

# Missing in (Collective) Action: Ideology, System Justification, and the Motivational Antecedents of Two Types of Protest Behavior

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## Abstract

Social-psychological models of collective action emphasize three antecedents of protest: (a) anger at perceived injustice, (b) social identification, and (c) beliefs about group efficacy. These models are extremely useful but have rarely incorporated ideological factors—despite the fact that protests occur in societal contexts in which some people are motivated to defend and bolster the status quo whereas others are motivated to challenge and oppose it. We adopt a system-justification perspective to specify when individuals and groups will—and will not—experience moral outrage and whether such outrage will be directed at defenders versus critics of the status quo. We describe evidence that epistemic, existential, and relational needs for certainty, security, and affiliation undermine support for system-challenging protests by increasing system-defensive motivation. We also discuss system-based emotions and backlash against protestors and propose an integrated model of collective action that paves the way for more comprehensive research on the psychological antecedents of social change.

## Keywords

ideology, system justification, moral outrage, collective action, protest

The deepest puzzle here is not occasional protest but pervasive tranquility.

—Donald Kinder and David Sears (1985, p. 702)

Given the extent of inequality and unfairness in the world, it is surprising how few people actually protest. According to the World Values Survey (2010–2014; World Values Survey Association, 2016), fewer than one in five citizens of North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand report having participated in a political demonstration, and more than a third say they would “never” do so (Table 1). There are many reasons why people may refuse to protest, including the worry that demonstrations are ineffective or dangerous—and protest can take many forms; a teacher who enlightens students about the government’s oppression of indigenous people, for instance, may contribute more to social change than a thousand petition signatories.

Social-psychological models of collective action leverage theories of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976; Gurr, 1970; Kinder & Sears, 1985) and social identification (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They emphasize three antecedents of protest: (a) anger at perceived injustice, (b) social identification, and (c) beliefs about group efficacy (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Tausch et al., 2011; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). According to these models, “collective action is more likely when people have shared interests, feel relatively deprived, are angry, believe they can make a difference, and strongly identify with relevant social groups” (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Bliuc, 2014, p. 726).

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**Table 1.** Percentage of Respondents Living in North America, Western Europe, and Australia/New Zealand Who Have Participated or Report Being Willing to Participate in Specific Forms of Collective Action

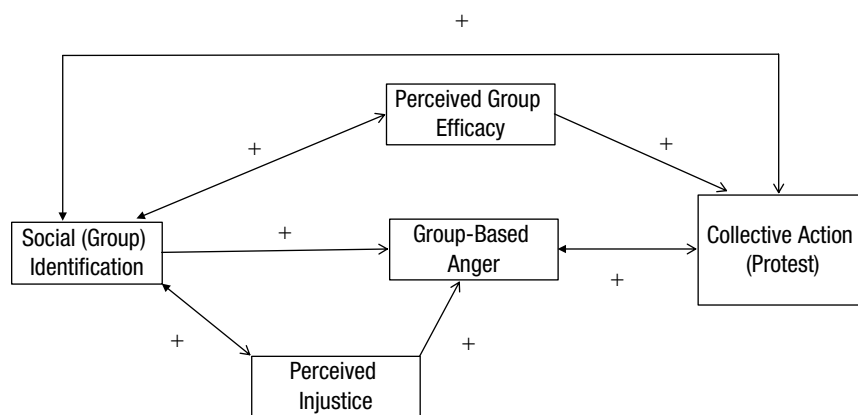
	Type of collective action														
	Signing a petition ( <i>N</i> = 12,665)			Joining a boycott ( <i>N</i> = 12,458)			Attending a peaceful demonstration ( <i>N</i> = 12,579)			Joining a strike ( <i>N</i> = 12,507)			Any other act of protest ( <i>N</i> = 10,097)		
	Have	Might	Never	Have	Might	Never	Have	Might	Never	Have	Might	Never	Have	Might	Never
North America															
United States	60.8	31.1	8.1	15.7	51.9	32.4	13.9	55.6	30.5	7.5	42.3	50.2	5.7	58.6	35.7
Mexico	18.4	39.3	42.3	2.6	15.4	82.0	10.2	40.6	49.1	5.5	28.9	65.6	4.2	31.2	64.6
Western Europe															
Germany	43.2	32.6	24.2	13.3	33.6	53.1	21.4	47.6	30.9	12.2	41.6	46.2	11.5	44.8	43.7
Netherlands	35.5	52.6	11.8	7.8	46.6	45.6	12.0	46.3	41.7	8.9	48.2	42.9	6.2	28.6	65.2
Spain	23.8	41.3	34.9	6.4	33.8	59.8	26.6	38.2	35.2	21.2	34.5	44.3	NA	NA	NA
Sweden	68.3	25.1	6.6	22.5	50.0	27.5	21.1	53.3	25.6	16.6	58.6	24.8	14.6	59.0	26.4
Australasia															
Australia	71.2	25.3	3.5	15.0	51.0	34.0	18.0	52.6	29.4	14.9	45.9	39.2	7.2	59.3	33.5
New Zealand	83.9	13.3	2.9	20.9	49.0	30.1	21.3	45.5	33.2	21.6	39.0	39.4	6.2	55.6	38.2
Total (unweighted)	47.7	34.4	17.9	12.2	40.5	47.4	16.9	47.9	35.2	11.9	42.0	46.1	7.8	47.8	44.4

Note: Data (*N*s = 10,097–12,665) are taken from Wave 6 of the World Values Survey (2010–2014; World Values Survey Association, 2016) and are based on face-to-face interviews with participants who were randomly sampled from the populations of these eight countries (*N*s = 613–2,207). Because of a small sample size, data from Spain (*N* = 23) were excluded for the item about whether respondents had engaged or would engage in “any other act of protest.”

To integrate diverse studies of collective action, van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (2008) advanced the *social identity model of collective action* (SIMCA), which holds that “social identity predicts collective action directly as well as indirectly through the injustice and efficacy variables” (p. 511). It is currently the most comprehensive and influential psychological model of collective action (see Fig. 1). Although SIMCA is an elegant and insightful model, it overlooks explicitly ideological and system-level factors, because protests are conceptualized

in terms of in-group/out-group dynamics.<sup>1</sup> Intergroup analysis is important but does not tell the whole story when it comes to protest. Psychologists studying collective action have largely neglected the role of social systems; as we will demonstrate, a system-justification perspective can help to fill this lacuna (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Choosing to participate—or withhold participation—in protest is inherently ideological in at least two senses. First, collective action reveals preferences concerning the



**Fig. 1.** A schematic illustration of the social identification model of collective action (SIMCA). Note: This figure is based on an original figure from van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears (2008, Fig. 2).

prevailing social system. This fits with Mills's (1960/1968) notion that "any political reflection that is of possible public significance is *ideological*: in its terms policies, institutions, men of power are criticized or approved" (p. 130). Second, political protestors (and counter-protestors) are often attracted to left or right ideological poles. Since the French Revolution, conservatives (on the right) have typically maintained the status quo and defended hierarchical traditions, whereas progressives (on the left) have tended to advance social change toward social, economic, and political equality (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). By conceptualizing collective action narrowly in terms of system-challenging protest, previous accounts have obscured the need to explain motivations that fuel system-supportive movements.

A satisfying account of collective action must therefore incorporate socio-structural and ideological processes, including those associated with the phenomenon of *system justification*—the motivation to defend and bolster the societal status quo. We review studies suggesting that system justification reduces moral outrage directed at the social system, thereby making system-challenging protest on behalf of the disadvantaged less likely (Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). This work helps explain when people will (and will not) experience a sense of moral outrage and whether moral outrage will yield collective action that challenges (vs. upholds) the status quo.

### **Epistemic, Existential, and Relational Motives Underlying System Justification**

According to system-justification theory, most people are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify the social, economic, and political systems on which they depend (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). This, we submit, helps to explain the "pervasive tranquility" in society observed by Kinder and Sears (1985). We focus on three factors that explain variability in system-justification motivation. These factors were anticipated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*—a treatise that sought to explain why familiar institutions, arrangements, ideas, and practices (the status quo) are experienced as natural and inevitable ("taken-for-granted"), thus acquiring a sense of legitimacy.

The first factor is *epistemic motivation*—the desire for certainty, structure, and control. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the feeling that societal institutions "hang together" is derived from a "built-in 'need' for cohesion in the psycho-physiological constitution of man" (pp. 63–64). Similarly, system-justification theory holds that people are motivated to justify the status quo

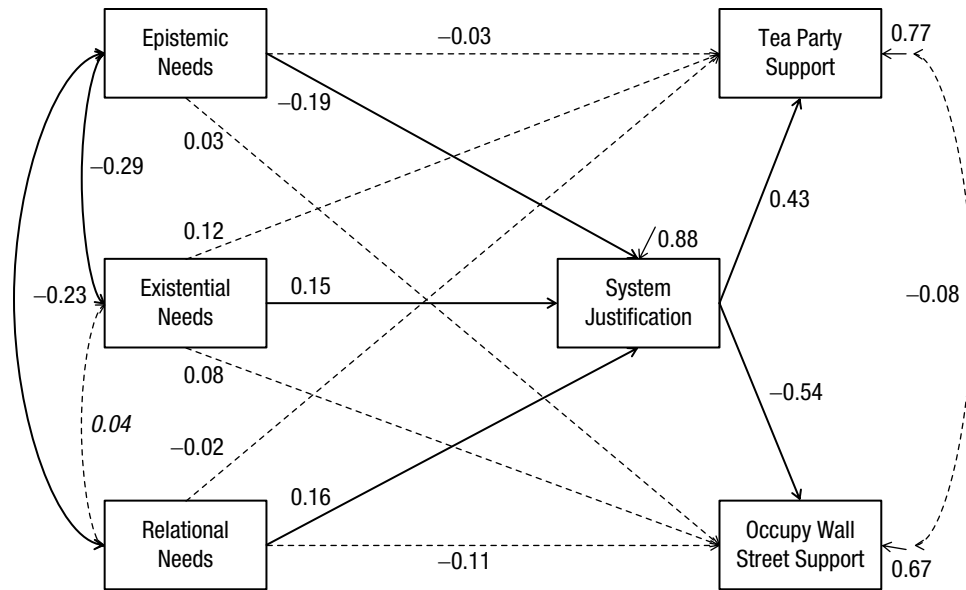
because doing so satisfies epistemic needs for order and predictability. Anti-system protestors often face discomfort associated with uncertainty, ambiguity, and lack of control—especially when confronted with unpredictable outcomes such as police arrests and crowd violence—unless these epistemic needs are otherwise satiated.

A second factor is *existential motivation*—the desire for safety and security. Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted that "the institutional order represents a shield against terror" and that the "symbolic universe" (i.e., the world of ideology) "shelters the individual from ultimate terror by bestowing ultimate legitimation upon the protective structures of the institutional order" (p. 102). That is, most people justify the social system because it helps them address existential needs for security. Conversely, protesting against the system may elicit fear, which may be exacerbated by the presence of police or military forces.

The third factor is *relational motivation*—the desire to affiliate with similar others. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), "in the social process of reality-maintenance it is possible to distinguish between significant others and less important others" (p. 149). They used religious ideology to illustrate their point: "If one is a believing Catholic, the reality of one's faith . . . is very likely to be threatened . . . by a non-believing wife," and so "it is logical for the Catholic church to . . . frown on interfaith marriage" (p. 152). Institutions benefit in terms of legitimacy when their members are tightly connected to supporters and isolated from detractors. Thus, relational desires to affiliate and share reality with others can play a strong motivational role in justifying the social order, whereas challenging the status quo can instigate relational discord. Conversely, protests may bring activists closer together but alienate them from friends and family who support "mainstream" society.

Chronic and temporary activation of epistemic, existential, and relational needs contributes to conservative, system-justifying outcomes. For instance, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway's (2003) meta-analysis revealed that needs to reduce uncertainty and threat were positively correlated with political conservatism. Subsequent studies have confirmed these results, demonstrating that situational and dispositional increases in epistemic, existential, and relational motivation boost support for conservative ideology (Jost & Krochik, 2014).

Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012) demonstrated that low need for cognition, high death anxiety, and high need for shared reality independently predicted higher scores on economic system justification, measured with items such as "Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame." In turn, U.S. economic system justification mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational



**Fig. 2.** Economic system justification mediates the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational motives on support for the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements. Numerical values are standardized regression coefficients for the full model. Dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths ( $p > .05$ ). Taken in conjunction, epistemic, existential, and relational motives explained 12.3% of the variance in economic system justification; the model as a whole explained 23% of the variance in Tea Party support and 33% of the variance in support for Occupy Wall Street. Bootstrapping techniques revealed that economic system justification significantly mediated all six paths between the three motives and degree of support for the two political movements. Adapted from “Not All Ideologies Are Created Equal: Epistemic, Existential, and Relational Needs Predict System-Justifying Attitudes,” by E. P. Hennes, H. H. Nam, C. Stern, and J. T. Jost, 2012, *Social Cognition*, 30, p. 677. Copyright 2012 by Guilford Press. Adapted with permission.

motives on approval of the conservative, system-supporting Tea Party movement and disapproval of the progressive, system-challenging Occupy Wall Street movement (Fig. 2).

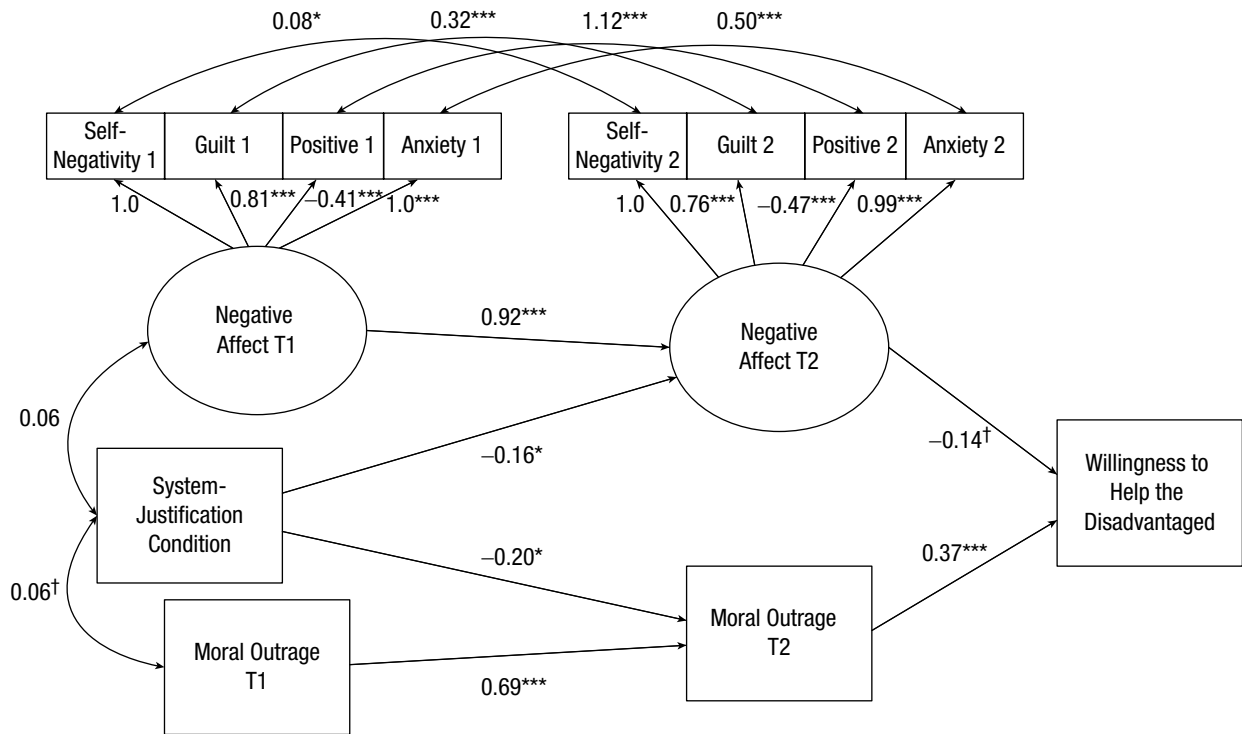
### System-Based Emotions and Palliative Effects of System Justification

Emotions are key components of collective action and are central to existing models, including SIMCA. However, people’s emotions are directed not only at individuals and groups but also at social systems (Solak, Jost, Sümer, & Clore, 2012). Injustice can elicit negative system-level emotions (e.g., moral outrage), but people also share positive system-level emotions such as pride, satisfaction, gratitude, and joy. Moral outrage, which is often alleviated through processes of system justification, seems to be a necessary (but insufficient) condition of protest. Satisfaction and gratitude with respect to the system may breed either inaction or—in response to dissidence—collective action aimed at preserving the status quo (Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Eibach, Wilmut, & Libby, 2015; Osborne, Smith, & Huo, 2012).

In one study, business school students interacted with peers in a hierarchical social order (Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008). Some individual mobility was permitted, but initial advantages were maintained and exacerbated. The

most advantaged group felt more satisfaction and more guilt compared to less advantaged groups. Conversely, the most disadvantaged group felt more anger and frustration than their advantaged counterparts. System justification was associated with increased satisfaction for members of all groups, decreased guilt for the most advantaged, and decreased frustration for the disadvantaged. Thus, group-based and system-based emotions reflected participants’ social standing as well as their appraisals of system legitimacy. In another study, college students who were high in socioeconomic status were exposed to “rags-to-riches” stories that induced a system-justification mind-set (Wakslak et al., 2007). Afterward, they expressed less moral outrage about inequality and were less willing to help the disadvantaged. As hypothesized, moral outrage mediated the dampening effect of system justification on willingness to help (Fig. 3).

Becker and Wright (2011) demonstrated that women exposed to hostile sexism experienced negative affect and rejected gender-specific system justification. However, women exposed to subtler, more “benevolent” sexism experienced positive affect and scored higher on gender-specific system justification. Moreover, system justification mediated the dampening effect of benevolent sexism on women’s support for feminist collective action (Fig. 4). Likewise, Osborne and Sibley (2013) found that



**Fig. 3.** Moral outrage mediates the dampening effect of system justification on willingness to help the disadvantaged. A higher score on the experimental variable (system-justification condition) reflected assignment to the high- (vs. low-) system-justification condition; higher scores on all of the affect variables indicated higher self-reported levels of each specific type of affect, including moral outrage. Self-negativity (“NegSelf” in the original study) reflected anger at oneself, disgust with oneself, annoyance at oneself, disappointment with oneself, self-criticism, and regret. Latent affect variables were created by setting the indicator with the highest loading to have a weight of 1. “T1” refers to variables measured at T1, and “T2” refers to variables measured at Time 2; the numbers 1 and 2 after variables indicate measurement at T1 or T2, respectively. Path coefficients are unstandardized. † $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Adapted from “Moral Outrage Mediates the Dampening Effect of System Justification on Support for Redistributive Social Policies,” by C. J. Wakslak, J. T. Jost, T. R. Tyler, and E. S. Chen, 2007, *Psychological Science*, 18, p. 272. Copyright 2007 by the Association for Psychological Science.

the endorsement of system justification was negatively associated with emotional distress and support for political mobilization in New Zealand. Importantly, system justification attenuated (a) the effect of individual deprivation on emotional distress and dissatisfaction with one’s standard of living and (b) the effect of group deprivation on support for protest on behalf of one’s group (Fig. 5).

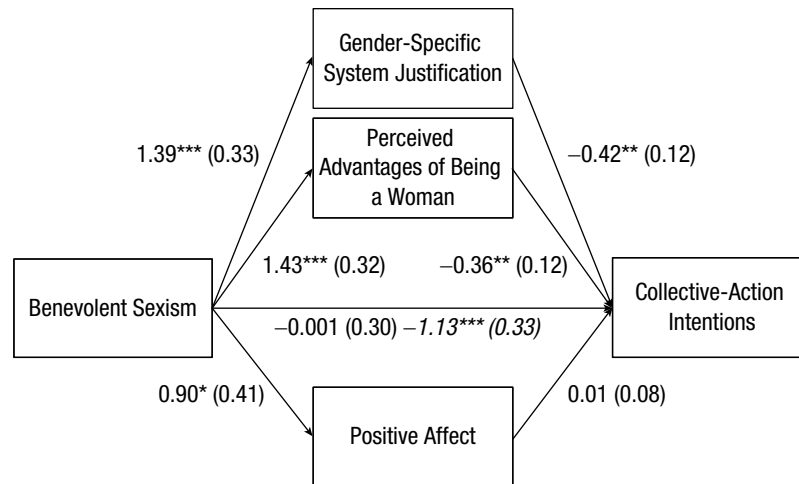
### How System Justification Undermines Protest Activity

System justification can undermine willingness to protest, even among political activists (Jost et al., 2012). For instance, May Day protestors in Greece primed with a system-justifying stereotype exhibited less anger and willingness to protest compared to a control group of protestors. In another study, members of a British teachers’ union primed with a system-rejecting mind-set scored lower on system justification and exhibited more anger at the government and more willingness to protest than those assigned to a control condition. The effect of system rejection on anger was mediated by system justification

and social identification, suggesting that both factors are important. The effect of system justification on willingness to engage in non-disruptive protest—that is, by writing letters, signing petitions, attending meetings, and distributing leaflets—was also mediated by a reduction in anger toward the government (Fig. 6).

Studies carried out in diverse settings have demonstrated that system justification fosters resistance to change. In the United States, conservatives (and high system justifiers) often minimize environmental problems and endorse false statements about the scientific evidence for global warming (Jost, 2015). In Finland, perceptions of climate change as a threat to the national system predicted general system justification and justification of the Finnish food-distribution system (Vainio, Mäkinen, & Paloniemi, 2014). In Australia, economic system justification was found to undercut engagement with environmental issues and support for pro-environmental policies (Leviston & Walker, 2014).

McGarty et al. (2014) identified a key problem facing opposition movements, namely “the taint of illegitimacy that comes from attacking a national government that is



**Fig. 4.** Gender-specific system justification and perceived advantages of being a woman mediate the dampening effect of exposure to benevolent sexism on collective-action intentions among women. Path coefficients are unstandardized estimates; standard errors are shown in parentheses. The unstandardized estimate in italics is the effect of benevolent sexism on collective action without the mediators included. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Adapted from “Yet Another Dark Side of Chivalry: Benevolent Sexism Undermines and Hostile Sexism Motivates Collective Action for Social Change,” by J. C. Becker and S. C. Wright, 2011, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, p. 67. Copyright 2011 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

wrapped in national symbols, controls national institutions, and which represents critics as being disloyal to the nation” (p. 729). This formulation is conducive to a system-justification analysis, insofar as backlash against protestors often reflects system-defensive motivation. Most citizens are suspicious of activists who challenge the societal status quo (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2007; O’Brien & Crandall, 2005), and their backlash intensifies in response to criticism of the social system (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012; Yeung, Kay, & Peach, 2014). Nevertheless, system-justification motivation can sometimes be harnessed to promote social change (Gaucher & Jost, 2011), and justice-based critiques may serve to delegitimize the status quo over an extended period of time (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

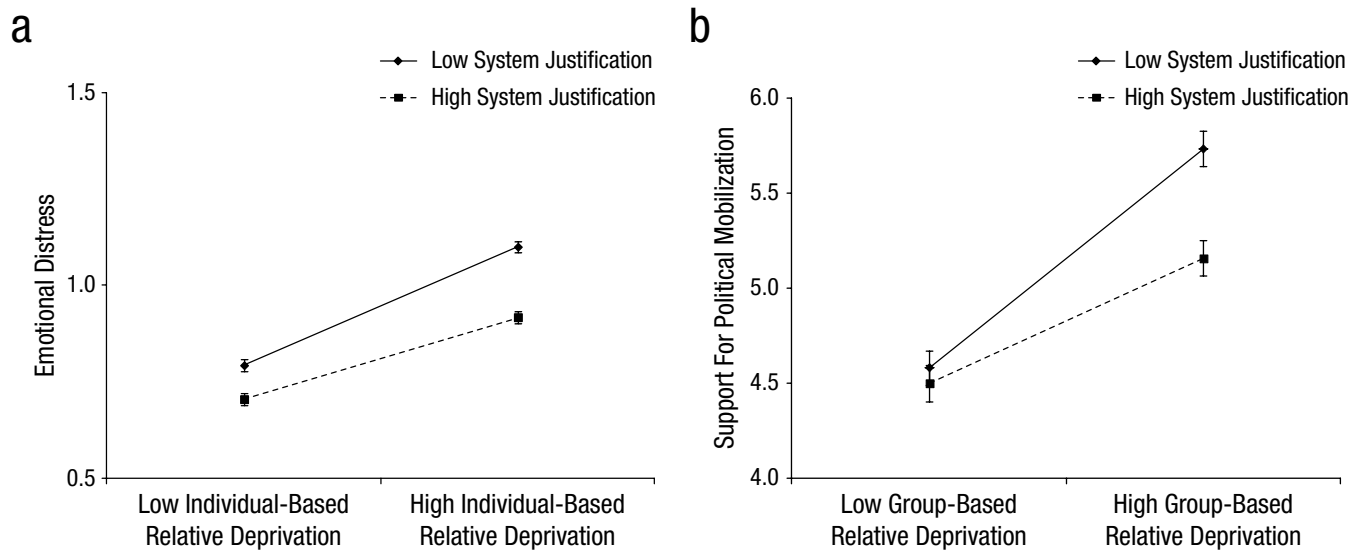
### A System-Justification Model of Collective Action

We propose an integrated model of collective action that incorporates epistemic, existential, and relational needs as well as ideological processes including criticism versus affirmation of the status quo. System-justification motivation—which may be activated by threats to the legitimacy or stability of the social system and affects system-targeted emotions (especially moral outrage)—predicts whether collective action is likely and what form it will take. Our goal is not to supplant existing models of collective action. Rather, we propose an integrated framework that

incorporates social identification, moral outrage, and beliefs about group efficacy—as well as ideological and system-level factors.

Our model (see Fig. 7) highlights the following additions to basic tenets of SIMCA: (a) epistemic, existential, and relational needs underlie and contribute to system justification; (b) in-group identification should be positively associated with system justification for those who are advantaged but negatively associated with system justification for the disadvantaged (Jost et al., 2001); (c) system justification should be negatively associated with perceived injustice and anger directed at the social system; and (d) system-based anger should be positively associated with system-challenging protest and negatively associated with system-supporting protest.

Importantly, however, group-based anger and perceived group efficacy should motivate distinct forms of protest for those who are advantaged versus disadvantaged by the status quo. That is, (e) those who are disadvantaged and are high in system-based anger, group-based anger, and perceived group efficacy should be more likely to engage in system-challenging protest, whereas (f) those who are advantaged and high in group-based anger and perceived group efficacy (but low in system-based anger) should be more likely to engage in system-supporting protest. Accordingly, individuals who are low in system-justification motivation are unlikely to participate in system-supporting protest, but they may engage in system-challenging collective action (i.e., dissidence), especially if

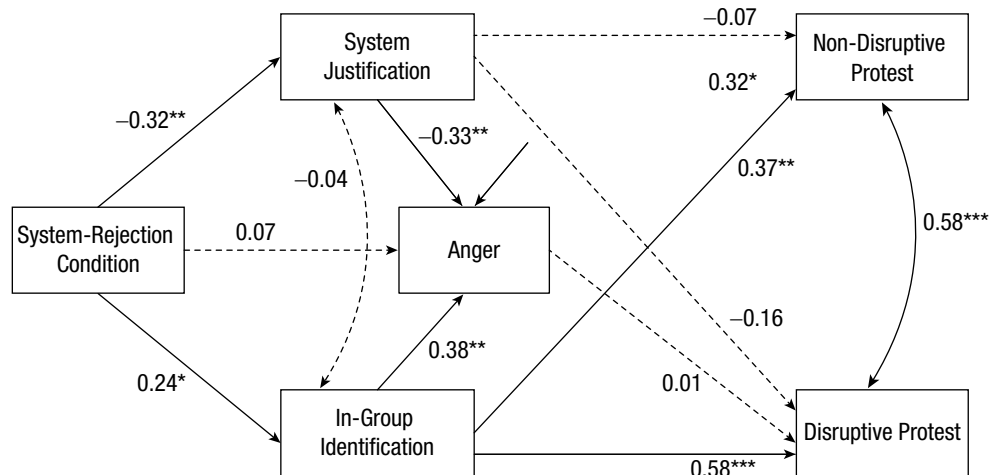


**Fig. 5.** Participants' (a) level of emotional distress ( $N = 6,019$ ) and (b) support for the political mobilization of Māori ( $N = 666$ ) as a function of relative deprivation (individual- and group-based, respectively) and system-justification motivation. Analyses included adjustments for the effects of sex, age, ethnicity (except in Fig. 5b, which includes data from only Māori participants), objective deprivation, and group-based deprivation (a) or individual-based deprivation (b). Perceived emotional distress ranged from 0 (*low distress*) to 4 (*high distress*), whereas support for political mobilization ranged from 1 (*low support*) to 7 (*high support*). Adapted from "Through Rose-Colored Glasses: System-Justifying Beliefs Dampen the Effects of Relative Deprivation on Well-Being and Political Mobilization," by D. Osborne and C. G. Sibley, 2013, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, pp. 997 (a) and 999 (b). Copyright 2013 by the Society of Personality and Social Psychology. Adapted with permission.

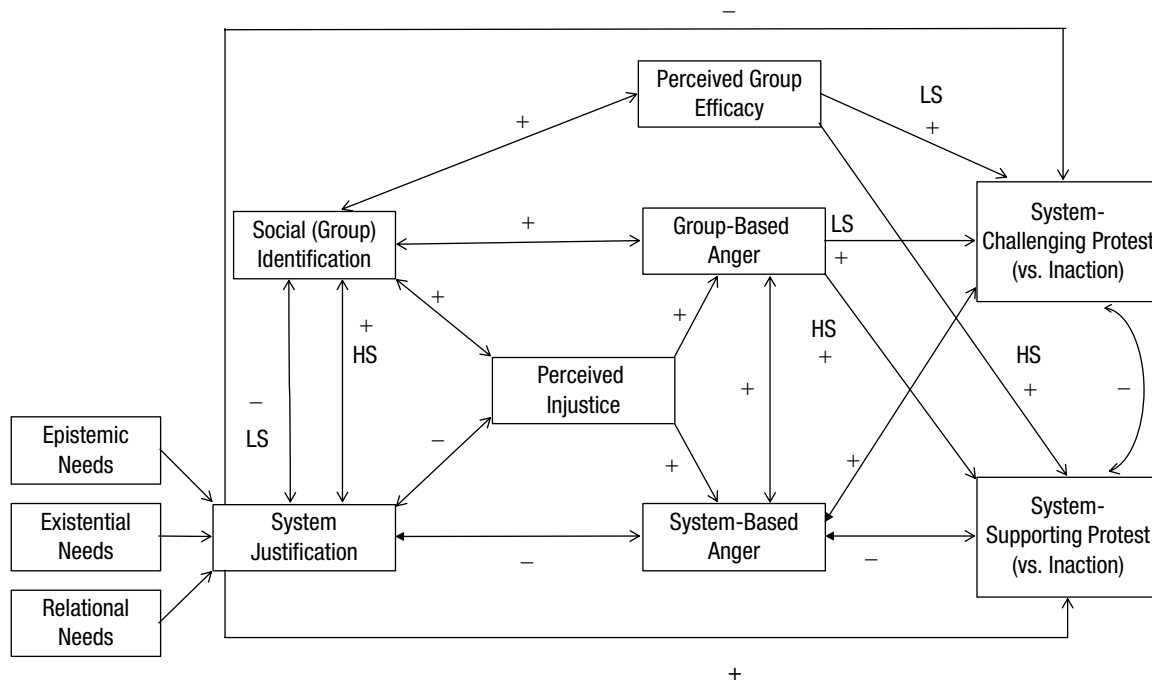
they identify strongly with a disadvantaged group. Conversely, individuals who are high in system-justification motivation are unlikely to participate in system-challenging protest, but they may engage in system-supporting

collective action (i.e., backlash)—especially if they identify strongly with an advantaged group.<sup>3</sup>

This model integrates variables from multiple accounts of collective action and incorporates societal (i.e., historical,



**Fig. 6.** Effects of system rejection (vs. a control condition) on system justification, group identification, anger at the government, and willingness to engage in disruptive and non-disruptive protest. Numerical values are standardized regression weights. Dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Adapted from "Why Men (and Women) Do and Don't Rebel: Effects of System Justification on Willingness to Protest," by J. T. Jost et al., 2012, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38, p. 205. Copyright 2012 by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Adapted with permission.



**Fig. 7.** Schematic illustration of a model of system-challenging and system-supporting protest that integrates social-identification and system-justification perspectives. Note: HS = high-status (or advantaged) group members; LS = low-status (or disadvantaged) group members.

cultural, and political) contexts as well as relative group status, ideological motivation, and emotional experiences to predict qualitatively distinct forms of collective (in)action. In so doing, it paves the way for far more comprehensive research on social, cognitive, and motivational antecedents of protest and social change. Our perspective also raises the possibility that perceptions of others' degree of system-justification motivation might influence feelings of collective efficacy. Given that fellow citizens' level of support for existing regimes is a critical determinant of protest activity (Kuran, 1991), there is a need to analyze the ways in which ritualized displays of system support—such as the singing of the national anthem at sporting events—contribute to the sense that system-justification motives are so pervasive in society that system-challenging protest is bound to fail.

### Recommended Reading

- Becker, J. C., & Wright, S. C. (2011). (See References). Studies demonstrating that women who are exposed to benevolent sexism decrease their support for collective action for greater gender equality because they perceive the gender system as more justified and see certain advantages of being a woman.
- Jost, J. T., Chaikalis-Petrtsis, V., Abrams, D., Sidanius, J., van der Toorn, J., & Bratt, C. (2012). (See References). A combination of survey and experimental studies indicating that system-justification motivation undermines people's willingness to protest by dampening the experience of group-based anger, even among political activists.

- Jost, J. T., Gaucher, D., & Stern, C. (2015). "The world isn't fair": A system justification perspective on social stratification and inequality. In J. F. Dovidio & J. A. Simpson (Eds.), *APA handbook of personality and social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 317–340). Washington, DC: APA. A comprehensive review that addresses the maintenance of social inequality from a system-justification perspective.
- Klandermans, B., & van Stekelenburg, J. (2013). (See References). A summary of the social-psychological literature focusing on the dynamics of supply, demand, and mobilization within a framework that emphasizes group-based grievances, collective efficacy, politicized identity, emotions (especially anger), and embeddedness as psychological antecedents of collective action.
- Osborne, D., & Sibley, C. G. (2013). (See References). A large-scale, nationally representative survey in New Zealand revealing that at higher (vs. lower) levels of system justification, the effect of relative deprivation on subjective well-being and support for collective action is attenuated.

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## Notes

1. A notable exception is Klandermands and van Stekelenburg (2013, p. 786), who identified “ideological motivation” as one contributor to collective action. However, these authors did not elaborate on the role of ideology, nor did their analysis (a) distinguish between system-supporting and system-challenging ideologies or (b) address the possibility that leftist and rightist social movements are fueled by different motivational concerns (see Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

2. Another basis for optimism comes from the observation that when members of disadvantaged groups eschew superordinate (i.e., system-level) forms of identification in favor of subordinate identities, they become more supportive of collective action (e.g., Górska & Bilewicz, 2015).

3. Although it seems reasonable to suggest that system justification would be negatively associated with system-challenging protest and positively associated with system-supportive protest, Cichočka and Jost (2014) observed that individuals who were relatively moderate in their level of system justification (rather than extremely high or extremely low) were most likely to participate in politics, presumably because they were (a) not so high in system justification as to adopt an uncritical stance toward the political situation and (b) not so low in system justification as to withdraw from civic participation altogether.

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