

Placating the Powerless: Effects of Legitimate and Illegitimate Explanation on Affect, Memory, and Stereotyping¹

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*In an experimental study involving power differences between groups, the effects of legitimate and illegitimate explanations for power were investigated on measures of affect, stereotyping, and memory. We found that powerless groups reported more positive affect (relative to negative affect) when explanations were provided for their powerlessness, whether these explanations were classified a priori as either legitimate or illegitimate. Members of powerless groups also attributed greater intelligence and responsibility to the outgroup when it was in a position of high power rather than equal power, and these effects on stereotyping were enhanced when explanations for the power differences were provided. Finally, research participants tended to misremember the reasons given for the power differences as more legitimate than they actually were. These results support a system justification theory of intergroup behavior (Jost and Banaji [1994] *Br. J. Soc. Psychol.* 33:1–27) in that people seem to imbue placebic explanations with legitimacy, use stereotypes to rationalize power differences, and exhibit biases in memory such that the status quo is increasingly legitimized over time.*

KEY WORDS: power; legitimacy; explanation; system justification; intergroup relations.

Since at least the time of Machiavelli, the Western world has recognized that if powerful groups and individuals want to win the consent and cooperation of their subordinates, they must acquire some level of legitimacy (e.g., Christie and Geis, 1970; Doob, 1983; Weber, 1947; Zelditch, in press). In this way, beliefs about legitimacy provide an essential “cushion of support for authority” (Rasinski *et al.*, 1985, p. 386), largely because the perception of legitimacy provides the powerful

¹This article is dedicated to the memory of two teachers who inspired us and paved the way for research on power and legitimacy: Florence “Lindy” Geis (1933–1993) and Leonard W. Doob (1909–2000).

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with conventionally accepted means to exert social influence over others (French and Raven, 1959; Raven, 1993). In sociology, psychology, political science, and organizational behavior, an ever-increasing body of research indicates that legitimacy appraisals are central to the acceptance or rejection of existing power differences between individuals and groups, and these appraisals determine the effects of power differences on our thoughts, feelings, and actions (e.g., Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Jost and Major, in press; Major, 1994; Ridgeway, in press; Shapiro, 1991; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Tyler, 1990; Weatherford, 1992; Zelditch, in press).

As French and Raven (1959) pointed out over 40 years ago, legitimacy functions as a primary basis of social power and influence, leading people to comply with everyday requests that are a part and parcel of social interaction (Raven, 1993; Yukl and Falbe, 1991) as well as leading them to obey the law and accept the rules of authority (Rasinski *et al.*, 1985; Tyler, 1990). Legitimate power also seems to activate the other bases of social power identified by French and Raven (1959), so that the perception of legitimacy enhances perceptions of referent, reward, coercive, and expert power (Carson *et al.*, 1993). In many ways, then, a legitimate source is an influential source (McGuire, 1985).

Matters are made more complicated, however, by the fact that subjective appraisals of legitimacy are often rendered under conditions of low certainty and high ambiguity (cf. Weick, 1995). Because social influence processes are critical in determining whether power differences are deemed legitimate or not (e.g., Doob, 1983; French and Raven, 1959; Raven, 1993), beliefs about legitimacy may be manipulated as a way of placating powerless groups. Insofar as legitimacy typically requires explanation (Bies and Sitkin, 1992; Rex, 1961), providing explanations for power differences may serve to maintain and justify inequality among groups and individuals (cf. Hoffman and Hurst, 1989; Jackman and Senter, 1983). Investigating the role of explanations in preserving power relations in this context supplements and extends research in organizational behavior on the effects of explanations in overcoming deceit (Shapiro, 1991), failure (Bies and Sitkin, 1992), inequity (Greenberg, 1990), job loss (Konovsky and Folger, 1991), and mismanagement (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992).

Providing people with legitimate reasons for occupying a position of power (such as experience or expertise) should make people feel better about being outcome dependent, and it should help to gain their compliance. When members of powerless groups lack an explanation for their situation, they may feel less comfortable, happy, and satisfied in comparison with members of powerful groups (Sachdev and Bourhis, 1985, 1991). A rather extensive body of research in the justice field (e.g., Bies and Sitkin, 1992; Greenberg, 1990; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Rasinski *et al.*, 1985; Shapiro, 1991; Tyler, 1990) supports the conclusion that providing a legitimate basis for the exercise of power or authority not only makes people feel better about inequality, but is also a most effective means of gaining

behavioral compliance on the part of subordinates and, ultimately, in preserving the existing social structure.

In general, it seems reasonable to expect that the converse of this proposition is also true, namely that illegitimate reasons for power differences (such as nepotism or favoritism) will lead to negative affect and a rejection of the *status quo*. Many theories of justice, such as equity theory and relative deprivation, for instance, hold that people will experience anger in response to the perception of unjust treatment (e.g., Martin *et al.*, 1984). Despite the evident sensibility of the assumption that people will reject inadequate explanations (cf. Greenberg, 1990; Konovsky and Folger, 1991; Shapiro, 1991), there are two complementary lines of research suggesting that people may accept pseudo-explanations or even relatively illegitimate explanations for power differences without necessarily objecting to them.

The first of these has to do with the well-known research by Langer *et al.* (1978), in which uninformative, placebic explanations were sufficient for gaining compliance. Merely asking people at a photocopying machine, for example, "May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?" was sufficient to produce acquiescence. Although this work was not cast in terms of perceptions of justice, it suggests that people may be relatively generous in granting legitimacy to others' explanations, especially when they are operating in a fairly "mindless" or nonreflective state. Research by Schmitt *et al.* (1992, Study 4) also found that people were relatively accepting of others' intrusions into the queue, especially when a legitimate reason was provided for the intrusion.

A second reason to expect that pseudo-explanations might be sufficient to placate the powerless comes from recent theory and research on the psychology of "system justification" (e.g., Jost, in press; Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost and Burgess, 2000). In this work, it is hypothesized that people are motivated to imbue the *status quo* with legitimacy and rationality, much as Lerner (1980) argued with regard to the "belief in a just world." A critical assumption of the system justification perspective is that even members of disadvantaged or powerless groups tend to perceive social events in such a way that hierarchical arrangements are perceived as fair and just, perhaps even natural and inevitable. Thus, whereas Langer *et al.*'s (1978) perspective stresses the ways in which people passively accept others' legitimating accounts, the system justification perspective implies that people might *actively* engage in the legitimation of social reality, even if it means justifying their own position of powerlessness. This means that people will use cognition and memory to go "beyond the information given" in ascribing legitimacy to even relatively illegitimate acts and actors (see Jost, in press). In part this is because people attempt to make sense of ongoing social reality (Weick, 1995), and in part this is because people want to preserve the sense that outcomes are fair and just (Lerner, 1980).

System justification theory takes its impetus from research on the tolerance of injustice and theorizing on the concept of "false consciousness" (Jost, 1995;

Jost and Banaji, 1994). It posits a motive to invest in and rationalize the *status quo*, and this motive is thought to be present even among members of disadvantaged groups, although typically to a lesser degree. The theory is consistent with research documenting "status quo biases" whereby people tend to favor whatever option is perceived as the current one and to avoid choices that require change (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988). It is also consistent with research on "outcome biases" whereby people attribute positive characteristics to "winners" and negative characteristics to "losers" (Allison *et al.*, 1996). Although these phenomena are typically explained in purely cognitive terms by social psychologists, we argue that there is an ideological tenor to them that adds a layer of political significance and motivation to the basic information processing functions.

System justification theory differs from other theories of cognitive restructuring, such as cognitive dissonance theory, in that the system justification perspective holds that people do not necessarily need to feel personally responsible for an aversive action in order to justify it. The argument made here is that we often justify the decisions of lawmakers, administrators, bosses, and other authority figures (as well as things that happen without any decisions being made), without necessarily being personally implicated in the way that cognitive dissonance theory would require (Cooper and Fazio, 1984). A broader version of cognitive dissonance theory arises in connection with Weick's work (Weick, 1995) on sensemaking, which describes the ways in which people assess and construct meaning in response to unexpected social and organizational events. But the sensemaking perspective stresses that people perceive consistency by "seeing a world on which they already imposed what they believe" (Weick, 1995, p. 15), whereas the system justification perspective states that people perceive legitimacy by seeing a world in which structures and outcomes are fair and deserved. The idea is that people not only seek to imbue the status quo with rationality and meaning, but they often perform cognitive and ideological work on behalf of the social system to preserve the sense that authorities and institutions are fair and legitimate (Jost, in press).

If there is indeed a general social psychological tendency to exaggerate the legitimacy of social events, then people might respond to illegitimate explanations (or placebic explanations) as if they are more legitimate and justified than they actually are, and such effects should appear on measures of affect, memory, and stereotyping. From this perspective, pseudo-explanations serve not only to smooth over social interaction and to increase behavioral compliance, as Langer *et al.* (1978) have shown, but such explanations might also stimulate people to actively reconstruct their judgments of powerful others and their memory for the legitimacy of power differences. In the present study, then, we explored the possibility that simple social explanations may assist the powerless with attempts to rationalize their position, making them feel better about inequality and making them more likely to engage in social and psychological justifications for the inequality.

Specifically, we predicted that explanations and pseudo-explanations should make members of powerless groups feel better about their situation, even when

those explanations do not establish an objectively valid or legitimate basis for the exercise of power. Thus, one hypothesis was that *the ratio of positive to negative affect would be higher when members of a powerless group are given an explanation for their situation than when they are not*. The general idea is that providing justifications makes people feel more comfortable with inequalities of status or power, even when they are in a relatively disadvantaged position. Thus, reasons and justifications serve a placating function when it comes to the preservation of power.

Consistent with the system justification approach, past research suggests that people draw stereotypical attributions and inferences in such a way that inequalities of status and power between groups are explained and rationalized (e.g., Allison *et al.*, 1996; Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Hoffman and Hurst, 1989; Jackman and Senter, 1983; Jost and Banaji, 1994; Ridgeway, in press). For instance, in a series of experimental studies involving real-world groups, Jost (in press) found that people justified the socioeconomic success of one group relative to another by altering their stereotypes, so that the more successful group (whether the ingroup or the outgroup) was perceived as more intelligent, more industrious, and more verbally skilled than the other group. These differences were especially likely to emerge when people believed that the socioeconomic success differences were fair, legitimate, and justifiable.

In the present research, we hypothesized that people would actively use stereotypes to rationalize power differences between groups, especially when they are provided with an explanation for the power differences. Specifically, it was predicted that (a) *people would perceive the outgroup as more intelligent, responsible, and deserving when that outgroup occupies a position of power than when it does not*, and (b) *people would be more likely to perceive the powerful outgroup as intelligent, responsible, and deserving when they are given an explanation for the power differences than when they are not*. To the extent that people are motivated to preserve the legitimacy of power differences between groups, they should attribute characteristics of superiority such as enhanced intelligence, responsibility, and deservingness to the powerful group (see Jost, in press). Thus, beliefs about the characteristics of the powerful group should reflect system justifying concerns, and the presence of (even weak) explanations should increase system justifying tendencies.

Finally, it was also predicted that there would be a system justifying bias in memory for the reasons that were given for the existence of power differences. Specifically, we examined the notion that people would falsely remember explanations as possessing more legitimacy than they actually possessed, so that *people assigned to the no explanation and illegitimate explanation conditions would misremember that they had been given legitimate reasons for the power differences*. This is consistent with the notion that social cognition serves system justifying ends, even on an implicit or nonconscious level (e.g., Jost, in press; Jost and Banaji, 1994).

These three hypotheses were assessed in the context of an experimental study in which research participants either did or did not learn of a power difference between their own group and a more powerful outgroup, and, if a power difference existed, they either were or were not provided with a rationale for the power difference. Subsequent to the manipulations of power and explanation, participants rated their own affect, judged the stereotypical characteristics of the powerful outgroup, and were asked to recall the original rationale for the intergroup power differences.

METHOD

Overview

Participants were assigned to one of four experimental conditions. In the "No Power Differences" condition, no mention was made of a power difference between the ingroup and the outgroup. In the "No Explanation" condition, research participants learned of a power difference favoring the outgroup, but they were provided with no rationale for this difference. In the "Illegitimate Explanation" condition, the power difference was explained in terms of friendship and social connections, which were judged in pretesting to be illegitimate reasons for achieving power. In the "Legitimate Explanation" condition, participants were informed that the outgroup was placed in a position of power because of their greater experience and expertise. Following these machinations, participants were asked to rate their own positive and negative affect, to assess the responsibility and intelligence of the powerful group, and finally to recall why the other group had been given the ability to control their outcomes. This procedure enabled us to investigate system justification processes in affect, stereotyping, and memory.

Research Participants

Research participants for the study were 194 male and female students from Hunter College in New York with ages ranging from 17 to 54 years ($M = 20.5$). The sample was diverse with regard to ethnicity: 33.5% White/Caucasian, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 16.5% Asian, 10% African American, 8% West Indian, and 2% Indian. An additional 6 percent either did not answer the question or classified themselves as "other" without giving any additional information. Gender, ethnicity, and age were equivalently distributed in all of the experimental groups. Students participated in the experiment in order to fulfill a course requirement.

Cover Story

The research participants' ostensible task in the present study was to determine the authenticity of suicide notes, which were taken from the book *Clues to Suicide* (Shneidman and Farberow, 1957). This task has been used previously in

research by Ross *et al.* (1975). Because of the difficulty in determining which of the notes were fictitious, the only way of evaluating the group's performance was by making use of the feedback that was relayed by the experimenter to the powerless group.

Manipulation of Power

In order to create a power differential between groups, research participants were led to believe that students from another college (Brooklyn College) were waiting in an adjacent room to determine whether the participants possessed sufficient skill in the experimental task. Specifically, participants were told that it was up to the other group to decide on the basis of their performance whether to allow them to leave early or stay for further instructions. Thus, the power manipulation was created by letting participants know that they would be evaluated by the other group and that their group's outcome (in this case, time expenditure) was dependent upon the judgments of the outgroup. A control condition was included in which research participants were told simply that Brooklyn College students were also taking part in the same experiment ("No Power Differences" condition). Thus, Hunter College students either faced a position of low power relative to Brooklyn College students or they did not.

Manipulations of Legitimate and Illegitimate Explanations

Pretesting

The relative legitimacy of eighteen different reasons for why a group can attain power over another group was assessed in pretesting sessions that involved 47 student raters who were enrolled in either of two psychology courses. Raters were asked to determine the illegitimacy or legitimacy of a group's controlling position on Likert scales ranging from 0 (labeled "*Illegitimate*") to 9 (labeled "*Legitimate*"). Expertise, experience, and ability yielded the highest means (aggregate $M = 6.88$), and so these were the bases of power mentioned in the "Legitimate Explanation" condition. Raters indicated that being friends with people in power as a reason for acquiring power was associated with very low levels of legitimacy ($M = 2.04$), and so this was used in the "Illegitimate Explanation" or "pseudo-explanation" condition. A paired samples t -test, $t(46) = 13.71$, $p < .0001$, confirmed that the "legitimate" reason (expertise) was perceived as significantly more legitimate than the "illegitimate" reason (friends).

Manipulations

There were four conditions of the experiment altogether, including the control condition that involved no power differences, as described earlier. The three

remaining conditions made use of the same power manipulation in which Brooklyn College students were said to have control over the outcomes of Hunter College students. These power differences were either left unexplained by the undergraduate experimenter ("No Explanation" condition) or they were explained in terms of reasons that were classified as legitimate or illegitimate on the basis of pretesting. In the "Legitimate Explanation" condition, the experimenter informed the participants that the Brooklyn College students were upper division psychology students who had six credits in abnormal psychology and three credits in personality psychology and who also worked part-time at Bellevue Hospital in the suicide prevention unit. In the "Illegitimate Explanation" condition, the research participants were told that Brooklyn College students would be evaluating them because the principal investigator graduated from Brooklyn College and knew people from that school.

Dependent Measures

Check on the Manipulation of Power

In order to verify that research participants assigned to the three conditions involving power differences perceived less outcome control than did research participants assigned to the condition involving no power differences, a single item was used as a manipulation check. Participants were asked, "How much control do you feel that the Brooklyn College group has over your group's outcomes at the moment?" In response to this question, they were asked to rate feelings of powerlessness/powerfulness on a 10-point scale from 0 (*no control*) to 9 (*complete control*).

Ratings of Positive and Negative Affect

Before engaging in the suicide note task, but after learning about the power differences and the alleged reasons for them, research participants completed a shortened version of Watson's (1988) Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). They rated 24 adjectives on 5-point scales from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*), indicating how they felt "at the present time." The 14 negative affective states were afraid, contemptuous, guilty, jittery, ashamed, disgusted, scared, distressed, revolted, nervous, irritable, upset, hostile, and scornful. The 10 positive states were interested, strong, excited, alert, active, enthusiastic, attentive, proud, inspired, and determined. Mean scores for positive affect and negative affect were calculated for each research participant, and a ratio of positive/negative affect was then calculated.

Stereotypical Beliefs About the Outgroup

Following the conclusion of the suicide note task, research participants were asked to estimate levels of intelligence and responsibility among the outgroup of Brooklyn College students and to indicate how much right they had to judge Hunter College students in this situation. The questions read (a) "How intelligent do you think the other group is?" (b) "How responsible do you think the other group is?" and (c) "How much do you think the Brooklyn group has the right to judge your assessments of the suicide notes?" Responses were made on Likert scales ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 9 (*Very Much*).

Memory for Reasons

At the end of the experiment, research participants completed a multiple-choice question in which they were asked to remember why the other group was judging their ability to assess suicide notes. The first two choices that were given were taken *verbatim* from the explanations contained in the experimenters' scripts. The possible responses were (A) "Because they are upper division Psychology students and work in a suicide prevention unit," (B) "Because the principal investigator graduated from Brooklyn College and knows people from Brooklyn College," (C) "We weren't told," and (D) "I don't remember." The purpose of this item was to determine whether people misremembered the reasons for the power differences as more legitimate than they actually were.

Procedure

Research participants arrived in groups ranging in size from 3 to 8 ($M = 4.67$). They were greeted by an undergraduate experimenter (who was unaware of the hypotheses of the study), and they were first asked to choose a group name. These group names were displayed on name tags worn throughout the study. To increase feelings of groupness before the experiment began, the experimenter took a Polaroid picture of the group to help identify the participants as one group. After the participants were seated in the laboratory, the experimenter informed them that their participation in the study, which involved assessing predictors of suicide, would provide helpful information to the health care industry. The suicide note task was then described.

Next, the experimenter stated that another group was seated in an adjacent room, which displayed a sign prominently on its door. Participants were informed that this group was composed of students from Brooklyn College. In the "No Power Differences" condition, research participants were simply told that these other students would also be taking part in the same study. In the three conditions involving

power differences between the groups, participants were told that the Brooklyn College students would be evaluating their performance on the suicide note task and would decide when the Hunter College students could leave the laboratory. Participants were given no explanation for the power differences, or they were given either the legitimate or the illegitimate explanation for the power differences.

The experimenter then stated that it was necessary to assess the moods of the research participants, because mood could affect how people judge the authenticity of the suicide notes. Following the ratings of positive and negative affect, participants were given pairs of suicide notes and were asked as a group to identify which of the two notes was the authentic one. Upon the group's completion of the task, participants completed individual questionnaires that contained questions about their understanding of the other group's characteristics (measures of stereotypical beliefs). When the participants finished this questionnaire, the experimenter took the assessments of the suicide notes out of the room, presumably so that the other group could judge their ability. The experimenter then asked participants to complete another questionnaire while they waited, and this questionnaire contained items about how they perceived the power difference and its legitimacy and their recall for the explanation about power. After all of the participants had completed this questionnaire, the experimenter re-entered the room and notified the groups that they had done very well and could leave immediately. Research participants were debriefed later as a group once all of the data were collected.

RESULTS

Check on the Manipulation of Power

To ensure that research participants in the experimental conditions did perceive a power difference between their group and the other group, they were asked, "How much control do you feel that the Brooklyn College group has over your group's outcomes at the moment?" Results indicate that in the three conditions in which a power difference existed (Legitimate [$M = 4.58$], Illegitimate [$M = 4.67$] and No Explanation [$M = 4.29$] groups), participants believed that the outgroup possessed significantly more control over their outcomes than when no manipulation of power existed, $M = 2.17$, $F(3, 187) = 8.92$, $p < .0001$. Thus, the manipulation of power was effective.

Ratings of Positive and Negative Affect

Reliability scores for the measures of positive and negative affect were high ($\alpha = .84$ and $.85$, respectively). Mean scores on positive and negative affect were calculated for each participant. Overall, participants reported more positive ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.72$) than negative affect ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.49$), and the two dimensions were positively but not significantly correlated ($r = .09$, n.s).

Because correlations between positive and negative affect were in the positive (rather than negative) direction and because a strong preponderance of positive affect was reported, we decided to calculate a ratio of positive to negative affect for each research participant and to use this measure as the dependent variable in conducting inferential statistics.

Results indicated that there were no statistically reliable differences between the "Legitimate Explanation" condition ($M = 2.92$) and the "Illegitimate Explanation" condition ($M = 3.40$) on the ratio of positive to negative affect, $t(92) = -.68$, n.s. When these two conditions were combined ($M = 3.17$), it appears that they were successful in producing an improvement in affect over the "No Explanation" condition ($M = 2.32$). Because Levene's test for equality of variances indicated that there was a significant difference in the variances associated with the "Explanation" and "No Explanation" conditions, $F(1, 142) = 3.82$, $p = .05$, a t -test in which unequal variances are assumed was used to calculate the difference in affect between these conditions. This analysis indicated that the ratio of positive to negative affect was indeed significantly higher when an explanation for the power differences was given than when it was not, $t(108.59) = 2.35$, $p = .02$, supporting the first hypothesis.

Stereotypical Beliefs About the Outgroup

Under various conditions of power and explanation, research participants were asked to estimate how intelligent and responsible the outgroup of Brooklyn College students was and how much right they had to judge the performance of Hunter College students on the suicide task. Two types of multivariate analyses were conducted on these three dependent variables of perceived intelligence, responsibility, and "right to judge." In the first case, the "No Power" condition was compared to the three conditions in which power differences did exist, to determine whether the presence of a power differential affected the stereotypical beliefs about the outgroup. In the second case, the condition in which a power difference existed but no explanation was given for it (the "No Explanation" condition) was compared to the two conditions in which explanations were given for the power difference. This analysis enabled us to determine whether providing explanations increased the use of system justifying stereotypes.

When the "No Power" condition was compared to the three conditions in which power differences existed, a multivariate analysis indicated that there was an overall effect of power on the three stereotypical ratings taken as a whole, $F(1, 187) = 3.39$, $p < .02$. Univariate analyses indicated that the presence of a power differential between the two groups led the ingroup of Hunter College students to rate the more powerful group of Brooklyn College students as significantly more intelligent and more responsible but not as having more of a right to judge their work. Means and univariate results are presented in Table I. It appears that research participants did use stereotypes to justify the power differences across the board.

Table I. Effects of Power Differences on Stereotypical Beliefs About the Outgroup

	No power differences (<i>n</i> = 46)	Power differences (<i>n</i> = 146)	Univariate <i>F</i> (<i>df</i> = 1, 189)
Intelligent	5.87 (1.09)	6.24 (1.16)	3.65*
Responsible	5.76 (1.52)	6.44 (1.46)	7.40**
"Right to judge"	4.80 (2.47)	4.48 (2.36)	0.63 (<i>n.s.</i>)

Note. Higher numbers indicate that the outgroup was rated to be more intelligent, more responsible, and as having more of a "right to judge."

* $p < .06$; ** $p < .01$.

Table II. Effects of Explanation for the Power Differences on Stereotypical Beliefs About the Outgroup

	No explanation (<i>n</i> = 48)	Explanation (<i>n</i> = 97)	Univariate <i>F</i> (<i>df</i> = 1, 143)
Intelligent	5.94 (1.02)	6.37 (1.20)	4.61*
Responsible	5.88 (1.42)	6.70 (1.40)	11.05***
"Right to judge"	3.75 (2.23)	4.85 (2.36)	7.20**

Note. Higher numbers indicate that the outgroup was rated to be more intelligent, more responsible, and as having more of a "right to judge."

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Looking only at those conditions in which power differences existed, we compared the "No Explanation" condition to the two conditions in which an explanation was given. (There were again no differences between the "Legitimate" and "Illegitimate" explanation conditions.) The analysis yielded an overall multivariate effect of explanation on the three stereotypical beliefs, $F(1, 141) = 4.79$, $p < .005$. Univariate analyses indicated that providing an explanation (whether legitimate or illegitimate) significantly increased the degree to which the outgroup was perceived as intelligent, responsible, and having a "right to judge." Means and univariate results for the effect of explanation are presented in Table II. These data support the notion that people are more likely to apply stereotypes that justify the use of power when they are provided with an explanation for the power differences than when they are not. Once again, even a relatively illegitimate explanation appeared to work as well as a more legitimate one.

Memory for Reasons

At the conclusion of the experiment, participants were asked to recall the reason that was given for the power differences between Brooklyn College and Hunter College. Four possible responses were given in a multiple-choice format: (A) "Because they are upper division Psychology students and work in a suicide prevention unit," (B) "Because the principal investigator graduated from Brooklyn College and knows people from Brooklyn College," (C) "We weren't told," and (D) "I don't remember." The first choice corresponded to the "Legitimate Explanation"

Table III. Percent Choosing Each Reason for the Power Difference
(Within Each Experimental Condition)

	No explanation (<i>n</i> = 48)	Illegitimate explanation (<i>n</i> = 43)	Legitimate explanation (<i>n</i> = 31)
"Because they have experience"	33.3	30.2	<i>80.6</i>
"Because they are friends with the Principal Investigator"	0	<i>41.9</i>	3.2
"We weren't told"	<i>47.9</i>	18.6	9.7
"Don't remember"	18.8	9.3	6.5

Note. Correct responses are italicized.

Table IV. Chi-Square Analysis of Participants' Memory for Power Explanations^{a*}

Memory for reason	Expected	Observed	Difference
Legitimate power	29	54	+25
Illegitimate power	39	19	-20
No explanation	39	34	-5

^aChi-square = 32.45; *df* = 2.

**p* < .0001.

condition, the second choice referred to the "Illegitimate Explanation" condition, and the third choice applied accurately to the "No Explanation" condition. The percentages of research participants selecting each response are presented in Table III, on the basis of assignment to experimental condition. As can be seen, people remembered the reasons as being more legitimate than they actually were. Thus, including the conditions in which (A) was *not* the correct answer, people chose this option between 30% and 81% of the time. By contrast, including the conditions in which (B) was the correct answer, people chose this option less than 42% of the time. Roughly a third of research participants who were either given no explanation or given an illegitimate explanation recalled falsely that they had been given a legitimate explanation for the power differences, whereas one-tenth of that number recalled falsely that they had been given an illegitimate explanation when they had in fact received a legitimate one.

Overall, inspecting only the three conditions in which power differences actually existed, respondents chose the "Legitimate" explanation 50% of the time on average (*n* = 54), the "Illegitimate" explanation 18% of the time (*n* = 19), and the "No Explanation" choice 32% of the time (*n* = 34). The results of a chi-square test of independence reveal that not only do people forget why the other group has power over them, but they *misremember* illegitimate explanations for power as legitimate explanations $\chi^2(2, n = 107) = 32.45, p < .0001$. (Actual and expected values for the chi-square test are listed in Table IV.) These results indicate that many more participants recalled a legitimate basis for the power differences than was actually the case.

DISCUSSION

In an experimental study involving power differences between groups, we found that explanations that were pretested as illegitimate in nature worked just as well as legitimate explanations in making members of powerless groups feel better about their plight and in increasing the likelihood of stereotyping the powerful outgroup in favorable terms. Although pretesting indicated that providing someone with power on the basis of friendship (as opposed to expertise) would be perceived as an illegitimate explanation, it may be that when powerless people are faced with an actual (rather than a hypothetical) situation, they are far more likely to lend legitimacy to a situation involving nepotism, insofar as they are motivated to provide justifications for the other party's power. Thus, people may be more willing to accept relatively illegitimate accounts than is commonly assumed, possibly because they assume that being offered some kind of an explanation is at least some indication that their perspective is being considered.

Compared with a condition in which no explanation was given for the power differences, we found that providing the powerless with either a legitimate or an illegitimate explanation increased the ratio of positive to negative affect that they reported. An illegitimate account, in other words, served to placate the powerless. With regard to stereotypes, people assigned to conditions in which the outgroup occupied a position of relative power believed that outgroup members were more intelligent and more responsible than when the same outgroup did not occupy a position of power. Furthermore, providing an explanation (legitimate or illegitimate) for the power differences increased the extent of such stereotyping.

Finally, we found that people misremembered the explanations that were given to them as more legitimate than they actually were. More than 30 percent of research participants who were given no explanation or given an illegitimate explanation recalled falsely that they had been given a legitimate explanation for the power differences, whereas only 3 percent of research participants who were given a legitimate explanation recalled falsely that they had been given an illegitimate explanation. Thus, it appears that there is a tendency in memory to remember things as more legitimate than they actually are. To our knowledge, this is the first study to document a system-serving bias in memory.

All of these findings support a system justification framework, in which people are hypothesized to provide cognitive and ideological support for the *status quo*, even when they are in a state of disadvantage or powerlessness. Thus, system justification theory predicts that people will be biased to perceive social events and hierarchical structures in such a way that their legitimacy is preserved or enhanced. We have reported evidence of this legitimation bias on measures of affect, stereotyping, and memory. This supports the notion that cognition is deployed in the service of the social system (Jost, in press).

Of course, there are some limitations of the study that deserve mention. For one thing, members of the powerful and powerless groups did not actually interact

during the experimental session, and so their judgments of the situation were relatively abstract. We do not know whether behavioral interaction in this context would have led to expectancy confirmation and the strengthening of power differences (e.g., Copeland, 1994; Ridgeway, in press), or an opportunity for the powerless to question and challenge the other group's superiority. A second limitation is that the task and the nature of the outcome dependence were probably not as personally involving as in many "real world" examples of power differences between groups. As a result, there may have been more "mindless" acceptance of legitimating accounts (e.g., Langer *et al.*, 1978) than would be the case under more consequential circumstances. A study by Konovsky and Folger (1991), for instance, found that layoff victims were not especially swayed by the explanations given to them. A third limitation is that our study does not distinguish fully between the tendency to justify power differences between groups and the tendency to justify the power of the experimenter. It may be that the illegitimate explanation was accepted at least in part because of a motivated tendency to experience the experimenter's authority as legitimate. Finally, a fourth limitation is that our research has not examined situations in which extremely illegitimate accounts are offered for power differences. Although our instructions for the "illegitimate" condition were selected on the basis of pretesting in which friendship and favoritism were rated as very low in legitimacy as reasons for providing power, it seems that in the experimental session, research participants did not experience these reasons as very illegitimate. In many ways, this finding reflects well the phenomenon of system justification, that is, the tendency to enhance the legitimacy of social events; but, it is also the case that an extremely illegitimate basis for power differences (such as racial or gender preferences) might have been less readily accepted by research participants.

Despite the fact that further research is needed before drawing strong conclusions about the ease with which the powerless may be placated, it seems that this study does provide some insight into social psychological responses to power differences between groups. Specifically, we have found that providing people with an explanation makes them feel better about being in a position of low power, and it leads them to rationalize the *status quo* to a greater degree. Our research suggests, furthermore, that members of powerless groups engage in an active as well as passive acceptance of their position, as reflected in stereotypical judgments and memory biases. Thus, the acceptance of illegitimate explanations may be more than mere "mindlessness," as Langer *et al.* (1978) have assumed. In some cases, acceptance may reflect the system justifying propensities of potential targets of social influence.

These results, perhaps, provide worrisome encouragement for the Machiavellians among us (e.g., Christie and Geis, 1970), who might be inspired by the knowledge that, under some circumstances at least, placebic explanations (or even relatively illegitimate) explanations for power work just as well as legitimate explanations. In any case, we have found that providing an explanation makes people

feel better and stereotype more in system justifying ways than when they are given no explanation for power differences. This technique of (pseudo-) explanation may therefore be added to the list of procedural tactics that serve to enhance legitimacy and increase levels of obedience and compliance (e.g., Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1990). In the context of responding to power relations among groups, our research suggests that people are not as sensitive to the relative quality or adequacy of explanations as has been found in prior research on social and psychological response to deceit, paycuts, or layoffs (Greenberg, 1990; Konovsky and Folger, 1991; Shapiro, 1991).

The present research should be useful, at the same time, to anyone who is interested in attempting to change the *status quo*, to the extent that this kind of research illuminates some of the psychological obstacles to the delegitimation of power differences. The knowledge that people exhibit system justifying biases with regard to memory and stereotyping, for instance, should be integral to the work of anyone who is seeking to undo such biases. Similarly, an awareness that people can be placated by relatively illegitimate explanations might lead one to be more vigilant in evaluating the quality and strength of explanations that are given for power differences and to promote warnings about the potential for political damage that exists when pseudo-explanations are accepted. Although the present study suggests that members of a powerless group are to some extent willing to grant legitimacy in a relatively uncritical manner, it also helps to identify some of the psychological processes that must be overcome in order for group consciousness-raising to occur.

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