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Debate

A quarter century of system justification theory: Questions, answers, criticisms, and societal applications

John T. Jost*

New York University, New York, NY, 10003, USA

A theory of system justification was proposed 25 years ago by Jost and Banaji (1994, Br. J. Soc. Psychol., 33, 1) in the *British Journal of Social Psychology* to explain 'the participation by disadvantaged individuals and groups in negative stereotypes of themselves' and the phenomenon of outgroup favouritism. The scope of the theory was subsequently expanded to account for a much wider range of outcomes, including appraisals of fairness, justice, legitimacy, deservingness, and entitlement; spontaneous and deliberate social judgements about individuals, groups, and events; and full-fledged political and religious ideologies. According to system justification theory, people are motivated (to varying degrees, depending upon situational and dispositional factors) to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of existing social, economic, and political systems. Engaging in system justification serves the palliative function of increasing satisfaction with the status quo and addresses underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord. This article summarizes the major tenets of system justification theory, reviews some of the empirical evidence supporting it, answers new (and old) questions and criticisms, and highlights areas of societal relevance and directions for future research.

Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV,

And you think you're so clever and classless and free. . ..

(John Lennon, 'Working Class Hero')

Learning to love the questions

A theory of system justification was proposed by Jost and Banaji (1994) in a special issue of the *British Journal of Social Psychology* (*BJSP*) devoted to the structure and functions of social stereotyping. In that article, which is now 'celebrating' its 25th anniversary, we conjectured that in addition to ego-justifying and group-justifying tendencies to defend and rationalize the interests and esteem of the self and the ingroup, respectively, people exhibit *system*-justifying tendencies to defend and rationalize existing social, economic, and political arrangements – sometimes even at the expense of individual and collective self-interest. Specifically, we felt that existing theories in social psychology did not

*Correspondence should be addressed to John T. Jost, Department of Psychology, New York University, Meyer Building, 6 Washington Place, Room 610, New York, NY 10003, USA (email: john.jost@nyu.edu).

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provide an entirely satisfying account of 'the participation by disadvantaged individuals and groups in negative stereotypes of themselves' (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 1) and the related phenomenon of outgroup favouritism, whereby '[s]ubordinate groups like black Americans, South African Bantus, the Mayans of Guatemala, and the lower castes of India either do, or until recently did, derogate or look down on the in-group and show positive attitudes toward the depriving out-group' (Brown, 1986, p. 558).

In proposing system justification theory, we took seriously – perhaps more seriously than the authors themselves – two critiques of social identity theory wielded by Hewstone and Ward (1985) and Hinkle and Brown (1990). Both argued that existing approaches to intergroup relations – including that of Tajfel and Turner (1979) – failed to provide an adequate account of outgroup favouritism (see Jost & Banaji, 1994, for details). To help fill the void, we turned to socialist-feminist analyses of the concept of 'false consciousness', which was defined by Cunningham (1987) as the holding of 'false beliefs that sustain one's own oppression' (p. 255). To me, these ideas offered a promising and heretofore unexplored direction in the empirical social psychological literature (see also Jost, 1995; Jost, Sapolsky, & Nam, 2018).

From the very start, the research goal was to synthesize and unify two distinct theoretical traditions – one coming from philosophy and social theory in the intellectual heritage of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Catharine MacKinnon, and Jon Elster and the other coming from social psychologists such as Kurt Lewin, Gordon Allport, Henri Tajfel, Morton Deutsch, Leon Festinger, Melvin Lerner, Serge Moscovici, William J. McGuire, Alice Eagly, John Turner, Susan Fiske, and many others (see Figure 1). The term 'system justification' was inspired by a single line from a book by Kluegel and Smith (1986), who made reference to 'certain Marxist theories that assume working-class people will come to recognize the *contradictions between their self-interests and their system-justifying beliefs*' (p. 15, emphasis added).

The *BJSP* article grew out of a term paper that I submitted for a doctoral seminar at Yale University on stereotyping and prejudice taught by Mahzarin Banaji (see Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Mahzarin's familiarity with the caste system in India may have led her to

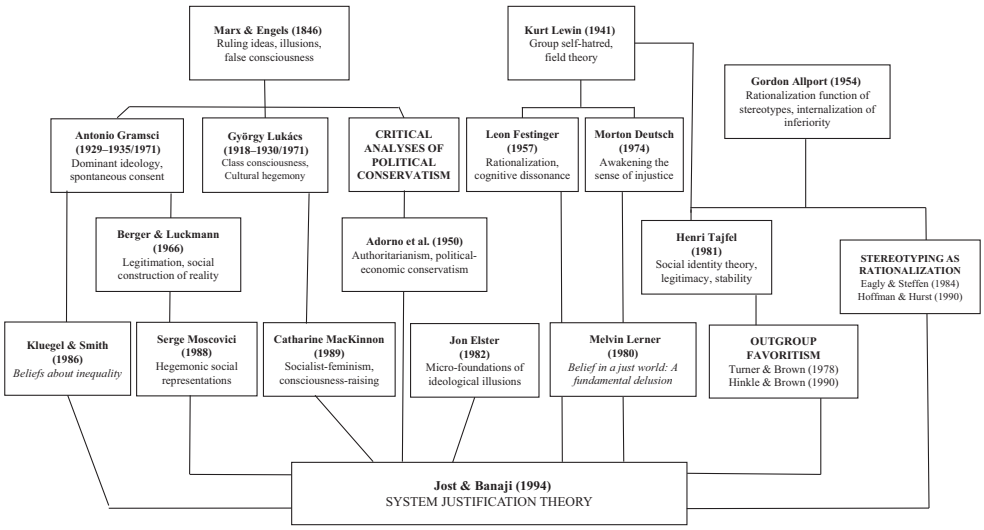


Figure 1. An intellectual genealogy of system justification theory (adapted from Jost & van der Toorn, 2012, Figure 42.1).

sympathize with the basic argument, despite her misgivings about the Marxian origins of the concept of false consciousness – a concept that struck me (then as now) as an indispensable one for the social and behavioural sciences (Jost, 1995; see also Lukes, 2011).[1] One of the guiding notions was that the *contents* of many familiar social stereotypes could be explained better by an ideological process of legitimizing inequality and exploitation than by the then-dominant 'cognitive miser' theory of stereotypes as heuristic energy-saving devices (see also Jost & Hamilton, 2005).

The most distinctive aspect of our argument, which was not clearly expressed in the writings of any of the theory's many influential predecessors, was the proposal that even members of disadvantaged groups would – for psychological reasons – *want* to believe that the existing social system is legitimate and justified. Perhaps Gramsci came closest when he wrote that: 'the great mass of people hesitate and lose heart when they think of what a radical change might bring. . .. They can only imagine the present being torn to pieces, and fail to perceive the new order which is possible' (quoted in Fiori, 1973, pp. 106–107). System justification theory seeks to explain not only resistance to change, which was also a primary goal of Lewin's (1947) field theory (see Jost, 2015), but also the occurrence of false consciousness from a social, cognitive, motivational perspective – to investigate it empirically as a psychological process and not merely as a sociological product or tool of literary criticism (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Like a great many other social critics, John Lennon observed that many cultural institutions are set up to persuade us that – as a society – we are 'clever and classless and free'. In addition, I believe that there are psychological factors that render us more persuadable than would be the case if we were (or could be) ideologically neutral about the social system. In other words, 'top-down' processes of elite communication (the 'discursive superstructure') necessarily meet up – or interact – with 'bottom-up' psychological needs and interests (the 'motivational substructure'), so that system-justifying messages find their audiences and vice versa (see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009).

Initially, system justification theory focused specifically on stereotyping, prejudice, and outgroup favouritism (Jost, 2001), but it was subsequently expanded to account for a much wider range of outcomes, including appraisals of fairness, justice, legitimacy, deservingness, and entitlement (Brandt & Reyna, 2013; Jost, 1997; Jost & Major, 2001; O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012; van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011); attributions and explanations for poverty and inequality (Ali, Ohls, Parker, & Walker, 2018; Durrheim, Jacobs, & Dixon, 2014; Godfrey & Wolf, 2016); spontaneous and deliberate social inferences and judgements about individuals and groups (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Monteith, Burns, Rupp, & Mihalec-Adkins, 2016); attitudes and opinions about social, economic, and political issues (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003a; Kay *et al.*, 2009; Mallett, Huntsinger, & Swim, 2011; Tan, Liu, Huang, & Zheng, 2017; van der Toorn, Jost, Packer, Noorbaloochi, & Van Bavel, 2017b); rationalizations for certain sociopolitical outcomes or events (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; Laurin, 2018); and full-fledged political and religious ideologies (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003b; Jost *et al.*, 2009, 2014).

Looking back, I find that the whole enterprise started with a set of questions that came to me as I took courses and attended talks not only in social psychology, but also in clinical, cognitive, and developmental psychology, as well as neighbouring disciplines such as

[1] *I share Lovibond's (1989) sense that the epistemological stakes are high: 'To reject [the concept of] 'false consciousness' is to take a large step towards abandoning the politics of Enlightenment modernism. For it means rejecting the view that personal autonomy is to be reached by way of a progressive transcendence of earlier, less adequate cognitive structures' (p. 26).*

philosophy and political science: Why do some women feel they are entitled to lower salaries than men, why do people stay in harmful relationships, and why do some African American children come to believe that white dolls are more attractive and desirable than black dolls? Why do people blame victims of injustice and why do victims of injustice sometimes blame themselves? Why do poor people often oppose the redistribution of wealth? Why do we tolerate political and economic corruption? Why is it so difficult to get people to stand up for themselves and each other, and why do we find personal and social change to be so challenging, even painful? Is there a common denominator here – a hidden factor that connects these seemingly unrelated phenomena? These questions have been with me for over 25 years, and although I am not entirely satisfied with the answers I can provide today, my students, collaborators, colleagues, and I have made significant progress in addressing them. I can only hope that the answers will become clearer and more definitive over the next 25 years. In the meantime, as Rilke (1929/1993) said, you 'have to try to love the questions themselves' (p. 35).

Major tenets of system justification theory

I have already alluded to the first major tenet of system justification theory, namely that people are motivated (often implicitly rather than explicitly) to defend, justify, and bolster aspects of the societal status quo, including existing social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements (Jost *et al.*, 2004). This is an important issue because some accept that system-justifying beliefs and ideologies may be internalized through a passive process of social learning but doubt that people are *motivated* to engage in system justification (Huddy, 2004; Mitchell & Tetlock, 2009; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018a; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001). Initial scepticism was understandable, because we did not directly investigate the motivational basis of system justification processes until several years after the theory was first proposed (Jost *et al.*, 2010; Kay *et al.*, 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2014). The evidence is by now rather strong, it seems to me.

Motivational basis of system justification processes

There are at least five lines of evidence supporting the idea that system justification is a motivated, goal-directed process (Jost *et al.*, 2010): (1) The endorsement of system-justifying beliefs, including beliefs associated with political conservatism, is linked to individual differences in self-deception and motivated social cognition (Jost *et al.*, 2003a, b, 2010; Wojcik, Hovasapian, Graham, Motyl, & Ditto, 2015); (2) people often respond defensively to threats, criticisms, and challenges directed at the overarching social system (Jost *et al.*, 2005; Kay *et al.*, 2005; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007) – unless they have the opportunity to affirm the goodness of the system (Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013; Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Liviatan & Jost, 2014); (3) system-justifying processes exhibit several 'classic' properties of goal pursuit (Jost, Pietrzak, Liviatan, Mandisodza, & Napier, 2007; Jost *et al.*, 2010); (4) people engage in selective, biased information processing to reach system-supporting conclusions (Haines & Jost, 2000; Hennes, Ruisch, Feygina, Monteiro, & Jost, 2016; Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; van der Toorn *et al.*, 2011); and (5) people are willing to expend behavioural effort in order to maintain the legitimacy of the socio-economic system (Ledgerwood *et al.*, 2011). Drawing on several of these ideas, Aaron Kay *et al.* (2009) conducted an

elegant series of experiments documenting a motivated preference to 'see the way things are as the way they should be' (p. 421).

However, this does not mean that people *always* or *invariably* perceive the societal status quo as fair and just, as critics of system justification theory have sometimes alleged (Désert & Leyens, 2006; Huddy, 2004; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Sidanius, Pratto, Van Laar, & Levin, 2004). As with all other motives in psychology, the strength of system justification motivation is expected to vary according to situational and dispositional factors. Through empirical investigations, social psychologists have discovered a number of contextual or situational moderators – we might think of these as 'triggers' of system justification processes (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Kay & Friesen, 2011; Kay & Zanna, 2009). One trigger, already alluded to above, is exposure to system criticism, challenge, and threat. At least 38 experiments published between 2005 and 2017 demonstrate that exposure to system criticism or threat can increase system-justifying responses in a variety of ways (see Table 1). These include complementary stereotypic differentiation of advantaged groups as agentic (but not communal) and disadvantaged groups as communal (but not agentic); backlash against feminists and women who defy gender stereotypes; preferences for domestic over foreign consumer products; and tolerance for civilian casualties during war and decreased support for hate crimes policies among chronically high system-justifiers. In the long term, it stands to reason that critiques of the system are useful and effective in delegitimizing the way things are and bringing about a desire for social change, but in the short term, they often elicit defensiveness and resistance.[2]

There are other moderators of system justification as well. People are more accepting of unwelcome social and political outcomes – such as restrictions on their freedoms and various forms of disadvantageous inequality – when these are perceived as *inevitable* or *inescapable* (Kay *et al.*, 2002; Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). For instance, Kristin Laurin (2018) demonstrated that US citizens – Democrats and Republicans alike – evaluated Donald Trump's election more favourably 1 week after his inauguration, compared to just 1 week before. Another moderator of system justification is perceived longevity. Blanchar and Eidelman (2013) found that people were more supportive of the caste system in India – and the capitalist system in the United States and the United Kingdom – when they were made to feel that these systems were traditional and longstanding, rather than fairly recent in history.

Several studies indicate that people are also more likely to justify social, economic, and political systems to the extent that they feel especially powerless or dependent on those systems. van der Toorn *et al.* (2011), for instance, observed that perceived dependence on educational authorities, government, and the police predicted high levels of institutional trust, confidence, and deference. van der Toorn *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that thinking intently about feelings of powerlessness increased the tendency to legitimize racial disparities in criminal sentencing, the unequal distribution of wealth in society, and the gender wage gap – even when system-challenging explanations for inequality, such as discrimination, were made cognitively available.

[2] *A timely example is that of the American quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, who is unemployed by the National Football League because of a decision he made to protest police brutality, 'taking a knee' rather than standing with his hand on his heart during the playing of the national anthem, declaring that 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color'. Consistent with the notion that people respond defensively to criticisms of the social system, Kaepernick faced massive backlash – strongly* motivated*, widespread, passionate, public, and private forms of attack and derision.*

Table 1. Experimental evidence of motivated system defensiveness (38 studies published between 2005 and 2017)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Jost *et al.* (2005, Study 3)	Reading about the deterioration of Israeli society (vs. functioning well)	Complementary stereotypic differentiation of high-status (Ashkenazi) and low-status (Sephardic) Jews; Ashkenazi were judged as more intelligent, ambitious, and agentic, whereas Sephardim were judged as more friendly, traditional, and communal (by both groups)
Kay *et al.* (2005)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Powerful people judged as more intelligent and independent but less happy (i.e., enhancement on traits seen as causally related to power, downgrading on status-irrelevant traits)
Kay *et al.* (2005)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Obese people judged as lazier but more sociable (i.e., derogation on traits seen as causally related to obesity, enhancement on status-irrelevant traits)
Ullrich and Cohrs (2007)	Reminder of terror attacks in Madrid (vs. dangers unrelated to terrorism or the system)	Increased legitimacy of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (general system justification)
Ullrich and Cohrs (2007)	Reminder of 9/11 or Madrid terror attacks (vs. issues related to the internet)	Increased legitimacy of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (general system justification)
Ullrich and Cohrs (2007)	Reminder of 9/11 or Madrid terror attacks (vs. issues related to the internet)	Increased legitimacy of the existing sociopolitical system in Germany (general system justification)
Lau, Kay, and Spencer (2008)	Reading an essay describing Canadian society as deteriorating (vs. functioning well)	Men expressed more romantic interest in women adhering to stereotypical norms associated with benevolent sexism (but not other women)
Kay *et al.* (2009, Study 4)	Reading about the deterioration of Canadian society (vs. functioning well)	Greater 'injunctification' (i.e., going from 'is' to 'ought', judging the current representation of women in politics as desirable)
Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, and Fitzsimons (2011, Study 2)	Reading a paragraph derogating the 'American way of life' (vs. essay about US geography)	Increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products, especially among chronically low system-justifiers

Continued

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Banfield *et al.* (2011)	Experimental instruction to recall many (vs. few) reasons for why the United States has 'the best way of life'	Increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products, especially among chronically low system-justifiers
Cutright *et al.* (2011)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products, especially among chronically low system-justifiers
Cutright *et al.* (2011)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. mortality salience and dental pain priming conditions)	Increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products, especially among chronically low system-justifiers
Cutright *et al.* (2011)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. an essay about US geography)	Derogation of the author among chronically high system-justifiers; increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products among chronically low system-justifiers
Cutright *et al.* (2011)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. an essay about US geography)	Increased preference for products with American symbols among chronically high system-justifiers; increased preference for domestic over foreign consumer products among chronically low system-justifiers
Day, Kay, Holmes, and Napier (2011)	Reading an essay alleging systematic discrimination (vs. no discrimination) against Arab Canadians	Increased endorsement of monogamous ideology among men
Day *et al.* (2011)	Reading about the deterioration of Canadian society (vs. functioning well)	Increased endorsement of monogamous ideology among men
Day *et al.* (2011)	Reading an essay describing the institution of committed relationships as unstable, fragile (vs. stable, strong)	Increased endorsement of the existing sociopolitical system in Canada (general system justification)
Laurin, Kay, and Shepherd (2011, Study 1)	Reading an essay alleging pervasive gender discrimination in Canada (vs. a new water system in Hungary)	Women stereotyped women as more communal; men stereotyped men as more agentic

Continued

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Ledgerwood *et al.* (2011, Study 1)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Scientific evidence was judged as stronger when it established (vs. undermined) a perceived (meritocratic) connection between hard work and economic success
Mallett *et al.* (2011, Study 4)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Decreased support for hate crimes policies among high (but not low) system-justifiers
Wakslak, Jost, and Bauer (2011)	Reading an essay describing (1) American society as deteriorating, or (2) the high school hierarchy as unfair (vs. no essay control condition)	Increased support of small-scale (high school) and large-scale (national) systems in both system threat conditions
Wakslak *et al.* (2011)	Reading an essay describing (1) American society as deteriorating, or (2) the nuclear family as unstable (vs. no essay control condition)	Increased support of small-scale (nuclear family) and large-scale (national) systems, in both system threat conditions
Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts (2012, Study 4)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well or a writing control condition)	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
Brescoll *et al.* (2013)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well, a memory control condition, or a 'no essay' control condition)	Men and women endorsed biological essentialism about gender more strongly and were more likely to state that gender differences are immutable
Brescoll *et al.* (2013)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well and a 'counter-arguing' control condition)	Men and women endorsed essentialist explanations for gender differences more strongly
Brescoll *et al.* (2013)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Men and women endorsed sociocultural and biological explanations for gender differences more strongly when they were framed as immutable (vs. mutable)
Friedman and Sutton (2013)	Newspaper articles concerning civilian deaths arising from the Afghanistan war flanked by luxury advertisements (priming conspicuous consumption and, by extension, inequality) vs. no advertisements	Increased tolerance of civilian casualties as a result of war among political conservatives (but not liberals)

Continued

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Liviatan and Jost (2014)	Reading speech transcript criticizing the economic and political system in the United States (vs. the economic and political system in Star Trek and the system of research in geology)	Response facilitation of legitimacy-related (vs. unrelated) words in the context of a computerized lexical decision task
Liviatan and Jost (2014)	Reading speech transcript criticizing the economic and political system in the United States (vs. the lack of creativity among Americans as a group and the system of research in geology)	Response facilitation of legitimacy-related (vs. unrelated) words in the context of a computerized lexical decision task
Liviatan and Jost (2014)	Reading speech transcript criticizing the economic and political system in the United States (vs. the system of research in geology)	Response facilitation of legitimacy-related (vs. unrelated) words in the context of a computerized lexical decision task before but not after having the opportunity to affirm the goodness of the US system
Liviatan and Jost (2014)	Reading speech transcript criticizing the economic and political system in the United States (vs. the system of research in geology)	Response facilitation of positive (vs. negative) adjectives in the context of a sequential evaluation priming task following exposure to system-relevant (vs. irrelevant) images
van der Toorn *et al.* (2014)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. functioning well)	Reduction of ideological gap in national attachment; liberals expressed stronger national identification
van der Toorn *et al.* (2014)	Reading about a failure of US justice system in which a white-collar criminal was to be released because of a technicality (vs. prosecuted)	Reduction of ideological gap in national attachment; liberals expressed stronger identification with America (but not the arts)
Yeung, Kay, and Peach (2014, Study 1)	Reading about the deterioration of Canadian society (vs. functioning well)	Increased ideological disagreement with identical statements made by a woman who was described as a 'feminist' (vs. not)

Continued

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Citation	Operationalization of system threat	Observed effect(s) of system threat
Jolley, Douglas, and Sutton (2018)	Reading about the deterioration of UK society (vs. functioning well)	Increased endorsement of real-world conspiracy theories and general notions of conspiracy
Jolley *et al.* (2018)	Reading about the deterioration of UK society (vs. functioning well)	Increased general system justification – but only for participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories
Jolley *et al.* (2018)	Reading about the deterioration of UK society (vs. functioning well)	Increased tendency to blame societal problems on individuals and small groups rather than institutional and system causes and increased general system justification – but only for participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories
van der Toorn, Jost, and Loffredo (2017a)	Reading about the deterioration of American society (vs. health threats associated with cell phone use or a control passage about house plants)	Increased general system justification among adolescents and self-identification as more politically conservative (and less liberal)

Note.. This table is adapted from Jost, Gaucher, and Stern (2015, Table 12.2); it has been updated and expanded to include a number of more recent studies.

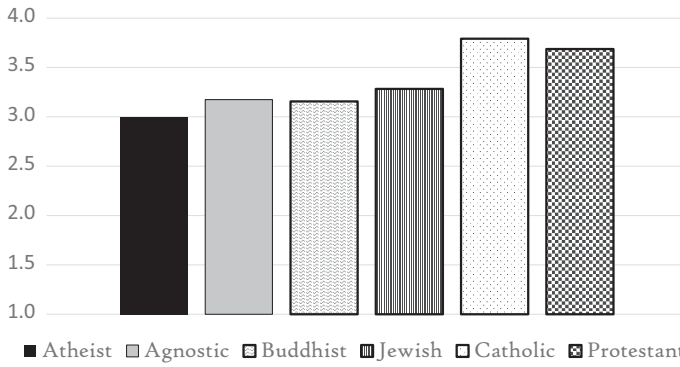


Figure 2. General system justification scores as a function of religious denomination. *Note:* This figure is based on data from Jost *et al.* (2014, table 9). Religious people were more likely than non-religious people to agree that 'Our society is getting worse every year', but they scored higher on the other seven items included in Kay and Jost's (2003) General System Justification Scale. Means shown here are a composite of those seven items, aggregating across participants from the same religious group who answered different items. Approximately 7,000 people (total) responded to each item.

The palliative function of system justification

Another major tenet of the theory is that system justification serves the palliative function of making people feel better about the societal status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; see also Hammond & Sibley, 2011; Napier, Thorisdottir, & Jost, 2010; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Khan, Liu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018a). The idea is somewhat reminiscent of Karl Marx's famous quip that religious ideology is the 'opiate of the masses' – that it placates and palliates. Indeed, a large-scale internet survey conducted by Jost *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that religious people, especially Catholics and Protestants, tend to score higher than Agnostics and Atheists on a measure of general system justification, which includes items such as 'My country is the best country in the world to live in' and 'Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness', as shown in Figure 2 (see also van der Toorn *et al.*, 2017b). Furthermore, religious people and those who justify the socio-economic system generally report feeling more positive affect and less negative affect and profess more satisfaction with their own life situations (e.g., Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003c; Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008b; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Rankin, Jost, & Wakslak, 2009).

At the same time, the emotional 'benefits' of system justification come with a cost in terms of decreased potential for social change and the remediation of inequality. Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, and Chen (2007) observed that system-justifying ideologies – whether measured or manipulated through a mindset-priming technique – were associated with lowered emotional distress. Random assignment to a high system justification condition in which participants were primed with 'rags-to-riches', 'anyone can succeed if they try hard enough' stories (vs. a control condition) led to reductions in negative affect and moral outrage, which made people less enthusiastic about volunteering or donating money to help the disadvantaged.

Jaime Napier and I hypothesized that – insofar as political conservatism is a system-justifying ideology – conservatives should report being happier than liberals, on average. Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), we confirmed that – even after adjusting for income, age, marital status, religiosity, and other demographic characteristics – conservatives scored significantly higher than liberals on measures of

subjective well-being, including self-reported happiness and life satisfaction. This ideological gap in subjective well-being was mediated by the belief that inequality in society is fair and justified. We replicated these results in 9 Western European countries using data from the World Values Survey, so this is by no means a purely American phenomenon. We also hypothesized that – if conservatives legitimize economic inequality to a greater degree than liberals do – their subjective well-being should be less affected by the steep increase in income inequality in the United States over the preceding 30 years. After plotting the self-reported happiness levels of liberals and conservatives against scores on the Gini index (a macroeconomic indicator of income inequality), we discovered that increasing inequality was associated with decreased happiness in general, adjusting for demographic factors, but that the decrease was significantly steeper for liberals, apparently because they lack conservatives' 'ideological buffer' against the negative hedonic effects of inequality (Napier & Jost, 2008).

Wojcik *et al.* (2015) subsequently challenged the notion that conservatives are 'happier' than liberals and presented evidence based on language use and smiling in photographs to conclude that liberals were in fact happier than conservatives. The problem with their critique is that it misses entirely the distinction between *subjective* and *objective* well-being. We did not claim on the basis of system justification theory that conservatives were thriving in any objective sense (as in Aristotle's concept of *Eudaimonia*) or that conservative societies make people *genuinely* happier than liberal, social-democratic societies (they do not; see Okulicz-Kozaryn, Holmes, & Avery, 2014). On the contrary, we argued that because of social psychological processes such as rationalization of inequality, conservatives are less *subjectively* affected by social injustices and therefore *report* being happier. Thus, the findings of Wojcik and colleagues are interesting, but they do not provide evidence against the hypothesis that system justification serves a palliative function. In any case, it is quite possible that liberals and leftists – because they are more sensitive to social injustices – are more prone to 'depressive realism' than conservatives and rightists (see Alloy & Abramson, 1988), and in some cases sensitivity and exposure to injustice may contribute to objective as well as subjective distress (e.g., Suppes, Napier, & van der Toorn, in press).

System justification not only decreases negative affect and increases satisfaction with the status quo, it diminishes support for system-challenging protest activity (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017a; Jost *et al.*, 2012) and the 'will to power' among members of disadvantaged groups (Hässler, Shnabel, Ullrich, Arditti-Vogel, & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2018). For instance, an experiment conducted in Germany revealed that when young women were exposed to relatively subtle, 'benevolent' justifications for sexism, they subsequently expressed more positive affect, scored higher on gender-specific system justification, and were less willing to participate in collective action on behalf of women (Becker & Wright, 2011). A nationally representative study of New Zealanders indicated that system justification was associated with reduced distress as well as an attenuation of the relationship between relative deprivation and willingness to protest on behalf of one's group (Osborne & Sibley, 2013; see also Osborne, Sengupta, & Sibley, 2018).

Epistemic, existential, and relational needs underlying system justification motivation

Given the social and psychological costs of system justification, it is important to ask *why* people would engage in system justification. Jost and Hunyady (2002) initially offered an explanation in terms of the 'palliative function' of system justification (see also Kluegel & Smith, 1986), but this was problematic, because, as Elster (1982) pointed out, 'the

beneficial consequences of. . . illusions' cannot necessarily 'serve to *explain* them' (p. 136).[3] Subsequently, we proposed that system justification addresses – at least subjectively, if not objectively – underlying epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity; existential motives to assuage threat and insecurity; and relational motives to coordinate social relationships and achieve a sense of shared reality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008a). The point may be easier to grasp in its negative form: To truly challenge the status quo, to engage in sustained and profound forms of protest, one must be willing and able to tolerate a great deal of uncertainty, potential threats to one's safety and security, and the risk of being alienated or cut off from friends, family members, and others in mainstream society (Jost *et al.*, 2017a). It is no wonder that stress and burnout rates among political activists are notoriously high (e.g., Chen & Gorski, 2015).

There is indeed evidence that situational and dispositional variability in needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord affects the strength of system justification tendencies. For example, laboratory manipulations of cognitive load, time pressure, distraction, and alcohol intoxication promote an affinity for conservative, system-justifying attitudes (Eidelman, Crandall, Goodman, & Blanchar, 2012; Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014; Hansson, Keating, & Terry, 1974; Lammers & Proulx, 2013; Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2010; Rutjens & Loseman, 2010; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002; van Berkel, Crandall, Eidelman, & Blanchar, 2015). Hussak and Cimpian (2015) argue that system justification reflects a heuristic cognitive process, such that a 'sociopolitical arrangement that is explained in inherent [i.e., simplistic, intrinsic, or essentialistic] terms is also likely to be seen as reasonable and fair' (p. 741). Likewise, a number of experimental and archival studies demonstrate that objectively threatening circumstances, such as death reminders and terrorist attacks, tend to increase support for conservative, system-justifying positions (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Echebarria-Echabe & Fernández-Guede, 2006; Economou & Kollias, 2015; Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Schüller, 2015; Thorisdottir & Jost, 2011; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007; van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2016). Finally, some experiments suggest that relational threats, such as social exclusion, increase system justification tendencies (Hess & Ledgerwood, 2014) – especially when one is motivated to share reality with high system-justifiers (Cheung, Noel, & Hardin, 2011; Jost *et al.*, 2008a).

In terms of dispositional variability, Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012) administered a survey containing items from individual difference scales of epistemic, existential, and relational motives and observed that respondents who scored lower on the personal need for cognition and higher on death anxiety and the need to share reality were more politically conservative and endorsed both general and economic forms of system justification to a higher degree. These respondents were also more likely to endorse conservative positions on issues of climate change, health care reform, and immigration policy – and in all cases these effects were mediated by economic system justification. Finally, they were more supportive of the politically conservative Tea Party movement and less supportive of the progressive Occupy Wall Street movement – and these effects, too, were mediated by economic system justification.

Very similar effects were observed in a study conducted in Argentina (Jost *et al.*, 2017b). People who scored higher on the need for cognitive closure, the need to share

[3] *I thank Melvin Lerner for first bringing this issue to my attention in the context of system justification theory.*

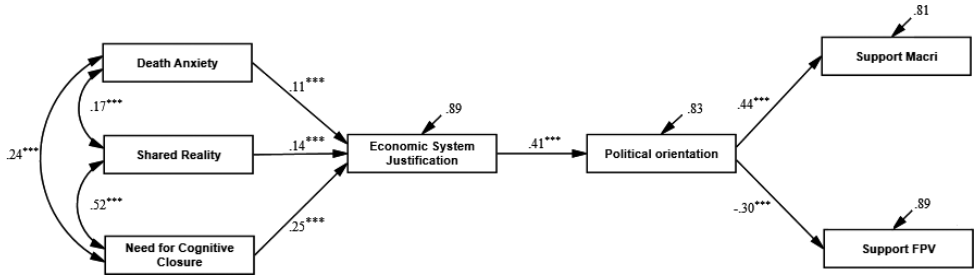


Figure 3. Evidence that economic system justification mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational needs on right-wing orientation and political preferences in Argentina. *Note:* This figure was prepared by Edgardo Etchezahar and is adapted from Jost *et al.* (2017b, figure 1). Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Political orientation is scored so that higher numbers indicate stronger right-wing (vs. left-wing) orientation. The two outcome variables are continuous measures of support for centre-right President Macri and the centre-left opposition party (FPV). Non-significant paths (not shown) were fixed to zero. The model provided an adequate fit to the data: AGFI = .949, CFI = .963, IFI = .964, RMSEA = .062 (.032–.092), X^2 = 26,721; *df* = 11; *p* = .005; X^2/df = 2,429. We tested indirect effects (with 95% confidence intervals) using a bootstrapping analysis and found that economic system justification mediated the effects of death anxiety, shared reality, and need for cognitive closure on political orientation. Political orientation mediated the effects of economic system justification on support for Macri and FPV.

reality, and death anxiety scored higher on economic system justification and right-wing (vs. left-wing) orientation. Furthermore, system justification mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational motives on right-wing orientation and support for President Mauricio Macri in the preceding election (as well as rejection of the centre-left opposition party). These relationships are depicted in Figure 3.

Implications for the study of intergroup relations

We know – from more than a century of writings on ethnocentrism – that people frequently favour their own groups over others (Brewer & Campbell, 1976; Summer, 1906; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and there is some indication that this favouritism may enhance self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Fein & Spencer, 1997). We also know that it can contribute to subtle (or not so subtle) forms of prejudice, hostility, and discrimination (Allport, 1979; Greenwald & Pettigrew, 2014; Tajfel, 1981). These are important facts about intergroup relations, but they are facts that apply more broadly to members of advantaged groups than to disadvantaged groups.

From the perspective of system justification theory, this is because – for members of advantaged groups – system justification is consistent with ego and group justification motives to maintain or enhance personal and collective self-esteem, respectively. For members of advantaged groups, therefore, it appears that system justification is positively associated with self-esteem, ingroup favouritism, and psychological well-being (Jost & Thompson, 2000). For members of disadvantaged groups, however, system justification conflicts with ego and group justification motives (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). Therefore, it does not follow from the logic of system justification theory that the disadvantaged are *usually* or *typically* more likely than the advantaged to support the overarching social system, which is a view

that has been repeatedly misattributed to us (Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2017; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016b; Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018a; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Liu, Pratto, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018b). On the contrary, system justification on the part of the disadvantaged is typically attenuated by countervailing motives for ego and group justification, as Jost *et al.* (2001) pointed out long ago. What is remarkable to me is that disadvantaged groups – such as members of the working class – subscribe to the legitimacy of the status quo as much as they do (Jost, 2017; see also Manstead, 2018). This is what needs to be understood and overcome – if one hopes for an end to unnecessary social and economic suffering, as I do.

For those who are disadvantaged by the status quo, system justification comes with social and psychological costs. It tends to be negatively associated with self-esteem, ingroup favouritism, and long-term psychological well-being – measured in terms of depression, neuroticism, ambivalence, and stigma internalization (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, in press; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Pacilli, Taurino, Jost, & van der Toorn, 2011). A study of gay men in Chile found that system justification was associated with internalized homonegativity, which was associated with increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. At the same time, after adjusting for these deleterious effects, system justification also served the palliative function of reducing anxiety and depression (Bahamondes-Correa, 2016). These findings were replicated and extended in several studies conducted in the United States in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals who minimized discrimination against their own groups exhibited more internalized homonegativity but also benefitted in terms of mental and physical health (Suppes *et al.*, in press). Thus, system justification is both a threat to the well-being of members of disadvantaged groups and a way of coping with that threat.

Indeed, as noted at the outset of this article, system justification theory was initially developed to explain why members of disadvantaged groups often (but not always) exhibit outgroup favouritism by expressing more positive attitudes about other groups that are higher in status or power than their own group. Although Spears *et al.* (2001) argued, on the basis of social identity theory, that it is very rare for the disadvantaged to internalize a sense of inferiority, studies using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and other implicit methods that mitigate social desirability concerns to at least some degree reveal that sizeable proportions of members of disadvantaged groups – often 40% or 50% or even more – exhibit implicit (or indirect) biases against their own group and in favour of more advantaged outgroup members.[4] For instance, poor people and obese people implicitly evaluate rich people and normal weight people more favourably than their own groups (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002); many gay men and lesbians implicitly evaluate straight people more favourably than their own groups (Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Jost *et al.*, 2004); in Chile Hispanics and dark-skinned Morenos implicitly evaluate Caucasians and light-skinned Blancos more favourably than their own groups (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002); Black and Coloured Children favour Whites in South Africa (Newheiser, Dunham, Merrill, Hoosain, & Olson, 2014); in the United States, minority college students implicitly evaluate White students more favourably than their own groups (Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003;

[4] *For reasons that are unclear to me, Brown (2010) strenuously resists the notion that implicit measures of attitudes can provide evidence of outgroup bias (pp. 239–241), but in the same book he spends several pages describing studies leading to the same conclusion, namely that there is a 'consistent tendency for children from (dominant) majority groups to show strong ingroup identification and preference, whilst the identification of children from (subordinate) minority groups with their ingroup was much weaker and often paralleled by evaluative preferences for stimuli symbolic of the majority group' (p. 116). Perhaps he believes that members of disadvantaged groups exhibit outgroup bias regularly as children but never as adults?*

Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Jost *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, several studies find that the magnitude of implicit outgroup bias on the part of the disadvantaged is positively correlated with individuals' scores on measures of system justification and conservatism, as predicted by system justification theory (Ashburn-Nardo *et al.*, 2003; Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Jost *et al.*, 2004).

Additional questions, criticisms, and answers

When I contemplate the various critiques of system justification theory that have been expressed over the years, I take solace in T.S. Eliot's observation that 'criticism is as inevitable as breathing'. It is difficult to know, as an author, how and when to respond to one's critics; too little responsiveness may be taken as aloofness or dismissiveness, and too much is sure to come off as defensive. After a quarter century of research on system justification theory, this may be an appropriate time to take stock of questions and criticisms that have accumulated over the years and to answer them in some way.

I have already addressed two major objections, namely that (1) although people may adopt system-justifying beliefs through social learning mechanisms, there is no evidence that they are motivated to engage in system justification, and (2) the theory fails to specify situational and dispositional moderators of system justification. In response to the first, I summarized five types of evidence suggesting that system justification is a goal-directed process linked to self-deception, defensive motivation, biased information processing, behavioural effort, and other properties of goal pursuit (Jost *et al.*, 2010). In response to the second criticism, I mentioned a number of situational moderators, including exposure to system criticism or threat, perceptions of system inevitability or inescapability, perceptions of historical longevity, and feelings of powerlessness or dependence (see also Friesen, Laurin, Shepherd, Gaucher, & Kay, 2018; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). I have also described work on dispositional moderators of system justification, such as epistemic, existential, and relational motives to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord (Hennes *et al.*, 2012; Jost *et al.*, 2017b).

There are more recent objections to system justification theory that I have yet to respond to – and I would like to take the opportunity to do so here. Let us begin with a multi-pronged critique by Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a), who argued that system justification on the part of disadvantaged group members may be explained (on the basis of social identity theory rather than system justification theory) in terms of (1) 'a passive reflection of social reality', (2) 'a form of in-group bias (at the superordinate level)', and (3) 'the hope that in-group advancement is possible in the future within the prevailing system' (p. 91). In addition to these three proposals, I will address several other critiques of system justification theory – nearly all of which have been framed as defences of social identity theory (Brewer, 2007; Caricati, 2017; Caricati & Sollami, 2018; Désert & Leyens, 2006; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, Reynolds, & Doosje, 2002; Jetten, Haslam, & Barlow, 2012; Reicher, 2004; Reynolds, Jones, O'Brien, & Subasic, 2013; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spears *et al.*, 2001).

Does system justification merely reflect the passive reflection of 'social reality'?

The concept of 'social reality constraints' has played a central role in several critiques of system justification theory (Brewer, 2007; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spears *et al.*, 2001), which were addressed in detail by Jost (2011). Nevertheless, Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a) argued once again that 'people may reflect the reality of social hierarchies by

acknowledging that, on specific status-related dimensions, high-status outgroups are better than low-status in-groups' (p. 93) and that system justification motivation is not required to explain this phenomenon. Fifteen years ago, Rubin and Hewstone (2004) compared the plight of those who are disadvantaged in society to a losing football team that must 'admit that they lost the game and that the other team won' and argued that 'this response is simply the passive reflection of the current status quo, as specified in a socially shared reality' (p. 831).

To my mind, this drastically misrepresents the psychology of system justification; poor people, women, and sexual minorities, among others, do not feel as if they 'played' and 'lost'. The position taken by Rubin and Hewstone (2004) – and echoed by Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a) – trivializes (and therefore seriously mischaracterizes) problems of social and economic inequality – and ignores the many ways in which inequality is legitimated in society (Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, & Jost, 2013). I do agree that some cases of system justification are passive (and non-conscious) rather than active (and conscious). As Hochschild (1981) pointed out, 'Some people enthusiastically endorse the status quo; some passively acquiesce in it; some strongly oppose it; and some are simply indifferent to it' (pp. 262–263). Nevertheless, I disagree with several other assumptions made by Rubin and Hewstone (2004) and Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a).

We know from extensive sociological research that contemporary societies fail to provide a 'level playing field' for rich and poor, men and women, racial and ethnic majorities and minorities, and so on. In such contexts the act of 'admitting defeat' – or 'acknowledging objective differences', as Marilynn Brewer (2007, p. 733), put it – does reflect an ideological process of taking for granted (consciously or non-consciously) the legitimacy of the status quo, even if it involves nothing more than 'complicitous silence' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 188; see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zelditch, 2001). Likewise, in a football game, 'admitting defeat' assumes the legitimacy of the league, rules of competition, the referees' authority and conduct, and the other team's behaviour (Jost, 2011). Otherwise, the 'losing team' would not say 'we lost'; they would say, 'We were cheated!' When the disadvantaged assume that they are not as *smart* or *hard-working* or *competent* or *deserving* as members of advantaged groups, they are indeed granting legitimacy to (and reinforcing) status and power differences in society. van Knippenberg (1984) made this point 35 years ago, when he wrote that 'The perceptions and evaluations of the higher status group can thus be seen as containing the implicit claim that the distribution of outcomes is legitimate' (p. 573).

Social psychologists ought to perceive a world of difference between 'admitting defeat' and exhibiting what Lewin (1941/1948) referred to as 'group self-hatred'. The fact that members of disadvantaged groups often harbour implicit associations linking their own kind to words and images that are unpleasant and even disgusting tells us something important about the effects of hierarchical social systems on our conscious and unconscious minds (Jost *et al.*, 2004). So, too, does the fact that moral outrage and protest activity are surprisingly rare among society's 'losers' (Jost *et al.*, 2017a). Even during periods of widespread discontent, a very small minority of citizens takes to the streets, and they often face tremendous backlash for doing so (e.g., see Langer *et al.*, in press).

Does system justification merely reflect (unrealistic) optimism?

If Owuamalam *et al.*'s (2018a) first criticism is that system justification on the part of the disadvantaged simply reflects an incontrovertible 'social reality', their second criticism seems to be that it reflects optimism that 'in-group advancement is possible. . . within the

prevailing system' (p. 91), however unrealistic that optimism may be. This is a surprisingly popular explanation on the right (e.g., David Brooks, Marco Rubio) and left (e.g., Michael Moore, Bill Maher, and Stephen Colbert) for why poor people oppose wealth redistribution, namely that they keep the faith that under capitalism they will become rich 1 day. This could indeed be one of many reasons why people engage in system justification, so I do not regard it as a sound criticism of the theory.[5]

Nevertheless, Jost *et al.* (2017b) re-analysed data from a small but nationally representative sample of low-income Americans surveyed by Rankin *et al.* (2009) and found little evidence that most expected to become rich. Only 24% agreed that 'I believe that one day I may become rich', whereas 47% disagreed and 29% were unsure. Most importantly, those who were financially optimistic scored no higher on general system justification, nor did they identify as more conservative or more supportive of the Republican Party, in comparison with those who were not so optimistic (see Jost *et al.*, 2017b). Thus, contrary to Owuamalam and colleagues' supposition, the perceived likelihood of future success – however realistic or unrealistic – does not seem to account for system justification in the economic sphere.

Is system justification merely a form of ingroup bias (at the superordinate level)?

Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a, p. 91) also claimed that system justification should be regarded as 'a form of in-group bias (at the superordinate level)' – perhaps something akin to nationalism or patriotism, which we have addressed from a system justification perspective (see van der Toorn, Nail, Liviatan, & Jost, 2014). Owuamalam and colleagues' criticism is essentially the same one raised by Reynolds *et al.* (2013), namely that people are merely motivated by self-interest considerations at whichever level of identification is most salient, so that 'the question. . . isn't so much "why do low status groups act against their self-interest?" but "when and why do members of low status groups define themselves at the level of the system?"' (p. 241). There are really two issues here: (1) whether system justification is based on self-categorization processes at a higher level of group identification, such as the nation state, and (2) whether system justification reflects self-interested (and group-interested) behaviour at this higher level of identification. These are both interesting questions, but I see several major problems with the overall argument when it is wielded as a critique of system justification theory.[6]

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[5] *Another possibility, which is consistent with the emphasis in social identity theory on beliefs about social mobility (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), is that people perceive the social system as more legitimate to the extent that it allows for (some) people to improve upon their situation. This idea strikes me as perfectly compatible with system justification theory (see also Day & Fiske, 2017; García-Sánchez* et al., *2018), especially if one is willing to grant that people might be motivated to exaggerate the degree of social mobility in capitalist society. Therefore, this possibility cannot provide the basis for a sound criticism of the theory either. As Hogg and Abrams (1988) pointed out, 'it may be to the advantage of high-status groups to foster social mobility belief systems (or "false consciousness", in Marxist terms) among low-status groups as this inhibits the perception of conflict of interests and weakens the cohesiveness and ability to act collectively of those groups' (p. 56).*

[6] *Robbie Sutton has astutely identified other serious problems with the Owuamalam* et al. *(2018a) critique, writing that 'the claim that social systems can be a superordinate level of identification is conceptually suspect': 'One can be a member or exemplar of a group (individuals are related to social groups taxonomically), but only part of, or affected by, a system (individuals are related to social systems partonomically). . . it is coherent to say in some cases, a collective (e.g., the United States) can be viewed either as a system or as a group [but this] does not logically entail that any given system can be seen as a collective, or therefore as a group. To highlight this issue, the 'system' at issue in a paper published by Owuamalam, Rubin, and Issmer (2016a) is a university-ranking system. This cannot meaningfully be seen as any kind of collective, let alone a group to which one might belong. Rather, it is a social institution or practice that is exogenous to the groups affected by it, yet in which they (are forced to) participate, and upon which they depend. Owuamalam* et al.*'s conception of a social system is a shape-shifter: to make some points, they conceptualize systems as groups, but to make others, they conceptualize them as social practices. (I'm also not sure that this rating system can properly be described as a social system: it seems rather to be a metric that is used within a system for various purposes)'.*

For one thing – as in the case of the 'football' analogy, it seriously mischaracterizes the plight of the working class to state that a poor person's decision, for instance, to enlist in the military – which may be explained by the fact that other educational or economic opportunities are unavailable – merely reflects 'self-interest' exercised at the level of national identification. According to the *New York Times*, 'since the draft was abolished in 1973, the [U.S.] has begun developing what could be called a warrior… caste' that depends almost exclusively upon the sacrifices of the working class (Halbfinger & Holmes, 2003). Needless to say, many thousands have died in action since then. But this only scratches the surface of the myriad ways in which the circumstances of poor people are exploited by those who benefit from the status quo (e.g., Durrheim *et al.*, 2014) – and the ways in which ideological manipulation can lead members of the working class to develop false and self-defeating beliefs about both political and economic matters (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 1999; Graetz & Shapiro, 2006; Lukes, 2011).

In addition, there are psychological costs that Reynolds *et al.* (2013) and Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a), among others, continue to ignore. Members of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities who 'buy into' the legitimacy of the status quo often suffer in terms of self-esteem, depression, anxiety, neuroticism, and other mental health problems (Bahamondes-Correa, 2016; Godfrey *et al.*, in press; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Suppes *et al.*, in press). Thus, to suggest that system justification on the part of the disadvantaged serves rational self-interest is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, completely misleading.

Furthermore, any 'explanation' in terms of social identification alone is question-begging: To understand working-class conservatism in these terms, we would need to know why poor people would 'identify with' rich people (like Country Club Republicans) in the first place. System justification theory highlights the fact that 'outgroup favouritism' in situations such as this reflects an ideological process that is akin to false consciousness and the internalization of inferiority (Jost *et al.*, 2004). This is not to say that that there is no relationship between levels of group identification and ideological processes such as system justification. As Shayo (2009) demonstrated, poor people around the world identify more strongly with their nation (and less strongly with their social class) in comparison with rich people, and those who identify more strongly with the nation are less supportive of economic redistribution than those who do not. These are important discoveries that, to my mind, highlight the ways in which processes of social identification and system justification are intertwined.

Does working-class conservatism reflect a process of dissonance reduction?

In an ambitious effort to ground the Marxian analysis of false consciousness in research on cognitive dissonance, the social theorist Jon Elster (1982) proposed that the 'interest of the upper class is better served by the lower classes spontaneously inventing an ideology justifying their inferior status' that may serve 'the interest of the lower classes in the sense of leading to dissonance reduction' although it 'is contrary to their interest' in the sense that it could produce 'excessive meekness' (p. 142). This formulation struck me as fascinating – and supportive of Robert E. Lane's (1959/2004) conclusions from interviews conducted with blue-collar workers who found 'it less punishing to think of themselves as correctly placed by a just society than to think of themselves as exploited, or victimized by an unjust society' (p. 227). It also fit with classic demonstrations of cognitive dissonance theory, including cases of fraternity pledges who were badly 'hazed' becoming fanatical supporters of the Greek system (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Gerard & Mathewson, 1966).

Inspired by these examples, Jost *et al.* (2003c) explored the hypothesis – which was a hybrid of cognitive dissonance and system justification perspectives – that people who were most disadvantaged by the status quo would have the strongest need to justify existing social systems, authorities, and outcomes. They obtained some evidence from public opinion surveys suggesting that low-income European Americans, African Americans, and Latinos were more likely than others to trust the government, support restrictions on criticizing it, and believe that society is meritocratic and that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary. These findings were broadly consistent with the notion derived from dissonance theory that those who suffer most intensely from a given state of affairs would be especially motivated to justify it (see also Henry & Saul, 2006; Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). A few studies have recently picked up on this idea, suggesting that the palliative effects of system justification may be stronger for the disadvantaged than the advantaged, at least under some circumstances (Sengupta, Greaves, Osborne, & Sibley, 2017; Vargas-Salfate, 2017).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Jost *et al.* (2003c) explicitly pointed out that 'economic and other theories of material and symbolic self-interest may be said to account for the "baseline"' (p. 14) and emphasized that: 'To be clear, we are not arguing that members of disadvantaged groups are always (or even ordinarily) the most likely ones to provide ideological support for the system. In fact, to the extent that system justification conflicts with motives for self-enhancement, self-interest, and ingroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups. . . it should often be tempered by these other motives' (p. 17). Thus, we never regarded dissonance reduction as the 'engine' of system justification, as an increasing number of scholars appear to have mistakenly assumed (Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2017; Caricati & Sollami, 2018; Owuamalam *et al.*, 2016b; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018a, 2018b; Vargas-Salfate *et al.*, 2018b).

Brandt (2013) went so far as to rename the strong, dissonance-based hypothesis the 'status–legitimacy hypothesis' and apply it to other domains – such as gender and education – that were not part of the original research programme. His analyses revealed few differences in terms of group status with respect to trust in government and other institutions and concluded that the phenomenon 'may be a random event without need of a theoretical explanation' (p. 2). Brandt found scant evidence of *enhanced* system justification among the disadvantaged – but he also found little or no consistent evidence of group-based self-interest. His null results are therefore equally at odds with theories of realistic group conflict, social identification, and social dominance (see Caricati & Sollami, 2018; Vargas-Salfate *et al.*, 2018b). As I have argued elsewhere (Jost, 2017), we must still confront a fundamental question in social science: Why is it that members of the working class are just as likely – or, in other cases, almost as likely – as the middle and upper classes to defend and justify the societal status quo?[7]

Working-class conservatism may indeed have little or nothing to do with cognitive dissonance reduction, as Owuamalam *et al.* (2016b, 2018a) have argued. However, their conceptual analysis is deeply confused. They conflate 'self-interest' with 'self-relevance' when they suggest that there is an incompatibility between cognitive dissonance theory and the hypothesis that system justification motivation among members of disadvantaged groups 'should be apparent only when their personal and group interests are relatively weak', because 'dissonance should be greatest when dissonance-arousing cognitions are

[7] *Zhang and Zhong (in press) provide evidence from China that adults who are lower (vs. higher) in income and education tend to have more children at an earlier age, and this renders them more dependent on governmental support and therefore more likely to defend and justify the authority of the Chinese government.*

self-relevant and important' (p. 92). I agree that people are only motivated to justify the status quo when it is personally relevant (see Kay *et al.*, 2002), but it is naïve to assume that the only people who defend and justify the capitalist system, for instance, are those who benefit from the system or are otherwise motivated by self-interest (or, for that matter, only those who *identify* with the group of 'capitalists').

Furthermore, Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a) confuse social stability – which is known to increase system justification tendencies (Laurin *et al.*, 2013) – with a lack of choice when they write: 'If the system is perceived to be stable, then the potential for uncertainty and associated dissonance will be low, and so the motive for system justification should be weak and relatively ineffective', but 'if the system is perceived to be unstable, then the potential for uncertainty and thus cognitive dissonance is high, and the system-justification motive should be strong and more effective' (p. 95). I see no reason from a cognitive dissonance perspective why a highly stable social system – such as capitalism – would fail to inspire motives for justification, as long as citizens feel that they are *choosing* to participate in it – as opposed to being coerced (as in a totalitarian system).[8]

An anonymous reviewer, who later identified himself as Robbie Sutton, listed a number of other problems with Owuamalam *et al.*'s (2018a) argument that '"contrary" to SJT, when social arrangements are stable in the short term but not long term, people justify them more, because they have greater hope for improved status'. Problems with this argumentation include the following: (1) It is incoherent to 'to talk about stability through time as anything other than stability in the long term, because "stable, but only in the short term" seems oxymoronic'; (2) Owuamalam *et al.* make a strong distinction between short-term and long-term stability, but 'the cited study operationalizes stability as stability per se: the stability factor has two levels, high (university rankings don't fluctuate year to year) and low (they go up and down year to year). It doesn't have an orthogonal manipulation of short vs. long-term stability'; (3) 'the manipulation refers to more or less stochastic fluctuations through time and not about the likelihood of progress: for one group to systematically improve its position, of the kind that interested Tajfel'; (4) 'the manipulation does not refer to any change in the system. It just refers to the hierarchical position of groups within the system'; and (5) Owuamalam *et al.* 'also describe the university system ranking system as "legitimate", which they describe as a precondition for [system justification] effects, but no effort is made to manipulate the legitimacy of the university ranking system: the legitimacy of the ranking system is rather a DV'. I, for one, find these criticisms of Owuamalam *et al.*'s (2018a) work to be rather compelling, and I hope they will address them.

No, seriously, why are conservatives happier than liberals?

As noted above, Napier and Jost (2008) found that, in comparison with liberals, political conservatives report greater happiness and personal satisfaction and that this 'happiness gap' is mediated, in part, by the justification of inequality. This pattern of results has been replicated many times over (Bixter, 2015; Burton, Plaks, & Peterson, 2015; Butz, Kieslich, & Bless, 2017; Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2009; Cichocka & Jost, 2014; Newman, Schwarz, Graham, & Stone, 2018; Okulicz-Kozaryn *et al.*, 2014; Onraet, Van Assche, Roets,

[8] *Owuamalam* et al. *(2018a) also claim it is inconsistent with system justification theory to propose that 'a rejection [of the social system] is likely to be regarded as being unrealistic because it implies a revolution and anarchy that could invoke much greater uncertainty and threat' (p. 94), but it is not. This is precisely why I argue that challenging the system – and pushing for social change –* aggravates *feelings of uncertainty and threat and triggers backlash (Hennes* et al.*, 2012; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost* et al.*, 2008a, 2017b).*

Haesevoets, & Van Hiel, 2016; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012; Wojcik *et al.*, 2015). These replications have not, however, prevented critics from disputing the basic notion that system justification serves a palliative function. Jetten *et al.* (2012), for instance, claim that the happiness gap between liberals and conservatives is attributable to the fact that conservatives are wealthier and this 'gives them access to more group memberships', and this, in turn, makes them happier. These authors conclude that 'what makes conservatives happy is not conservative ideology but rather material advantage' (p. 7).

Jetten *et al.*'s (2012) alternative explanation simply cannot account for the findings of Napier and Jost (2008), because we adjusted statistically for personal income in all of our analyses, and the happiness gap remained significant. To delve deeper into the issue, Butz *et al.* (2017) analysed data from a nationally representative sample in Germany and found that the justification of social and economic inequality mediated the relationship between conservatism and life satisfaction, providing clear support for system justification theory, whereas other variables that were proposed as alternative explanations – such as number of group memberships (Jetten *et al.*, 2012) and general optimism (Schlenker *et al.*, 2012) – did not.

Can system justification theory account for the occurrence of social change?

Some critics allege that system justification theory – by seeking to understand the motivation to preserve the status quo – is incapable of explaining protest and social change (Désert & Leyens, 2006; Haslam *et al.*, 2002; Reicher, 2004; Sidanius *et al.*, 2004; Spears *et al.*, 2001). But system justification theory does not suggest that social change is impossible, only that it is *difficult* – for psychological as well as other reasons (Jost, 2015). As Bruno Bettelheim observed, 'Most people want to make sure that tomorrow is just like yesterday'.

Reicher (2004) claimed that 'revolt', 'resistance', and 'countermobilization' are 'equally' present in human society, in comparison with social stasis (p. 941), but this is unrealistic. According to public opinion data from the World Values Survey, less than one in five citizens of North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have ever participated in a political demonstration – and more than a third say that they would *never* do so (Jost *et al.*, 2017a, p. 100). I suppose that Reicher may have been channelling Foucault, who wrote: 'As soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy' and 'The struggle is everywhere. . . at every moment, we move from rebellion to domination, from domination to rebellion' (Fontana & Bertani, 2003, p. 280).

I agree that there is indeed always the *possibility* of resistance, but this is very different from suggesting that, in practice, defenders and challengers of the societal status quo are on equal footing; they are not, for social and psychological as well as historical, economic, and institutional reasons. To my mind, Gramsci was much closer to the mark than Foucault when he observed that the 'great mass of people hesitate and lose heart when they think of what a radical change might bring. . .. [and] only imagine the present being torn to pieces'. And so was Simone de Beauvoir, who unlike Foucault recognized that a 'real repression – or oppression – of the self is always possible' (Kruks, 2006, p. 58). Research programmes on self-objectification and body shame among women show that Beauvoir was right (e.g., Calogero, 2013; Calogero & Jost, 2011; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

Nevertheless, there are several ways of accounting for social change from the perspective of system justification theory (Gaucher & Jost, 2011). To begin with, there are

other motives identified by the theory – such as ego and group justification (as well as motives for accuracy, justice, and system improvement) – that may very well trump system justification motives in some situations (Day & Fiske, 2017; Johnson & Fujita, 2012; McCall, Burk, Laperrière, & Richeson, 2017). And, although I share Lewin's (1947) conviction that resistance to change is all too common in human affairs, when regime change is perceived as extremely likely (or inevitable), many people will begin to justify the newly emerging status quo (Kay *et al.*, 2002; Laurin, 2018; Laurin *et al.*, 2012). Thus, Kuran (1991) describes 'revolutionary bandwagons', in which Eastern Europeans, among others, 'displayed a remarkable tolerance for tyranny and inefficiency', remaining 'docile, submissive, and even outwardly supportive of the status quo' for decades before the seeming 'invulnerability of the status quo' was finally shattered in 1989 (pp. 25–26).

In addition, it follows from system justification theory that people will be less defensive and more open to new possibilities when potential changes to the status quo are described as 'system-sanctioned', that is, congruent rather than incongruent with the preservation of the overarching system, as we have found in the case of pro-environmental initiatives (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010). Another possibility is suggested by the work of Fernando *et al.* (2018), which suggests that the act of engaging in utopian thinking (and mentally contrasting the actual vs. ideal state of society) may decrease system justification and increase the motivation for social change. When John Lennon implored us to, 'Imagine no possessions. . . no need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man, imagine all the people sharing all the world', he knew full well that the exercise would inspire a more critical perspective on the status quo. He may also have anticipated that the song would provoke the kind of system-justifying backlash expressed by Haidt (2012): 'It's a vision of heaven for liberals, but conservatives believe it would quickly descend into hell. I think conservatives are on to something' (p. 311).

Jost *et al.* (2017a) explicitly incorporated system justification motivation in a model of collective action, pointing out that the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) ignores ideological and system-level factors, because it conceptualizes protest exclusively in terms of ingroup/outgroup dynamics (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). As a result, it overlooks important political and psychological differences between system-challenging and system-supporting collective action. Abrams and Grant (2012) proposed a more comprehensive model in which preferences for social change mediated the effects of group identification and feelings of relative deprivation on support for Scottish nationalism. This makes it clearer that social identity and system justification approaches to collective action are complementary and mutually informative. In studies conducted in New Zealand and the United States, Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, and Sibley (in press) tested an integrative model that also incorporated variables from both theories. Among other things, they found that for members of low-status and high-status groups alike (1) system justification was negatively associated with system-challenging collective action (e.g., support for the 'Black Lives Matter' movement) and positively associated with system-supporting collective action (e.g., support for the 'All Lives Matter' movement), and (2) group identification, perceptions of injustice, and anger mediated the effects of system justification on collective action intentions.

Additional applications to the study of social and political behaviour

System justification theory, as I conceive of it, is highly 'practical' or 'relevant' in the Lewinian sense that it is useful for diagnosing and addressing social problems, including many problems that apologists for the status quo would prefer to ignore. These include

racism, colorism, sexism, classism, self-objectification, tolerance of corruption, legitimation of social and economic inequality, hostility towards immigrants, scepticism about climate change, and acceptance of environmentally harmful industrial practices, among many other things (e.g., Brescoll *et al.*, 2013; Calogero & Jost, 2011; Chapleau & Oswald, 2014; Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018; Feygina *et al.*, 2010; García-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018; Hässler *et al.*, 2018; Hennes *et al.*, 2016; Intawan & Nicholson, 2018; Jost, 2015; Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008; Napier *et al.*, 2010; Pacilli *et al.*, 2011; Shepherd & Kay, 2012; Tan, Liu, Huang, Zheng, & Liang, 2016; Vainio, Mäkiniemi, & Paloniemi, 2014; van der Toorn *et al.*, 2011, 2015). Throughout this article I have sought to provide examples of the ways in which system justification theory can be applied to better understand societal phenomena. Before closing, I would like to say a bit more about applications to the study of political behaviour in particular.

There are many consequences of system justification motivation for political behaviour, including participation (and lack of participation) in collective action (Jost *et al.*, 2017a; Langer *et al.*, in press) and support for versus opposition to specific political candidates (Azevedo, Jost, & Rothmund, 2017), parties (Jost *et al.*, 2017b), and movements (Hennes *et al.*, 2012). Studies conducted all over the world reveal that system justification is almost always positively associated with the endorsement of politically conservative or right-wing ideologies. This is consistent with the notion that conservatism is an ideology that seeks to maintain the status quo and that rightists, more than leftists, perceive existing social and economic inequalities as legitimate and desirable (Jost *et al.*, 2003a,b, 2004, 2009, 2017b). As shown in Table 2, there are rather strong positive correlations (often .4 or higher) between system justification and right-wing conservatism in Argentina, Finland, Hungary, Lebanon, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The correlations are somewhat weaker in Germany, Poland, and Latvia although they remain positive and statistically significant in nearly all cases.

Thus far, the only country in which we have observed a significant *negative* correlation between system justification and conservatism is France, where we see that general system justification is associated with liberal-socialist (rather than conservative) attitudes – and low rather than high levels of authoritarianism and hostility towards immigrants. Thus, it would appear that the Enlightenment ideals of 'liberté, egalité, fraternité' are very well entrenched in France, to the point that they represent the societal status quo. We have not been able to collect data in Cuba or other longstanding socialist countries, but in those contexts we would expect a strong correlation between system justification and *left*-wing orientation.

Shortly before the 2016 US presidential election, Azevedo *et al.* (2017) conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,500 Americans, administering general, economic, and gender-specific system justification scales. A number of observations follow from an inspection of the major correlates of these three forms of system justification, as shown in Figures 4–6. To begin with, general, economic, and gender-specific system justification scores were strongly and positively intercorrelated (with *r*s ranging from .33 to .58). Furthermore, all three were modestly and positively correlated with right-wing authoritarianism ($.08 \leq r \leq .43$), social dominance orientation ($.15 \leq r \leq .57$), national identification ($.21 \leq r \leq .35$), and a wide variety of symbolic and operational measures of social and economic conservatism ($.13 \leq r \leq .65$). Income and education were positively correlated with all three types of system justification, but only weakly so (with *r*s ranging from .17 to .21 and .05 to .12, respectively).

Table 2. Correlations between system justification and political orientation in 12 different countries

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
Argentina: Convenience sample of adults in Buenos Aires	Spanish translation of economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)	Left–right self-placement	.416***	328	Badaan *et al.* (2018)
Argentina: Students from the University of Buenos Aires			.412***	373	
Finland: Students from universities in Helsinki and Tampere	Finnish translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.440***	350	Vainio *et al.* (2014)
France: Nationally representative sample (2017 French Election Study)	French translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		−.170***	22,277	Pavlos Vasilopoulos (personal correspondence)
Germany: Nationally representative sample (YouGov online panel)	German translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.086*	757	
Hungary: National sample (demographically similar to the adult population)	Hungarian translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.312***	931	Anna Kende (personal correspondence)
	Hungarian translation of economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.235***		

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
National sample (demographically similar to the adult population)	Hungarian translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.369***	1,005	
		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.303***		
Latvia: Convenience sample of adults	General System Justification (6-item scale)	Left–right self-placement	.228***	251	Dimdins, Sandgren, and Montgomery (2016)
Lebanon: Nationally representative sample	Lebanese translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.231***	500	Badaan *et al.* (2018)
		Self-reported social conservatism (liberal–conservative)	.305***		
		Self-reported economic conservatism (liberal–conservative)	.417***		
New Zealand: NZAVS (2011–2012)	General system justification (4-item scale)	Liberal–conservative self-placement	.243***	6,476	Danny Osborne (personal correspondence)
			.362***	6,555	

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
		Left–right self-placement			
NZAVS (2012–2013)		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.222***	11,121	
		Left–right self-placement	.351***	11,163	
NZAVS (2013–2014)		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.259***	16,133	
		Left–right self-placement	.421***	16,048	
NZAVS (2014–2015)		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.291***	14,562	
		Left–right self-placement	.468***	14,612	
NZAVS (2015–2016)		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.321***	12,764	
		Left–right self-placement	.495***	12,749	
NZAVS (2016–2017)		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.326***	20,396	
	Ethnic system justification (2-item scale)		.324***	20,761	
	Gender system justification (2-item scale)		.316***	20,751	

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
	Economic system justification (1-item scale)		.324***	20,235	
	General system justification (4-item scale)	Left–right self-placement	.455***	20,048	
	Ethnic system justification (2-item scale)		.410***	20,400	
	Gender system justification (2-item scale)		.487***	20,391	
	Economic system justification (1-item scale)		.391***	19,899	
Poland: Nationally representative sample of internet users	Polish translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)	Self-reported social, economic, and overall political conservatism	.108*	501	Cichocka and Jost (2014)
Nationally representative sample of Polish adults			.099**	1,038	Aleksandra Cichocka (personal correspondence)
		Left–right self-placement	.068*	1,108	
Sweden: Lund University Students	Swedish translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.712***	332	Nilsson & Jost (under review)

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
	Swedish translation of economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.748***		
Convenience sample of adults	Swedish translation of General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.518***	398	Artur Nilsson (personal correspondence)
		Liberal–conservative self-placement	.114*	383	
Convenience sample of adults		Left–right self-placement	.194***	418	
Convenience sample of adults	General system justification (6-item scale)		.525***	320	Dimdins *et al.* (2016)
United Kingdom: YouGov panel of social media users (SoMA)	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)	Left–right self-placement	.372***	1,853	SMaPP
Prolific Academic Survey	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) adapted to British context	Political party affiliation	.369***	332	Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins (2018)

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
United States: Mechanical Turk workers	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)	Liberal–conservative self-placement	.358***	181	Hennes *et al.* (2012)
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.594***		
NYU students (2004–2016)	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.335***	9,487	Jost *et al.* (2017b)
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.429***	9,761	
Nationally representative panel survey (YouGov 2016 US Elections)	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.237***	3,329	SMaPP
Nationally representative sample (SSI)	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.152***	1,500	Azevedo *et al.* (2017)
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.532***		
	Gender-specific system justification scale (Jost and Kay, 2005)		.455***		

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
Non-representative replication sample (SSI)	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.166***	2,119	Azevedo and Rothmund (2018)
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.612***		
	Gender-specific system justification scale (Jost and Kay, 2005)		.478***		
NYU students	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)		.266***	218	Nilsson & Jost (under review)
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)		.445***	385	
Online survey of adults	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)	Issue-based conservatism	.307***	352	
	Economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000)	Liberal–conservative self-placement	.497***		
		Issue-based conservatism	.590***		

Continued

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Sample description	System justification measure	Political orientation measure	Correlation (*r*)	Sample size (*N*)	Citation/source
MTurk Sample 2017	General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)	Liberal/left-wing vs. conservative/ right-wing self-placement	.402***	1,511	Danny Osborne (personal correspondence)

Note.. NZAVS, New Zealand Attitudes and Values Survey (nationally representative panel survey); SSI, Survey Sampling International; SMaPP, Social Media and Political Participation Laboratory at New York University.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.



Figure 4. Correlates of General System Justification in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).

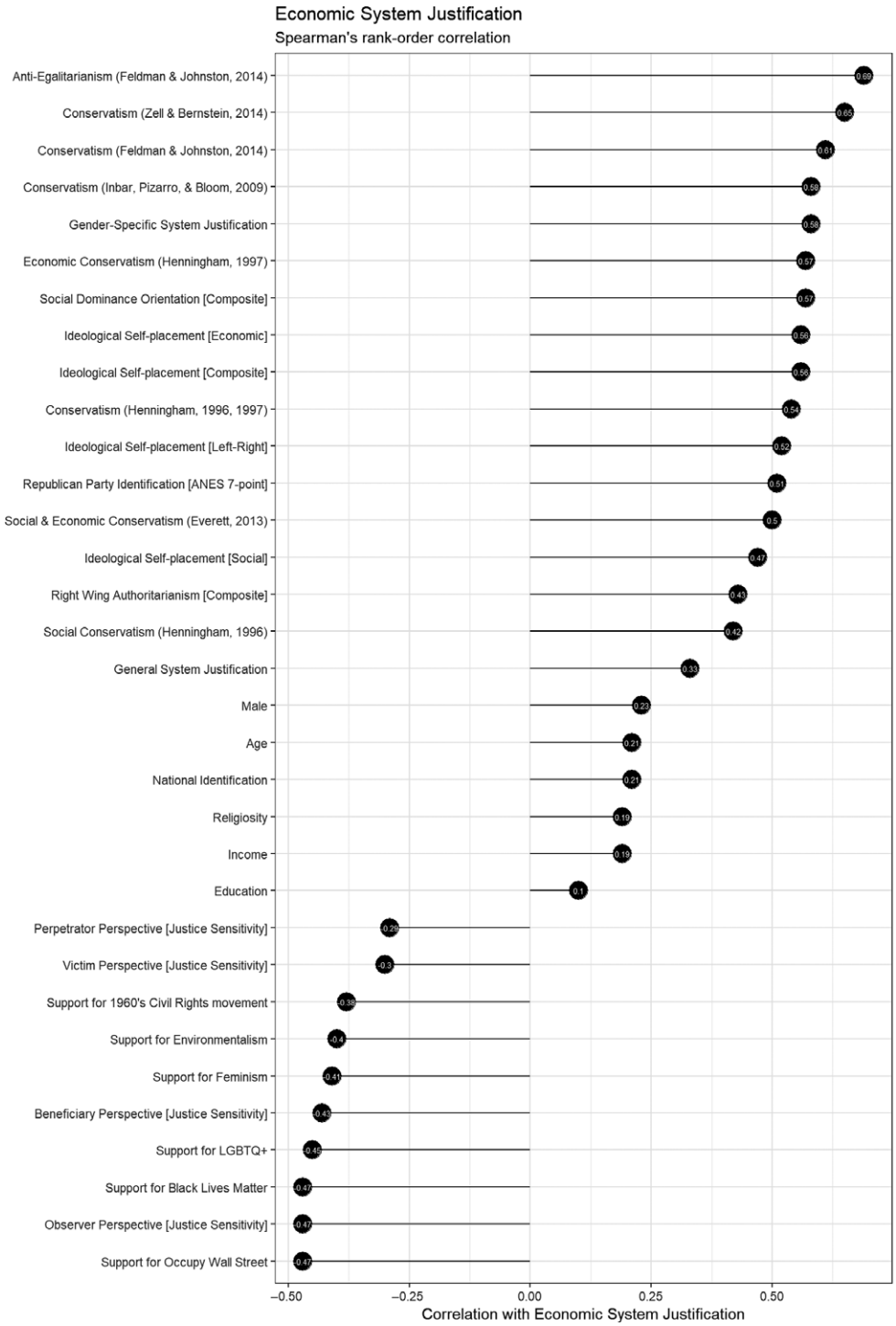


Figure 5. Correlates of Economic System Justification in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).

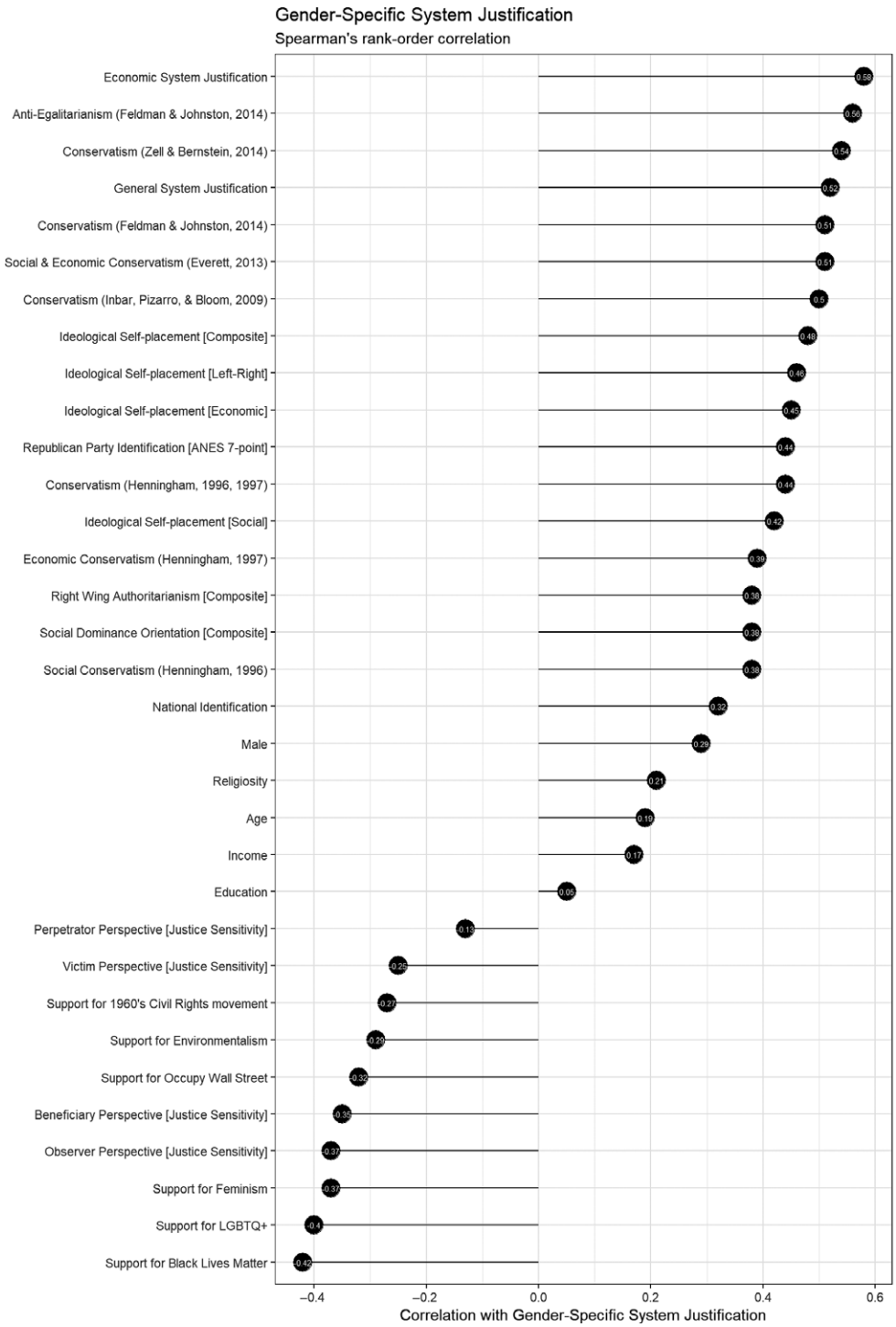
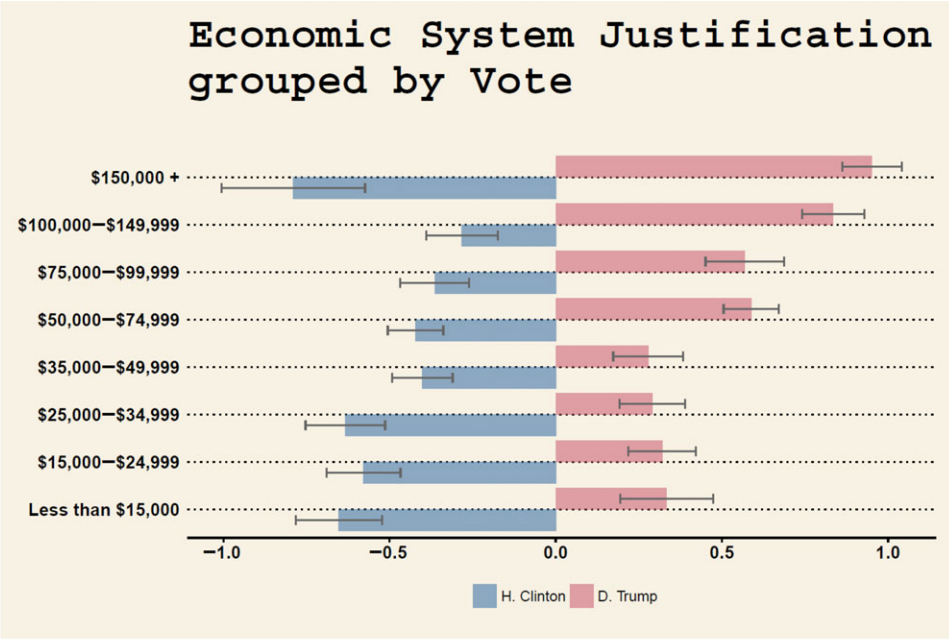


Figure 6. Correlates of Gender-Specific System Justification in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).



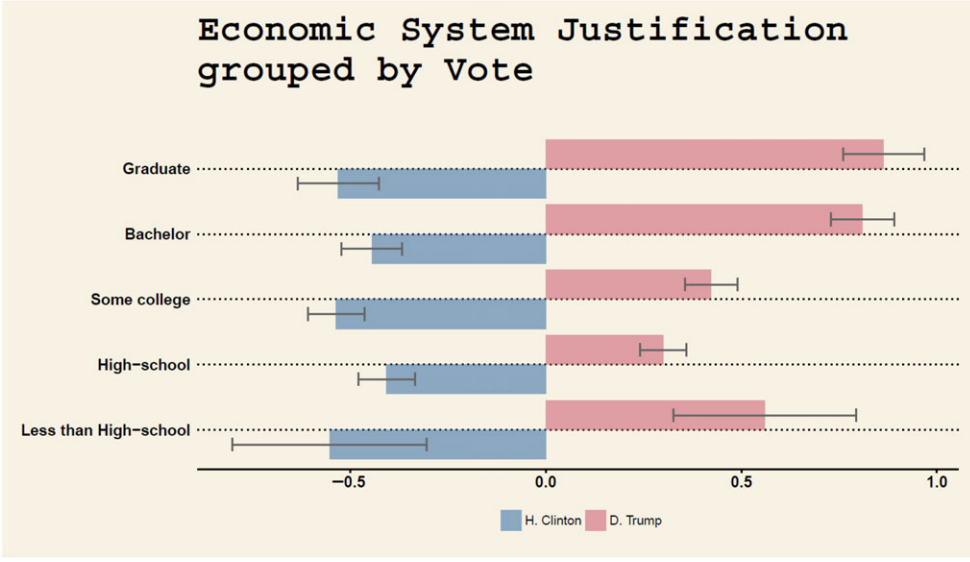
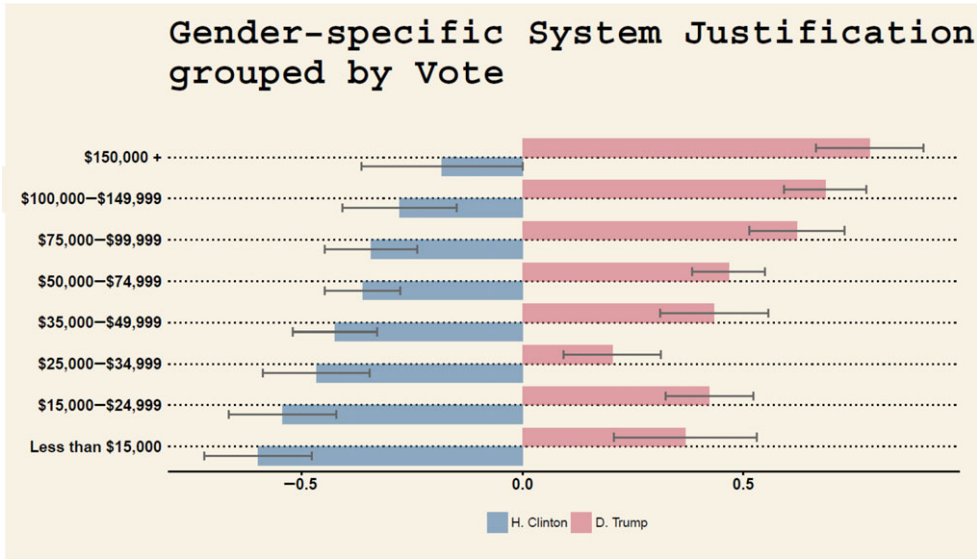


Figure 7. Correlations Between Economic System Justification and Voting Preferences in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500) at Various Levels of Income (Top) and Education (Bottom). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).

We found that economic and gender-specific (but not general) system justification predicted resistance to system-challenging social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, feminism, environmentalism, and even the 1960s civil rights



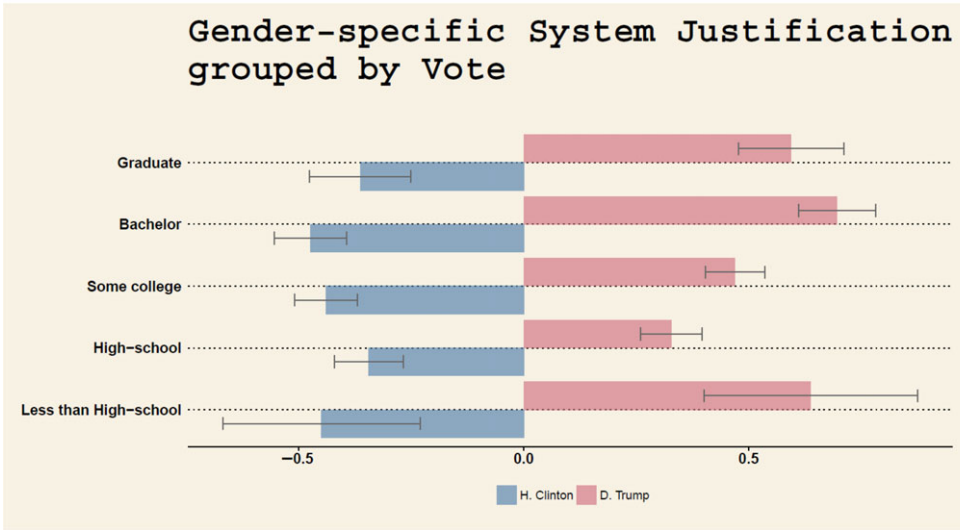
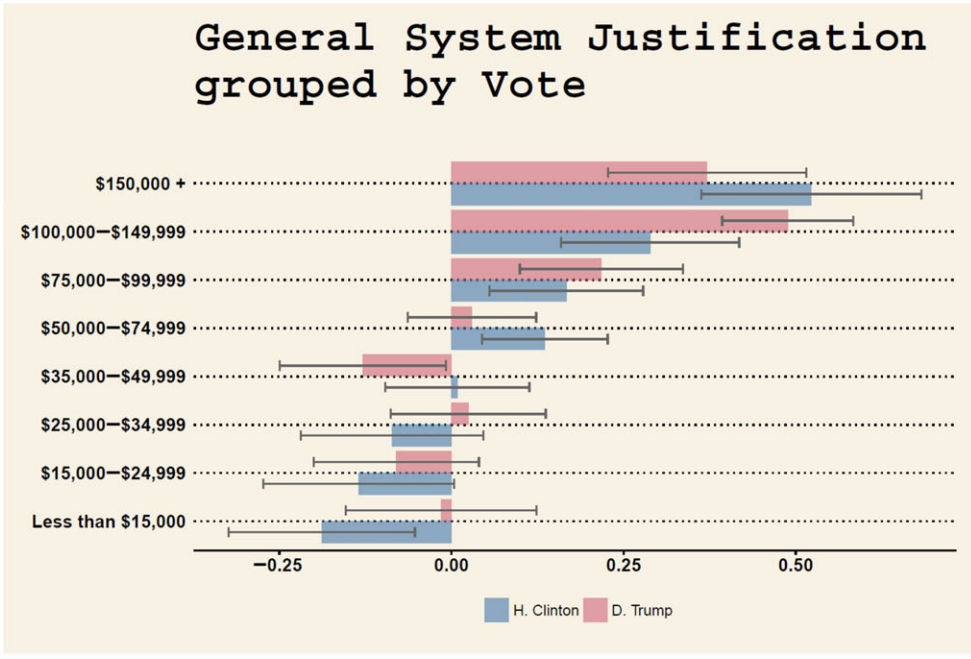


Figure 8. Correlations Between Gender-Specific System Justification and Voting Preferences in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500) at Various Levels of Income (Top) and Education (Bottom). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).

movement (with rs ranging from .27 to .47). All three types of system justification were negatively correlated with justice sensitivity from the perspectives of victims, observers, beneficiaries, and perpetrators ($-.47 \leq r \leq -.12$). This finding is important because it speaks to a major difference between just world and system justification theories (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Whereas Lerner (1980) argued that genuine concerns for justice (inspired by the 'justice motive') should be positively associated with the belief in a just



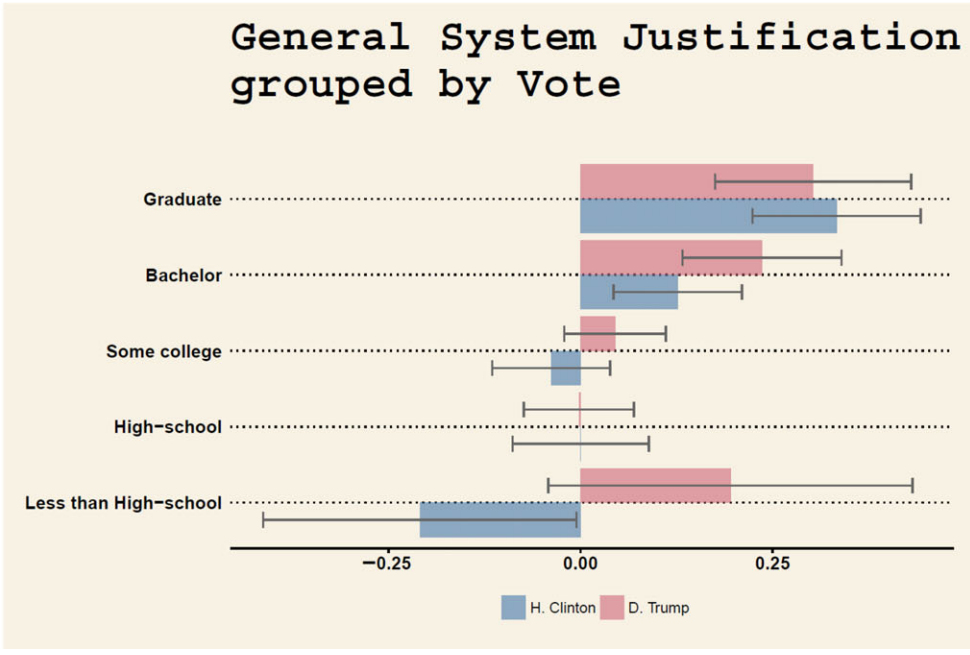


Figure 9. Correlations Between General System Justification and Voting Preferences in a Nationally Representative Sample of Americans Shortly Before the 2016 US Presidential Election (N = 1,500) at Various Levels of Income (Top) and Education (Bottom). *Source*: This figure was prepared by Flávio Azevedo and is based on data from Azevedo *et al.* (2017).

world and victim-blaming tendencies, it follows from system justification theory that there would be a negative association between the motivation to justify the societal status quo and sensitivity to potential injustices. This is indeed what we see in Figures 4–6.

Azevedo *et al.* (2017) observed that general system justification was unrelated to candidate liking in 2016, but economic and gender-specific system justification were positively associated with liking for Donald Trump ($.39 \leq r \leq .40$) and negatively associated with liking for Hillary Clinton ($-.40 \leq r \leq -.32$). At every level of income and education, economic and gender-specific system justification were positively associated with support for Trump and negatively associated with support for Clinton (see Figures 7 and 8). However, this was not the case for general system justification (see Figure 9). When the three types of system justification were entered into a multiple regression, general system justification was actually associated with a preference for Clinton (the more 'mainstream' candidate) over Trump (the more disruptive and less traditional candidate). Thus, Trump supporters clearly did reject the 'status quo' of Democratic governance under President Obama (and Secretary of State Clinton), but – like conservatives in general – they strongly justified existing economic and gender-based disparities. Trump voters may have been frustrated by the consequences of global competition under capitalism, but there was no evidence that they blamed the economic system itself for their frustration.

Concluding remarks

Social psychologists under the sweeping influence of social identity theory have long assumed that 'dominant group members are motivated to maintain the status quo and so to perceive it as legitimate, whereas subordinate group members are motivated to enhance their social identity and act toward change, perceiving the status quo as illegitimate' (DeMoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, 2009, p. 13). As a first pass at conceiving of the relationship between motivated social cognition and political ideology, this strikes me as a reasonable enough approximation of reality. But it hardly tells the whole story. When we look back at social history, we see a great many cases of 'liberal' or 'progressive' members of advantaged groups fighting to change the status quo so as to increase social, economic, and political equality, and a great many cases of 'conservative' members of disadvantaged groups defending the legitimacy of the status quo. Anything like a complete account of social and political psychology must account for these phenomena as well. This is why I believe that we need a theory of system justification as well as a theory of social identification.

I would like to close with a specific example. On 11 September 1964, the Beatles – led by 23-year-old John Lennon – refused to obey the tenets of racial segregation at a concert in Florida (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eWECN9-sY4). We should ask how four very young White men achieved such a high degree of moral clarity on racial issues more than 50 years ago, when so many Americans accepted the status quo of segregation. It would be too crude to suggest that because the Beatles were British rather than American, it was purely a matter of ingroup favouritism (or outgroup derogation) at the level of nation states, because the Beatles loved many things about the United States and criticized many things about the United Kingdom. They were hardly known as high system-justifiers in any context. Lennon, for instance, returned his MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) to the Queen of England in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War. At the same time, I would suggest that in 1964 it must have helped *to see the American system from the outside*, rather than from within it, where one depends upon – and is

therefore tempted to defend and justify (or at least tolerate) the status quo and to downplay its shortcomings. Perhaps it is this critical perspicacity that we should actively cultivate, both individually and collectively, lest we remain complicit – silently or otherwise – in the various social injustices that afflict the institutions and arrangements that provide the setting for our few moments in history.

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