the hypothesis that a subjective sense of powerlessness predicts system justification even in the context of blatant inequality and when system-challenging explanations for the inequality are readily available.

### Study 5: The Effect of Political Powerlessness on Governmental Legitimacy

Taken in conjunction, our first four studies suggest that the psychological experience of low power (or outcome dependence) leads individuals to legitimize authority and hierarchy. These findings have important ramifications for political life, to the extent that “power, politics, and change are inextricably linked” (Buchanan & Badham, 1999, p. 6). In Study 5, we focused even more explicitly on the legitimation of the political system. In particular, we manipulated participants’ sense of political powerlessness and measured their subsequent legitimation of governmental authority. In addition to comparing low- and high-power conditions, we added a control condition to assess the distinctive possibilities that, compared to a neutral baseline, (1) a sense of low power increases system legitimation, and (2) a sense of high power decreases system justification.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and one American Mechanical Turk workers (51.5% male; mean age = 35.76,  $SD = 12.39$ ) participated in exchange for monetary compensation. Four participants were excluded from the analysis because of outlying values on the measure of perceived legitimacy of the political system. Of the remaining 97 participants, 78.4% identified themselves as European American, 3.1% as African American, 5.2% as Asian-American, 2.1% as Latino, 11.4% as “Other” or missing. In terms of socioeconomic status, 11.5% reported that they came from “lower class” backgrounds, 35.4% as “lower middle class,” 40.6% as “middle class,” and 12.5% as “upper middle class.”

### *Procedure*

Participants were informed that the study consisted of two unrelated parts. In the first part, which ostensibly measured reading comprehension, participants were presented with several short

passages and were then asked to summarize in one or two sentences what each passage was about. To minimize suspicion regarding the topic of our study, all participants first read a filler passage describing a new hearing device for hearing-impaired people. Next, they were randomly assigned to read one of three passages, which constituted our manipulation of political powerlessness. In the low-power condition, the passage was entitled “The average American is powerless” and described the limited ability of the average American to make a difference in the way the U.S. government works and the negligible influence of a single vote. In the high-power condition, the passage was entitled “The average American is powerful” and described the “great ability” of the average American to make a difference in the way the U.S. government works through voting. In the control condition, participants read a passage on the topic of mapping the topography of ocean floors.

In the second part of the study, which was labeled as an “Attitudes and Opinions Survey,” participants rated the perceived legitimacy of the political system by indicating their agreement with the following statement on a 7-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree): “The U.S. political system is a legitimate form of government.”

## Results and Discussion

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) yielded a significant effect of the power manipulation on the perceived legitimacy of the U.S. political system,  $F(2,93) = 3.27, p < .05$ . Post hoc analysis (LSD) revealed that participants assigned to the low-power condition scored higher on perceived legitimacy ( $M = 6.03, SE = .22$ ) than did participants assigned to the high-power ( $M = 5.34, SE = .22, p < .05$ ) and control conditions ( $M = 5.34, SE = .22, p < .05$ ), which did not differ from one another ( $p = 1.00$ ). In summary, then, we found that a subjective sense of political powerlessness increased the legitimization of government in comparison with high power and control conditions. A heightened sense of power, at least in this context, was not associated with decreased legitimization, relative to the control condition. Thus, Study 5 not only provided a conceptual replication of findings from the previous studies in a more explicitly political domain but also extended them in an important way.

## General Discussion

The social historian Barrington Moore Jr. (1978) once wrote about the processes that are necessary for people to acquire a sense of injustice: “At the level of the individual human personality it is necessary to overcome certain forms of dependence on others . . . At the level of social organization they also have to overcome dependence” (p. 461). While legitimacy is often thought of as a source of power (e.g., French & Raven, 1959; Weber, 1947), this article has examined the possibility that power may also lead to legitimacy. Rather than focusing on the effect of being powerful, which so many studies have addressed, we have focused on the consequences of *lacking* power for the maintenance of the status quo. Several research programs have emphasized the role of the powerful in perpetuating system-level stratification through increased action-orientation and goal-directed behavior (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). We have demonstrated some of the ways in which the powerless also legitimize hierarchical social systems and in so doing perpetuate their own disadvantaged position.

We have presented data from five studies, using diverse methodologies, demonstrating that a subjective sense of powerlessness predicts the perceived legitimacy of authority figures, hierarchical social systems, and the government. In Study 1, we investigated the role of powerlessness in shaping employees’ judgments of the legitimacy of managerial authorities, and we found that employees who were more financially dependent on their job tended to perceive their supervisor as more legitimate. This effect was independent of the quality of one’s procedural treatment by the authority figure or the

fairness and valence of the outcomes the employee received. In Study 2, participants rated their sense of powerlessness, which was (somewhat counterintuitively, but in accordance with system justification theory) associated with greater endorsement of the legitimacy of existing social arrangements. Study 3 documented a causal relationship between powerlessness and system justification in that participants who were primed with powerlessness (vs. power) scored higher on a system justification scale. In Study 4, we replicated the effect obtained in Study 3 and demonstrated that the effect occurred even with respect to glaring forms of social and economic inequality. That is, powerlessness predicted increased legitimation of inequality even when the possibility was explicitly raised that the inequality was due to discrimination. In Study 5, we extended these findings to a more explicitly political domain and demonstrated that a sense of political powerlessness contributed to the legitimation of governmental authority. In addition, we were able to definitively establish that powerlessness increases system justification (relative to baseline conditions).

Taken in conjunction, the evidence from these studies is consistent with the strongest version of the system justification hypothesis, which suggests that those who are the most disadvantaged by the system are (at least *sometimes*) its most ardent supporters (Jost et al., 2003). We have responded to Brandt's (2013) critique and gone well beyond previous studies (including his) by measuring self-ascribed powerlessness (rather than group-level status ascriptions) and by demonstrating experimental effects for the first time. However, it is important to point out that our theory does not suggest that members of disadvantaged groups are *never* motivated by self-interest (see also Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). Instead, we propose that to the extent that disadvantage is accompanied by a strong sense of powerlessness (or outcome dependence), individuals are more likely to accept and justify the system, all other things being equal. Indeed, we have shown that subjective feelings of powerlessness increase the perceived legitimacy of authorities and institutions. At the same time, we hasten to point out that perceptions of legitimacy are capable of moderating the effects of power on many other variables. For instance, Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, and Otten (2008) noted that a strong (preexisting) sense of illegitimacy can disrupt the otherwise positive relationship between power and approach-related behavior (see also Smith, Jost, & Vijay, 2008).

The current research program further illustrates the ways in which people adapt psychologically to suboptimal situations. As French and Raven (1959) argued, when power differences are seen as legitimate, it follows that power holders have a "right" to influence them, and the powerless are "obliged" to follow their directions. For instance, Haines and Jost (2000) observed that participants perceived outgroup members who had power over them as highly competent even when no substantive explanation was given for the power differences. Findings such as these have far-reaching (and potentially disturbing) consequences for exploitation and the maintenance of inequality.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Admittedly, the current research has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Although experimental evidence from Studies 3–5 indicated that powerlessness *causes* enhanced system justification, there is no way to be certain that the legitimation of managerial authorities in Study 1 was the result of financial dependence rather than a cause or correlate of it (see also van der Toorn et al., 2011). It is conceivable that the employees who worked for legitimate supervisors came to feel more financially dependent on their job. This strikes us as unlikely but certainly not impossible. Adequately accounting for all "third variables" that could contribute to spurious correlations is another issue that warrants deeper examination. In addition to procedural fairness and outcome favorability, both of which were included in the analyses for Study 1, we also made efforts to adjust for demographic and individual difference variables such as age, sex, income, and education. Nevertheless, it is difficult to be sure that we adjusted for all relevant variables, and further research in organizational contexts should be conducted to identify possible confounding

influences. It would also be useful to develop more psychometrically sophisticated measures—replacing, for instance, the single legitimacy item in Study 5 with a multi-item index.

The results of our studies (especially the experimental studies) suggest that increased feelings of powerlessness may explain why the disadvantaged sometimes justify the system as much as (or even more than) the advantaged. Although we did not directly manipulate disadvantaged (sub-)group membership, nor did we systematically investigate the relationship between objective and subjective conceptions of disadvantage, our results do suggest that membership in an objectively disadvantaged group is correlated, albeit modestly, with the psychological experience of low power. In Study 1, respondents who were lower in income and Black (vs. White) expressed stronger feelings of dependence, and in Study 2, respondents who were lower in terms of socioeconomic status experienced a decreased sense of power in general. Nevertheless, future studies would do well to determine the extent to which being in an objectively disadvantaged position leads to system justification through subjective feelings of powerlessness. This could help to explain when (and why) those who are disadvantaged in objective terms are sometimes more likely than others to justify the status quo (e.g., Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost et al., 2003) and sometimes are not (e.g., Brandt, 2013).

Another topic that warrants additional investigation pertains to the self-regulatory function of system justification. We have suggested that a subjective sense of powerlessness may make the world seem less predictable and controllable and that system justification could help to reduce negative arousal and to reassert a sense of control. However, the current set of studies does not pinpoint the specific psychological process (or processes) that mediate the effects of powerlessness on system justification. It would be useful to conduct additional experiments to determine whether perceptions of control mediate the relationship between low power and system justification. Indeed, some evidence already exists in support of this notion (Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011). Along the same lines, it would be useful to determine whether providing those who are subjectively powerless with the opportunity to engage in system justification would be effective in terms of restoring a sense of control and predictability.

Finally, the nature of affective (or emotional) processes contributing to legitimation represents another worthwhile topic for further inquiry. If, as we suggest, system justification provides epistemic and existential reassurance to those who feel powerless, then it should be possible to document specific psychophysiological patterns of negative arousal (cf. Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007). That is, participants who are dependent on another person (or the system) for desired resources should experience heightened negative arousal in comparison with participants who are not similarly dependent. When given the opportunity to legitimize the authority or system, they should experience a decrease in negative emotion and arousal, consistent with the palliative function of system justification (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007).

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this article, we have focused on the perspective of the powerless and how their sense of dependence might lead them to imbue the system and its authorities with legitimacy. Contrary to what one might expect based on theories of individual or collective self-interest, we found that people who were made to feel relatively powerless were more likely to perceive the power structures that affect them as fair and legitimate. These findings suggest that hierarchies, once formed, may become self-reinforcing through bottom-up processes of system justification. To some degree at least, the powerless serve as accomplices (after the fact) in their own subjugation (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Memmi, 1965) insofar as they legitimize rather than critique and challenge the structures of inequality that affect them. More optimistically (from the standpoint of social change), the empirical analysis of power relations can help to specify “the aspects of powerlessness which must be overcome in the development of successful protest” (Gaventa, 1980, p. 257). As Gaventa (1980)

pointed out: “What for the powerless are obstacles to be overcome in the raising of issues, for the powerful are mechanisms for maintaining the *status quo*. Rebellion, to be successful, must both confront power and overcome the accumulated effects of powerlessness” (p. 258). The research program summarized here may serve as a useful reminder that the “accumulated effects of powerlessness” include psychological as well as social, economic, and political consequences of resource dependence.

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