

Research Article

Victim Derogation and Victim Enhancement as Alternate Routes to System Justification

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ABSTRACT—Numerous studies have documented the potential for victim-blaming attributions to justify the status quo. Recent work suggests that complementary, victim-enhancing stereotypes may also increase support for existing social arrangements. We seek to reconcile these seemingly contradictory findings by proposing that victim derogation and victim enhancement are alternate routes to system justification, with the preferred route depending on the perception of a causal link between trait and outcome. Derogating “losers” (and lionizing “winners”) on traits (e.g., intelligence) that are causally related to outcomes (e.g., wealth vs. poverty) serves to increase system justification, as does compensating “losers” (and downgrading “winners”) on traits (e.g., physical attractiveness) that are causally unrelated to those outcomes. We provide converging evidence using system-threat and stereotype-activation paradigms.

There is consistent evidence for the psychological principle that people prefer to believe that the social system that affects them is fair, legitimate, and justifiable rather than unfair, illegitimate, and full of caprice (e.g., Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O’Connell, & Whalen, 1989; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Major, 1994; Martin, 1986; Tyler & McGraw, 1986). Most demonstrations of this principle have focused on the tendency to maintain the “belief in a just world” by blaming victims of disadvantage for their own misfortune (e.g., Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Lerner & Simmons, 1966; Olson & Hafer, 2001) and crediting persons who are more advantaged with favorable psychological characteristics (e.g., Dion & Dion, 1987). These

approaches assume, either implicitly or explicitly, attributional mechanisms of cognitive consistency whereby people draw individual or stereotypical inferences that are consonant with targets’ relative status, outcome, or position. The approaches assume, furthermore, that it is the perceived congruity between characteristics such as intelligence, ability, and motivation on the one hand and status rankings (or outcomes) on the other that provides justification and legitimacy for the social system and its actors.

Derogating society’s “losers” and lionizing its “winners” is one powerful means of justifying the system, but we propose that it is not the only means. Recent work suggests that complementary, victim-enhancing stereotypes—in which members of disadvantaged groups are ascribed compensating favorable characteristics and members of advantaged groups are ascribed unfavorable characteristics—may also be effective system-justifying devices (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kay & Jost, 2003). A series of studies (Kay & Jost, 2003) found that people who were exposed to “poor but happy,” “poor but honest,” “rich but miserable,” and “rich but dishonest” complementary stereotype exemplars endorsed perceptions of the societal status quo as fair, legitimate, and justifiable more strongly than did people who were exposed to cognitively consistent representations of the poor as unhappy and dishonest and the rich as happy and honest. Similarly, reminding people of complementary gender stereotypes of women as communal (but not agentic) and men as agentic (but not communal) serves to increase both gender-specific and diffuse forms of system justification (Jost & Kay, in press).

How do we reconcile seemingly contradictory patterns of results indicating that (a) victim-derogating judgments and stereotypes maintain the belief in a just world, and (b) victim-enhancing representations increase system-justification tendencies? According to the principle of *equifinality* (see Kruglanski, 1996), there are often multiple psychological routes to the same end state; the most likely route is determined by,

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among other variables, specific situational constraints and opportunities. If people are motivated to justify existing social arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994), then it follows that they may selectively employ different “strategies” (e.g., victim derogation and victim enhancement) to attain this goal, depending on which strategy seems most appropriate or effective under the circumstances.

HYPOTHESIZED EFFECTS OF TRAIT CAUSALITY AND SYSTEM THREAT

Victim-derogation tendencies are theorized to restore the belief in a just world by maintaining beliefs of personal responsibility and controllability over social outcomes (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lerner, 1980; Major, 1994). Believing that people who suffer disadvantage have themselves caused their plight seems to be an effective method for maintaining just-world beliefs (Lerner, 1980). Consistent with these propositions, research shows that poor people are generally assumed to be lazy and unintelligent (Jost & Banaji, 1994), and obese people are assumed to be lacking in self-control (Crandall, 1994; Quinn & Crocker, 1999). This perspective implies that the effectiveness of victim-blaming attributions should depend on the perception of a specific causal link between the trait (e.g., intelligence) and the outcome (e.g., wealth). When the trait is perceived as causally irrelevant to the outcome, however, victim derogation is unlikely to justify the social system.

Victim-enhancing attributions, by contrast, are theorized to increase system justification by subtly reminding people that every position in society has both advantages and disadvantages and that the system is fair because no single group has a monopoly on valued attributes (Kay & Jost, 2003). In this way, complementary stereotypes help people to sustain a benign image of the social system in which both benefits and burdens are fairly dispersed across social groups. The poor, for example, are often seen as happier or more honest than rich people (see also Lane, 1959/2004), and women are assumed to be more caring and likable than men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Jackman, 1994). This theoretical account does not depend on the mechanism of perceived causality (or deservingness). In fact, it seems significant that the compensating benefits commonly ascribed to members of disadvantaged groups are causally unrelated to the dimension on which they are disadvantaged.

We hypothesize, therefore, that the effects of victim-derogating versus victim-enhancing stereotypes on system justification will be moderated by perceptions of the causal relationship between the trait and the outcome. When the trait is causally linked to the relevant outcome, victim-derogating attributions should possess more system-justifying potential. When the trait is seen as causally irrelevant, however, victim-enhancing attributions should possess greater system-justifying potential.

System threat is another moderating variable of interest. Much as self-related and group-related threats lead people to seek restoration of self-esteem and positive group distinctiveness (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997), threats directed at the existing social system stimulate increased efforts at justifying the status quo (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). To the extent that people are motivated to perceive the system as fair and legitimate, they should defend and bolster it when it comes under attack (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Threatening the societal status quo, then, should lead to an increased reliance on those stereotyping tendencies that justify the system. We hypothesize that system threat should lead to (a) increased victim derogation on traits that are causally linked to status outcomes and (b) increased victim enhancement on traits that are causally unrelated to outcomes.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

These hypotheses were investigated in two experimental studies. First, we employed a system-threat manipulation designed to increase the system-justification motive and observed subsequent effects on tendencies to derogate (vs. enhance) the powerful (Experiment 1a) and the obese (Experiment 1b) on traits pretested as either causally relevant or irrelevant to these outcomes. Second, we primed participants with character vignettes that served to derogate or enhance wealthy and poor individuals on causally relevant or irrelevant dimensions and measured subsequent perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of the social system (Experiment 2).

EXPERIMENT 1

Participants

Fifty-six student participants completed the full battery of materials for Experiments 1a and 1b. An additional 28 participants completed pretesting materials that allowed us to check on the system-threat manipulation, and 23 other participants completed pretesting materials to facilitate trait selection.

Independent Variable: Manipulation of System Threat

Participants read one of two excerpts ostensibly written by a local journalist. They were asked to read the passage as many times as necessary to become familiar with it and expected to answer questions about it later in the session. In the high-system-threat condition, they read:

These days, many people in the United States 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. . . . It seems that many countries in the world are enjoying better social, economic, and political conditions than the U.S. More and more Americans express a willingness to leave the United States and emigrate to other nations.

The low-system-threat excerpt read as follows:

These days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people in the United States feel safer and more secure relative to the past. Many citizens feel that the country is relatively stable in terms of social, economic, and political factors. . . . It seems that compared with many countries in the world the social, economic, and political conditions in the U.S. are relatively good. Very few Americans express a willingness to leave the United States and emigrate to other nations.

After reading the passage, participants completed ratings of powerful and overweight target groups, ostensibly as part of an unrelated study.

Pretesting I: Check on Manipulation of System Threat

In a pretesting session, we sought to confirm that the system-threat manipulation would temporarily decrease satisfaction with the status quo (without threatening related constructs such as self-esteem and group identification). Twenty-eight participants were exposed to one of the two system-threat passages before completing (in counterbalanced order) measures of satisfaction with the social system (Kay & Jost, 2003), individual state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), and collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

Three one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed using condition (high vs. low system threat) as the independent variable. With regard to perceptions of the system, the effect of condition was significant, $F(1, 26) = 9.60, p = .005$. Participants reported less satisfaction with the social system under conditions of high ($M = 3.59$) than low ($M = 5.06$) system threat. No effects of condition were observed on measures of state self-esteem, $F(1, 26) = 0.40, p = .53$, or collective self-esteem, $F(1, 24) = 0.77, p = .39$, or on any of their subscales. These results confirmed that the manipulation successfully threatened the perceived legitimacy of the system without threatening individual or collective self-esteem.

Pretesting II: Trait Selection

We conducted a second pretesting session to determine which traits would be perceived as causally relevant and irrelevant to the outcomes studied in Experiments 1a and 1b (power and obesity). Twenty-three participants were asked to “indicate the extent to which you think the following traits are causally related to power [obesity]. That is, indicate the degree to which you believe that possessing the following traits makes it easier for a person to become powerful [obese].” Answers were given on scales ranging from 1, *makes it much more difficult to become powerful [obese]*, to 9, *makes it much easier to become powerful [obese]*. For power, the four traits presented were intelligence, independence, happiness, and generosity. For obesity, the traits were laziness, being active, being outgoing, and being sociable.

Mean ratings near the bottom (1–3) or top (7–9) of the scale were defined as indicating a perceived (positive or negative) causal relationship. Mean ratings within 0.5 of the scale’s

midpoint (i.e., 4.5–5.5) indicated causal irrelevance. With respect to the causes of power, intelligence and independence were both seen as highly causally relevant ($M_s = 7.78$ and 7.09 , respectively). Happiness met our criterion for the perception of causal irrelevance ($M = 4.87$), but generosity did not. Thus, for Experiment 1a, we included two causally relevant traits (independence and intelligence) and one causally irrelevant trait (happiness). With respect to causes of obesity, laziness met our criterion for high causal relevance ($M = 8.13$), and being sociable met our criterion for causal irrelevance ($M = 4.74$). Thus, for Experiment 1b, we included one causally relevant trait (laziness) and one causally irrelevant trait (sociability).

Dependent Variable: Trait Endorsement

After being exposed to one of the two system-threat passages, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed various traits were typical of powerful people (Experiment 1a) and obese people (Experiment 1b). The specific instructions read as follows:

People tend to think that powerful [overweight] people’s traits differ from the traits of people without power [who are not overweight], and we are interested in learning about these perceived differences. Using the scale provided, *please indicate the extent to which you think the following traits are related to powerful [overweight] people*. That is, assuming that all that you know about a person is that s/he is powerful [overweight], how likely is it that s/he will also possess the following traits?

Ratings were made on scales ranging from 1, *trait characteristic of a person without power [who is not overweight]*, to 9, *trait characteristic of a person with power [who is overweight]*. With regard to power, participants rated the causally irrelevant trait of happiness and the two causally relevant traits of independence and intelligence. These latter two traits, which correlated very highly in the pretest data ($r = .86, p < .001$), were collapsed to form one causally relevant dimension. For obesity, participants rated the causally relevant trait of laziness and the causally irrelevant trait of sociability; both were scored so that higher numbers indicated more favorable ratings (i.e., greater sociability and lesser laziness).

Results

Experiment 1a

Our main hypothesis was that high (vs. low) system threat would lead simultaneously to (a) increased victim derogation on causally relevant traits and (b) increased victim enhancement on causally irrelevant traits. To assess this hypothesis, we conducted a 2 (high vs. low system threat) \times 2 (causally related vs. causally unrelated traits) mixed model ANOVA, with re-

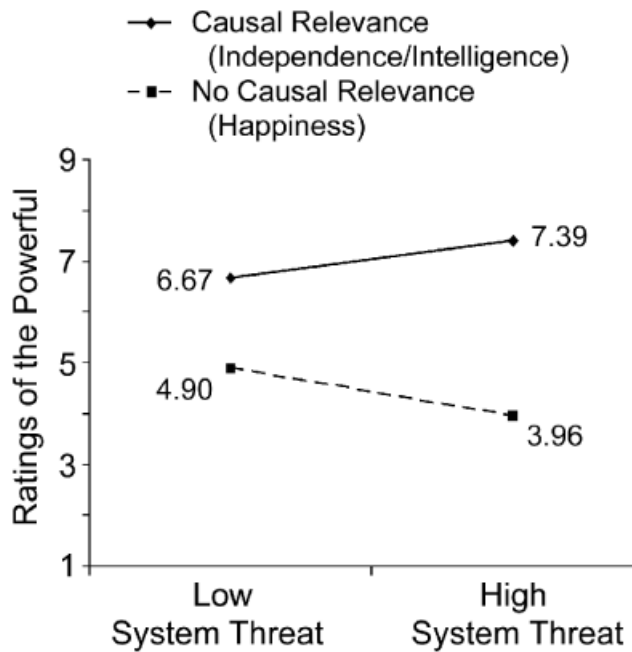


Fig. 1. Results of Experiment 1a: effects of system-threat manipulation on ratings of the powerful for causally relevant and irrelevant traits. Ratings were made on 9-point scales, with higher numbers indicating that powerful people were judged to be more independent, more intelligent, and happier.

peated measures on the last factor.¹ The analysis yielded a main effect of trait type, $F(1, 54) = 107.16, p < .001$, indicating that participants were far more likely to associate powerful people with intelligence and independence than with happiness.

Of greater theoretical significance, the hypothesized interaction between system threat and causal relevance was obtained, $F(1, 54) = 10.78, p = .002$. As illustrated in Figure 1, people reported a stronger (positive) association between the holding of power and causally relevant traits (intelligence and independence) under conditions of high system threat than under conditions of low system threat, $t(54) = 2.10, p < .05$ (all t tests are two-tailed). By contrast, participants expressed a weaker positive association (or, what is the same, a stronger negative association) between the holding of power and causally irrelevant traits (happiness) under high compared with low system threat, $t(54) = 2.17, p < .05$. In other words, system threat led participants to judge powerful people as more intelligent and independent but less happy (and, conversely, to judge powerless people as less intelligent and independent but more happy).

¹Participants in Experiments 1a and 1b also completed a single-item measure of affect so we could rule out the possibility that negative affect arising from the system-threat manipulation would account for differences in trait ratings across conditions. Specifically, participants indicated how they were feeling at that moment on a scale from 1, *not happy*, to 9, *very happy*. Affect did not exert any reliable effects in either experiment, and the results were very similar when affect was and was not included as a covariate in the models.

Experiment 1b

For trait ratings of overweight versus normal-weight target persons, we conducted the same 2 (high vs. low system threat) \times 2 (causally related vs. causally unrelated traits) ANOVA. The analysis yielded a main effect of trait type, $F(1, 54) = 6.16, p < .02$, indicating that participants were more likely to associate obesity with laziness than with sociability. The analysis also yielded the predicted interaction between system threat and causal relevance, $F(1, 54) = 8.95, p = .004$. As shown in Figure 2, in comparison with low system threat, high system threat led participants to judge overweight people as lazier, $t(54) = 2.41, p = .02$, but also more sociable, $t(54) = -1.76, p < .09$. Thus, participants responded to the threat to the system by showing increased victim derogation on the causally relevant trait and increased victim enhancement on the causally irrelevant trait.

Discussion

Experiments 1a and 1b provided converging support for our hypothesis that following a threat to the social system, participants would increasingly derogate losers (and lionize winners) on traits that are causally linked to relevant outcomes and, at the same time, elevate losers (and downgrade winners) on traits that are causally unrelated to those outcomes. In Experiment 2, we sought to extend these findings using a different methodological approach (as well as different trait-outcome pairings). Rather than threatening the system and observing the effects of threat on trait ratings, we exposed participants in Experiment 2 to situations of victim derogation and victim enhancement on different types of traits and then measured subsequent system-justification scores directly.

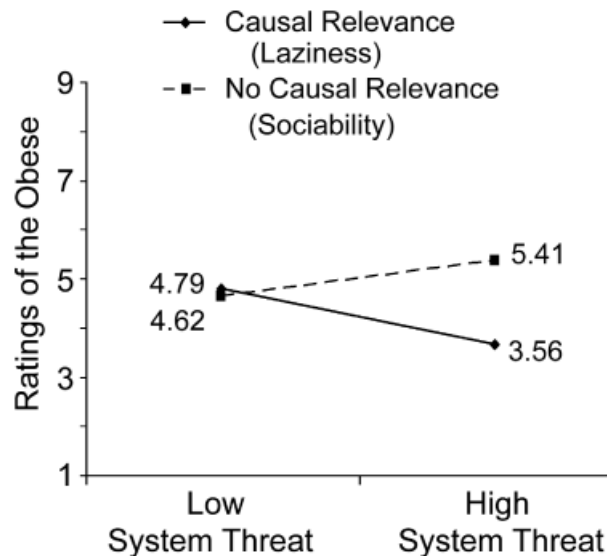


Fig. 2. Results of Experiment 1b: effects of system-threat manipulation on ratings of the obese for causally relevant and irrelevant traits. Ratings were made on 9-point scales, with higher numbers indicating that overweight people were judged to be more sociable and less lazy.

EXPERIMENT 2

In Experiment 2, we examined the system-justifying consequences of derogating versus enhancing specific social groups on the trait of intelligence. Previous research has demonstrated that exposure to complementary (i.e., victim-enhancing) stereotypes, as compared with noncomplementary (i.e., victim-derogating) stereotypes, can lead to increased satisfaction with the status quo (Kay & Jost, 2003). We sought to demonstrate that the system-justifying potential of these functionally equivalent strategies would depend on whether a causal link exists between the trait (e.g., intelligence) and the outcome (e.g., wealth vs. attractiveness).

Participants were exposed to one of four sets of stimulus materials according to a 2 (complementary vs. noncomplementary representations) \times 2 (trait causally related vs. causally unrelated to outcome) between-participants design. We then measured the effects of these variables on system-justification scores. We hypothesized an interaction effect such that (a) when there was a causal connection between trait and outcome, exposure to noncomplementary representations (derogating the loser, lionizing the winner) would lead to greater system justification than would exposure to complementary representations, whereas (b) when there was no causal connection between trait and outcome, exposure to complementary representations (elevating the loser, downgrading the winner) would lead to greater system justification than would exposure to noncomplementary representations.

Participants

Seventy-seven undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. An additional 15 undergraduates completed pretesting materials.

Pretesting: Perceptions of Causality

For this study, we selected a single trait (intelligence) and sought to determine the extent to which it was seen as causing various social outcomes. Pretesting participants were asked to “indicate the extent to which you think being ‘intelligent’ is causally related to each of the following. That is, indicate the degree to which you believe that being more intelligent makes it easier for one to become each of the following. . . .” The six outcomes were healthy, wealthy, attractive, famous, athletic, and popular. Judgments were made on scales ranging from 1, *intelligence is not at all causal*, to 9, *intelligence is extremely causal*. We then selected the two outcomes that were rated as most and least likely to be caused by intelligence, respectively: wealth ($M = 7.40$, $SD = 1.06$) and physical attractiveness ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.44$).

Manipulation of the Independent Variables

Participants were led to believe that they were completing materials for two unrelated studies. For the first, they were

asked to read a passage until they became familiar with it and told they would later be given a memory test. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four passages about a pair of friends. For conditions in which a perceived causal link existed between the trait (intelligence) and the outcome (wealth vs. poverty), the complementary (and, in brackets, the noncomplementary) passage read:

Mary and Sarah both grew up in the Midwestern United States and now both live in Seattle. . . . Mary is very bright but not very wealthy [is both very bright and now very wealthy]. Sarah, on the other hand, is not very smart at all, but is now very wealthy [is not very wealthy at all, and is also much less intelligent than Mary]. Because of these differences, Mary is always thought of as that woman “who had an easy time getting good grades, but now has a hard time paying the bills” [“who is both smart and rich”] and Sarah is always thought of as the girl “who is not very smart but is very rich” [“who had a hard time getting decent grades and now has a hard time paying the bills”].

For conditions in which no perceived causal connection existed between the trait (intelligence) and the outcome (attractive vs. unattractive), the complementary (and, in brackets, the noncomplementary) passage began the same way and continued as follows:

Mary, although not particularly bright, is very pretty [is both very bright and very pretty]. Sarah, on the other hand, is not generally considered to be very good-looking, but is without a question much more intelligent than Mary [is not generally considered to be very good-looking, and is also much less intelligent than Mary]. Because of these differences, in college Mary was always thought of as that girl “who got lots of looks from the boys but no good grades from the professors” [“who got lots of looks from the boys and lots of A’s from the teachers”] and Sarah was always thought of as the girl who had “an easy time getting an A but a hard time getting a date” [“a hard time getting decent grades and dates”].

Dependent Variable: System Justification

After reading one of these four vignettes, participants proceeded directly to the “second” study, during which they completed the eight-item measure of system justification we used in a previous study (Kay & Jost, 2003, p. 828). Sample items included “In general, you find society to be fair”; “American society needs to be radically restructured” (reverse-coded); and “Most policies serve the greater good.” Responses were given on 9-point scales, and an overall index of system justification was calculated by taking the mean of ratings on all eight items following reverse coding ($\alpha = .87$), with higher scores indicating greater system justification.

Results

To assess the interaction hypothesis that the perception of a causal link between trait and outcome would moderate the

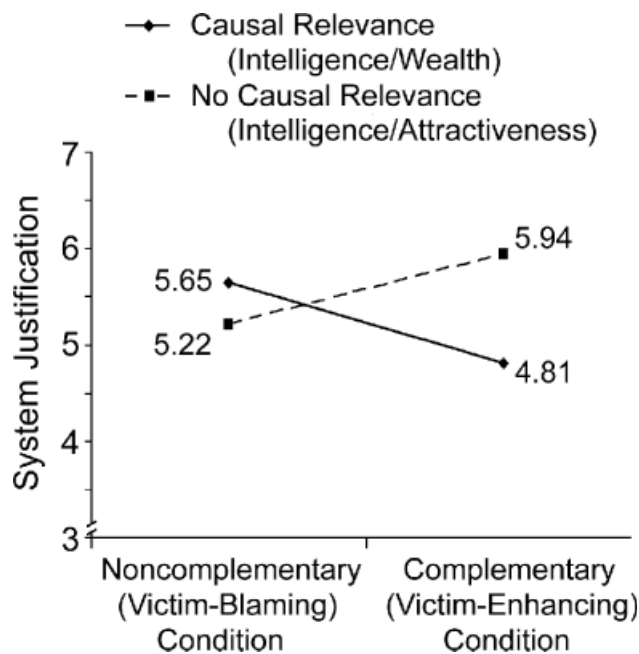


Fig. 3. Results of Experiment 2: effects of exposure to complementary and noncomplementary representations on system justification as a function of causal relevance. Ratings were made on 9-point scales, with higher numbers indicating stronger system justification.

effects of complementary versus noncomplementary representations on system justification, we conducted a 2 (complementary vs. noncomplementary representations) \times 2 (trait causally related vs. causally unrelated to outcome) ANOVA. As hypothesized, the analysis yielded a significant interaction between the two independent variables, $F(1, 73) = 8.56, p = .005$. No main effects were obtained.

As illustrated in Figure 3, when a causal connection between trait (intelligence) and outcome (wealth vs. poverty) existed, participants scored higher on system justification ($M = 5.65$) following a noncomplementary, victim-derogating representation (i.e., the wealthy protagonist was more intelligent than the poor protagonist) than following a complementary, victim-enhancing representation ($M = 4.81$), $t(34) = 2.16, p < .04$. The opposite pattern of results was obtained when no causal connection existed between trait (intelligence) and outcome (physical attractiveness). In this case, participants scored higher on system justification ($M = 5.94$) following a complementary, victim-enhancing representation (i.e., when the attractive protagonist was seen as less intelligent than the unattractive protagonist) than following a noncomplementary, victim-derogating representation ($M = 5.22$), $t(39) = 1.98, p < .06$.

CONCLUSION

We have provided evidence that the relative effectiveness of noncomplementary (i.e., victim-derogating) and complementary (i.e., victim-enhancing) ascriptions in increasing support for the

existing system of social arrangements varies as a function of trait causality. In Experiments 1a and 1b, a manipulation designed to increase the strength of the system-justification motive led people to increasingly derogate losers and lionize winners on causally relevant dimensions and, at the same time, to increasingly elevate losers and downgrade winners on causally irrelevant dimensions. That is, under high (vs. low) system threat, participants judged the powerful to be more independent and intelligent but less happy, and they also judged the obese to be more lazy but also more sociable. That both victim derogation and victim enhancement can serve system-justifying ends was demonstrated even more directly in Experiment 2. For causally relevant traits, people who were primed with examples of victim blaming scored higher on system justification than did those who were primed with examples of victim enhancement. The opposite pattern emerged with regard to causally irrelevant traits; in this case, people exposed to victim enhancement scored higher on system justification compared with those in the victim-blaming condition.

By derogating the victims of misfortune (and idealizing the recipients of good fortune) on characteristics that are assumed to be causally linked to relevant social outcomes, while at the same time compensating those same victims (and downgrading the privileged) on causally unrelated dimensions, people seem impressively able to maintain twin system-justifying beliefs. These beliefs, which were identified in different contexts by Lerner (1980) and Lane (1959/2004), respectively, are that “people get what they deserve and deserve what they get” and that “no one has it all.” The present research suggests that these are not mutually exclusive but rather compatible, functionally equivalent routes to system justification.

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