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Chapter 39

System Justification as Conscious and Nonconscious Goal Pursuit

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The myriad ways in which people, contrary to their own self-interest, “buy into” a social system that objectively harms them constitute the theme of Thomas Frank’s (2004) best-selling book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* In seeking to understand the resurgence of blue-collar conservatism and what he calls “The Great Backlash” in middle America, Frank writes:

The country seems . . . like a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymous Bosch: of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a “rust belt,” will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover. (p. 10)

The book is full of vivid ethnographic details, but it does relatively little to shed light on the general social psychological mechanisms by which people defend and justify existing social, economic, and political arrangements, often to their own detriment—not just in the midwestern United States in recent years, but around the globe and for as long as anyone can remember (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Why is the attraction of the status quo so great? What drives popular ideological support for the existing social system, even among those citizens whose interests it seems not to serve? What inhibits those who are disenfranchised by the status quo from denouncing the system and working toward a better one? What allows those who are privileged by the status quo to suppress guilt and dissonance evoked by the suffering of others? Finally, how does adopting a social psychological perspective on these questions enable us to better understand dynamic processes of change?

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In attempting to understand why acquiescence in the face of injustice is so prevalent and why social change is so rare and difficult to accomplish, system justification theory posits that—to varying degrees, depending on both situational and dispositional factors—people are motivated to defend, justify, and rationalize the status quo (e.g., Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005). In this chapter we focus on the motivational basis of system justification, the palliative function it serves, and the implications of the theory for the dynamics of social change. More specifically, we seek to develop the following four theoretical propositions:

1. There is a goal to maintain the status quo. Once a given system or regime is firmly in place, people will be motivated to maintain its existence and stability. Consequently, system-justifying tendencies will display features of goal pursuit.
2. System justification tendencies are moderated by dispositional and situational factors. The extent to which an individual possesses heightened needs to reduce uncertainty and threat will affect his or her system justification tendencies. Similar responses are elicited when the status quo is directly or indirectly threatened.
3. System justification serves a palliative function: It operates as a coping mechanism for members of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups by reducing anxiety and uncertainty when the system's faults are highlighted and promoting positive affect. However, this palliative function inhibits the motivation for social change and therefore may have detrimental long-term consequences for the individual and society.
4. Once change is inevitable, system justification processes should produce rapid conversion to the new status quo.

Before we discuss these four propositions more elaborately, we summarize recent theory and research on system justification processes.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY

System justification theory provides a sustained, integrated approach to understanding how and why people defend the status quo, even when a

different system would better meet their interests (Blasi & Jost, 2006; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005). We use the term *system justification* to refer to the set of social psychological processes by which the status quo is defended and upheld simply because it exists (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; Keller, 2005). To varying degrees, depending on both situational and dispositional factors, people are motivated to accept and perpetuate features of the status quo, even if those features were arrived at accidentally or arbitrarily. System justification efforts are associated with increased ideological support for economic and political systems and arrangements; stereotypic differentiation of social groups; and ingroup favoritism by members of advantaged groups and outgroup favoritism by members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004). These tendencies help to maintain an imperfect but stable status quo.

Typically, system justification efforts are consistent with self-interest for people who are advantaged by the status quo, but harmful to the interests of the disadvantaged. However, research on system justification theory has shown that members of disadvantaged groups engage in system justification processes, even at the expense of their own personal and group interests (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). This inherently conservative tendency to maintain the legitimacy of the status quo cannot be explained in terms of theories that emphasize justification on behalf of oneself or one's own group. For members of disadvantaged groups, system justification reactions appear to conflict with ego and group justification goals (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kaiser, Dyrnforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Quinn & Crocker, 1999). For example, stark forms of inequality can create a discrepancy between competing needs to justify the system and to feel good about oneself and one's fellow group members (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Lane, 1962; Sennett & Cobb, 1972).

As a result, members of disadvantaged groups who "buy into" the legitimacy of the status quo (with its attendant degree of inequality) tend to have lower self-esteem and hold more ambivalent attitudes about their own group membership than do those who reject the status quo and strive for social change (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Nevertheless, some members of disad-

vantaged groups even defend and justify the system and its authorities more strongly than do members of advantaged groups, presumably because they have a stronger need to reduce cognitive dissonance by justifying their suffering and their ongoing participation in the status quo (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). Under these circumstances, the dissonance that is created by the discrepancy between reality (e.g., widespread disparities in wealth) and one's beliefs about the system ("The economic system is fair") cannot be resolved by rationalizing one's own behavior. Rather, a rationalization of the system is necessary to resolve emotional discomfort.

How does system justification theory explain such tendencies? In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss four propositions that may help to explain these findings.

PROPOSITION 1: THERE IS A GOAL TO MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO

In previous work, system justification has been operationalized largely in terms of explicit ideologies, such as beliefs and attitudes that are used to justify conservatism about the social system (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005). Here we consider the notion that system justification operates as a conscious and nonconscious goal: People do not only believe the system is fair and legitimate; they *want* to believe that it is fair and legitimate, and they are prepared to legitimize it despite its evident failings (e.g., Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006). Insofar as system justification can be conceptualized as a psychological striving to maintain the status quo, it should exhibit goal-like properties. When the system's legitimacy is in question, people should persist in system justification efforts until it is restored. Thus the motivational aspects of system justification may provide the key to understanding its effects and consequences.

Theory and research on goals and goal pursuit processes assume that individuals have desired end-states toward which they strive vigorously and purposefully (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Such goal-directed action continues until these end-states are attained (or otherwise altered or abandoned). It is characterized by properties such as persistence (a goal will grow stronger until it is attained or the possibility of attainment is eliminated), sub-

stitutability of means (a goal can be reached through a number of different means), flexibility (a goal can be altered upon changes in individual's needs or in the situational circumstances), and resumption following interruption (a goal will remain activated even if goal pursuit is interrupted, and it will resume when the possibility arises) (Atkinson & Birch, 1968; Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, Trötschel, 2001; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Heckhausen, 1991). Attaining a goal leads to positive affect, whereas failure to attain a goal leads to negative affect (Brendl, Higgins, 1996; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996).

Extensive research has shown that goals guide the processing, interpretation, and memory of information (for a review, see Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Goals have been found to affect attention to information (e.g., more attention to goal-relevant than goal-irrelevant information), processing of information (e.g., systematic information processing following accuracy goal), and encoding/recall of information (e.g., organization of information in memory according to the goal), as well as judgment and decision making (e.g., greater reliance on judgmental heuristics upon a goal of reach closure).

Evidence from decision-making studies similarly indicates that people anchor on the status quo, however arbitrarily it was arrived at, and make insufficient adjustments to it when additional information is provided (Arkes & Loewenstein, & Prelec, 2003). Typically, people compare the status quo to counterfactual alternatives and find the alternatives worse (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999). Indeed, they often disparage alternatives without even attempting to understand them. O'Brien & Crandall (2005) found that people are temporarily dismissive of arguments that challenge the status quo as more self-interested than arguments that favor the status quo. All of these processes can lead to perpetuation of the status quo for reasons that are largely tangential to the merits of the system (i.e., the benefits it bestows on its citizens). Both those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged by the status quo are therefore likely to support it in general (Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004).

Effects on Information Processing

In a study that examined more directly the effects of system justification tendencies on in-

System Justification as a Nonconscious Goal

We further postulate that system justification processes can operate nonconsciously, leading people to implicitly accept and defend current social arrangements. Extensive research has demonstrated that goals can be activated outside of awareness, and that subsequent behavior is then guided by these goals to attain the desired end-state (e.g., Bargh et al., 2001; see also Chartrand, Dalton, & Cheng, Chapter 22, and Ferguson, Hassin, & Bargh, Chapter 10, this volume). Hence people may not even be aware of the extent to which they are privileging the status quo and resisting change. Moreover, some forms of system justification efforts are not normatively acceptable, such as stereotyping of and discrimination against low-status groups, and thus may interfere with social desirability concerns at a conscious level (see Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004). Additionally, an explicit acknowledgment of their inferiority may have negative consequences for members of disadvantaged groups. Thus system justification processes may be especially likely to be manifested implicitly rather than explicitly.

Consistent with this assertion, several studies have documented the nonconscious operation of system-justifying biases (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003; Lane, Mitchell, & Banaji, 2005; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). For example, Jost, Pelham, and Carvallo (2002) found evidence for outgroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups and ingroup favoritism among members of advantaged groups, thereby exhibiting attitudes that legitimize inequality between groups in society. In one study, more than twice as many members of a low-status group (San Jose State University [SJSU] students) exhibited implicit outgroup favoritism on an affective Implicit Association Test (IAT) measure as did members of a high-status group (Stanford University students). Among SJSU students (but not Stanford students), implicit stereotyping of the two groups (Stanford as more academic, SJSU as more involved in "extracurricular" activities) was associated with implicit outgroup favoritism on the affective measure. In a second study, Jost and colleagues showed that European, Hispanic, and Asian American students all preferred to associate with another participant whom they believed to be European American

than with a participant whom they believed to be Hispanic or Asian American. Taken together, these studies are consistent with the notion that implicit system justification can serve as a goal.

Similarly, Banaji, Greenwald, and Rosier (1997) have assessed explicit and implicit ingroup and outgroup favoritism among African and European American students, using an explicit "feeling thermometer" measure and the IAT. Their results show that whereas on the explicit measure African Americans expressed significantly more favorable attitudes toward their own group than did European Americans, on the implicit measure African Americans showed less favorable attitudes toward their own group than did European Americans. This pattern of results was replicated with larger and more diverse samples, as well as with other social groups (e.g., young vs. old or heterosexual vs. homosexual samples; see Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004).

In sum, then, system justification goals seem to guide thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through mechanisms that are outside of conscious awareness. As a result, implicit processes seem to conform to the pervasive tendency to justify and rationalize the existing status quo, and to decrease the likelihood that substantive change to existing social arrangements will occur. In general, conceptualizing system justification as a goal-directed tendency is useful for understanding why nearly everyone is motivated (at least to some extent) to explain and justify the status quo in such a way that it is perceived as fair and legitimate (e.g., Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). A motivated perspective on system justification tendencies is especially well suited to address relatively puzzling cases of conservatism, right-wing allegiance, and outgroup favoritism among members of low-status groups, such as African Americans, Hispanics, women, and members of the working class (e.g., Frank, 2004; Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Lipset, 1960).

PROPOSITION 2: SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION IS MODERATED BY DISPOSITIONAL AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS

The intensity of goal-directed actions is determined by the individual's motivation, or commitment, to pursue the goal. Thus studies have shown that highly committed individuals are those typically exhibiting the properties com-

monly attributed to goal pursuit (e.g., studies on self-completion theory, Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; or studies on goal shielding, Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). In line with this theory and research on the moderating effects of commitment on goal-directed behavior, we propose that system justification tendencies depend on dispositional and situational factors that increase motivation to maintain and defend the status quo and render such goals more accessible.

There are several individual difference variables that gauge the extent to which individuals support versus challenge the status quo (Crandall, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Examples of system-justifying ideologies that people endorse to different extents include the Protestant work ethic (Quinn & Crocker, 1999), the belief in a just world (Hafer & Begué, 2005), political conservatism (Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004), opposition to equality (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), and fair market ideology (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003). The degree to which people endorse conservative, system-justifying beliefs is affected by such general dispositional factors as uncertainty avoidance; intolerance of ambiguity; and epistemic needs for order, structure, and closure (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; see also Kruglanski & Chun, Chapter 6, this volume). It appears that there is a resonant match between psychological needs to reduce uncertainty and threat and the contents of attitudes that serve to justify the status quo (thereby preserving what is familiar). As illustrated in Figure 39.1, needs for uncertainty reduction and threat management can be satisfied by attaining the system justification goal through various means.

Increased commitment to goals (such as system justification) can be activated by situational as well as dispositional factors (Higgins, 1996; Kruglanski et al., 2002). Much as self-serving biases are accentuated after self-threat and group-serving biases are accentuated after group threat, we find that system justification tendencies increase following system threat. Defensive forms of justification can be triggered by a threat to the legitimacy or stability of the system. Indeed, the need for system justification is greater when a flaw in the system is exposed or the status quo is otherwise threatened. There is reason to think that system-level threats induce negative affect, such as anxiety, cognitive dissonance, and discomfort, and that the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies serves to reduce these negative experiences

(Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007).

Anecdotal observation and scientific search both suggest that threats to the status quo—whether direct, as when the system is attacked, or indirect, as when its faults are exposed—provoke negative affect and motivate people to defend the desirability and legitimacy of the social system (e.g., Doty, Peter & Winter, 1991; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2002; Napier et al., 2006; Sales, 1973; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). That is, threats to the existing system, as long as they are not so severe as to unseat the current regime and establish another, stimulate a defensive motivational response on behalf of the existing system (Jost & Hunyady, 2002): This defensive response, which can be automatic and unconscious, restores positive affect, but it can have unanticipated consequences.

The responses to the attacks of September 11, 2001 illustrate that support for the regime that is already in place is strengthened following system threat. Support for the U.S. system and its representatives—including President Bush, Congress, the military, and the government in general—increased sharply after the attacks, according to national polling data from the Gallup Poll (2001) organization. About half of Americans expressed approval of President Bush from the time he became president until 9/11. Following the attacks, the president's approval rating shot up to almost 90% and remained above 70% for the following year (Gallup Poll, 2005).

Jost, Glaser, and colleagues (2003) found a meta-analysis that the two strongest situational predictors of conservative, system-justifying responses were system threat and mortality salience. Clearly, the events of 9/11 involved both. Consistent with the Jost, Glaser, and colleagues theoretical analysis, Leach and colleagues (2004) found that people who were experimentally primed to think about the 9/11 attacks 2 years later showed significantly more support for President Bush than did those who were not primed (see also Echebarria & Fernández, 2006; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Control groups included thinking about a neutral event or about extreme pain, and these groups did not show increased support for President Bush, indicating that system threat and mortality salience are especially important motivating factors in determining the degree of system support. Furthermore, Willer (2004) found that between 2001 and

government-issued warnings that resulted in raising the terror alert level had the effect of increasing popular support for President Bush, even on aspects unrelated to terrorism (such as his handling of the economy).

Other research that has manipulated system threat by exposing participants to criticism of the status quo has obtained similar results. For example, in a study conducted in Israel by Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, and Mosso (2005), high (vs. low) system threat was experimentally induced by exposing people to a short passage that was (or was not) highly critical of the system. System threat led to increased complementary stereotypic differentiation between an advantaged group (Ashkenazi Jews) and a disadvantaged group (Sephardic Jews). In a further demonstration, Kay and colleagues (2005) showed that system threat (exposure to a passage ostensibly written by a journalist that was broadly critical of U.S. society) led people to increasingly endorse complementary stereotypes justifying status differences. For example, people in the high-system-threat condition judged overweight people to be lazier but more sociable, and powerful people to be more intelligent but less happy. In this way, strategies of victim blaming on causally relevant traits (e.g., stereotyping obese people as being lazy) and victim enhancement on causally irrelevant traits (e.g., ascribing sociability to obese people) can both serve the goal of system justification (see also Kay et al., 2007, for a comprehensive review).

In sum, then, ample research supports the idea that several dispositional and situational characteristics affect the strength of motivation to justify the system. Under circumstances of system threat, people who endorse system-justifying ideologies may be especially likely to experience negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and dissonance. Pursuing system justification efforts reduces these negative emotions as well as promoting positive affect. In the next section of the chapter, we review research that supports this palliative function of system justification processes.

PROPOSITION 3: SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION SERVES A PALLIATIVE FUNCTION

We have addressed the issues of what people do (i.e., defend, bolster, and justify the status quo), and when they typically do it (i.e., when motivation is increased because of dispositional

and/or situational factors). We have only partially dealt with the perplexing question of *why* people support the system so enthusiastically, especially when it clearly does not benefit them. We suggest that justifying the status quo satisfies several social and psychological needs—including epistemic needs for consistency, coherence, and certainty, and existential needs to manage various forms of threat and distress and to find meaning in life (see also Festinger, 1957; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Lerner, 1980). The status quo has many advantages over counterfactual alternatives: It is familiar, predictable, safe, and (due to system-justifying biases) subjectively experienced as desirable, natural, and just. People often assume that existing arrangements are for the best, and that if alternatives really worked better, then they would have already been adopted. Sticking with the status quo provides a simple and easy way of meeting a variety of psychological needs. Threats to the legitimacy or stability of the system, on the other hand, may elicit feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and dissonance concerning one's role in the larger system. The fact that attaining the system justification goal satisfies multiple needs and therefore possesses *multifinality* (see Kruglanski et al., 2002) renders it a motivationally powerful factor in human lives (see Figure 39.1).

We propose that in a hierarchical system, both those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged by the system are susceptible to experiencing *emotional distress*. The type of emotional distress differs, depending largely on the status of the group, and this in turn influences the system-justifying strategies that advantaged and disadvantaged group members use to manage their emotional distress. The powerful may experience guilt over their relatively advantaged position, particularly when it appears to be undeserved. For example, European Americans experience guilt and dissonance when confronted with evidence of fellow group members' prejudicial or discriminatory actions toward African Americans (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerinik, & Elliot, 1991; Swim & Miller, 1999). Similarly, men who are reminded of their gender privilege experience increased guilt and decreased well-being (Branscombe, 1998). To assuage their guilt, ease their consciences, and reduce dissonance arising from inequality in the system, people rationalize their own advantages (Chen & Tyler, 2001)

and derogate those who are disadvantaged (Jost, Banaji, et al., 2004; Kay et al., 2005).

The powerless, meanwhile, may feel understandably frustrated and angry about their position in society. They may rail against the system, deriding barriers to individual and social mobility. However, they seldom do. According to system justification theory, the disadvantaged may lower their own aspirations and adapt to the status quo to minimize the anger and resentment evoked by a system with impermeable boundaries. For example, Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that poor people who blamed themselves for their own poverty reported feeling more positive emotion, less guilt, and greater satisfaction than did poor people who made external attributions for their situation. Similarly, Jost, Pelham, and colleagues (2003) found in a national survey that holding the belief that inequality is both legitimate and necessary was associated with increased satisfaction, regardless of a respondent's income level.

Several studies that have examined the relationship between system justification tendencies and affect support the palliative function of system justification. For example, research by Jost, Pelham, and colleagues (2003, Study 5) indicates that ideology is related to satisfaction in terms of one's job, one's financial situation, and life in general. These researchers examined the effects of demographic variables (race and socioeconomic status [SES]) and ideological beliefs concerning meritocracy (e.g., ambition, ability, and hard work are important for "getting ahead in life") and the legitimacy of economic inequality (e.g., "large differences in income are necessary for America's prosperity") on satisfaction. Structural equation modeling revealed that (1) African Americans and people who were lower in SES were *more* likely than others to believe that SES differences were necessary and legitimate, apparently because they had stronger needs to justify the system in order to reduce cognitive dissonance and restore positive affect; and (2) endorsement of meritocratic ideology was positively related to satisfaction for all respondents. That is, the more people believed that hard work, ability, and motivation lead to success, the more they reported being satisfied with their own economic situation, regardless of whether they were rich or poor.

In the United States, stark inequality is a potential indicator of system illegitimacy, and as

such it can pose a threat to the system. Placid people in a situation of inequality among peers should therefore activate the system justification goal. Studies conducted by Wakslak and colleagues (2007) explored the dynamic affective consequences of system justification, including effects on discrete negative emotion (e.g., guilt, frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty) associated with advantaged versus disadvantaged positions in hierarchical systems. In a heretofore unpublished study, inequality among peers was artificially created via the "Star Power" exercise, so that a stratified system involving three groups differing in status, power, and privilege was established. Members of all three groups were given the opportunity to endorse meritocratic ideology and consequent stereotypes to justify the system. Results indicated that system justification increased satisfaction in all groups, and that it decreased frustration for members of disadvantaged groups and decreased guilt for members of the advantaged group. The beneficial effects of system-justifying stereotypes and ideologies, then, were evinced by greater self-reported satisfaction and happiness (and less negative affect) on the part of people who were given the opportunity to endorse the legitimacy of the system. For both advantaged and disadvantaged individuals, it appears that system justification processes serve a palliative function.

Endorsing complementary stereotypes of the disadvantaged as lazy but happy can reduce dissonance and guilt for the advantaged, and can reduce dissonance and frustration for the disadvantaged (see Kay & Jost, 2003). Perhaps this is even more crucial for the disadvantaged who must come to terms with their complicity in the system (Lane, 1962). Sticking with the status quo provides the added benefits of familiarity, coherence, and security, thereby reducing uncertainty and potential anxiety (e.g., Jost & Glaser, et al., 2003). Thus affirming the system simultaneously restores integrity to the status quo and reduces negative affect.

Although the palliative function of system justification may be adaptive in some ways, it may also have long-term negative consequences, particularly for members of disadvantaged groups. Jost and Banaji (1994) argued that there are three justification motives: the tendency to justify the system, the tendency to develop and maintain favorable self-views; group justification, or the tendency to maintain a favorable image of one's social group and defend its

tions; and system justification, or the tendency to defend and bolster the social system. For the advantaged group, ego justification, group justification, and system justification goals are concordant. For the disadvantaged group, however, these justification goals are potentially discordant; these conflicts should give rise to attitudinal ambivalence toward ingroup members, and may affect psychological well-being. Indeed, research has shown that conflict among long-term goals is associated with poorer psychological well-being, including lessened life satisfaction and affective problems (Emmons & King, 1988; Riediger & Freund, 2004). Relatedly, Jost and Thompson (2000) found that opposition to equality was positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to depression and neuroticism for members of advantaged groups, but that it was negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to depression and neuroticism for disadvantaged group members (see also O'Brien & Major, 2005). Thus pursuing system justification goals may have positive affective consequences for members of disadvantaged groups in the short term, but it may also have aversive consequences for long-term well-being (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

In addition to these aversive consequences at the individual level, the palliative effects of system justification may have negative ramifications at the societal level. That is, the positive outcomes of attaining system justification goals may inhibit efforts to improve and change the status quo, thereby producing serious impediments to bringing about substantial change in society's institutions and organizations. Two follow-up studies to the "Star Power" study described above support this notion. These studies indicated that the palliative effect had as its by-product a weakening of support for social policies aimed at eliminating imbalance (Wakslak et al., 2007). In particular, reductions in moral outrage (Montada & Schneider, 1989) mediated the dampening effect of system justification on support for helping the disadvantaged through community service programs. These findings support the notion that system justification tendencies encourage resistance to social change and a reluctance to support policies that would lead to reform and to a more equal redistribution of resources (see also Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Tendencies to blame individuals rather than systems for poor outcomes, and to minimize

the extent of corruption, could also lead to system undercorrection in circumstances in which qualitative change would be beneficial (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003). The palliative function of system justification, therefore, may help to explain many cases of failure to support changes in the system.

PROPOSITION 4: ONCE CHANGE IS INEVITABLE, SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION PROCESSES PRODUCE RAPID CONVERSION TO THE NEW STATUS QUO

Given system justification tendencies to maintain the status quo and to defend and buttress it in times of trouble, one might expect social change to be virtually impossible. Indeed, collective action and protest are quite rare and occur only when the system is seen as severely unjust (e.g., Gurr, 1970; Moore, 1978; Zinn, 1968). Paradoxically, criticism can make current arrangements seem *more* attractive because of system-justifying processes, as outlined in connection with Proposition 2. If an alternative is considered, system-justifying processes may make its adoption unlikely. Nevertheless, social systems change and evolve in relation to external circumstances, as well as in conjunction with changes to the composition and internal states of the individuals and groups who constitute and control those systems. Economic systems and public policy positions shift, solidify, and shift again. Alternatives to the status quo may be derogated when they are considered improbable, but they become much more attractive as their probability of success increases (Kay et al., 2002; McGuire & McGuire, 1991). According to system justification theory, then, although the idea of change almost always breeds some degree of resistance, innovation is possible because over time people adapt their perceptions of reality—so that what was once seen as untenable eventually becomes accepted and commonplace, and people wonder how and why they could have opposed the change in the first place.

In line with the notion of goal-directed behavior as flexible and adaptive (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; see also Ferguson et al., Chapter 10, this volume), we propose that the same processes (e.g., rationalization, stereotyping) that explain inertia also aid social and psychological adaptation to system-level change, provided that change comes quickly and com-

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pletely (see also Blasi & Jost, 2006). Gradual change can be complicated by resistance to it at each subsequent stage, due to continued justification of the "old" system's remaining elements. Once a new system irrevocably replaces the previous one, however, people should begin to justify its distinctive features (both consciously and nonconsciously) as part of the conversion process. In fact, the rapid change may increase feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and dissonance, thereby highly activating system justification goals. Thus, when a new status quo is established, people should become motivated to perceive the emerging social arrangements in favorable terms and thus to rationalize the new regime. In contrast, defending the old status quo has no psychological benefits any more, and therefore people will eventually disengage from their previous goal of justifying it.

Such a process was observed in the United States with regard to the relatively rapid shift to a system of racial integration from the earlier norm of racial segregation. Kelman (2001) described a study he conducted in 1954 concerning African American students' attitudes toward maintaining some private all-black colleges in the face of an impending decision by the U.S. Supreme Court regarding racial desegregation in education. After hearing a persuasive message advocating the maintenance of some all-black colleges, students' attitudes were measured just 3 days before the decision and again on the day of the decision. Regardless of the source and degree of the communicator's power, students were significantly more opposed to maintaining all-black colleges after the decision to integrate was made than before. That is, when segregation was the status quo, African Americans professed stronger support for voluntary segregation. When integration became the status quo 3 days later because of the Supreme Court decision, the same group of students became more enthusiastic integrationists.

More direct evidence for our claim that people are motivated to justify an emerging status quo comes from experimental studies by Kay and colleagues (2002). They demonstrated in two studies that system justification processes contribute to anticipatory rationalization for outcomes that have not yet occurred but are likely to occur. In Study 1, a political survey was administered to Democrats, Republicans, and independents/nonpartisans prior to the

2000 presidential election. The survey manipulated the perceived probability of the election outcome (victory likelihoods: 43/51, 45/49, 47, 49/45, or 51/43 in favor of Bush vs. Gore). Participants were asked to indicate how desirable a Bush victory would be for them, a how desirable a Gore victory would be for them. Results showed that for Democrats and Republicans alike, the greater a particular candidate's chances were, the more subjectively desirable his presidency became. For nonpartisans, there was no relationship between likelihood and desirability. When people were motivationally involved in an outcome (as was the case for Democrats and Republicans, but not for nonpartisans), people elevated their evaluation of more likely outcomes (and devalued unlikely outcomes) regardless of their political leanings.

To eliminate potential confounding effects associated with the use of consensus information and impression management concerns and to generalize beyond the historically unique 2000 presidential election, Kay and colleagues (2002, Study 2) conducted a laboratory study concerning rationalizations of a decision made by university trustees to increase or decrease tuition rates. The researchers again found evidence for rationalization when involvement in the decision was high (large tuition changes), so that more probable outcomes were seen as more desirable. This was not true for small changes in tuition. People high in motivational involvement again engaged in rationalization by enhancing the favorability of likely outcomes and derogating unlikely outcomes, regardless of whether they were initially defined as attractive or unattractive.

Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, and Wheatley (1998) obtained similar results in research on what they termed *immune neglect*. In one of their studies, they contacted citizens who voted in the 1994 Texas gubernatorial election between Ann Richards and George Bush, just before the elections and approximately 1 month following them. On the occasion, voters were asked to predict how happy they would be 1 month after the election if their candidate were to win or lose, as well as how they would evaluate Bush or Richards if the winning candidate. One month later, voters were contacted again and were asked about their happiness and about their satisfaction with Bush (who won the election). Gilbert and colleagues found that supporters of Rich-

were significantly happier than they had expected to be, evaluated Bush more positively after the election than before, and felt better about their new governor than they had expected to feel. The authors explained these results in terms of immune neglect. That is, "people fail to recognize that their negative affect will not merely subside but will be actively antagonized by powerful psychological mechanisms that are specifically dedicated to its amelioration . . . [and therefore] tend to overestimate the longevity of those emotional reactions" (p. 619).

From a system justification perspective, these effects are not merely indicative of people's inability to predict their own internal states, but they also signal a shift in people's motivational concerns. Prior to the Texas election, Richards's voters did not possess the goal of rationalizing a hypothetical victory for Bush, and most likely even had the opposite goal. However, once Bush's authority was firmly in place (i.e., it became the status quo), system justification goals were activated, thereby motivating these people to justify and legitimize Bush's position as governor. Furthermore, research on the effects of goal pursuit on object evaluation has shown that when an object facilitates current goal attainment, it is evaluated more favorably than when the goal is absent (e.g., Shah & Higgins, 2001). Ferguson and Bargh (2004) pointed out that this increased favorability can result from greater accessibility of positive object information, greater inhibition of negative object information, or both. Thus, when Bush's administration became the status quo and people were motivated to justify it, then presumably positive aspects of his tenure became more accessible, negative aspects became less accessible, or both.

In sum, according to our conceptualization of system justification as a motivated process, initial resistance to change should be greater than would be expected on the basis of other theories, and yet adaptation to fully implemented change (i.e., when a new status quo is firmly established) may be easier than expected (Blasi & Jost, 2006). Once change becomes inevitable, support for the former system should dwindle as quickly as support for the emergent system grows, and the old regime should be derogated as much as (or more than) other alternatives to the current status quo. As soon as the new system is completely installed, people begin to rationalize its distinctive features, both

consciously and unconsciously. Although there is no way of predicting future events with certainty, it is possible to take advantage of naturally occurring changes to investigate these phenomena. The studies by Kay and colleagues (2002) took advantage of the 2000 presidential election in the United States to demonstrate the increase in support for a new regime as soon as it becomes reality—in this case, support gained by Bush when he was elected. The implication of a system justification analysis for social change is that it will either come not at all or all at once, the way that catastrophic change occurs in dynamic systems and in *tipping point* phenomena (e.g., Gladwell, 2000; Johnson, 1966).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter we have sought to deepen our understanding of the motivational underpinnings of system justification tendencies. Conceptualizing system justification as a goal helps to shed light on why people would defend and justify the status quo, even when it is contrary to their social, economic, and political interests. We propose that there are multiple means (e.g., ideological endorsement, stereotyping, ingroup vs. outgroup favoritism) of satisfying the system justification goal (see also Kay et al., 2005; Napier et al., 2006). In the language of goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah et al., 2002), system justification thereby exhibits the property of *equifinality*. More importantly, perhaps, system justification also possesses the property of *multifinality* (see Figure 39.1). That is, it seems to satisfy several epistemic and existential needs, including uncertainty reduction and threat management (Jost, Fitzsimons, et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005), and it serves a palliative function in general (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Wakslak et al., 2007). Ultimately, these psychological benefits may help to explain the prevalence of system-justifying tendencies, the motivational strength that they can acquire, and the extent to which individuals will persist in efforts to justify the status quo.

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39. System Justification as Goal Pursuit

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