Antecedents and Consequences of System-Justifying Ideologies

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ABSTRACT—*According to system justification theory, there is a psychological motive to defend and justify the status quo. There are both dispositional antecedents (e.g., need for closure, openness to experience) and situational antecedents (e.g., system threat, mortality salience) of the tendency to embrace system-justifying ideologies. Consequences of system justification sometimes differ for members of advantaged versus disadvantaged groups, with the former experiencing increased and the latter decreased self-esteem, well-being, and in-group favoritism. In accordance with the palliative function of system justification, endorsement of such ideologies is associated with reduced negative affect for everyone, as well as weakened support for social change and redistribution of resources.*

KEYWORDS—*system justification; ideology; conservatism; status quo*

In the wake of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* ran the following headline: "Nation's Poor Win Election for Nation's Rich" (November 11–17, 2004). The accompanying article contained a fictitious quote from the incredulous winner, President Bush, who observed that "The alliance between the tiny fraction at the top of the pyramid and the teeming masses of mouth-breathers at its enormous base has never been stronger. We have an understanding, them and us. They help us stay rich, and in return, we help them stay poor. No matter what naysayers may think, the system works" (p. 10). For many readers, this parody summarized well the apparent irrationality involved in members of disadvantaged groups' support for conservative ideology and the societal status quo.

The failure of self-interest models to explain ideology and public opinion has led political observers and analysts to search for better explanations. To investigate how and why people accept and maintain the social systems that affect them, we have developed system justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). To date, the theory has shed light on such paradoxical phenomena as working-class conservatism (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), increased commitment to institutional authorities and meritocratic ideology among the poor (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003), idealization of the capitalist system (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003), and minority-group members' conscious and unconscious preferences for members of majority groups (Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002).

System justification theory holds that people are motivated to justify and rationalize the way things are, so that existing social, economic, and political arrangements tend to be perceived as fair and legitimate.[1] We postulate that there is, as with virtually all other psychological motives (e.g., self-enhancement, cognitive consistency), both (a) a general motivational tendency to rationalize the status quo and (b) substantial variation in the expression of that tendency due to situational and dispositional factors. Thus, members of disadvantaged as well as advantaged groups would be expected to engage in system justification (at least to some degree) even at considerable cost to themselves and to fellow group members.

TYPES OF SYSTEM-JUSTIFYING IDEOLOGIES

There are a number of ideologies that people adopt to justify the status quo in our society. Over the years, researchers have identified several distinct but related system-justifying ideologies, including the Protestant work ethic, meritocratic ideology, fair market ideology, economic system justification, belief in a just world, power distance, social dominance orientation, opposition to equality, right-wing authoritarianism, and political conservatism. These ideologies are listed and described in Table 1; some focus purely on social and cultural issues, whereas others concern economic matters. The fact that these belief

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[1]Unfortunately, space constraints prohibit discussion of how system justification theory differs from cognitive dissonance, just world, social identity, social dominance, and terror management theories, but interested readers are directed elsewhere (esp. Jost et al., 2004, pp. 881–888, 911–912; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, pp. 114–118).

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TABLE 1

System-Justifying Ideologies, Their Descriptive Contents, and Illustrative References

Ideology	Descriptive Content	Sample illustrative reference(s)
Protestant work ethic	People have a moral responsibility to work hard and avoid leisure activities; hard work is a virtue and is its own reward.	Jost & Hunyady (2002)
Meritocratic ideology	The system rewards individual ability and motivation, so success is an indicator of personal deservingness.	Jost, Pelham, et al. (2003)
Fair market ideology	Market-based procedures and outcomes are not only efficient but are inherently fair, legitimate, and just.	Jost, Blount, et al. (2003)
Economic system justification	Economic inequality is natural, inevitable, and legitimate; economic outcomes are fair and deserved.	Jost & Thompson (2000)
Belief in a just world	People typically get what they deserve and deserve what they get; with regard to outcomes, what "is" is what "ought" to be.	Jost & Burgess (2000); Lerner (1980)
Power distance	Inequality is a natural and desirable feature of the social order; large power differences are acceptable and legitimate.	Jost, Blount, et al. (2003)
Social dominance orientation	Some groups are superior to others; group-based hierarchy is a good thing.	Jost & Thompson (2000); Sidanius & Pratto (1999)
Opposition to equality	Increased social and economic equality is unattainable and undesirable; it would be detrimental for society.	Jost & Thompson (2000); Kluegel & Smith (1986)
Right-wing authoritarianism	People should follow conventional traditions and established authorities and stop getting rebellious ideas.	Altemeyer (1998); Jost, Glaser, et al. (2003)
Political conservatism	Traditional institutions in society should be preserved; social and economic inequality is acceptable and natural.	Jost, Glaser, et al. (2003)

systems reliably correlate with one another—at least in Western capitalist societies—suggests that they may serve a similar ideological function, namely to legitimize existing social arrangements (e.g., Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In this article, we will review evidence indicating that these system-justifying ideologies (a) share similar cognitive and motivational antecedents and (b) produce similar consequences for individuals, groups, and systems.

Under a dramatically different socio-economic system than in North America and Western Europe (a system such as communism, for example), the contents of system-justifying ideologies would differ, but the social and psychological processes would be similar. That is, we expect that many of the antecedents of procapitalist ideology in the West would be the same as antecedents of procommunist ideology under a communist regime (see Kossowska & van Hiel, 2003). In both contexts, people tend to anchor on the status quo and are prone to exaggerating the fairness and legitimacy of their own system. Because most of the research to date on the antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies has been conducted in Western, capitalist societies, this is the context that provides the empirical foundation for our conclusions.

ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION

Why would people legitimize and support social arrangements that conflict with their own self-interest? There are hedonic benefits to minimizing the unpredictable, unjust, and oppressive aspects of social reality. As Lerner (1980) put it, "People want to

and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future" (p. 14). But there are also social and political costs of system justification, insofar as people who rationalize the status quo are less likely to improve upon it. Many people who lived under feudalism, the Crusades, slavery, communism, apartheid, and the Taliban believed that their systems were imperfect but morally defensible and, in many cases, better than the alternatives they could envision. Popular support helped prolong those regimes, much as it helps prolong our current system. In this section, we first consider in greater detail the factors (both dispositional and situational) that make system-justifying ideologies appealing. Then we summarize the ramifications of these ideologies—both favorable and unfavorable—for individuals, groups, and the system as a whole.

Antecedents of System Justification

As with many psychological tendencies, there are both dispositional and situational sources of variation in the expression of system justification. Several are listed in Table 2. People who possess heightened needs to manage uncertainty and threat are especially likely to embrace conservative, system-justifying ideologies (including right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and economic system justification). More specifically, uncertainty avoidance; intolerance of ambiguity; needs for order, structure, and closure; perception of a dangerous world; and fear of death are all positively associated with the endorsement of these ideologies. Cognitive complexity and openness to experience are negatively associated with their

TABLE 2

Some Cognitive-Motivational Antecedents of System-Justifying Ideologies

Antecedent	Conceptual/operational definition
Needs for order, structure, and closure (+)	Preference for a decision-making environment that is orderly, well structured, and unambiguous; a desire to make decisions quickly and to stick with them
Openness to experience (−)	An orientation that is creative, curious, flexible, and sensation seeking; an affinity for situations involving novelty, diversity, and change
Perception of a dangerous world (+)	Heightened sensitivity to potential dangers in the social environment, including threats of violence, crime, terrorism, and evildoing
Death anxiety/mortality salience (+)	Existential awareness of and fear associated with the prospect of one's own death; anxiety arising from mortality concerns
System instability and threat (+)	Actual or perceived threat to the legitimacy or stability of the social, economic, or political system; an attack (symbolic or material) on the status quo

Note. (+) Indicates that the variable is positively associated with the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies; (−) indicates that it is negatively associated with system justification.

endorsement (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003). There is a good match between needs to reduce uncertainty and threat and system justification, because preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar while rejecting the uncertain prospect of social change. For many people, the devil they know seems less threatening and more legitimate than the devil they don't.

There are other dispositional findings that suggest a motivational basis to system justification. Jost, Blount, et al. (2003) found that self-deception (measured as an individual difference variable) predicts endorsement of fair market ideology and support for capitalism. Scores on the fair market ideology scale—operationally defined as the tendency to believe that market-based procedures and outcomes are inherently fair and legitimate—are moderately to strongly correlated with endorsement of other system-justifying ideologies, including conservatism, opposition to equality, right-wing authoritarianism, belief in a just world, and economic system justification (which also tend to be correlated with one another). The observation that self-deception and feelings of threat are associated with the degree of system justification indicates that there is a motivational (or "hot") component to otherwise "cold" judgments concerning the legitimacy of political and economic institutions.

With regard to situational variables, the appeal of conservative, system-justifying beliefs is enhanced under conditions of high system threat and mortality salience (e.g., Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Landau, et al., 2004). Our experiments demonstrate that threats to the legitimacy of the social system lead people to increase their use of stereotypes to justify inequality between groups (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002) and—especially if they are high in self-deception—to defend the capitalist status quo more vigorously (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003). The fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks simultaneously evoked mortality salience and system threat may help to explain why they precipitated relatively strong increases (among liberals as well as conservatives) in patriotism and support for the Bush administration and its policies. In general, threats to the system—as long as they fall short of toppling the status quo—lead people to bolster existing arrangements by endorsing system-justifying ideologies. Experiments by Kay, Jimenez, and Jost (2002) suggest that, when regime change seems inevitable, people will begin to rationalize the new arrangements almost immediately.

Consequences of System Justification

From a social psychological point of view, there are both advantages and disadvantages of engaging in system justification (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002). In Table 3 we have listed some of the consequences for individuals, for groups, and for the social system as a whole. There is evidence that, at the individual level, system-justifying beliefs and ideologies serve the palliative function of decreasing negative affect and increasing positive affect and satisfaction with one's situation (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Studies by Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, and Chen (2005) further demonstrate that endorsement of system justification is associated with reductions in moral outrage, guilt (especially but not exclusively among the advantaged), and frustration (especially but not exclusively among the disadvantaged).

At the same time, however, members of disadvantaged groups are faced with a potential conflict between needs to justify the status quo and competing motives to enhance their own self-esteem and group status. Consequently, members of disadvantaged groups (such as blacks) who reject egalitarian alternatives to the status quo tend to suffer in terms of subjective well-being as indexed by levels of self-esteem and depression (Jost & Thompson, 2000). This conflict is not present for members of advantaged groups, who have no problem reconciling the desire to see the system as fair and just with the desire to see themselves and their fellow group members in favorable terms.

There are also important consequences of system justification for attitudes toward social groups. To the extent that they endorse system-justifying ideologies, members of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups tend to perpetuate the status quo by

TABLE 3

Several Consequences of Endorsement of System-Justifying Ideologies for Members of Advantaged and Disadvantaged Groups

Variable	Operational definition(s)	Consequences of system justification for advantaged	Consequences of system justification for disadvantaged
Positive and negative affect	Self-report ratings of (a) happiness, satisfaction, contentment, and general positive affect; and (b) frustration, anger, guilt, shame, discomfort, and general negative affect	Increased positive affect, decreased negative affect	Increased positive affect, decreased negative affect
Self-esteem, subjective well-being	Scores on self-report measures of individual self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism	Increased self-esteem, subjective well-being	Decreased self-esteem, subjective well-being
In-group versus out-group favoritism	Favorability of (implicit and explicit) attitudes toward one's own group relative to the favorability of attitudes toward other groups	Increased in-group favoritism	Increased out-group favoritism (decreased in-group favoritism)
Perceived legitimacy of authorities and institutions	Trust and approval of the government, support for restricting criticism of the government, belief in the fairness of the economic system	Increased perceptions of legitimacy	Increased perceptions of legitimacy
Support for social change and redistribution of resources	Support for policies of redistribution in educational and employment contexts; willingness to support community service programs to help the disadvantaged	Decreased support for social change	Decreased support for social change

evaluating the advantaged group more favorably than the disadvantaged group on implicit (unconscious) as well as explicit (conscious) measures. Evidence summarized by Jost et al. (2004) indicates that acceptance of system-justifying ideologies (including the belief in a just world, economic system justification, social dominance orientation, and political conservatism) is associated with (a) increased in-group favoritism among members of advantaged groups (such as whites, Northerners, and heterosexuals), and (b) increased out-group favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups (such as blacks, Southerners, and homosexuals; see Fig. 1).

In addition, there are clear consequences of system justification for the perceived legitimacy and stability of the overarching social system. Survey research by Jost, Pelham, et al. (2003) suggests that motives to rationalize the status quo may lead those who suffer the most under current circumstances to defend existing authorities and institutions, to support limitations on rights to criticize the government, and to imbue the economic system with legitimacy. Work by Jost, Blount, et al. (2003) showed that endorsement of fair market ideology was associated with the tendency to minimize the seriousness of ethical scandals involving business corporations.

Finally, Wakslak et al. (2005) found that increased system justification (either in terms of ideological endorsement or the temporary activation of a Horatio Alger "rags to riches" mindset) undermines support for the redistribution of resources and the desire to help the disadvantaged by alleviating negative emotional states. That is, system justification leads to a significant reduction in emotional distress, both in general and with respect to the particular affective states of moral outrage, guilt, and

frustration. Because moral outrage inspires efforts to remedy injustice and participate in social change, the lessening of moral outrage triggered by system justification ultimately contributes to a withdrawal of support for social change.

CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from the research we have summarized is of man as an "ideological animal." Although there are im-
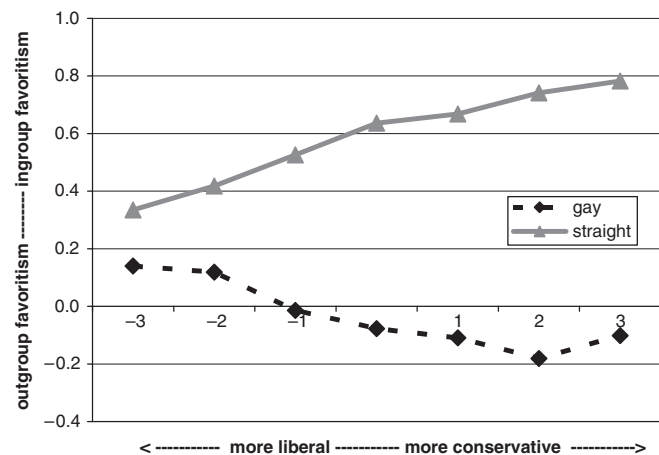

Fig. 1. Implicit in- and out-group favoritism as a function of endorsement of conservative versus liberal ideologies among gay ($n = 3,264$) and straight ($n = 14,038$) respondents. Endorsement of conservative ideology was associated with increased in-group favoritism among straight respondents but with decreased in-group favoritism (and increased outgroup favoritism) among gay respondents. Similar results were obtained for explicit measures of favoritism as well as for racial comparisons (black vs. white). Adapted from Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004).

portant situational and dispositional sources of variability in the system-justification tendency, most people possess at least some motivation to see the social, economic, and political arrangements that affect them as fair and legitimate. We will end by mentioning some practical implications and directions for future research.

Practical Implications

It is often assumed that liberal and left-wing parties enjoy a "natural advantage" in democratic political systems over conservative, right-wing parties because the poor outnumber the rich. This is derived from the notion that ideologies are rationally adopted according to economic and political self-interest. In this article, we have reviewed evidence that ideological endorsement is a product of motivated social cognition rather than "cold logic." At least two practical consequences follow for political parties and leaders in the U.S. system.

First, although liberals may possess weaker needs for system justification than conservatives in general, even liberals want to feel good about most aspects of their own system. Thus, liberals (as well as conservatives) value patriotism; trust and respect most authorities; and believe that democracy and capitalism are the only acceptable political and economic forms, respectively. However, because liberals are more open than conservatives are to modest change (reform) in the system, they consistently leave themselves open to political charges that they are (a) not supportive enough of the current system (i.e., unpatriotic, nontraditional, unconventional), or (b) the same as conservatives, only weaker (i.e., "Republican lite").

Second, the political advantages associated with conservative, system-justifying agendas may be especially pronounced under conditions of uncertainty and threat. This may be the case even if conservative politicians are themselves responsible for increasing levels of threat. Analysis of public opinion data, for example, indicates that President Bush's approval ratings increased after each incident in which terror alert levels were raised during his first term.

Future Research

In addition to identifying antecedents and consequences of system justification across time and place, we need to make further progress on disentangling the various cognitive and motivational mechanisms involved in justifying the status quo. In this article, we have focused on conscious endorsement of ideologies, but there are unconscious mechanisms as well. Stereotypes, for example, can provide support for existing forms of intergroup relations whether they are consciously endorsed or not. Our research suggests that even incidental exposure to complementary stereotypes—in which members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups are seen as possessing both strengths and weaknesses—increases the perception that society is fair and just. In future work, it would be useful to determine whether

the system-justifying potential of specific stereotype contents (e.g., Southerners are "poor but honest," blacks are "aggressive but athletic," and professors are "smart but absentminded") can explain their emergence and popularity.

In this article, we have reviewed evidence suggesting that there are dispositional and situational sources of variability in the individual's need for system justification and that this need may be satisfied through the endorsement of different ideologies (as well as through other means, including stereotyping). These qualities of flexibility and substitutability of means suggest that system justification may operate as a goal. If so, it may exhibit other goal-like properties, such as persistence and resumption following interruption. We expect that the strength of an individual's motivation to restore the system's legitimacy following system threat would steadily increase until the goal is attained and that interruption of goal pursuit would lead people to redouble their system-justification efforts. Experiments directly investigating these possibilities would shed valuable light on the motivational dynamics of system-justification processes.

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