

“THE WORLD ISN’T FAIR”: A SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND INEQUALITY

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We do not live in a just world. This may be the least controversial claim one could make in political theory.

—Thomas Nagel

If Marx were living today, he’d be rolling around in his grave.

—Randy Newman

Just a few months before the Occupy Wall Street movement began, the Nobel Prize–winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2011) wrote the following:

It’s no use pretending that what has obviously happened has not in fact happened. The upper 1 percent of Americans are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation’s income every year. In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1 percent control 40 percent. Their lot in life has improved considerably. Twenty-five years ago, the corresponding figures were 12 percent and 33 percent. One response might be to celebrate the ingenuity and drive that brought good fortune to these people, and to contend that a rising tide lifts all boats. That response would be misguided. While the top 1 percent have seen their incomes rise 18 percent over the past decade, those in the middle

have actually seen their incomes fall. . . . All the growth in recent decades—and more—has gone to those at the top.

There are, of course, many different ways of looking at income inequality, but they all tell the same story. Over the past 30 years, the rich in the United States (and many other industrial nations) have grown richer, while the middle and working classes have either remained stagnant or declined in terms of their economic position (e.g., Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2011; Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Between 1976 and 2007, for instance, the inflation-adjusted hourly wage declined by more than 7%, whereas the share of total income going to the top 1% of the income distribution nearly tripled during the same time period (Frank, 2010). At least 25 million Americans (17.2% of the workforce) struggle with unemployment or drastic underemployment, nearly 50 million Americans experience “food deprivation” (hunger), and as many as 75 million Americans live in poverty (Corning, 2011). The effects of inequality persist until the bitter end: The bottom 10% of income earners in the United States die 4.5 years before the top 10% (Gould, 2008).

Income inequality is by no means confined to the United States. According to economic statistics summarized by the Canadian government, the richest 10% of the world’s population takes 42% of the total

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income, while the poorest 10% earn only 1% (Conference Board of Canada, 2013). At present, 71% of the world's total population inhabits nations in which economic inequality has grown over the past few decades—including India, China, the Russian Federation, Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, Colombia, Honduras, Rwanda, South Africa, and Thailand. These data also reveal that the income gap between workers in high-income versus low-income nations has nearly doubled since 1980.

How do we square these harsh social and economic facts with our scientific knowledge that human beings—and perhaps even other species (Brosnan & de Waal, 2003)—care passionately about questions of *fairness* and *justice* (e.g., Boehm, 1999; Corning, 2011; Lerner, 1977)? The degree of inequality that exists in U.S. society (and many other societies) violates all known justice standards of *equity* (or merit), *equality* (of opportunity and outcome), and *need* (Deutsch, 1975; see also Jost & Kay, 2010). As Robert Frank (2010) observed, “No one dares to argue that rising inequality is required in the name of fairness.”

There has been noticeable worry and consternation expressed in recent years about increasing inequality—and there is good reason for concern. Greater economic inequality, even after adjusting for levels of wealth, is associated with a number of negative social consequences, including poorer physical and mental health, shorter life spans, increased rates of divorce, and lack of social cohesion (e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Studies show that (even after adjusting for respondents' own income levels) increased economic inequality is associated with decreased happiness (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011)—especially for liberals, socialists, and others who are skeptical of common ideological justifications offered for the degree of inequality in a capitalist society (Napier & Jost, 2008).

A great many theories in sociology and political science focus on individual and collective responses to social stratification and inequality—including theories of relative deprivation, moral outrage, self-interest motivation, identity politics, collective action, and revolution. All (or nearly all) of these theories propose that citizens should object, perhaps even violently, to stark inequality, especially

accelerating inequality. Corning (2011), for instance, wrote that “defection is the likely response to an exploitative, asymmetrical interaction” (p. 164), and “No wonder there were protests and even riots at [World Trade Organization] meetings” (p. 128).

There is one significant problem with this reasoning, and it is a problem that has given several generations of social scientists fits: Why are protests and rebellions so infrequent, and why do they take so long to occur? Why, for instance, have Americans put up with steeply increasing inequality and the kind of economic policies that could appeal only to a dyslexic Robin Hood?

There is a joke, often attributed to economist Paul A. Samuelson, which goes, “Economists have correctly predicted nine of the last five recessions.” The fact is that sociologists, political scientists, and others who study protest movements suffer from a similar problem: They have correctly predicted nine of the last five revolutions. The great political theorist Ted Robert Gurr (1970), for instance, wrote in *Why Men Rebel*: “Men are quick to aspire beyond their social means and quick to anger when those means prove inadequate, but slow to accept their limitations” (p. 58). If this were true in a deep psychological sense, rebellion would be far more common than acquiescence, but this does not seem to be the case (see also Jost & Kay, 2010).

A strong majority of Americans consistently accept the economic system as basically fair and legitimate, even in times of social and economic strife. For example, midway through the extraordinary increase in income inequality, results from a Gallup Poll revealed that a strong majority of Americans (68% overall) and 74% of respondents from middle and high socioeconomic status groups agreed that “the economic situation in the United States is basically fair.” Remarkably, *half* of the respondents in the lowest socioeconomic status group reported that the economic system was fair. When respondents were asked whether disparities between the rich and the poor in the United States are “an acceptable part of our economic system” or “a problem that needs to be fixed,” 45% overall (and 37% of the lowest socioeconomic group) reported that they found the situation to be acceptable (see Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003, p. 56).

In a World Public Opinion Survey conducted in 2005, 71% of Americans agreed that: “The free

enterprise system and free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world.” Of 20 nations surveyed, citizens of only one nation (France) were more likely to disagree than agree with this statement (see Bénabou, 2008).

In his 2012 State of the Union, President Barack Obama directly addressed the issue of economic inequality, stating,

We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by. Or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules.

Within a few days of the speech, a new Gallup Poll was conducted to assess American’s perceptions of the economic system. When asked whether the U.S. economic system is fair or unfair in general, 45% of respondents overall (and 55% of Republicans) stated that it was fair. And when they were asked whether the system was fair to them *personally*, 62% of respondents overall answered affirmatively (see Table 12.1). It is striking, given the economic facts that we have reviewed, that approximately half of all Americans (whose family fortunes

have largely declined or stayed the same while the very rich have benefited extraordinarily over the past several decades) maintain that the economic system is fair. The fact that respondents are more likely to say that the system is fair *to them personally* than in general is reminiscent of Crosby’s (1984) research on “the denial of personal disadvantage,” whereby members of disadvantaged groups are more likely to believe that their group is discriminated against in general than that they are discriminated against as an individual. It is also consistent with the notion that people are more likely to rationalize self-relevant (vs. irrelevant) outcomes (e.g., Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). Members of disadvantaged groups commonly deny that the system places them at a significant disadvantage. Perhaps it is simply too painful and demoralizing to draw this conclusion.

One major factor that leads to differences in public opinion about inequality is political ideology. As Larry Bartels (2008) has demonstrated, political conservatives are more likely than liberals and moderates to believe that the gap between rich and poor is “smaller, or about the same as it was 20 years ago” (which is incorrect) and that it is “a good thing” or at least not “a bad thing.” Conservatives are also more likely to believe that (a) poor people have the same access to justice as rich people (36% conservatives vs.

TABLE 12.1

Percent of U.S. Survey Respondents Stating That the Economic System Is Fair (vs. Unfair), 2012

“Do you think the U.S. economic system is fair or unfair?”	Unfair	Fair
Respondents overall	49%	45%
Democratic respondents	56%	37%
Independent respondents	50%	45%
Republican respondents	42%	55%
“Do you think the U.S. economic system is fair or unfair to you, personally?”		
Respondents overall	36%	62%
Democratic respondents	31%	68%
Independent respondents	41%	57%
Republican respondents	35%	63%

Note. Not shown: percent answering “No Opinion.” Data are based on telephone interviews conducted on January 23, 2012, by Gallup Poll with a random sample of 1,008 U.S. adults, ages 18 years and older (see <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152186/americans-divided-whether-economic-system-unfair.aspx>).

11% liberals) and (b) hard work is a very important explanation for income differences (60% conservatives vs. 28% liberals). Importantly, political sophistication *increases* ideological differences in recognizing and regretting inequality. The more that liberals are interested in and knowledgeable about politics, the more likely they are to believe that economic inequality has increased and that this is a “bad thing,” whereas the more interested and knowledgeable conservatives are, the less likely they are to recognize and regret increasing inequality (Bartels, 2008, p. 151).

These facts about public opinion raise two important questions. First, why do a sizeable proportion of citizens living in capitalist systems (at least one half or more) not only tolerate, but find ways of justifying (i.e., believing in the fairness and legitimacy of) extreme forms of economic inequality? Second, why are some people, such as political conservatives, especially likely to tolerate and justify inequality while simultaneously denying or minimizing problems associated with increasing inequality?

A SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION PERSPECTIVE

The concept of system justification is based loosely on the concept of false consciousness, which is rooted in the early humanistic, sociological work of Karl Marx, who famously claimed that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx & Engels, 1846/1978, p. 172). Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, argued that ideas favoring dominant groups in society prevail because these groups control the cultural and institutional means by which ideas are spread. As a result, social and political realities are distorted systematically by the ideological machinations of elites.

Marx believed, however, that the working classes eventually would see through the ideological illusions and strive to overthrow the capitalist system. From the perspective of rational self-interest, Marx emphatically assumed that the poor had “nothing to lose but their chains.” His expectation

that the oppressed would recognize and take action against the sources of their oppression may have been overly optimistic, however, especially considering the various social and psychological obstacles to social change that exist, including denial, rationalization, and other system justification tendencies.

To explain why revolutions against capitalism (and other arguably exploitative systems) did not occur in heavily industrialized nations, later theorists in the Marxian tradition, such as Gramsci, Lukács, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse, Elster, and others further developed the analysis of dominant ideology, cultural hegemony, and false consciousness (Jost, 1995). Following Kluegel and Smith (1986), Jost and Banaji (1994) proposed the concept of *system justification* to “ground these sociological constructs in psychological science and to capture the process rather than simply the outcome (or product) of ideological activity” (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012, p. 318).

System justification theory, as originally developed by Jost and Banaji (1994), and Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004), addresses the question of why men and women do and do *not* rebel against a system that disadvantages themselves as well as others (e.g., see Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012; Kuang & Liu, 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013). According to this theory, people are motivated—at least to some degree—to excuse the moral and other failings of their social, economic, and political systems and to derogate potential alternatives to them.

In developing this idea, Jost and Banaji (1994) were influenced heavily by Lerner’s (1980) work on the “belief in a just world,” which suggested that there is a sweeping motivational tendency (a “fundamental delusion”) to believe that the social world is one in which people quite simply “get what they deserve” (p. 11). In elaborating on the ways in which individuals distort notions of deservingness and justice to maintain a conception of the world as not only predictable and controllable but also fair and just, Lerner wrote the following:

The deserving component . . . in the Belief in a Just World implies that people can, and should, control their own fate. Obviously, this can lead to a justification

of the status quo—those who are highly privileged must have deserved it, and those who are deprived had it coming as a result of their own failures—or, at the worst, it is just a matter of time until they earn their way out of their miserable condition. . . . [T]he irony inherent in the “justice” aspect of the belief in a just world is that it often takes the form of *justification*. In this survey of social attitudes, we find the same ironic pattern appearing in the strong association of this dimension with positive attitudes toward Americans, mixed reactions to the Jews, but, again, a negative reaction to the obvious victims of society. (p. 155)

Most of the empirical research addressing the implications of belief in a just world has focused on “victim-blaming” behavior, as when people are motivated to assert that rape victims deserved their misfortune (e.g., Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980). From a system justification perspective, there is a much wider range of ideological consequences of believing that the “world”—or, more concretely, the social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements that affect us—are legitimate and justified (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Kay & Jost, 2003).

We propose that the system justification motive drives individuals to exaggerate their system’s virtues, downplay its vices, and see the societal status quo as more fair and desirable than it actually is. This motive creates an inherently conservative tendency to maintain the status quo (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). System justification processes can occur both consciously and unconsciously (e.g., see Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). The social systems that individuals are motivated to justify may be small in size and scope, such as (at the most micro level of analysis) relationship dyads and family units, or they may extend to formal and informal status hierarchies, institutional or organizational policies, and (at the most macro level of analysis) even entire nations or

societies (e.g., Fiske, 2010; Kuang & Liu, 2012; Laurin et al., 2012; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011).

Jost and van der Toorn (2012) enumerated nine major postulates of system justification theory that have been investigated empirically. The remainder of this chapter outlines these postulates and discusses at least some of the research findings bearing on each postulate. Following a review of evidence for each of the major postulates of system justification theory, the chapter considers broader societal implications of the system justification motive.

Postulate I

People are motivated to defend, justify, and bolster aspects of the status quo, including existing social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements. A great deal of research in social psychology demonstrates that people want to view themselves in favorable terms. This motivation leads people to exaggerate their positive qualities and to minimize (or excuse) their shortcomings (e.g., Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Similarly, people are motivated to hold positive views about the social groups to which they belong and to draw favorable comparisons between their own groups and other groups (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Turner, 1975). Building on these empirically validated assumptions and ascending at least one level of analysis, Jost and Banaji (1994) proposed that individuals likewise are motivated to view the social systems that affect them as fair, legitimate, natural, and desirable. A distinctive tenet of system justification theory is that more or less everyone possesses at least some degree of system justification motivation, regardless of whether his or her status or position within the social system is advantageous (Jost, 2011). This system-justifying motivation often is enacted unconsciously, that is, without deliberate awareness or intent (see Jost et al., 2002; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Rudman et al., 2002).

Jost et al. (2010) summarized five lines of evidence that corroborate the motivational claims of system justification theorists. Specifically, they noted that (a) individual differences in self-deception and ideological sources of motivation are linked to system justification tendencies (e.g., Jost, Blount,

et al., 2003); (b) exposure to system criticism or threat elicits defensive responses on behalf of the system (e.g., Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005); (c) people engage in biased information-processing in favor of system-serving conclusions (e.g., Hennes, Jost, & Ruisch, 2012); (d) system justification processes exhibit “classic” properties of goal pursuit, so that people engage in multiple, functionally interchangeable means of reaching the desired end-state of justifying the system (e.g., Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005); and (e) the desire to justify the system inspires behavioral effort, so that under certain circumstances people are willing to work harder to prove (to themselves and others) that the system is meritocratic and therefore inequality in the system is justified (e.g., Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011). We will elaborate on several of these points in explicating the other postulates of system justification theory.

Postulate II

The strength of system justification motivation and its expression are expected to vary according to situational and dispositional factors. The noted social–personality psychologist William J. McGuire (1925–2007) was fond of suggesting that there are two general scientific laws of psychology: The first is that “everybody is the same” and the second is that “everybody is different” (see Evans, 1980). In the same vein, system justification theory posits that the strength of system justification motivation (and its expression) varies according to both situational and dispositional factors. That is, certain contextual variables are hypothesized to increase or decrease the motivational tendency to justify the status quo, and certain types of people are more likely than others to justify it (see also Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kay & Friesen, 2011). It is not the case—as some critics have claimed—that “there is an essential contradiction in the theory between the existence of universal ‘social and psychological needs to imbue the status quo with legitimacy’ and individual differences” (Huddy, 2004, p. 952). Indeed, social–personality psychologists often demonstrate that there are situational and dispositional sources of variability in basic psychological motives and tendencies, including those pertaining to cognitive consistency, self-

enhancement, social identification, and so on (e.g., see Deaux & Snyder, 2012). We move next to a consideration of specific situational (and then dispositional) variables that have been found thus far to moderate the expression of system justification tendencies.

Postulate III

System justification motivation is activated (or increased) when (a) the individual feels dependent on or controlled by the system and its authorities; (b) the status quo is perceived as inevitable or inescapable; (c) inequality in the system is made especially salient; (d) the system is criticized, challenged, or threatened; and (e) the system is perceived as traditional or longstanding. In a series of studies conducted in educational, political, and legal settings, van der Toorn, Tyler, and Jost (2011) found that the more individuals experienced outcome dependence with respect to a given authority figure, the more legitimacy they ascribed to him or her and the more deference they reported, after adjusting for procedural treatment. Two follow-up experiments provided direct evidence of a causal relationship between outcome dependence and perceived legitimacy and acquiescence to requests made by an authority figure. Van der Toorn and colleagues also found that participants who were assigned to a high (vs. low) outcome dependence condition judged the outcomes they received to be more favorable, despite the fact that the outcomes were identical in the two conditions; this effect was mediated by perceptions of legitimacy.

Kay et al. (2009, Study 2) exposed Canadian college students to one of two passages suggesting either that, according to sociological research, (a) “the university you attend has enormously broad effects on your life and wellbeing” or (b) “the country you live in has enormously broad effects on your life and wellbeing.” Next, participants learned that either their university or the Canadian government had instituted a policy of distributing funds unequally to various divisions to reward performance in a meritocratic manner. Results revealed that when participants were made to feel dependent on their university, they were more likely to accept as natural, just, and desirable the unequal funding

policy when it was attributed to their university (but not to the Canadian government). By contrast, when they were made to feel dependent on the Canadian government, they were more likely to accept as natural, just, and desirable the unequal funding policy when it was attributed to the nation (but not to the university). In another experiment, Kay et al. (2009, Study 3) demonstrated that female participants who were made to feel dependent on the Canadian government judged women to be less “desirable” and less than “ideal” as members of parliament—but only when they also were led to believe that the status quo consisted of very few (vs. many) women in the Canadian Parliament.

Shepherd and Kay (2012) used survey and laboratory methods to show that when citizens feel uninformed or unable to understand complex, technical issues concerning the environment, energy concerns, and the economy, they feel more dependent on the government. These feelings of dependence, in turn, foster increased trust of government authorities to do what is right, and this trust causes people to avoid learning about important information that is either negative or potentially negative. In other words, ignorance breeds dependence, which breeds system justification, which breeds motivated avoidance, which breeds continued ignorance.

A second, closely related situational variable that activates system justification tendencies is system inevitability—the extent to which a system is experienced as inescapable or unavoidable. Put simply, when individuals feel trapped in a particular social system, they are more likely to defend and justify its policies and practices. For instance, Laurin, Shepherd, and Kay (2010) found that when participants were led to believe that their freedom of movement was highly restricted—that is, that leaving their country was extremely difficult—they expressed stronger system justification tendencies even in domains that were unrelated to emigration policy, such as gender disparities in society. Similarly, the more likely or certain it is that a given policy outcome will occur, the more people tend to rationalize it (e.g., see Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). For example, Laurin et al. (2012) demonstrated that participants accepted and justified restrictions on their own personal freedom when these restrictions were

framed as inevitable. When, however, there was even a small chance that the restriction would not be implemented, individuals were more likely to react against it.

Work by Johnson and Fujita (2012) suggested that when the status quo is regarded as clearly changeable, individuals are less motivated to defend it. In this research, students at Ohio State University were presented with information indicating that past attempts to change the freshman orientation program were successful or not at their own university or at another university. Participants then indicated whether they wished to read a report that focused on either the strengths or the weaknesses of their own university. Results revealed that when the status quo was presented as changeable (vs. unchangeable) and the system was relevant (vs. irrelevant) to participants, a greater number of participants chose to read the report detailing the weaknesses of the university. These findings suggest that people may explore the possibility of system improvement when they regard change as possible and motivationally relevant. At the same time, roughly *half* of the participants preferred to read positive information even when the status quo was motivationally relevant and explicitly described as changeable. Thus, it would appear that some individuals prefer to bolster the status quo even when it is regarded negatively and the possibility of change is made cognitively accessible (see also van der Toorn, Feinberg, et al., in press, Study 4).

A third situational variable that appears to activate system justification tendencies is attention to the presence of inequality in the social system. Yoshimura and Hardin (2009) conducted an experiment in Japan to examine the effects of increasing the cognitive salience of an unequal relationship—such as the relationship between the United States and Japan in the reconstruction following World War II, which included the Japanese adoption of a constitution that was written primarily by Americans and is still in effect. Given this historical context, the researchers asked participants in one condition to write about ways in which “Japan and/or Japanese culture is inferior to the U.S. and has been subjugated by U.S. domination, and how this has influenced the

Japanese way of life.” Other participants were asked to write about ways in which “Japan and/or Japanese culture is superior to the U.S.,” as in areas of technological development, popular culture, and traditional customs. Afterward, participants’ attitudes concerning both the United States and Japan were measured.

What Yoshimura and Hardin (2009) found was that increasing the cognitive salience of subjugation strengthened the correlation between system justification, measured with a Japanese translation of the Kay and Jost (2003) general system justification scale, and the relative favorability of in-group and out-group attitudes. That is, Japanese participants who scored high on system justification expressed more favorable attitudes toward the United States than Japan, but they did so only when the history of subjugation was made salient (i.e., when they were instructed to write an essay about how “Japan and/or Japanese culture is inferior to the U.S.”). Under these circumstances, Japanese participants who scored especially low on system justification rejected historical precedent and showed in-group favoritism rather than out-group favoritism.

A fourth situational variable that tends to increase or activate system-justifying tendencies is exposure to system criticism or threat (Jost et al., 2010). At least 24 experiments, the major findings of which are summarized in Table 12.2, illustrate this phenomenon. Such findings contradict the commonsensical assumption that thinking about the flaws and injustices of the social system would simply decrease one’s support for the status quo and motivate efforts to *change* or *improve* the system.

In a typical experiment of this kind, participants are asked to read one of two passages, ostensibly written by a journalist (sometimes a foreign journalist), and are instructed to try to remember the passage for a memory test later in the experiment. For example, Kay et al. (2005) exposed half of their U.S. participants to a passage that included system-threatening statements, such as this: “These days, many people in the U.S. feel disappointed with the nation’s condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors.” The other half read system-affirming statements, such as this: “These

days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people in the U.S. feel satisfied with the nation’s condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a stable point in terms of social, economic, and political factors.” Exposure to the system-threatening passage did not affect individual or collective self-esteem, but it did lead to a temporary decrease in the perceived legitimacy of the status quo, followed by active attempts to bolster the sagging legitimacy of the system. Thus, participants assigned to the high (vs. low) system threat condition subsequently judged (a) powerful people to be more intelligent and independent and powerless people to be less intelligent and independent; and (b) obese people as lazier and more sociable, relative to normal weight people. As Blasi and Jost (2006) pointed out, it would be difficult to tell a purely rational story about effects such as these. Why should people become more prejudiced toward overweight people and, at the same time, more deferential to the powerful after reading a passage criticizing the United States? This apparent irrationality is by no means confined to Americans. When Israeli citizens read a similar system threat passage in Israel, they relied more heavily on stereotypes to rationalize social and economic inequalities between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews (Jost et al., 2005).

Ullrich and Cohrs (2007) conducted four experiments in which they exposed German participants to a different kind of system threat, namely one in which the salience of terrorism as a threat to the social order was emphasized. This manipulation led participants to score significantly higher (compared with various control conditions) on a German translation of Kay and Jost’s (2003) general system justification scale. Thus, evidence from many different laboratories and several countries indicates that exposure to system criticism or threat induces individuals to respond defensively, showing stronger system justification on both direct and indirect measures (see Table 12.2).

Thus far, we have suggested that exposure to system threat causes people to exhibit system-bolstering effects, in general. Some studies, however, reveal person-by-situation interactions, so that system-threatening stimuli tend to increase certain kinds of system justification more for some

TABLE 12.2

Summary of the Effects of System Criticism or Threat (24 experiments published between 2005 and 2013)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso (2005, Study 3)	Reading an essay describing Israeli society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Complementary stereotypic differentiation of high-status (Ashkenazim) and low-status (Sephardim) groups; Ashkenazi Jews were seen by members of both groups as more intelligent, ambitious, and agentic, whereas Sephardic Jews were seen as more friendly, traditional, and communal.
Kay, Jost, & Young (2005, Study 1a)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Powerful people were judged as more intelligent and independent but less happy (i.e., enhancement on traits that are seen as causally related to power, complementary downgrading on irrelevant traits).
Kay, Jost, & Young (2005, Study 1b)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Obese people were judged as lazier but more sociable (i.e., derogation on traits that are seen as causally related to obesity, complementary enhancement on irrelevant traits).
Ullrich & Cohrs (2007, Study 1)	Reminder of terror attacks in Madrid (vs. dangers unrelated to terrorism or the system)	Increased endorsement of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (i.e., general or diffuse system justification).
Ullrich & Cohrs (2007, Study 2)	Reminder of 9/11 or Madrid terror attacks (vs. issues related to the internet)	Increased endorsement of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (i.e., general or diffuse system justification).
Ullrich & Cohrs (2007, Study 3)	Reminder of 9/11 or Madrid terror attacks (vs. issues related to the internet)	Increased endorsement of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (i.e., general or diffuse system justification).
Lau, Kay, & Spencer (2008)	Reading an essay describing Canadian society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Men showed greater romantic interest in women who adhered to stereotypical norms associated with benevolent sexism (but not other women).
Kay et al. (2009, Study 4)	Reading an essay describing Canadian society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Greater "injustification" (i.e., going from "is" to "ought," judging the current representation of women in politics [whether high or low] as most desirable).
Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 2)	Reading a paragraph derogating the "American way of life" (vs. essay about U.S. geography)	Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products, especially among chronically low system justifiers.
Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 3)	Experimental instruction to recall many (vs. few) reasons for why the U.S. has "the best way of life"	Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products, especially among chronically low system justifiers.
Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products, especially among chronically low system justifiers.
Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 2)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. mortality salience vs. dental pain priming)	Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products, especially among chronically low system justifiers.

(Continued)

TABLE 12.2 (Continued)

Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 4)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. an essay about U.S. geography)	Direct derogation of the author among chronically high system justifiers. Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products among chronically low system justifiers.
Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons (2011, Study 5)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. an essay about U.S. geography)	Increased preference for products with clearly displayed American symbols among chronically high system justifiers. Increased preference for domestic over international consumer products among chronically low system justifiers.
Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay alleging systematic discrimination (vs. no discrimination) against Arab Canadians	Increased endorsement of committed relationship ideology (i.e., monogamy) among men.
Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier (2011, Study 2)	Reading an essay describing Canadian society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Increased endorsement of committed relationship ideology (i.e., monogamy) among men.
Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier (2011, Study 3)	Reading an essay describing the institution of committed relationships as unstable, fragile (vs. stable, strong)	Increased endorsement of the existing sociopolitical system in Canada (i.e., general or diffuse system justification).
Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay alleging pervasive gender discrimination in Canada (vs. a new water system in Hungary)	Increased complementary self-stereotyping; women described themselves in more communal terms, whereas men described themselves in more agentic terms.
Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	System-serving bias (i.e., use of double standards); scientific evidence was judged as stronger when it established (vs. undermined) the connection between hard work and economic success in society.
Mallett, Huntsinger, & Swim (2011, Study 4)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Decreased support for hate crimes policies among high (but not low) system justifiers.
Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay describing (a) U.S. society as deteriorating, or (b) the high school hierarchy as unfair (vs. no essay condition)	Increased support of both small-scale (high school) and large-scale (national) systems, regardless of whether the threat was directed at the small or large system.
Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer (2011, Study 2)	Reading an essay describing (a) U.S. society as deteriorating, or (b) the nuclear family as unstable (vs. no essay condition)	Increased support of both small-scale (nuclear family) and large-scale (national) systems, regardless of whether the threat was directed at the small or large system.
Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts (2012, Study 4)	Reading an essay describing U.S. society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well) or a control task (writing about yesterday's experiences)	Backlash against women who defy stereotypes; an agentic woman (but not an agentic man) was judged as more dominant but less likable and less employable.
Friedman & Sutton (2013)	Newspaper articles concerning civilian deaths arising from the war in Afghanistan were flanked by luxury advertisements (priming conspicuous consumption and, by extension, economic inequality) vs. no advertisements	Increased tolerance of civilian casualties as a result of war among political conservatives (but not liberals).

individuals than others (e.g., see Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Friedman & Sutton, 2013; Mallett, Huntsinger, & Swim, 2011; van der Toorn, Nail, Liviatan, & Jost, in press). Importantly, Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, and Fitzsimons (2011, Study 5) found that whereas system threat caused chronically high system justifiers to bolster the status quo *directly and explicitly* (e.g., by preferring T-shirts emblazoned with American flags and logos such as “U.S. Pride” and “Love It or Get Out”), the system threat manipulation caused low system justifiers to express stronger system justification in more *subtle, indirect ways* (e.g., preferring domestic over foreign T-shirts).

A fifth situational moderator of system justification tendencies is suggested in research by Blanchar and Eidelman (2013), who systematically manipulated the *perceived longevity* of the social system. In one experiment, the researchers represented the intellectual origins of capitalism—as exemplified by Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*—as relatively recent or old with the use of a “subjective timeline” (which mentioned a preponderance of historical events that either preceded or succeeded the publication of Smith’s book). Blanchar and Eidelman demonstrated that the economic system in the United States was perceived by American, British, and Canadian participants as more legitimate—and inequality under capitalism as more justifiable—when the origins of capitalism were presented as significantly older. In a second experiment, they observed that depicting the Indian caste system as especially old caused Indian and American participants to justify inequality under the caste system more strongly. In both studies, the effects of perceived longevity on legitimation of inequality were mediated by scores on an economic system justification scale. We expect that future research will continue to identify situational and dispositional factors that affect the strength of system justification motivation.

Postulate IV

System justification addresses existential motives to manage threat, epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty, and relational motives to coordinate social relationships. Thus, dispositional and situa-

tional variability in such needs will affect the strength of system justification motivation. Jost and Hunyady (2005) proposed that the tendency to defend, bolster, and justify the societal status quo is appealing psychologically because it addresses fundamental needs or motives that all humans possess to varying degrees. These include *epistemic* motives to attain certainty, consistency, and cognitive closure as well as *existential* motives to manage threat, insecurity, and distress (see also Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003). To this list, Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin (2008) added *relational* motives to coordinate social relationships and achieve a sense of shared reality with others. Thus, system justification theory holds that chronic and temporary increases in epistemic, existential, and relational motivation will be associated with stronger preferences for system-justifying ideologies and outcomes (and stronger rejection of system-challenging ideologies and outcomes).

With regard to epistemic motivation, Jost et al. (2012) randomly assigned some college students to write about the experience of being uncertain and others to write about a control topic (watching television). Afterward, all students read a newspaper article about the U.S. government’s bailout of Wall Street firms following the banking crisis of 2008 and indicated their willingness to engage in both disruptive and nondisruptive forms of protest (i.e., occupying a building and signing a letter of protest, respectively). Jost et al. (2012) found that students who were assigned to the high-uncertainty salience condition (as well as those who scored high rather than low on economic system justification) were less likely to support disruptive protest, in comparison with students assigned to the control condition. With respect to nondisruptive protest tendencies (i.e., support for a letter-writing campaign), students who were high in economic system justification were unwilling to engage in protest whether or not uncertainty was made salient, whereas participants who were low in economic system justification were less likely to support the campaign under high (vs. low) uncertainty salience.

Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, and Laurin (2008) discovered that depriving individuals of a sense of predictability and control led them to embrace

external systems and authorities such as “God and the government” and to protect their legitimacy and stability more enthusiastically. The idea undergirding this research program is that it is psychologically aversive to believe that the world in which we live operates randomly or haphazardly. To alleviate such feelings, people seek to increase their faith in social systems that compensate for the lack of personal control (see Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010).

Day, Kay, Holmes, and Napier (2011) demonstrated that when individuals are led to believe that close relationships constitute a means of control over happiness, stability, and order, they more enthusiastically endorse a “committed relationship ideology,” in which committed relationships are viewed as having few downsides and providing “the ultimate answer” to life’s problems. Interestingly, causing individuals to question this ideology increased their scores on a general measure of system justification, suggesting that a hydraulic relationship may exist between support for the overarching social system and the ideologies that justify specific aspects of the system (see also Wakslak et al., 2011).

A number of studies, including some that have already been mentioned (see Table 12.2), show that existential motivation is linked to the expression of system justification. For instance, Ullrich and Cohrs (2007) demonstrated that increasing the salience of terrorism caused German respondents to endorse system-justifying statements more enthusiastically. Exposure to death primes and horror films similarly lead people to endorse more conservative, system-justifying beliefs, opinions, and labels (e.g., Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011). Dispositional anxiety and sensitivity to fear and threat also are correlated with the holding of politically conservative attitudes (e.g., Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007; Oxley et al., 2008). Some studies even suggest that conservatives are more perceptually vigilant (at an automatic level) than liberals when it comes to attending to potentially threatening stimuli, such as words, images, and faces (e.g., Carraro, Castelli, & Macchiella, 2011; Shook & Clay, 2011; Vigil, 2010).

In terms of relational motives, Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, and Hardin (2005) found that when female (but not male) participants were primed with

a motive to affiliate before interacting with someone who seemed to endorse traditional system-justifying beliefs about women, they rated themselves as possessing more stereotypically feminine attributes. Similarly, Cheung, Noel, and Hardin (2011) showed that the threat of social exclusion caused low-status participants to “tune” their own attitudes in a system-justifying direction, so that they more closely matched their higher status interaction partner. These findings are broadly consistent with those of Jost et al. (2008), who observed that college students who were asked to write an essay about their more conservative (vs. more liberal) parent subsequently scored higher on a general system justification measure.

The notion that system justification serves relational (as well as epistemic and existential) needs may help to explain why there are such strong social norms and pressures against criticizing one’s country, complaining about discrimination, contradicting role-related stereotypes and expectations, and participating in protest or social activism (e.g., see Carvallo & Pelham, 2006; Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2007; Eliezer & Major, 2012; Garcia, Reser, Amo, Redersdorff, & Branscombe, 2005; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012).

The full “multimotive” model suggested by Postulate IV has been tested most comprehensively in an online survey conducted by Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012) using dispositional (i.e., individual difference) measures of epistemic, existential, and relational motives. They found that the personal need for cognition (i.e., the tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity) was associated negatively with economic system justification, whereas death anxiety and the need to share reality were associated positively with economic system justification. Economic system justification, in turn, mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational needs on support for the Tea Party (a pro-business movement seeking to restore America’s “traditional values”) and opposition to Occupy Wall Street (a movement dedicated to shifting the balance of political and economic power in a more egalitarian direction). The pattern of results is illustrated graphically in Figure 12.1. Hennes and colleagues observed that system justification also mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational needs

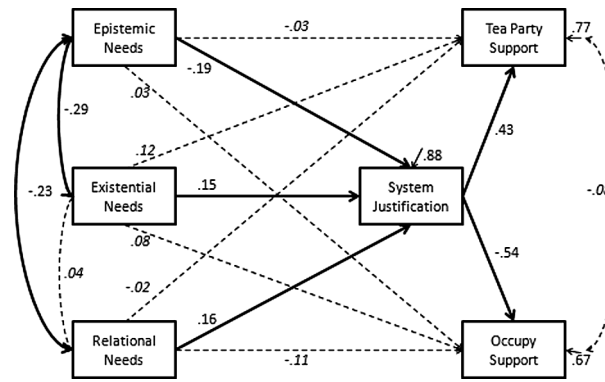


FIGURE 12.1. Path model illustrating the mediation by economic system justification of epistemic, existential, and relational needs on attitudes toward the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements. Numerical entries are standardized regression coefficients for the full model. Broken lines indicate nonsignificant paths ($p > .05$). 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.

on various public policy preferences, including opposition to health care and immigration reform, the building of a mosque near Ground Zero, and the notion that global warming is occurring and is caused by human activity.

The fact that system justification addresses a set of basic epistemic, existential, and relational needs makes it a potentially powerful motivational force. In other words, system justification may exhibit the motivational property of multifinality, which Kruglanski et al. (2002) paraphrased as the principle of hitting “many birds with one stone.” There is also reason to think that system justification exhibits the property of equifinality, which is epitomized by the suggestion that “all roads lead to Rome”; this brings us to the next postulate.

Postulate V

There are several possible means by which the system can be justified. The means of attaining the system justification goal include, but are not limited to, explicit endorsement of belief systems and ideologies (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005); stereotyping, discrimination, and social judgment (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2005; Kay et al., 2005; Kuang & Liu, 2012); legitimization of and deference to authorities and institutions (Shepherd & Kay, 2012; van der Toorn, Feinberg, et al., in press); rationalization, denial, and minimization of system-level problems (Feygina et al., 2010;

Kay et al., 2002; Laurin et al., 2010, 2012); and “injunctification,” that is, coming to believe that what “is” is what “ought” to be (Kay et al., 2009). Some evidence suggests that these means (and others) are more or less substitutable for one another.

That is, once the system justification motive is active, individuals may engage in whatever means are available or accessible to defend, justify, and bolster the status quo. For instance, Jost et al. (2010) found that participants who were exposed to system criticism responded by scoring higher on system justification in whichever domain they were asked about (i.e., economic or political), in comparison with those who were not exposed to system criticism. This does not mean that individuals are indifferent when it comes to the *means* of justifying the system (or which system they are justifying). As noted previously, Cutright et al. (2011) discovered that individuals who were chronically low in system justification preferred to support the system indirectly following exposure to system criticism, whereas those who were chronically high in system justification pursued a more direct and explicit means of defending the system.

Wakslak et al. (2011) observed the phenomenon of “spreading rationalization,” whereby a criticism or threat directed at one type of social system (or one aspect of the status quo) causes individuals to defend and bolster additional systems (or other aspects of the status quo). For instance, high school

students who were exposed to criticism of a small-scale social system (i.e., the reigning social clique in their high school) scored higher on system justification with respect to the high school system and the nation as a whole. When the students were exposed to criticism of the national system, they also justified both small-scale and large-scale systems more strongly (compared with a control condition). This suggests that a threat to the legitimacy or stability of one aspect of the social system stimulates defensive responding on behalf of other parts of the system. Future research is needed to determine when system justification in one domain is likely to *spread* to other domains and when, instead, it is likely to *satisfy* system justification motivation, thereby obviating the need for subsequent bolstering of the status quo (see also Jost et al., 2010).

Postulates VI and VII

For those who are advantaged, system justification is consistent with self and group justification motives. For those who are disadvantaged, however, system justification conflicts with self and group justification motives. According to the sixth postulate, for members of high status or advantaged groups, ego, group, and system justification motives are consistently aligned and mutually reinforcing. As a result, system justification should be associated positively with self-esteem, in-group favoritism, and long-term psychological well-being for those who are advantaged by the status quo. According to the seventh postulate, for members of low-status or disadvantaged groups, system justification is (at least potentially) on a collision course with ego and group justification motives. For those who are disadvantaged by the status quo, then, system justification should be associated negatively with self-esteem, in-group favoritism, and long-term psychological well-being (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; see also Harding & Sibley, 2013). In fact, system justification frequently leads members of disadvantaged groups to exhibit *out-group* favoritism—as the Japanese participants did in Yoshimura and Hardin’s (2009) experiment when they were reminded of the fact that Japan was subjected to U.S. domination in the aftermath of World War II.

Research focusing on implicit or automatic attitudes—such as studies using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and other methods that decrease social desirability concerns (see Jost et al., 2009)—reveal that substantial numbers of disadvantaged group members (sometimes 50% or more) exhibit implicit biases against their own group and in favor of more advantaged out-group members. These disadvantaged groups include dark-skinned Morenos in Chile (Uhlmann et al. 2002), poor people and the obese in the United States (Rudman et al., 2002), Yale undergraduates who are assigned randomly to low-status versus high-status residential colleges (Lane, Mitchell, & Banaji, 2005), and gays and lesbians (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Racial and ethnic groups that commonly exhibit implicit out-group favoritism include Latinos, Asians, and African Americans. Members of these groups may reject the legitimacy of racial inequality at an explicit level but show fairly clear signs of internalization of inferiority at the implicit level (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2002; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

It has been suggested that implicit out-group favoritism on the part of the disadvantaged may be attributable to “extrapersonal” associations that are “bestowed by the greater society” rather than processes of internalization per se (Olson, Crawford, & Devlin, 2009, p. 1112). This alternative account strikes us less than satisfactory because it depends on a potentially misleading distinction between “intrapersonal” and “extrapersonal” bases of social attitudes. This distinction, if adhered to rigidly, contradicts social psychological wisdom (since at least Allport, 1954) that attitudes are the result of *both* personal and cultural processes (see also Jost et al., 2009). Or, as Nosek and Hansen (2008) put it: “The associations in our heads belong to us” (p. 553)—even if they are in some important respects socially transmitted (see also Livingston, 2002). In any case, the alternative account cannot explain why out-group favoritism on the part of the disadvantaged—if it is truly unrelated to system justification processes—would be correlated positively with the endorsement of system-justifying belief systems, such as opposition to equality and political conservatism (see Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Studies show that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs is associated with lower self-esteem for African Americans but higher self-esteem for European Americans. In addition, system justification is associated with more depression and neuroticism for African Americans (i.e., poorer subjective well-being), but it is associated with less depression and neuroticism for European Americans (Jost & Thompson, 2000; O’Brien & Major, 2005; see also Harding & Sibley, 2013). Pacilli, Taurino, Jost, and van der Toorn (2011) conducted a study of gay men and lesbians in Italy and observed that gay men who scored higher on an Italian translation of Kay and Jost’s (2003) general system justification scale (and those who identified as right wing in terms of political orientation) were more likely to exhibit internalized homophobia (i.e., negative feelings about being gay), which apparently contributed to their conviction that same-sex parents were less competent than heterosexual parents.

Experiments by Calogero and Jost (2011) revealed that exposure to system-justifying stereotypes about women led female (but not male) participants to engage in higher levels of self-objectification, self-surveillance, and body-shame. Intriguingly, women who were especially low in the need for cognitive closure were relatively unaffected by stereotype exposure. It also would appear that, in some cases at least, system-justifying beliefs literally can “get under the skin” of members of disadvantaged groups. Eliezer, Townsend, Sawyer, Major, and Mendes (2011) observed a positive relationship between perceived discrimination and elevated levels of resting blood pressure for women—but only to the extent that they embraced system-justifying beliefs.

Postulate VIII

System justification serves the palliative function of increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect. In a song entitled “The World Isn’t Fair,” Randy Newman (1999) imagines a contemporary conversation with Karl Marx, who surely is “rolling around in his grave.” In ruminating on the persistent injustices of the modern world, Newman sang: “It would depress us, Karl, because we care . . . that the world still isn’t fair.” The idea, which is supported by a great deal of research in social psychology, is that

confronting injustice is psychologically painful (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Lerner, 1980). From a system justification perspective, this is one important reason why people are motivated to come up with excuses and justifications for why things are the way they are. In other words, system justification increases satisfaction with the status quo and, in so doing, serves the (short-term) *palliative* function of increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; see also Harding & Sibley, 2013; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Solak, Jost, Sümer, & Clore, 2012).

Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, and Chen (2007) demonstrated that system-justifying beliefs—whether measured or manipulated through a mind-set-priming technique—do indeed reduce emotional distress, including negative affect, guilt, and “moral outrage,” which is itself a motivational prerequisite for the remediation of injustice. In one study, for instance, priming research participants with “rags-to-riches” (i.e., “anyone can succeed in America”) types of stories led them to express less negative affect and moral outrage in comparison with a control condition. The reduction in moral outrage, in turn, made participants less inclined to help the disadvantaged, measured in terms of their support for soup kitchens, crisis hotlines, and tutoring and job training programs.

In thinking about the palliative function of system justification and the notion that political conservatism is a system-justifying ideology, Napier and Jost (2008) hypothesized that conservatives (or rightists) should report being happier, on average, than liberals (or leftists). They explored this hypothesis using data from the American National Election Studies. Napier and Jost found that even after adjusting for survey respondents’ income, age, marital status, religiosity, and other demographic characteristics, conservatives did indeed score significantly higher than liberals in terms of subjective well-being (i.e., self-reported happiness and life satisfaction). The ideological gap in subjective well-being was attributable to the fact that conservatives were more likely to believe that inequality in society is fair and legitimate (i.e., to endorse system-justifying beliefs). Similar findings have been reported by other researchers (e.g., Brooks, 2012; Choma,

Busseri, & Sadava, 2009; Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012). Indeed, Napier and Jost replicated the basic finding in nine other countries using data from the World Values Survey. The results back up Fiske’s (2010) tongue-in-cheek remark that ideological faith in “[m]eritocracy is not just an American disease” (p. 949).

Taking things a bit further, Napier and Jost (2008) hypothesized that if conservatives are more likely than liberals to justify inequality, then their subjective well-being should have been less affected by rising income inequality in the United States over the past 30 years. To explore this possibility, the researchers plotted the happiness levels of liberals and conservatives against scores on the Gini index (a macroeconomic indicator of income inequality in society), once again adjusting for demographic factors. Results revealed that increasing inequality generally was associated with decreased happiness, but the decrease was significantly steeper for liberals (or leftists), as illustrated in Figure 12.2. Presumably, this is because conservatives benefit more than liberals from the palliative function of system-justifying belief systems. Consistent with Postulates VI and VII, it also appears that even when it comes to the poor, members of ethnic majority groups benefit more from the palliative function of system justification than do members of ethnic minority groups (Rankin, Jost, & Wakslak, 2009).

Harding and Sibley (2013) directly investigated the hypothesis—which had been suggested by Jost and Hunyady (2002)—that those who are disadvantaged by the status quo would experience *short-term benefits* but *long-term costs* associated with system justification. In their first study, which was a large national survey of New Zealanders, Harding and Sibley found that high system justifiers generally reported greater life satisfaction, regardless of whether they were high or low in experiences of harmful treatment. By contrast, low system justifiers who reported being targets of harm (such as threats and attacks) were less satisfied with their lives in comparison with low system justifiers who were low in perceived harm. In a second study, which followed college students over a 1-year period, the researchers observed that system justification appeared to buffer the effects of harmful treatment when these were measured concurrently (as in the first study), but not when life satisfaction was measured 1 year later. Under these circumstances, high system justifiers who experienced harmful treatment in society were less satisfied with their lives 1 year later, adjusting for life satisfaction during the initial period (compared with high system justifiers who experienced no harmful treatment and low system justifiers who experienced harmful treatment). The authors concluded that

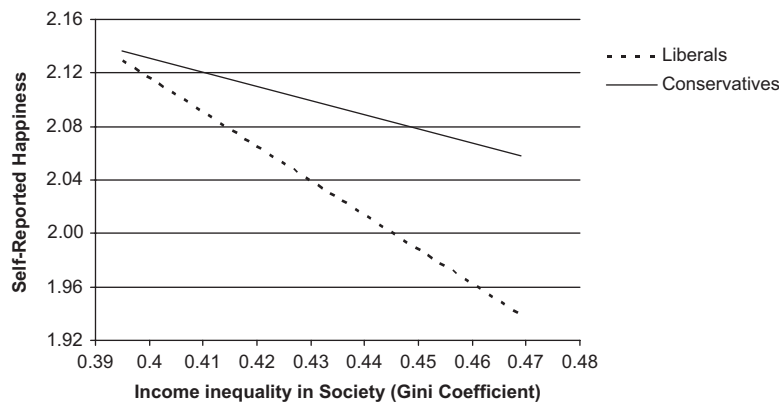


FIGURE 12.2. The relationship between income inequality in society and self-reported happiness as a function of ideological endorsement. From “Why Are Conservatives Happier Than Liberals?” by J. L. Napier and J. T. Jost, 2008, *Psychological Science*, 19, p. 571. Copyright 2008 by the Association for Psychological Science. Adapted with permission.

people who experience active harm from others in society and who also believe that society is fair and just, may exist in a state of unresolved dissonance or internal ideological conflict, which over time, should result in experiences of active harm having a stronger negative effect on the assessment of quality of life down the track. (p. 14)

The palliative function also implies that individuals who engage in system justification are unlikely to participate in protest or other forms of collective action aimed at challenging or reforming the status quo. Several studies illustrate this pattern of results. For instance, Jost et al. (2012) showed that system justification motivation, whether measured as an individual difference variable or manipulated as a situational factor, was associated negatively with support for protest against sources of disadvantage in three studies involving U.S. college students, Greek participants in a May Day demonstration, and the members of a British teachers’ union. In the last context, the dampening effect of system justification on (nondisruptive) protest was mediated by a reduction in group-based anger. Thus, even among political activists, it would appear that system justification reduces negative affect (including moral outrage) and that this plays a significant role in undermining willingness to protest.

Osborne and Sibley (2013) analyzed data from a national probability sample of New Zealanders and found that endorsement of system-justifying beliefs was associated with decreased psychological distress as well as decreased support for political mobilization. Furthermore, the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs dampened the effects of (a) individual relative deprivation (measured in terms of personal economic frustration) on psychological distress and satisfaction with one’s standard of living, and (b) group relative deprivation (measured in terms of economic frustration on behalf of one’s ethnic group) on perceived ethnic group discrimination and political mobilization (i.e., support for protest activity on behalf of one’s group).

In the context of gender relations, Becker and Wright (2011) demonstrated that women in

Germany who were exposed to hostile, overt forms of sexism tended to express more negative affect, to state that there are few advantages to being a woman, and to score lower on a German translation of Jost and Kay’s (2005) gender-specific system justification scale. By contrast, exposure to more subtle, “benevolent” forms of sexism caused these women to express more positive affect, to state that there are advantages to being a woman, and to score higher on gender-specific system justification. Whereas exposure to hostile sexism increased women’s support for collective action directed at feminist goals (such as equal pay for equal work), exposure to benevolent sexism decreased their support for feminist action, and these effects were statistically mediated by gender-specific system justification.

Postulate IX

Although system justification motivation typically leads people to resist social change, they should be more willing to embrace change when it is perceived as (a) inevitable or extremely likely to occur, and/or (b) congruent with the preservation of the social system and its ideals. The ninth and final postulate refers to prospects for social change. Typically, system justification motivation leads people to refrain from supporting or participating in social change, as we already have seen (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Wakslak et al., 2007). At the same time, it follows from the theory that people would be more willing to embrace change when it is perceived as (a) inevitable or extremely likely to occur, and/or (b) congruent with the preservation of at least some aspects of the social system and its ideals.

The first possibility was addressed by Laurin et al. (2012), who demonstrated that individuals are likely to react against unfavorable changes to the status quo (such as new restrictions on personal freedom) when these changes are only somewhat or even very likely (but not certain) to occur, but they tend to justify the new policies if they believe that they *definitely* will be implemented. For instance, Americans were informed that proscriptions against the use of cell phones while driving were somewhat likely, very likely, or definitely going to be implemented in the United States. When the changes were

proposed (but not definite), respondents stated that it was more important for them to be able to text and talk while driving—compared with a control condition in which they were told nothing about the policy. By contrast, when they believed that the restriction was inevitable, they rationalized it, stating that it was not important at all for them to use their cell phones while driving. None of these differences were observed when U.S. participants believed that the policy changes would be implemented in India.

The very last possibility suggested in Postulate IX—that people would be more accepting of social change when it is seen as congruent with the goals and ideals of the system—was explored by Feygina, Jost, and Goldsmith (2010) in the context of research on environmental attitudes. To begin with, they replicated and extended previous studies of public opinion showing that conservatives are more likely than liberals to deny the existence of anthropogenic (i.e., human-caused) climate change (e.g., McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Feygina et al. also found that system justification partially mediated the relationship between political ideology and environmental attitudes, so that heightened system justification tendencies help to explain why conservatives are more likely than liberals to deny global warming and resist proenvironmental initiatives.

These results suggest that high system justifiers are resistant to proenvironmental initiatives (and to changing their own behavior) to the extent that they are motivated to deny or minimize problems associated with the status quo. Feygina et al. (2010) reasoned, however, that it should be possible to harness system justification motivation on behalf of the environment by reframing proenvironmental initiatives as “patriotic” and consistent with the goal of protecting and preserving the “American way of life.” The results of an experimental study confirmed this possibility (Feygina et al., 2010, Study 3). When the need for proenvironmental action was “system sanctioned,” that is, described as congruent rather than incongruent with the preservation of the American system, high system justifiers were more committed to helping the environment and more likely to sign a proenvironmental petition. System-sanctioned appeals (calls for change that are framed as congruent with the extant system) capitalize on system justification motivation—rather than flying in the face of it and instigating system-defensive processes. In some cases, direct forms of

protest that explicitly challenge the system’s legitimacy may be necessary to bring about social change. However, if the goal is to gain popular support for new initiatives—especially among those who are inclined to resist change because of system justification tendencies, then system-sanctioned appeals for change may have the best chance of “going viral,” so to speak. Future work is needed to address in a more sustained and comprehensive manner the social and psychological antecedents, concomitants, and consequences of social change through the lens of system justification theory (see also Gaucher & Jost, 2011; Kay & Friesen, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Oh Karl the world isn't fair,
it isn't and never will be
They tried out your plan,
it brought misery instead
If you'd seen how they worked it,
you'd be glad you were dead
Just like I'm glad I'm living in the land of
the free,
Where the rich just get richer
and the poor you don't ever have to see.
—Randy Newman

System justification theory is distinctive among social psychological theories in postulating a general motivational tendency to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of the societal status quo—but not necessarily at a conscious level of awareness (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Historically speaking, ideas about system justification build on the Marxian concept of false consciousness, except that we propose that human beings are prone—for *psychological* as well as *sociological* reasons—to justify a much wider range of social systems than Marx considered (including, ironically and tragically, the Communist system). This does not mean that, according to the theory, people will *always* or *invariably* engage in system justification, as critics sometimes allege (see Jost, 2011). Differences in the strength of system justification motivation, as we have demonstrated, are

linked both theoretically and empirically to situational and dispositional variability in underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs to attain certainty, security, and social belongingness (e.g., Hennes et al., 2012).

This chapter has summarized the basic tenets (or major postulates) of system justification theory. In highlighting specific areas of investigation, we have identified some especially promising directions for future research. Here we emphasize one more, which has to do with the capacity to generate creative solutions to pressing social problems. To flourish, societies must develop innovative solutions to both predictable and unpredictable types of problems. Yet, in the face of system-level failures, such as those revealed by poverty, racism, gender disparities, and environmental challenges, citizens and policy makers often “double down” on familiar methods and approaches—even when these have proven to be ineffective—rather than generating truly novel solutions.

The failure to come up with innovative solutions to persistent social problems was described vividly by Thomas Homer-Dixon (2002) in his book entitled *The Ingenuity Gap*, which documented an increase in the complexity of social problems and, at the same time, a decrease in the supply of new programs designed to address those problems. Given the powerful and wide-ranging effects of system justification motivation that we have considered throughout this chapter, one can only assume that system justification tendencies will impair creativity when it comes to the solution of social problems. Insofar as calling attention to social problems threatens the legitimacy of the system, it is likely to provoke some to respond defensively, bolstering the status quo while disparaging novel, unfamiliar, or “foreign” solutions that otherwise might hold genuine promise. Future research is needed to address ways of reducing system defensiveness and fostering creativity when it comes to problem solving at the societal level of analysis.

In terms of consequences for the well-being of individuals, we have seen that system justification often is associated with short-term palliative benefits (Jost & Hunyady, 2002) as well as long-term costs—especially for those who are disadvantaged by the status quo (Harding & Sibley, 2013; Jost &

Thompson, 2000; Rankin et al., 2009). Or, to put the same point in a different way, it is psychologically *painful* to face up to the fact that, as Randy Newman (1999) put it, “The world isn’t fair, it isn’t and never will be.”

Stiglitz (2011), for one, has compared U.S. society to “an unjust system without opportunity that has given rise to the conflagrations in the Middle East.” He asked provocatively, “When will it [the conflagration] come to America?” We submit that a satisfying answer to this difficult but important question must take account of the motivational force of system justification—the unexamined preferences that encourage us, subtly or not so subtly, to excuse aspects of the social system, such as the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor and the damage we are inflicting upon the natural environment. In the absence of system justification motivation, circumstances such as these would be expected to inspire citizens to demand a world that is, among other things, more fair and sustainable.

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