

“TALL POPPIES” AND “AMERICAN DREAMS”

Reactions to Rich and Poor in Australia and the United States

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A comparative study conducted in Australia and the United States examined people's responses to protagonists who were either born rich or poor and who ended up either rich or poor as adults. Results reveal some cross-cultural similarities and some differences. Specifically, people in both countries perceive initially poor and subsequently rich individuals as more competent and likeable than initially rich and subsequently poor individuals, but these differences were greater in the American context than in the Australian context. In addition, being exposed to someone who was born rich (vs. born poor) led Americans to perceive the economic system as more fair and legitimate, but it led Australians to perceive the system as less fair and legitimate.

Keywords: rich; poor; wealth; status; United States; Australia

To a considerable extent, social and economic systems are maintained through culturally transmitted attitudes and beliefs that support them. Research on system justification demonstrates that stereotypes and other shared representations of individuals and groups are often linked to the belief that social and economic institutions are fair, legitimate, and justifiable (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Assumptions that “poor people are happy and honest” or that “women are communal and warm,” for example, may provide ideological support for systems that are characterized by inequality (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). Often these legitimizing myths achieve a high degree of cultural consensus, with significant consequences for individual members of society and for the stability of the social system as a whole.

In the United States, a popular legitimizing myth is that of the “American Dream,” which promises that through sheer hard work and determination, nearly everyone can achieve prosperity (Cawelti, 1965; Hochschild, 1995; Weiss, 1969/1988). The 19th-century novels of Horatio Alger Jr. made famous the notion that heroic individual effort could lead even the poorest street urchin to rise from rags to riches. The American ideal of attaining wealth despite humble origins is a kind of cultural myth for the simple reason that many poor people fail to succeed despite hard work and ambition (“Class and the American Dream,” 2005). The belief that boundaries between social classes are permeable and that upward (and downward) social mobility is prevalent is an especially effective legitimizing myth because it encourages the assumption that people “get what they deserve and deserve what they get” (e.g., Lerner, 1980; Major & Schmader, 2001). Consistent with these theoretical

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notions, Ho, Sanbonmatsu, and Akimoto (2002) demonstrated that exposing people to narratives about a “social riser”—someone who starts out poor but manages to overcome obstacles and attain success—produces system-justifying consequences. Specifically, watching the televised “Horatio Alger Awards” caused viewers to blame African Americans more for their own social and economic plight, apparently deflecting responsibility for group inequality away from the societal system (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

In other cultural contexts, different myths may gain popular appeal, possibly because they depart from the ideological assumptions of the American Dream. There is reason to believe that Australians, for instance, do not value wealth, power, and mastery as highly as Americans do and that they value egalitarianism more (Feather, 1998; Hofstede, 1991/1997; Schwartz, 1994). The media and social commentators suggest that Australians experience malicious joy (*Schadenfreude*) in response to the reversal of status or downward social mobility of others, that is, to the fall of “tall poppies” (e.g., see Wikipedia, 2005). Examples include a television celebrity who suffers a decline in popularity or a well-known business person who loses money in the stock market. Research has shown that, in reality, the truth about Australian attitudes is more complicated. Specifically, Australians and Americans do not differ in their desires to see tall poppies fall (Feather, 1998). At the same time, Americans do value achievement, competence, conformity, and self-esteem to a higher degree and favor the reward of tall poppies more than Australians, who are more likely to favor prosocial values and egalitarianism (Feather, 1998; see also Feather, 1994). Given that Australians place a relatively high value on social harmony and equality, especially in comparison to the United States (Schwartz, 1994), their satisfaction at the fall of tall poppies (which reinforces the perception of social and economic parity) may be analogous to the enthusiasm Americans express for social risers.

Previous research comparing the attitudes of Australians and North Americans suggests that there are some important cultural similarities and some telling differences. In general, it seems that respondents in these countries prefer to see tall poppies rewarded than to see them fall (Feather, 1998). The tendency to see successful individuals as competent and likeable (and unsuccessful individuals as incompetent and unlikeable) is consistent with research literatures on outcome biases (Allison, Mackie, & Messick, 1996), just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980), and victim blaming (Dion & Dion, 1987; Furnham & Gunter, 1984). There is also evidence that the perception of high achievers (or tall poppies) is related to the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies, as described by Jost and Hunyady (2005). Specifically, people who favor the reward of tall poppies are more likely to score high (vs. low) on measures of right-wing authoritarianism, social power, restrictive conformity, and political conservatism (see Feather, 1994, pp. 46-56). At the same time, Feather (1998) found that American respondents were more in favor of rewarding tall poppies than were Australians, which is consistent with the American Dream and the notion that wealth and success are particularly admired characteristics in the context of the American capitalist system.

In the study that follows, we further explore cross-cultural similarities and differences in reactions to the rich and poor in the United States and Australia. Specifically, we investigate ascriptions of competence and likeability to target persons who are described as having been born either rich or poor and who ended up as either rich or poor in adulthood. Furthermore, we examine the consequences of exposure to these different types of individual protagonists for participants’ appraisals of the fairness and legitimacy of their respective economic systems.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

The U.S. sample consisted of 269 university students and adults in northern California (135 females, 132 males, and 2 who did not specify gender), with an age range of 17 to 69 years and a mean age of 24.19 years ($SD = 8.99$). The Australian sample consisted of 122 university students in Melbourne (90 females, 28 males, and 4 who did not specify gender), with an age range of 17 to 42 and a mean age of 20.62 years ($SD = 4.76$).

Participants read a vignette about a protagonist, Mr. Z, who was described in one of four ways according to a 2 (initial status: rich vs. poor) \times 2 (subsequent status: rich vs. poor) between-participants factorial design. They then answered a series of questions about the protagonist and about their own social and economic system.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

In the vignette, Mr. Z was described as either initially poor or initially rich and as either subsequently poor or subsequently rich. In all conditions, the passage started similarly:

Mr. Z was born into a *very poor* [very wealthy] family in this country, but from an early age he exhibited a great deal of ambition and a confidence in his own ability to succeed. He worked hard in school, but he was never an outstanding student.

Depending upon the protagonist's subsequent status, the passage continued as follows:

Later, he found a business opportunity *and made the most of it* [but it never paid off]. Within a few years, he *was able* [attempted] to branch out into other ventures, *and* [but] his persistence *was rewarded with great success* [only met with failure].

In the initially poor + subsequently poor condition, the vignette was concluded in the following way:

Today, he is just as poor as the day he was born and is seen as a typical example of someone who grew up in an underprivileged environment. He is the epitome of someone who was never able to rise above adverse circumstances to fulfill his dreams. Truly, he is an unfortunate man.

In the initially poor + subsequently rich condition, the vignette instead read:

Today, he is extremely wealthy and is seen as a role model for children who grow up in underprivileged environments. He is the epitome of someone who rose above adverse circumstances to fulfill his dreams. Truly, he is a fortunate man.

In the initially rich + subsequently poor condition, the passage ended this way:

Today, he is much poorer than the day he was born and is seen as a typical example of someone who squandered his opportunities. He is the epitome of someone who was never able to benefit from his circumstances to fulfill his dreams. Truly, he is an unfortunate man.

Finally, in the initially rich + subsequently rich condition, the vignette ended as follows:

Today, he is extremely wealthy and is seen as a role model for children. He is the epitome of someone who benefited from his circumstances to fulfill his dreams. Truly, he is a fortunate man.

PILOT TESTING

Because we were concerned that minor wording differences between the four experimental conditions might affect perceptions of protagonist wealth and effort, we conducted a pilot study using a separate sample of 45 American undergraduate students. Specifically, we asked these participants to read one of the four vignettes and then asked them the following two questions: (a) "In your opinion, how wealthy is Mr. Z?" and (b) "In your opinion, how much effort has Mr. Z exerted to get where he is today?" Responses were provided on 9-point Likert-type scales. We found that perceptions of Mr. Z's wealth were affected only by the manipulation of subsequent status, $F(1, 41) = 110.96, p < .001$. There were no main or interaction effects involving initial status ($F_s < 1$). Thus, perceptions of the protagonist's subsequent degree of wealth were not affected by where he started.

With respect to perceived effort, the analysis yielded main effects of both initial status, $F(1, 41) = 10.75, p < .005$, and subsequent status, $F(1, 41) = 6.45, p < .05$. Participants assumed that if Mr. Z was born poor, he exerted more effort, regardless of whether he eventually succeeded or failed. In addition, they assumed that when Mr. Z ended up rich, he also exerted more effort than when he ended up poor. Thus, initial and subsequent status information affected perceptions of effort independently but not in combination; this suggests that the two independent variables were indeed orthogonally manipulated.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

After reading one of the passages describing Mr. Z, study participants provided judgments of the protagonist and perceptions of the social system.

Perceived competence was assessed using a single item: "How *competent* or *incompetent* do you think that Mr. Z is?" Perceived likeability was also assessed using a single item, namely "How much do you *like* or *dislike* Mr. Z?" Participants responded to both questions using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely incompetent* and *strongly dislike*) to 9 (*extremely competent* and *strongly like*).

The social boundary permeability was measured using two items: (a) "How *open* or *closed* do you think boundaries are between social classes in this country?" and (b) "To what extent do you think that *social mobility* is *possible* in this society?"¹ Participants responded to both items using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely closed* and *very little*) to 9 (*extremely open* and *very much*). These two items were averaged to construct a composite score, $\alpha = .75$ (both samples combined).

Economic-related system justification was also measured using two items: (a) "How *fair* or *unfair* do you think that the economic system is in this country?" and (b) "To what extent do you think that *economic differences* in this society are *legitimate* or *illegitimate*?" Participants responded to both items using a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely unfair/illegitimate*) to 9 (*extremely fair/legitimate*). These items were averaged to make a composite score, $\alpha = .73$ (both samples combined).

TABLE 1
Raw (Unadjusted) Means, Standard Deviations,
and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

| | <i>United States</i> | | <i>Australia</i> | | <i>Intercorrelations</i> | | | |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|--------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> |
| 1. Perceived competence | 5.73 | 2.11 | 5.87 | 1.86 | — | .63** | .04 | .10 |
| 2. Perceived likeability | 6.03 | 1.61 | 5.99 | 1.38 | .44** | — | .14* | .21** |
| 3. Social boundary permeability | 5.26 | 1.68 | 4.92 | 1.49 | .04 | -.02 | — | .49** |
| 4. Economic-related system justification | 4.96 | 1.69 | 4.73 | 1.41 | .11 | .09 | .39** | — |

NOTE: Intercorrelations above the diagonal are for the U.S. sample ($n = 269$), and intercorrelations below the diagonal are for the Australian sample ($n = 122$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

RESULTS

The effects of national culture and experimental condition were assessed by conducting 2 (country: United States vs. Australia) \times 2 (initial status: rich vs. poor) \times 2 (subsequent status: rich vs. poor) between-participants ANOVAs for each of the four dependent variables, with age and gender entered as covariates in the model. Raw (unadjusted) means and intercorrelations among variables can be found in Table 1. Other cell means reported in the text are adjusted for all variables included in the statistical model.

PERCEIVED COMPETENCE OF THE PROTAGONIST

There was a significant effect of initial status, $F(1, 367) = 28.38, p < .001$, indicating that initially poor protagonists were perceived as more competent ($M = 6.25$) than initially rich protagonists ($M = 5.38$) in both countries. Thus, Americans and Australians alike appeared to demonstrate “sympathetic identification with the underdog” (Schuman & Harding, 1963).

The analysis also yielded a highly reliable main effect of subsequent status, $F(1, 367) = 262.39, p < .001$. Subsequently rich protagonists were perceived as more competent ($M = 7.13$) than were subsequently poor protagonists ($M = 4.50$). This effect is consistent with prior research on outcome biases, victim blaming, and system justification. A marginally significant interaction between subsequent status and country indicated that although both groups perceived a significant difference in competence between subsequently rich and poor protagonists, the difference was greater for Americans than Australians, $F(1, 367) = 3.33, p = .07$ (see Figure 1).

PERCEIVED LIKEABILITY OF THE PROTAGONIST

The analysis of liking for the protagonist revealed a significant main effect of initial status, $F(1, 366) = 8.60, p < .05$. Initially poor protagonists were liked more ($M = 6.25$) than initially rich protagonists ($M = 5.78$), again suggesting a general affinity for underdogs.

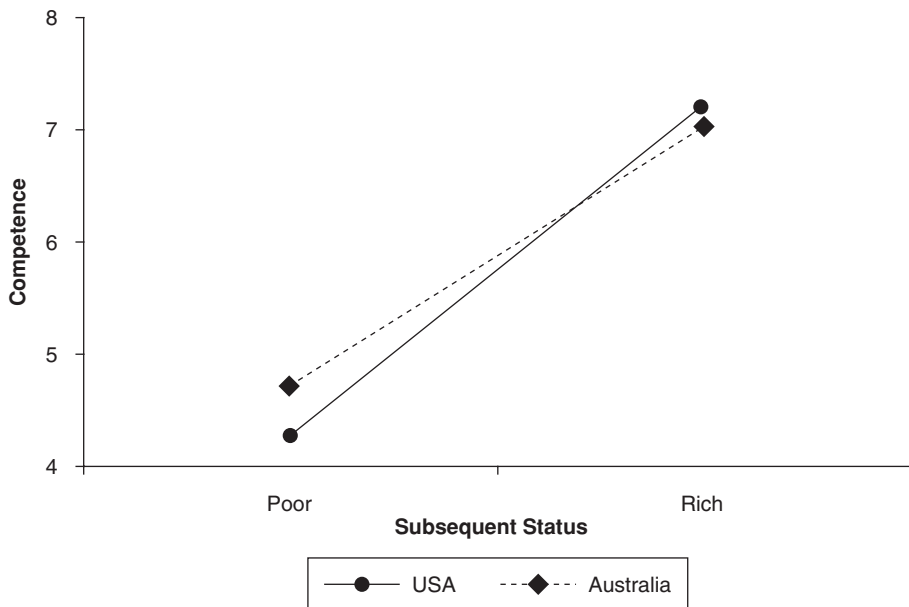


Figure 1: Perceived Competence of Protagonist as a Function of Country and Subsequent Status

There was also a significant main effect of subsequent status, $F(1, 366) = 23.47$, $p < .001$. Respondents reported liking subsequently rich protagonists ($M = 6.41$) more than subsequently poor protagonists ($M = 5.62$). This is consistent with the high value placed on individual achievement in both countries (e.g., Feather, 1998). The analysis also yielded a significant interaction between subsequent status and country $F(1, 366) = 4.63$, $p < .05$. Although participants in both countries liked the subsequently rich protagonist more than the poor one, this difference was greater in the United States than in Australia (see Figure 2).

SOCIAL BOUNDARY PERMEABILITY

With respect to perceived social boundary permeability, a marginally significant main effect of country emerged, $F(1, 367) = 2.83$, $p = .09$. Consistent with the image of the American Dream, U.S. respondents perceived slightly more permeability of class boundaries in their society ($M = 5.25$) than did Australian respondents ($M = 4.93$). These perceptions were not affected by experimental condition.

ECONOMIC-RELATED SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION

The analysis performed on participants' economic-related system justification scores yielded two main effects of demographic variables and an interaction between country and the protagonist's initial status. A main effect of gender indicated that men were more likely to justify the system ($M = 5.14$) than were women ($M = 4.70$), $F(1, 367) = 8.36$, $p < .05$. A marginal effect of age indicated that older respondents tended to justify the system more

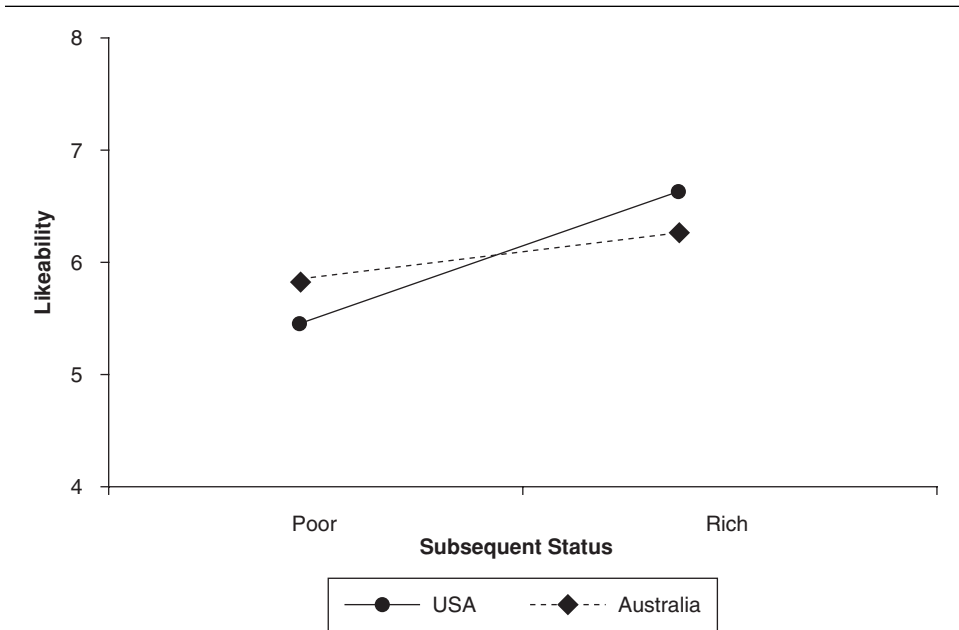


Figure 2: Likeability of Protagonist as a Function of Country and Subsequent Status

than younger respondents did, $F(1, 367) = 3.52, p = .06$. Both of these effects are consistent with previous research (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003).²

More important, a significant interaction was observed between country and initial status, $F(1, 367) = 12.97, p < .001$. Americans perceived the economic system to be significantly more fair and legitimate following exposure to someone who was born rich rather than poor, $t(267) = 3.01, p < .005$. By contrast, Australians tended to perceive the system to be less fair and legitimate following exposure to an initially rich rather than an initially poor protagonist, $t(120) = -1.75, p = .08$. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 3 and is consistent with the notion that, in comparison with Americans, Australians tend to value egalitarianism more and to value conspicuous wealth less, especially when that wealth is inherited rather than achieved. It also suggests that for Americans, reminders of undeserved poverty may (at least temporarily) lower the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the system.

DISCUSSION

Results reveal both similarities and differences in the way that Americans and Australians treat wealth and status. People in both countries demonstrate sympathy for the underdog (Schuman & Harding, 1963) by perceiving initially poor protagonists as more competent and likeable than initially rich protagonists. Although subsequently rich protagonists were perceived as more competent and more likeable than subsequently poor protagonists, both of these effects were greater among Americans than Australians. These findings suggest that outcome biases and halo effects may be more prevalent in the American context.

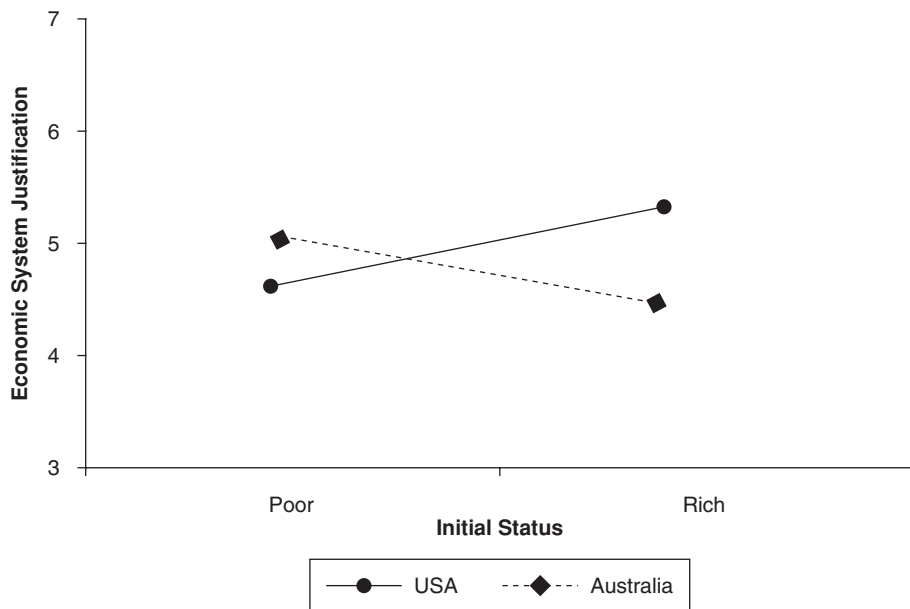


Figure 3: Economic-Related System Justification as a Function of Country and Initial Status

Exposure to individual cases of upward and downward mobility did not produce differences in the perception of social boundary permeability. However, there were cross-cultural trends suggesting that Americans perceive class boundaries to be more permeable than Australians do. This result is consistent with the image of the American Dream—a cultural myth that is not as relevant to the Australian context (Feather, 1998). It is also worth pointing out that in both countries the perception of boundary permeability was positively associated with the belief that the economic system is fair and legitimate, as suggested by Major and Schmader (2001), among others.

Significant cultural differences emerged with respect to economic-related system justification. Americans perceived the economic system to be more fair and legitimate following exposure to someone who was born rich rather than poor, possibly because undeserved poverty raises questions about the legitimacy of the system (see also Kay & Jost, 2003). In keeping with the cultural distaste for conspicuous wealth and the perpetuation of inequality (see Feather, 1994; Schwartz, 1994), Australians perceived the system as less fair and legitimate following exposure to someone who was born rich rather than poor.

There are fairly obvious methodological limitations arising from the use of hypothetical vignettes, although they may be especially useful for tapping into cultural myths or defaults. One specific feature of the passages we used to manipulate perceptions of initial and subsequent status of the protagonist is that both differences in wealth and effort were mentioned. This means that attributions about the protagonist could have resulted either from perceptions of wealth or the fact that, in some circumstances, his or her effort was rewarded. Nonetheless, this ambiguity cannot account for the cultural differences between Australian and American respondents because the passages were identical for the two samples. At the same time, it would be useful to disentangle the justification of wealth

per se from the justification of rewarded effort, which may have more explicit consequences for perceived deservingness (Feather, 1994).

Taken as a whole, the findings from our study suggest that modal reactions to the rich and poor reinforce cultural ideologies of meritocracy and egalitarianism in the United States and Australia, respectively. Furthermore, exposure to individual exemplars significantly affects the degree to which people perceive the economic system to be fair and legitimate, as suggested by system justification theory (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). A unique contribution of the current study is the suggestion that the same individual exemplars can have system-justifying consequences in one culture and system-challenging consequences in another. This idea, we think, is well worth pursuing in future research.

NOTES

1. To ensure that participants in the study understood the term *social mobility*, we asked the 45 pilot study participants to "write a brief definition that reflects your understanding of the term *social mobility*." Their open-ended responses were transcribed and coded by two independent raters, who achieved a high degree of concordance ($\alpha = .80$). Disputes were resolved by a third rater. All raters were given the definition of social mobility provided by the *New Dictionary on Cultural Literacy*: "The ability of individuals or groups to move upward or downward in status based on wealth, occupation, education, or some other social variable" (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002). Raters coded each of the participants' responses on a 4-point scale, such that 1 = *no understanding*, 2 = *understands that it relates to class and/or status*, 3 = *mentioned mobility in upward direction only*, and 4 = *defined mobility in bidirectional terms*. Results indicated that 11% of participants did not understand the term, 18% recognized that it related to status and/or class, 40% defined it in terms of upward mobility alone, and 31% provided a complete definition. Thus, more than 70% of the sample was able to define the term reasonably well, and 89% of the sample understood the gist of the concept.

2. There were no main effects of age or gender on any of the other three dependent variables. To further investigate the effect of gender on economic-related system justification, we conducted additional 2 (initial status) \times 2 (subsequent status) ANOVAs with gender and age entered as covariates separately for each country. Results indicated that men scored higher on system justification in the U.S. sample, $F(1, 255) = 7.29, p < .05$, but not in the Australian sample, $F(1, 110) = .99, p = .32$.

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