

**SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION:
HOW DO WE KNOW IT'S MOTIVATED?**

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This chapter was prepared for A. C. Kay et al. (Eds.), *The psychology of justice and legitimacy: The Ontario symposium* (Vol. 11). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Abstract

According to system justification theory, people are *motivated* to defend and legitimize social systems that affect them. In this chapter, we review fifteen years of theory and empirical research bearing on the motivational underpinnings of system justification processes. We begin by explaining why people are motivated to system justify (i.e., it serves certain social and psychological needs). We then describe five lines of evidence that corroborate the motivational claims of system justification theorists. Specifically, we find that (1) Individual differences in self-deception and ideological motivation are linked to system justification; (2) System threat elicits defensive responses on behalf of the system; (3) People engage in biased information-processing in favor of system-serving conclusions; (4) System justification processes exhibits properties of goal pursuit; and (5) The desire to legitimize the system inspires greater behavioral effort. We conclude by discussing the implications of a motivational approach for understanding conditions that foster resistance to vs. support for social change.

System Justification: How Do We Know It's Motivated?

In her *Ontario Symposium* chapter on “The Tolerance of Injustice” Joanne Martin (1986, p. 217) raised a fundamental question: Why do “people who are clearly in a disadvantaged position—such as the poor, the underpaid, and victims of discrimination—often tolerate situations that seem unjust to an outside observer?” Variations of this question are at the core of theory and research by historians, social scientists, and particularly social psychologists, including Deutsch (1974), Lerner (1980), Crosby (1984), Tyler and McGraw (1986), Major (1994), Sidanius and Pratto (1999), and Olson and Hafer (2001). Our work on system justification as a motivated, goal-directed process follows very much in their footsteps.

History reveals a staggering number of instances of decent people (as well as indecent people) not merely passively accepting—but sometimes even actively justifying and rationalizing—social systems that are seen as extremely unjust by outsiders, often in retrospect. The caste system in India has survived largely intact for 3,000 years, with 150 million Indians to this day declared “Untouchables” (Ghose, 2003). The institution of slavery survived for more than 400 years in Europe and the Americas. Colonialism was also practiced for centuries and still is in some places (as is slavery), and the apartheid system in South Africa lasted for 46 years. These social systems were (or still are) bolstered by motivated social cognition through the use of stereotypes, rationalizations, ideologies, and legitimizing myths (e.g., Faust, 1981; Frederickson, 2002; Jackman, 1994; Jost & Hamilton, 2005; Kay, Jost, et al., 2007; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). That is, there are profound psychological factors that motivate individuals to accept, even support, the existing social system, even if that system entails substantial costs and relatively few benefits for them individually and for the community as a whole (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Despite being the wealthiest society in history, the United States is a country in which 37 million citizens (approximately 12.6% of the population) are living in poverty (USA Today, 2006). Poverty rates for Blacks and Latinos in the United States are near to one in four (National Index of Violence and Harm, 2007). At the same time, the combined net worth of the 400 wealthiest Americans exceeds 1 trillion dollars (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretta, 2005), with C.E.O.'s today earning approximately 500 times the salary of their average employee, up from a factor of 85 just one decade ago (Stiglitz, 2004). Theories of motivation that stress self-interest, identity politics, and the thirst for justice would likely predict that these facts would elicit widespread protest, rebellion, and moral outrage on the part of the disadvantaged. For instance, Gurr (1970) summarized his prominent theory of relative deprivation this way: “[M]en are quick to aspire beyond their social means and quick to anger when those means prove inadequate, but slow to accept their limitations” (p. 58). More recently, Simon and Klandermans (2001) argued that, “Feelings of illegitimate inequality or injustice typically result when social comparisons reveal that one’s ingroup is worse off than relevant out-groups” (p. 324). However, “quickness to anger” in economic and other spheres occurs more rarely than one would expect, and the “sense of injustice” is surprisingly difficult to awaken (Deutsch, 1974). Despite the fact that most Americans explicitly espouse egalitarian ideals, public opinion polls show that a strong majority perceives their economic system as fair and legitimate (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003, pp. 55-57). In one particularly dramatic example, more than 80% of survey respondents belonging to the poorest economic classification endorsed the belief that “large income differences are necessary to get people to work hard” (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003, p. 24).

Those few who do campaign for social and economic change are, generally speaking, not the ones who would benefit the most from it, and they are frequently subjected to at least some degree of resentment and disapproval for their efforts (e.g., Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2007; see also Frank, 2004; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004 for evidence of “backlash

effects” against those who criticize or otherwise threaten the status quo). Moral outrage, in other words, is often more easily directed at those who dare to challenge the system than at those who are responsible for its failings. The poet, W.H. Auden (1939/1977), exercised considerable social psychological insight into this phenomenon when he wrote that:

There is a merciful mechanism in the human mind that prevents one from knowing how unhappy one is. One only realizes it if the unhappiness passes, and then one wonders how on earth one was ever able to stand it. If the factory workers once got out of factory life for six months, there would be a revolution such as the world has never seen. (p. 402)

This mechanism—like rationalization in general—is indeed merciful in certain psychological respects, because it helps people cope with and adapt to realities, including unwelcome realities (e.g., Gilbert, Pintel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999; McGuire & McGuire, 1991; O’Brien & Major, 2005; Pyszczynski, 1982; Taylor & Brown, 1988). But it is also potentially costly at the societal level, insofar as it undermines the motivation to push for progress and social change (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). The goal of this chapter is to shed light on the motivational dynamics underlying system justification tendencies in order to better understand some of the psychological obstacles to social innovation, system change, and the attainment of justice-related goals.

Stalking the “Merciful Mechanism”

We have, in essence, been stalking Auden’s “merciful” mechanism for nearly 15 years now and, if nothing else, we have given it a name: “system justification” (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Specifically, we have argued that in addition to well-known motives for ego and group justification that are assumed to serve personal and collective self-esteem and interests, people are also motivated to defend, bolster, and rationalize the *social systems* that affect them—to see the status quo as good, fair, legitimate, and desirable (Jost et al., 2004; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Kay, Jost, et al., 2007).¹ System justification theory does not suggest that people *always* perceive the status quo as completely fair and just; as with other motives (including ego and group justification motives), the strength of system justification motives is expected to vary considerably across individuals, groups, and situations. In short, we are merely suggesting that people are prone to emphasize their system’s virtues, downplay its vices, and consequently see the societal status quo as better and more just than it actually is (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).²

¹ System justification theory bears some resemblance to just world theory (Lerner, 1980), which posits that people are motivated to believe that we live in an orderly, predictable, and just world in which people get what they deserve. Although many consequences of system justification and the belief in a just world are the same, the underlying motives are theorized to be somewhat different. Whereas just world theory concerns the desire for actual justice (i.e., the *justice motive*), system justification theory concerns the desire for the perception (or appearance) of justice (i.e., the *justification motive*). According to Lerner’s (1980) theory, people will only attempt to justify unjust outcomes when they are unable to engage in behaviors that would restore it directly. In theory, then, people who strongly endorse the belief in a just world should, whenever possible, choose *more* just alternatives to the status quo. By contrast, people who strongly endorse system-justifying belief systems are likely to support even an unjust status quo and to derogate potential alternatives.

² It may be difficult to measure or otherwise assess the objective fairness of a given social system or situation (as well as its actual rather than perceived costs and benefits), but we regard this as a disciplinary challenge that must be confronted by social scientists. That is, social scientists should not merely concern themselves with descriptive questions about what people perceive as fair; they must also address, to the best of their abilities and on the basis of reason and evidence, thorny normative questions about justice (e.g., see Tyler & Jost, 2007).

For the purposes of indicating the breadth of situations in which we think that system justification processes can operate, we adopt Parsons' (1951) very general definition of a "social system" as a structured network of social relations, that is, a "system of processes of interaction between actors" (p. 25; see also Thorisdottir, Jost, & Kay, 2009). The property of "systematicity" implies that there exists some sustained differentiation or hierarchical clustering of relations among individuals and/or groups within the social order (Blasi & Jost, 2006), such as status, distributions of resources, and the division of social roles. Presumably, such systems can be relatively tangible, such as families, institutions, organizations, and even society as a whole, or they can be more abstract and intangible, such as the unwritten but clearly recognizable rules and norms that prescribe appropriate interpersonal and intergroup behavior. Indeed, research on system justification theory has shown that regardless of whether the system is operationalized as a nation, the government, the economic system, specific institutions, or even the network of social norms, it engenders the kind of psychological attachment that leads people to defend and bolster its legitimacy.

An important tenet of system justification theory is that for those who occupy a relatively advantaged position in the social system, the three motives of ego, group, and system justification are generally consonant, complementary, and mutually reinforcing. For those who are disadvantaged, however, these three motives are often in conflict or contradiction with one another, and different individuals may make different "choices" about how to resolve these conflicts (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost et al., 2001; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Accordingly, several studies show that the more African Americans subscribe to system-justifying beliefs, such as the belief that inequality in society is fair and necessary, the more they suffer in terms of self-esteem and neuroticism, and the more ambivalent they feel toward fellow ingroup members (Jost & Thompson, 2000). These results were replicated and extended by O'Brien and Major (2005), who demonstrated that the negative consequences occurred only for those members of disadvantaged groups who were relatively highly identified with their own group; this makes sense given that it is only under these circumstances that a true conflict between group and system justification motives exists. Distancing from (or disidentification with) one's own group is another way of resolving the conflict between group and system justification motives for members of disadvantaged groups.

Because ego, group, and system justification motives are in opposition for those who are disadvantaged by the status quo, such individuals are on average less likely than those who are advantaged to see the existing system as fair and legitimate (Jost et al., 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, under some circumstances—such as when the salience of individual or collective self-interest is very low—members of disadvantaged groups can ironically be the most ardent supporters of the status quo (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). This phenomenon is difficult to explain from the standpoint of other prominent theories in social psychology, such as social identity theory and social dominance theory (see Jost et al., 2004). Evidence of enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged is somewhat more consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003), but there is nothing in that theory to suggest that, when faced with an incompatibility between the belief in the integrity of oneself [or one's group] and belief in the integrity or legitimacy of the system, people would ever opt for the system over the self or the ingroup (see also Blasi & Jost, 2006). In fact, prominent interpretations of cognitive dissonance theory that emphasize the need to maintain the integrity of the self-concept would lead to the expectation that people should resolve dissonance in a *self-serving* rather than a system-serving manner (e.g., Aronson, 1968, 1999).³

³ Another difference between system justification and cognitive dissonance theories is that the latter assumes people experience dissonance *only* when something that they choose is incongruent with other

To take just one example, Jost, Pelham, et al. (2003) analyzed data from a survey study involving over 3,000 nationally representative respondents to the General Social Survey in the 1980s and 1990s who were asked whether they believed that “large differences in income were *legitimate and necessary*” either “to get people to work hard” or “as an incentive for individual effort.” Results indicated that a majority of respondents accepted both justifications for economic inequality. Furthermore, these justifications were most enthusiastically endorsed by the very lowest income respondents, who did not show any of the self-serving or group-serving patterns of attribution that one might otherwise expect. These results (and others) suggest that nearly everyone holds at least some system-justifying attitudes and that, paradoxically, it is sometimes those who are the worst off who are the strongest defenders of the system.⁴

These findings are broadly consistent with the observations of political scientist Jennifer Hochschild (1981, pp. 1-2), who wrote that:

[T]he American poor apparently do not support the downward distribution of wealth. The United States does not now have, and seldom ever has had, a political movement among the poor seeking greater economic equality. The fact that such a political movement could succeed constitutionally makes its absence even more startling. Since most of the population have less than an average amount of wealth—the median level of holdings is below the mean—more people would benefit than would lose from downward redistribution. And yet never has the poorer majority of the population, not to speak of the poorest minority, voted itself out of its economic disadvantage.

System justification theory, we propose, may help to explain why “the dog doesn’t bark,” as Hochschild (1981) put it in a well-known allusion to a Sherlock Holmes story.

Henry and Saul (2006) also conducted an investigation of system justification tendencies among the disadvantaged in a study of the social and political attitudes of children in Bolivia, where 63% of the population lives below the poverty line and over a third of the population earns less than \$2 per day. The poorest of the poor in Bolivia are the Indigenous peoples, who are direct descendants of the Incan and other native tribes living in Bolivia at the time of the Spanish conquest as long as 5 centuries ago. Today, the descendants of the Spanish conquerors comprise 15% of the Bolivian population, but they still control most of the wealth in the country, as well as the governmental leadership positions, including the presidency.

In a particularly stringent test of the system justification hypothesis, Henry and Saul (2006) asked 10-15 year-old children for their opinions about the legitimacy of the Bolivian government. They sampled children from each of three groups – the severely disadvantaged Indigenous group,

values, beliefs, and actions, leading them to engage in a rationalization *of their choice*. System justification theory goes further in predicting the post-hoc rationalization of occurrences that are not of one’s own choosing, such as unintended outcomes of one’s own or others’ behavior, as well as anticipated social and political events (e.g., see Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002).

⁴ Findings such as these—especially when taken in conjunction with the notion that political conservatism is a system-justifying ideology—may be confusing to those who assume that more advantaged members of society are also the most politically conservative. However, the validity of this “self-interest” assumption has been called into question repeatedly (e.g., Frank, 2004; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003). In a recent cross-national investigation involving respondents from 19 democratic countries, Napier and Jost (2008b) observed virtually no correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and political orientation, in part because there is a weak but positive correlation between income and conservatism and a weak but negative correlation between education and conservatism. Results from this investigation also indicated that high-SES respondents may be drawn to right-wing ideology because of economic conservatism, whereas low-SES respondents may be drawn to it because of moral and ethnic intolerance.

the relatively privileged Hispanic group, and a middle-status or “mixed” group of “Mestizos” (who have both Indigenous and Hispanic ancestors). Despite being much poorer and having parents who were far less likely to hold professional occupations (or even good jobs), Indigenous children were no less politically knowledgeable than children of other groups. They were, however, significantly more likely to approve of the Hispanic-run government, more likely to endorse the suppression of speeches against the government, and less likely to be cynical or distrusting of the government, compared to children who were better off.

A skeptical reader might wonder—as did Spears, Jetten, and Doosje (2001)—whether data such as these reflect the actual internalization of favorable attitudes toward the system (and the outgroup) or whether they are the result of impression management processes, that is, insincere displays of deference (see also Scott, 1990). There is no way to answer this question with respect to the Bolivian children studied by Henry and Saul (2006), but other research using implicit measures that reduce opportunities for impression management, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007), suggest that favorability toward the social system and toward high status outgroups is readily observable in implicit social cognition (see Dasgupta, 2004; Jost et al., 2004; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). In these studies, substantial proportions of members of disadvantaged groups – including dark-skinned Morenos in Chile (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002), poor people and the obese (Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002), Yale undergrads randomly assigned to low-status vs. high-status residential colleges (Lane, Mitchell, & Banaji, 2005), gays and lesbians (Jost et al., 2004), Latinos and Asians (Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002), and African Americans (Ashburn-Nardo & Johnson, 2008; Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003; Jost et al., 2004; Nosek, Smyth, et al., 2007)—exhibit implicit biases in favor of more advantaged *outgroup* members. Furthermore the magnitude of implicit outgroup favoritism among the disadvantaged is positively correlated with individuals’ scores on measures of system justification (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003) and political conservatism (Jost et al., 2004), which is commonly understood as a system-justifying ideology (see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

The Palliative Function of System Justification

Although the findings described so far are reasonably comprehensive, they do not really answer the question of *why* people would justify the social system even at the expense of personal and group interests and esteem. In prior work we have suggested that system justification serves certain psychological functions without speculating about the details of its evolutionary origins. Specifically, we have proposed that system justification serves a set of relatively proximal epistemic, existential, and relational functions that help to manage uncertainty and threat and smooth out social relationships (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Jost, Pietrzak, et al., 2007; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). System justification is therefore reassuring because it enables people to cope with and feel better about the societal status quo and their place in it (see also Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002).

Along these lines, Jost and Hunyady (2002) suggested that system justification serves the *palliative function* of reducing negative affect associated with perceived injustice and increasing positive affect and therefore satisfaction with the status quo. This idea bears some resemblance to Marx’s notion that religion is the “opiate of the masses,” or the “illusory happiness of the people.” As Turner (1991) noted: “Presumably Marx thought that drugs were taken as a source of illusions and hallucinations and also as a palliative, a form of consolatory flight from the harshness of the real world” (p. 320). In several studies we find that giving people the opportunity to justify the system does indeed lead them to feel better and more satisfied and to report feeling more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions (e.g., Jost et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2007). Furthermore, chronically

high system-justifiers, such as political conservatives, are *happier* (as measured in terms of subjective well-being) than are chronically low system-justifiers, such as liberals, leftists, and others who are more troubled by the degree of social and economic inequality in our society (Napier & Jost, 2008a).

The hedonic benefits of system justification, however, come with a *cost* in terms of decreased potential for social change and the remediation of inequality. Wakslak and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that system-justifying ideologies, whether measured or manipulated through a mindset-priming technique, do indeed serve to reduce emotional distress—including negative affect in general and guilt in particular—but they also reduce “moral outrage.” This last consequence is particularly important, because moral outrage motivates people to engage in helping behavior and to support social change (Carlson & Miller, 1987; Montada & Schneider, 1989). Thus, the reduction in moral outrage made people less inclined to help those who are disadvantaged, measured in terms of research participants’ degree of support for and willingness to volunteer for or donate to a soup kitchen, a crisis hotline, and tutoring or job training programs for the underprivileged (see also Jost et al., 2008).

How Do We Know It’s Motivated?

Many scholars and others are prepared to believe that attitudes and behaviors are commonly system-justifying in their *consequences*, but not necessarily that people are *motivated* to see the societal status quo as fair, legitimate, and desirable. Some skeptics suggest that those who acquiesce are simply the *passive* recipients of ideology or are *compelled* by authorities to comply with the status quo, but they do not really *believe* in it (e.g., Scott, 1990; Spears et al., 2001). Others might accept that system-justifying attitudes are internalized because of social learning but deny that they have a motivational basis (e.g., Huddy, 2004; Mitchell & Tetlock, 2009; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). These theoretical alternatives provide an opportunity to clarify our theoretical claims and to assess the empirical evidence for our specific propositions. In particular, we believe that these alternative interpretations underestimate the pervasiveness and goal-directed nature of system justification tendencies, that is, the ways in which people actively and purposively (but not necessarily consciously) rationalize existing social arrangements (see also Jost, Pietrzak, et al., 2007). They also overestimate the extent to which system-justifying beliefs will be responsive to reason and evidence (e.g., see Ledgerwood, Jost, Mandisodza, & Pohl, 2008) and are therefore unrealistically optimistic about the prospects for social change. It should be pointed out that even if we are correct that system justification is a motivated process, this does not mean that people who engage in it are either irrational or malevolent (see also Jost, 2006). Rather, we have suggested that system justification serves a host of normal, typically adaptive epistemic, existential, and relational needs.

In the remainder of this chapter we describe five lines of evidence that, especially in conjunction, lead to the conclusion that system justification is, as we have suggested, a motivated, goal-directed process. Specifically, we will show that: (1) System justification is linked to individual differences in self-deception and ideological motivation; (2) Situations of system threat tend to elicit defensive responses on behalf of the system; (3) System justification leads to selective, biased information-processing in favor of system-serving conclusions; (4) System justification exhibits several other properties of goal pursuit, including the Lewinian properties of “equifinality” and “multifinality”; and (5) The desire to make the system look good and fair inspires behavioral efforts in terms of task persistence and performance. As we and (other researchers) make progress on each of these lines of evidence, the motivational case for system justification is strengthened.

Personality and Individual Differences: Self-Deception and Other Motives

Conceptualizing system justification tendencies as a goal-directed process suggests that their strength should be sensitive to individual differences in certain intrapsychic motives as well as the endorsement of ideological beliefs that are supportive of the status quo (see also Jost, Glaser, et al.,

2003). Specifically, a system-justifying goal can be reached if one can distort perceptions of the status quo so as to avoid confronting the discrepancy between its actual state and personal or shared moral standards. One way of “accomplishing” this would be to engage in the process of self-deception. Thus, individuals’ endorsement of system-justifying belief systems, such as political conservatism, should be correlated with their scores on self-deception even in nonpolitical contexts.

To investigate this possibility, we conducted a study involving more than 8,500 online respondents. In this study, participants completed a single-item measure of political orientation along with Paulhus’ (1984) measure of socially desirable responding, which includes individual subscales tapping motivational concerns related to self-deceptive enhancement and impression management. As can be seen in Figure 1, we observed a modest but consistent linear relationship between liberalism-conservatism and self-deception, $r(8629) = .12, p < .0001$, as well as a weaker but significant relationship between liberalism-conservatism and impression management, $r(8747) = .07, p < .0001$. Although the cross-sectional, correlational nature of these findings warns against drawing firm conclusions, this study does provide initial support for the notion that system justification tendencies are motivated.

Further evidence comes from research by Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, and Hunyady (2003) on “Fair Market Ideology,” which is defined as the tendency to believe not merely that market-based procedures and outcomes are efficient (which many people believe), but also that they are inherently fair and just, which is an ethically normative position that no economist would attempt to defend (with the possible exception of Milton Friedman, 1962). Endorsement of Fair Market Ideology appears to reflect a stable, individual difference variable that can be measured with items such as:

- “The free market system is a fair system.”
- “Common or ‘normal’ business practices must be fair, or they would not survive.”
- “Profitable businesses tend to be more morally responsible than unprofitable businesses.”
- “The most fair economic system is a market system in which everyone is allowed to independently pursue their own economic interests.”

In seven samples of MBA and non-MBA students at the University of Chicago, Stanford University, Boston University, and New York University, the tendency to subscribe to Fair Market Ideology was widespread and was predicted by self-deceptive enhancement (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003). It was also positively correlated with the desire to believe in a just world in which people “get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996).

Furthermore, self-reported political conservatism and individual’s scores on Jost and Thompson’s (2000) Economic System Justification scale both predicted scores on the Fair Market Ideology scale. Suggesting that there are behavioral consequences of endorsing Fair Market Ideology, participants who scored more highly on the Fair Market Ideology scale tended to downplay or minimize the seriousness of high-profile corporate scandals and to recommend more lenient sentences for those involved. These findings suggest that system-justifying ideologies are linked to individual differences in self-deception and other forms of motivated social cognition, and that self-deceptive tendencies are associated with *system-serving* biases as well as self- and group-serving biases (see also Elster, 1982; Jost, 1995; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Turner, 1991).

Situational Effects: Defensive Responses to System Threat

The second category of evidence suggests that—much as people respond defensively to threats directed at their own self-esteem and threats to their group identity or status—they also respond defensively to threats directed at the societal status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). It is well known that conservative Republican President George W. Bush’s approval

rating shot up 40 percentage points immediately after 9/11, even before he had time to do anything about the attacks at all, and it stayed very high (around 70% or more) for about a year. One possibility is that these effects were due to the President's personal charisma or leadership style (Cohen et al., 2005), but an alternative explanation is that system threat stimulates ideological defense of the social system and its representatives. The latter account is more plausible because, according to the results of Gallup Polls, Americans' opinions of nearly *every* system-level authority and agency became more favorable in the aftermath of 9/11 including Congress, the Military, and the Police (Jones, 2003). Likewise, trust in government to handle both domestic and international issues increased immediately after 9/11. Were Americans' pursuing a cold calculus of evidence for these assessments, then the 9/11 attacks should have, if anything, indicated a failure of government to protect its citizens and decreased overall trust.

Because there are always many influences on public opinion that are difficult to disentangle, it is necessary to adopt an experimental approach in order to investigate cause and effect. We have developed several different paradigms for manipulating a sense of system threat in the laboratory. In one paradigm, participants are exposed to one of two passages, ostensibly written by a journalist, and they are instructed to try to remember the passage for a memory test later in the experiment (Kay et al., 2005; see also Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005). An example of a "system-threatening" passage is as follows:

These days, many people feel disappointed with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People do not feel as safe and secure as they used to, and there is a sense of uncertainty regarding the country's future. It seems that many countries in the world, such as the United States and Western European, nations, are enjoying better social, economic, and political conditions than Israel. More and more Israelis express a willingness to leave Israel and emigrate to other nations.

The "system-affirming" passage reads instead:

These days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people feel satisfied with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that Israel has reached a stable point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People feel safer and securer than they used to, and there is a sense of confidence and optimism regarding the country's future. It seems that compared with many countries in the world the social, economic, and political conditions in Israel are relatively good. Fewer and fewer Israelis express a willingness to leave Israel and emigrate to other nations.

Exposure to the high (vs. low) system threat passage does *not* significantly affect individual state self-esteem, measured with Heatherton & Polivy's (1991) scale, nor does it affect collective self-esteem, measured with Luhtanen & Crocker's (1992) scale, or any of the individual subscales of those measures (Kay et al., 2005). That is, the manipulation does not threaten individual or collective self-esteem. However, it does lead to a (presumably temporary) decrease in the perceived legitimacy of the status quo, and our motivational account therefore suggests that the threat should cause people to bolster the sagging legitimacy of the system (either directly or indirectly) when they have an opportunity to do so.

In accordance with this prediction, participants assigned to the high system threat condition rate powerful people as more intelligent and more independent, and, conversely, the powerless as less intelligent and independent (Kay et al., 2005, Experiment 1a). System threat also leads people to rate the powerful as less happy (and the powerless as happier), consistent with work by Kay and Jost (2003; see also Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay, Jost, et al., 2007; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007) on the system-justifying potential of complementary (or compensatory) stereotypes. Similarly, system threat

increases judgments of obese people as lazier but more sociable, relative to normal weight people (Kay et al., 2005, Experiment 1b). In an example from recent American history, Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, and Jost (2006) argued that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina may have posed a threat to the perceived legitimacy of the governmental system, and this threat may have motivated journalists as well as ordinary citizens to engage in stereotyping and victim-blaming in an effort to satisfy system justification motivation.

Ullrich and Cohrs (2007) conducted four experiments in which they exposed participants to a different kind of system threat—one in which the salience of terrorism as a threat to the social order was emphasized (see also Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Frey, & Oßwald, 2007). This manipulation led participants to score significantly higher (compared to various control conditions) on a German translation of Kay and Jost's (2003) general or diffuse system justification scale, which contained items such as:

- "In general you find society to be fair,"
- "Most policies serve the greater good," and
- "In general the German political system operates as it should."

There is evidence, then, from multiple laboratories and several countries indicating that exposure to system threat induces people to respond defensively, showing stronger system justification on direct and indirect measures. Lau, Kay, and Spencer (2008) demonstrated that system threat can even motivate people to make different choices concerning dating partners, causing men to prefer women who confirm sexist, system-justifying stereotypes over those who do not.

As Blasi and Jost (2006) pointed out, findings of this kind do not lend themselves to a purely rational, "cold cognitive" explanation. Why should people become more prejudiced toward overweight people and, at the same time, more deferential to the powerful after reading a passage criticizing the United States? Why should reminding people about the terrorist threat increase their satisfaction with the political status quo? Why should thinking about the system's shortcomings alter the object of romantic desire? The apparent irrationality is not confined to North Americans and Germans. Exposure to a system threat passage led Israeli citizens to rely more heavily on stereotypes to rationalize social and economic inequalities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews (Jost, Kivetz, et al., 2005). In sum, then—much as self-protective, ego-justifying motives become more pronounced when self-esteem is threatened—a wide range of system-justifying tendencies are increased in response to system-level threats.

Biased Judgment and the Desire for System-Serving Conclusions

Extensive research has shown that motivation can bias information processing, leading people to selectively attend to and process information that will allow them to reach desired conclusions (Kruglanski, 1996; Kunda, 1990; for a review, see Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). A third line of research on system justification theory has provided evidence suggesting that people engage in selective, biased information processing in order to reach system-justifying conclusions. Moreover, supporting the idea that such processes are goal-directed, evidence has shown that these biases are sensitive to personal and situational factors that are linked to system justification motivation. For instance, an experiment by Haines and Jost (2000) revealed that people exhibited clear distortions in memory for the reasons given by the experimenter for creating power differences that favored the members of another group over participants' own group. Specifically, they misremembered the reasons for the power differences as being more fair and legitimate than they actually were, recalling legitimate explanations when no explanation or even illegitimate explanations were given. This research suggests that the acceptance of pseudo-explanations allowed people to reconstrue inequality in legitimate terms, thereby satisfying their system justification motivation. Research by van der Toorn, Tyler, and Jost (2008) suggests further that being in a position of

psychological dependence leads people to enhance the perceived legitimacy of authorities and institutions on which they depend (see also Kay & Zanna, 2009; Pepitone, 1950).

In a relatively direct demonstration of system-serving biases in social cognition, Ledgerwood et al. (2008) found that people see research evidence as stronger and more valid when it supports (vs. challenges) the existence of the “American Dream” (see also Ho et al., 2002; Mandisodza et al., 2006; McCoy & Major, 2007). Using an experimental procedure developed by Pomerantz, Chaiken, and Tordesillas (1995), participants read and evaluated two studies: one concluding that hard work and determination lead to success (pro-meritocracy), and another concluding that there is no correlation (anti-meritocracy). For each study, participants read an abstract, detailed methods and results sections, and three criticisms and three rebuttals. Across participants, a given study apparently supported either a pro-meritocracy or an anti-meritocracy conclusion with no change in methods. For example, one study was a national telephone survey of over 800 adults in the workforce that, using a random-digit dialing procedure, “tested whether the success of American adults was more influenced by their parents’ socioeconomic status, or by their own hard work and determination.” Half of the participants read that this study’s results supported the reality of the American Dream, namely that a person’s hard work and determination had a larger influence on a person’s success than did his or her parental income and/or social status. The other half instead received an anti-meritocracy conclusion that called into question the reality of the American Dream, suggesting that parental income and social status had a larger influence on a person’s success than his or her own hard work and determination.

As hypothesized, Ledgerwood et al. (2008) found that participants judged the same study procedure as “more convincing” and “well-conducted” when it supported the pro-meritocracy (vs. anti-meritocracy) conclusion. An internal analysis suggested that this was not just a case of people rationalizing their own personal, prior beliefs (cf. McCoy & Major, 2007). That is, the same pattern of results was evidence for those who explicitly disagreed (in a pre-testing session held months earlier) that the U.S. is a meritocratic society in practice. Insofar as the belief that hard work leads to success can help rationalize existing inequalities in society (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), this study suggests that system justification motivation leads people to engage in biased cognitive processing in order to maintain the apparent veracity of this belief. Reinforcing a motivational account, the results further revealed that the pro-meritocratic bias was exacerbated by system threat; under these circumstances the studies supporting the American dream were seen as even more convincing than before and the studies casting doubt on the American dream were seen as even less convincing. This type of defensive reaction to system threat appears to reflect a motivated effort to restore legitimacy to the system.⁵

System Justification Exhibits Other Properties of Goal Pursuit

In addition to biasing information processing, system justification tendencies seem to follow properties of goal-directed behavior as well. One such property is the Lewinian property of equifinality. According to this property, satisfying the goal is the desired end-state, and there could be multiple, functionally interchangeable means of reaching the end-state. That is, there should be different ways of satisfying the system justification goal, including direct or indirect ways of legitimizing, for example, the economic system, the political system, or the system of gender

⁵ The findings from this research were supportive of a motivated account in other ways as well. Specifically, Ledgerwood et al. (2008) found that the pro-meritocracy bias was enhanced for those who were chronically high (vs. low) on Economic System Justification and for women, who might be especially motivated to justify the system in order to rationalize their lower social status (see also Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). Furthermore, motivated cognition, namely selective cognitive elaboration, was found to statistically mediate the bias in favor of system-serving conclusions.

relations in society or the family (Jost, Pietrzak, et al., 2007). Several studies have shown that people employ different strategies to restore legitimacy to the status quo, such as complementary stereotypic differentiation as well as more direct forms of system affirmation (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), suggesting that these are two of the means that can be used, perhaps interchangeably, to justify and rationalize the status quo.

Another example comes from a previously unpublished experiment showing that system threat increases both economic and political routes to system justification (Liviatan & Jost, 2008). In this study, participants were first exposed either to a high system threat or a low system threat passage in a manipulation that was very similar to the one described above and used in research by Jost, Kivetz, et al. (2005) and Kay et al. (2005). Next we gave some participants the opportunity to justify the system on political grounds (see items in Table 1) and other participants the opportunity to justify the system on economic grounds (see items in Table 2). Afterward, participants completed measures of positive and negative affect and were then given the opportunity to justify the system in the *other* domain.

We found, first, that system threat increased both economic and political routes to system justification, as can be seen in Figure 2. This is consistent with the principle of equifinality; there seem to be multiple ways of restoring legitimacy to the status quo following system threat (see also Kay et al., 2005). In addition, using a path model, we found that (adjusting for baseline levels of political orientation and system justification as measured weeks or months before), being assigned to the high (vs. low) system threat condition led to an increase in whichever type of system justification (economic or political) participants had the opportunity to endorse first (see Figure 3). The degree of system justification on that first measure was associated with a significant decrease in negative affect and a slight increase in positive affect,⁶ which may indicate another property of goal pursuit, namely that there is relief associated with fulfilling a goal, consistent with the hypothesized palliative function of system justification (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Furthermore, the left over or residual negative affect following the first system justification opportunity significantly predicted the degree of system justification in the second opportunity. So, this study provides some evidence that system justification reduces negative affect and that negative affect motivates further efforts to engage in system justification (see also Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008).

System justification processes exhibit the property of multifinality as well. That is, attaining the system justification goal satisfies multiple needs, making it a potentially powerful motivational force (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). We theorize that system justification satisfies at least three important types of psychological needs, including:

- Epistemic needs to reduce uncertainty and create a stable, predictable worldview
- Existential needs to manage threat and to perceive a safe, reassuring environment, and
- Relational needs to achieve *shared reality* with important others, including friends and family members who have system justification needs of their own.

⁶ The degree of system justification on the first measure was also positively associated with the degree of system justification on the second measure. This suggests that adopting one means of attaining the system justification goal does not necessarily decrease the likelihood of adopting other means. Thus, although we did find evidence consistent with the notion of equifinality (i.e., that system threat leads people to show increased system justification in either economic or political domains), we did not observe evidence that system justification in the first instance entirely satisfied the goal. The failure of one means to satiate the desire to pursue other means could suggest high *commitment* to attaining the system justification goal, insofar as commitment would lead people to persist in goal pursuit even after some “progress” has occurred (see Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006).

The possibility that there may be relational reasons, in addition to epistemic and existential reasons, to profess one's support for the status quo and to refrain from "upsetting the apple cart" is a relatively new addition to system justification theory (see Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). We are suggesting that people engage in system justification at least in part because it facilitates social interaction with others. This idea is consistent with other research indicating that it is socially normative for people to derogate those who are perceived as complaining about discrimination and injustice in the system as well as those who seek to challenge or reform the status quo (e.g., Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2007; Kaiser et al., 2006; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). That is, it may be easier in general to establish common ground (or shared reality) concerning system-justifying (rather than system-challenging) beliefs.

System Justification Inspires Behavioral Effort

Our fifth line of evidence for the motivational basis of system justification is that the desire to make the system look good can inspire task persistence and performance, both of which are classic features of goal pursuit (Bargh et al., 2001; Lewin, 1935; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). That is, Ledgerwood and colleagues (2008) sought to determine whether system justification motivation has significant *behavioral* ramifications, such as leading people to work harder in the service of the social system. They hypothesized that people would work harder when their behavior was seen as diagnostic of the American system and when successful performance could be seen as contributing to the legitimacy of that system.

To measure behavioral effort, Ledgerwood and colleagues (2008) asked a sample of college students to work on an anagram task in which they would unscramble a number of letter strings into as many correct English words as possible. They manipulated whether the instructions before the task attributed success on the task to luck or to effort by suggesting that past research showed anagram task performance was mainly a result of either luck or hard work. This factor was crossed with a manipulation of whether the task was framed as irrelevant or relevant to evaluating the legitimacy of American society by saying that the study was about "the relationship between effort and doing well in scrambled word tasks" (system-irrelevant condition) or "the relationship between effort and doing well in American society" (system-relevant condition).

In the system-irrelevant condition, Ledgerwood and colleagues hypothesized that people would (quite rationally) exert more effort and perform more successfully, as measured by the number of anagrams they solved correctly, when they believed that success on this task was due to effort rather than luck. In fact, this is what prior research on goal commitment, expectations, and performance motivation has shown (e.g., Atkinson, 1964; Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Heckhausen, 1977; Vroom, 1964). However, from a system justification perspective, attributing success purely to luck could threaten the perceived link between effort and success and therefore motivate participants to defend this link. If so, then participants might (paradoxically) work harder after learning that success is due to luck (vs. effort), in an attempt to prove that hard work really does lead to success. Furthermore, insofar as this defensive tendency to work harder at a task when success is attributed to luck (vs. effort) serves a system-justifying function, it should emerge only when the link between hard work and success is framed as relevant (vs. irrelevant) to the social system.

This is indeed what the study showed. When the task was seen as largely irrelevant to American society as a whole, the pattern of results was consistent with prior research, namely that task performance was better when people believed that effort led to success than when they believed that luck was responsible. When the task was seen as diagnostic of American society, however, participants worked harder and were more accurate in solving anagrams in an apparent effort to affirm that our system is in fact a meritocratic and therefore highly legitimate one. Ledgerwood and

colleagues conducted a successful replication of this study with pre-selected participants who, explicitly at least, rejected the notion that American society is highly meritocratic in practice. Their persistence was measured on a set of impossible anagrams after telling them that success on the task was due to luck or effort, and (for half the participants) that the task was diagnostic of American society. Results indicated that even people who self-consciously rejected the notion that society is meritocratic put behavioral effort into defending the system against anti-meritocratic insinuations, but only when the task was seen as diagnostic of American society as a whole. Thus, it appears that the motivation to defend, bolster, and justify the societal status quo can inspire people to expend more effort than they otherwise would in order to restore perceived legitimacy to the system.

Concluding Remarks: System Justification as Motivated Goal Pursuit

Philip Mason (1971) once wrote: “That so many people for so much of history have accepted treatment manifestly unfair must always be puzzling to an observer from an individualist society, particularly in an age of revolt against privilege and inequality” (p. 13). Research on system justification is meant to solve just this puzzle. In this chapter we have focused on recent evidence suggesting that people are motivated, at least to some degree, to defend, bolster, and justify the social systems that affect them (see also Jost et al., 2004; Kay, Jost, et al., 2007).

For a number of reasons that should now be clear, we think that it is useful to adopt a goal systems framework in recognition of the motivational force of system justification tendencies. Such a framework, we think, helps to explain why system justification is so prevalent, insofar as it suggests that there are multiple means (e.g., social, economic, and political forms of system justification) of satisfying multiple needs (i.e., epistemic, existential, and relational needs). The preferred means presumably depend upon both situational and individual differences (e.g., Kay et al., 2005; Kay, Czaplinski, & Jost, 2008). In addition, goals are often pursued non-consciously (e.g., Bargh et al., 2001; Ferguson et al., 2008), and we are indeed finding evidence of implicit or nonconscious motivation to evaluate the system favorably in ongoing research.

The goal of system justification may be pursued non-consciously for several reasons (see also Jost et al., 2004). First, because system justification may conflict with other goals and norms such as egalitarianism, people may be more likely to resist system-justifying conclusions when they are made explicit. But without awareness of the goal or its implications, system-justifying tendencies are less likely to be resisted. Second, acts of patriotism and other system-justifying efforts may be so frequent that they become over-learned and automatic, thereby becoming relatively effortless to use, and effortful to avoid. And third, continuous conscious pursuit of system justification in multiple social domains would be exhausting, so it would be highly functional to develop a routinized capacity to maintain the subjective sense that existing social arrangements are fair and legitimate and to automatically defend the status quo against threat.

A motivational approach to system justification may ultimately help us to answer a question asked by Morton Deutsch (1974) many years ago, namely: “How do we awaken the sense of injustice?” Because a goal systems framework allows for the operation of competing goals—such as ego justification or group justification (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001), goals for novelty or accuracy (Kunda, 1990; Kruglanski, 2004), or the desire for retribution and other justice-related motives (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Lerner, 2003)—it can help to clarify the circumstances under which people will challenge or criticize the system. Such an approach will enable us to better understand the processes that give rise to widespread defection from the motivational clutches of system justification (e.g., Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Reicher, 2004).

The system justification goal will finally be abandoned when justifying the system no longer satisfies epistemic, existential, or relational needs. This may occur when the status quo itself offers no stability or certainty or may even be regarded as a source of threat rather than reassurance, or

when it has become counter-normative to stick with an old regime when a new one is gaining in popularity. Under circumstances such as these, the motivational impetus of system justification tendencies would be low and people might even work to change the status quo. Arguably, this is largely what happened in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when several decades of Soviet Communist rule in Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, and elsewhere finally came to an abrupt end. Once a new system or regime acquires an aura of inevitability, system justification motives should lead people to engage in rationalization processes that will bolster the new system and bury the old one (see also Blasi & Jost, 2006; Kay et al., 2002).

Kurt Lewin (1947) once wrote that: “The study of the conditions for change begins appropriately with an analysis of the conditions for ‘no change,’ that is for the state of equilibrium” (p. 208). For this reason, our personal and professional interests in social change have led us to try to understand, to the best of our abilities, the social and psychological *obstacles* to change, that is, to analyze the psychological power of the status quo. Our success in this theoretical and practical endeavor will not only enable human beings to overcome the “merciful mechanism” that prevents recognition of unfairness and inequality in society. It should also help us to better promote a world in which justice principles such as equity, equality, and need are not merely palliative fictions, but pillars of reality.

Authors' Note

Some of the ideas described in this chapter were first presented at the 2007 Morton Deutsch Award Ceremony at Columbia University's Teachers College and a conference held in honor of Joanne Martin's retirement from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business in June of 2007. Thus, we are particularly grateful to Morton Deutsch and Joanne Martin for providing both distal and proximal sources of inspiration for this work. Subsequent presentations of this material occurred at the 11th Ontario Symposium: *The Psychology of Justice and Legitimacy* in Waterloo, Canada, as well as the Summer Institute in Social Psychology (SISP) in Austin, TX, the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) conference in Portland, OR, and the Department of Psychology at Yale University. This research was supported by National Science Foundation Award # BCS-0617558 to John T. Jost and by the Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response at NYU. We thank Aaron Kay and James Olson for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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Table 1: Items Used to Measure Justification of the Political System

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1. The American political system is the best system there is.
 2. The system of checks and balances insures that no one branch of government can ever pursue unreasonable or illegal activities.
 3. It is part of the game of American politics to behave unethically. (R)
 4. Radical changes should be made in order to have a truly democratic political system in our country. (R)
 5. In general, the American political system operates as it should.
 6. There is no place in the world where civil liberties are better protected than right here at home.
 7. The political system lacks legitimacy because of the power of special interests. (R)
 8. The two-party electoral system is democracy at its best.
 9. Our governments have always tried to carry out diplomatic and military missions in the most humane way possible.
 10. Human rights and civil rights are constantly violated in the United States. (R)
 11. Our political actions in the international arena are guided entirely by selfish motives. (R)
 12. There are fundamental flaws in our political system, as clearly demonstrated in many previous elections. (R)
 13. America is a leader in the promotion of democracy around the world.
 14. The political system is unfair and cannot be trusted. (R)
 15. The main concern of our presidents has almost always been the public good.
 16. Some of our diplomatic and military interventions around the world can be classified as war crimes. (R)
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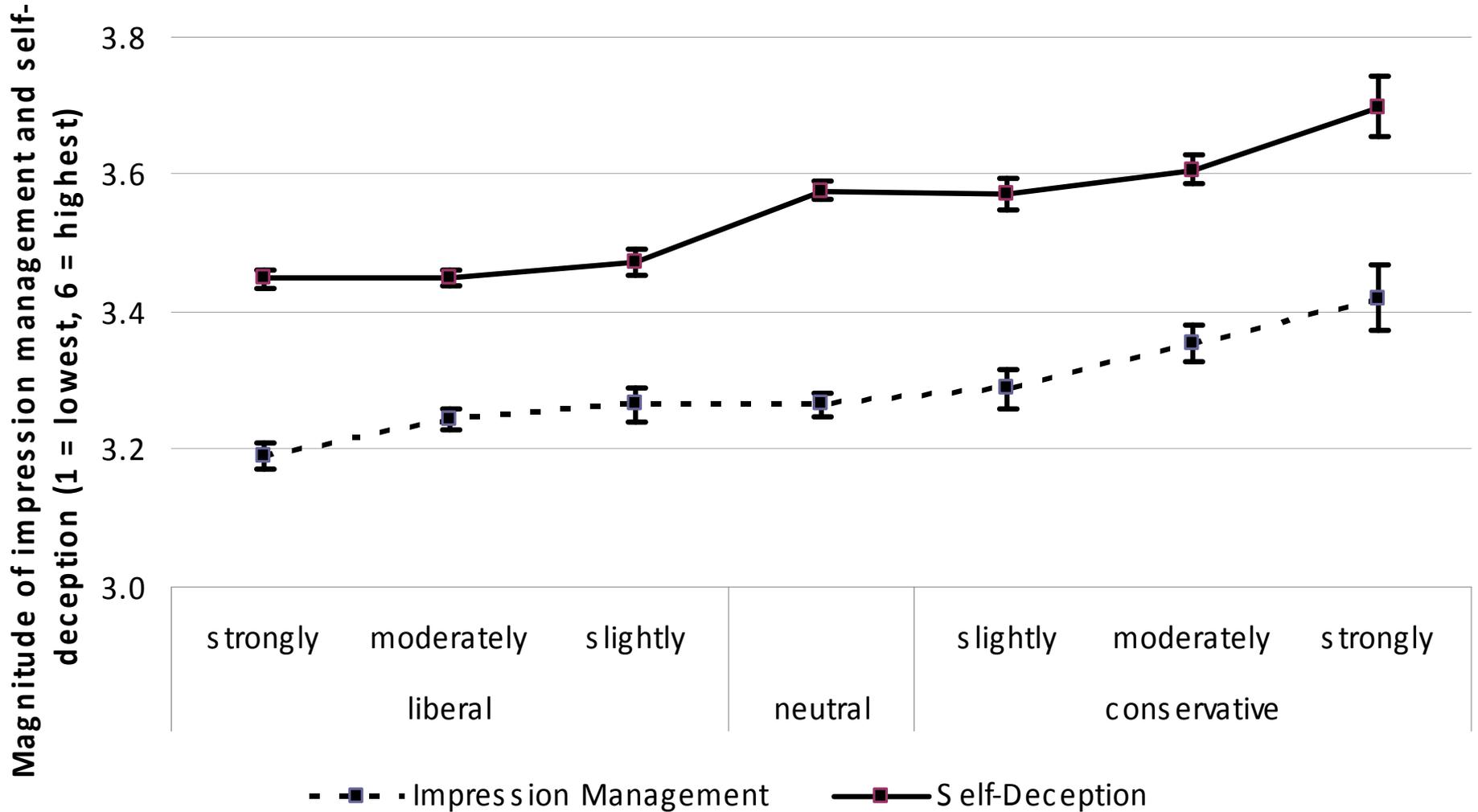
(R) = Items were reverse-scored prior to analysis.

Table 2. Items Used to Measure Justification of the Economic System

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1. The way the free market system operates in the United States is fair.
 2. The American economic system is set up so that everyone is born with the same chance to succeed.
 3. The rules of our economic system only encourage greed and immorality. (R)
 4. Radical changes are needed to turn our economic system into a fair one. (R)
 5. Overall, Capitalism is the best economic system available.
 6. There is no country in the world where economic opportunities are better than in the United States.
 7. The American economic system unfairly increases the gap between rich and poor. (R)
 8. If incomes were more equal, nothing would motivate people to work hard.
 9. We should be embarrassed by the high rates of poverty in America. (R)
 10. No matter how much people try to stop it, there will always be widespread business corruption under Capitalism. (R)
 11. Economic markets do not reward people fairly. (R)
 12. Making incomes more equal means socialism, and that deprives people of individual freedoms.
 13. Under a free market system, people tend to get the outcomes they deserve.
 14. It is obvious that Capitalism is bad for most people in society. (R)
 15. Incomes cannot be made more equal because it's human nature to always want more than others have.
 16. Only a grand-scale economic revolution could create a better, more just distribution of resources in society. (R)
-

(R) = Items were reverse-scored prior to analysis.

Relationship between Political Orientation and Self-Deception/Social Desirability



Note: Error bars indicate standard error of the mean.

System Threat Increases Multiple Routes to System Justification

■ Low System Threat ■ High System Threat

