Special issue article

Stability and the justification of social inequality

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Abstract

Modern society is rife with inequality. People's interpretations of these inequalities, however, vary considerably: Different people can interpret, for example, the existing gender gap in wages as being the result of systemic discrimination, or as being the fair and natural result of genuine differences between men and women. Here, we examine one factor that may help explain differing interpretations of existing social inequalities: perceptions of system stability. System justification theory proposes that people are often motivated to rationalize and justify the systems within which they operate, legitimizing whatever social inequalities are present within them. We draw on theories and evidence of rationalization more broadly to predict that people should be most likely to legitimize inequalities in their systems when they perceive those systems as stable and unchanging. In one study, participants who witnessed stability, rather than change, in the domain of gender equality in business subsequently reported less willingness to support programs designed to redress inequalities in completely unrelated domains. In a second study, exposure to the mere concept of stability, via a standard priming procedure, led participants to spontaneously produce legitimizing, rather than blaming, explanations for existing gender inequality in their country. This effect, however, emerged only among politically liberal participants. These findings contribute to an emerging body of research that aims to identify the conditions that promote, and those which prevent, system-justifying tendencies. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Few credible arguments can be made against the fact that social inequalities exist. Beliefs about the legitimacy of these inequalities, however, vary. To some, they are the result of blatant discrimination; to others, the legitimate, natural, and justifiable result of group differences in ability or life choices. Here, we add to a new body of literature that focuses on identifying the conditions that activate versus inhibit people's tendency to legitimize social inequality, hypothesizing that people are especially likely to exhibit this tendency when they perceive their social systems as stable and unchanging.

Inevitable Systems

In recent decades, research on people's judgments of social inequality has supported system justification theory's assertion that people tend to judge as legitimate whatever inequalities happen to be present in the systems within which they operate (e.g., Jost, 1997; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kay et al., 2009; see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). A second generation of research has begun to explore the various factors that modulate people's system-justifying tendency to rationalize the status quo. For example, people tend to rationalize and legitimize systems upon which they depend (Shepherd & Kay, 2012) and particularly when the system has been challenged (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). People even tend to rationalize anticipated status quos

(Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002), particularly when they are 100% certain (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012).

One factor that may trigger system justification is people's sense that their system is inevitable. Indeed, system justification theory at its core aims to explain people's tendency to preserve the *status quo* (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which by definition refers to a persistent, ongoing set of arrangements. If a person believes that her system is inevitable, then she believes its norms and regulations will continue to govern her life. To preserve her own happiness, she may find ways to view these norms and regulations more positively than she otherwise would. In other words, she may become motivated to perceive her inevitable system as fair and good, and justify its inequalities, to avoid the uncomfortable sense that she is "trapped" (Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2003; Kidd, 2004) in a substandard system.

Here, we test the notion that perceptions of system stability, which may lead to a sense of inevitability, may motivate the legitimation of inequalities within the system in question. One recent set of studies tested the related idea that people are particularly motivated to justify systems that are inescapable—that is, systems with restricted exit opportunities. Compared with other participants, Canadian women who learned that it was becoming more difficult to leave Canada attributed Canadian gender inequalities more to real differences between men and women, and less to unfairness in Canadian society (Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). These results suggest

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that people rationalize away injustices perpetrated by systems in which they perceive themselves to be "stuck" (see also Festinger, 1957; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; McGuire, 1960; Pyszczynski, 1982).

In other words, previous research supports the notion that inescapability, which may contribute to a sense of inevitability in the dimension of space, motivates the legitimation of social inequality. Here, we build on these findings by studying a different psychological factor that may contribute to a sense of inevitability in the dimension of time: perceptions of stability. If a person believes his system is unlikely to change, then he likely expects that the he will continue to be subject to its current status quo. For the same reasons described earlier, then, he may become motivated to perceive this unchanging, stable system as fair and good. On the basis of this reasoning, we hypothesize that people may be particularly motivated to justify inequalities present in their systems when they perceive those systems as stable and unchanging.[1]

Rationalizing Stability

The idea that people may be more motivated to justify stable and unchanging systems bears similarities to, yet remains distinct from, two previous approaches. First, social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that perceptions of stability influence whether lower-status group members accept or contest their group's position. According to this theory, when members of lower-status groups see the group hierarchy as stable, they accept their group's status and try to improve their own individual standing. By contrast, when they perceive the group hierarchy as unstable, they try to improve their group's status. This SIT perspective shares with ours the contention that perceived stability (at least in terms of group hierarchies) leads to the acceptance of group inequalities, but there are also important differences. First, our predictions apply not only to low-status group members but also to all individuals who operate within the system in question: We contend that members of neither high-status nor low-status groups want to feel that they are "trapped" in a substandard system. Indeed, it is a core tenet of system justification theory that members of all social groups, no matter their status, have a motivation to legitimize their system. Second, our prediction is broader than SIT's, which accounts only for the link between perceptions of stability in a particular group hierarchy and people's tendency to accept or challenge that very group hierarchy. We predict that perceiving any indicator of stability within their system will lead people to legitimize existing inequalities within this stable system.

To illustrate the differences between SIT-based hypothesis and our own, consider what each predicts about the effects of perceiving stability in the domain of gender equality. The SIT-based prediction is that perceiving a stable gender

hierarchy would lead women to accept their inferior status, relative to men, whereas perceiving instability in the domain of gender equality would lead women to challenge the group hierarchy. In contrast, we predict that perceiving stability in the gender hierarchy would prompt both men and women to consider their entire social system as more stable, and as a result to justify all its inequalities, even non-gender-related ones. The contrast between the SIT and ours is that prediction becomes sharper when we consider other instances of stability versus change. The SIT-based hypothesis described earlier pertains to a specific type of stability: stability of group hierarchy. There are other instances where SIT would predict that *change*—for example, token women displaying individual mobility—leads to increased legitimation of inequality (see Tajfel, 1984). In contrast, our hypothesis concerns the perceptions of stability and change more broadly, suggesting that perceived stability typically leads to increased legitimation, and perceived change to less.

The second previous approach that deserves consideration here is a recent set of experiments by Johnson and Fujita (2012). These experiments demonstrated that participants who saw a successful attempt at system change showed a greater desire to change that system, and greater willingness to receive negative information about it, implying a reduced system justification motive. This link between perceiving system change and reduced system-justifying tendencies is compatible with our hypothesis; however, our theoretical approach and our emphasis on measuring people's tendency to legitimize social inequality, rather than people's willingness to receive negative information about their system, distinguish our research from theirs. Moreover, our perspective offers the unique prediction that any change—even a change that results in greater inequality—might lessen people's tendency to legitimize existing inequalities. We return in the General Discussion section to some potential links between the two sets of findings.

Overview of Present Studies

We test the prediction that perceiving stability in the system leads to greater system justification and rationalization of inequalities, compared with perceiving change in the system. In Study 1, we manipulate system stability by presenting participants with stability-relevant information regarding the number of women in business and assess an established downstream consequence of the legitimation of inequality. In Study 2, we explore whether simply activating the abstract concept of stability leads to increased legitimation in participants' spontaneous responses to social inequality.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we investigated whether perceiving stability in one domain would lead people to legitimize inequality in completely unrelated domains. Specifically, we manipulated stability versus change in the domain of gender inequality and measured a downstream consequence of the legitimation of non-gender-related socioeconomic inequalities. The disconnect between the domain of the manipulation and the domain of the dependent measure reduces the plausibility of alternative explanations. Briefly, if

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[1]Although the rationale for our predictions regarding stability is similar to the rationale underlying the inescapability-based predictions, and the two processes are likely related, they may be dissociable. Processes of stability and inescapability may even interact. For example, in a highly escapable system, the effect of stability may disappear: A stable but highly escapable system is hardly inevitable. In other words, even though people may believe that such a system's status quo is likely to persist into the future, that status quo may not continue to affect their own lives if they can easily leave it. Similar reasoning suggests that in a highly changeable system, the effect of inescapability may disappear as well. We return to this idea more fully in the General Discussion section.

increased stability in the domain of gender inequality led to increased rationalization of gender inequality, this could be attributed to people's documented inclination to rationalize the status quo they have just been directly told they can anticipate (e.g., Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2003). Our hypothesis is unique in its prediction that an overall sense of the system's stability, prompted by observing stability in the domain of gender equality, should lead people to legitimize all the inequalities present in the system.

Nonetheless, we used an additional procedure to isolate the effects of stability from any incidental effects of the particular nature of the instance of stability described. We crossed the stability manipulation with an additional manipulation such that some participants read about a socially progressive future, and others read about a socially regressive future. We took this precaution because our dependent measure tapped attitudes toward socially progressive programs, and we were concerned that if we simply had participants read about a socially progressive change (or a socially regressive stable state of affairs), they might come to embrace (reject) other socially progressive plans in line with the future they anticipate (see Kay et al., 2002). Using this 2 (stability: high versus low) × 2 (anticipated future: socially progressive versus socially regressive) design allowed us to separate the effects of change *per se* from the effects of the particular state of affairs participants expect in the future. We expected a main effect of stability on the participants' legitimation of inequalities, regardless of the manipulation of anticipated future.

Method

Participants

Forty-three Canadian citizens (23 women and 20 men; $M_{age} = 21.8$ years; 56% Caucasian) participated in a public venue on campus.

Procedure

First, participants read a report about Canada's current and projected numbers of female business executives. The report identified both past and projected future numbers for the proportion of women in top business positions. These numbers were manipulated according to our design. Specifically, participants in the high-stability conditions read the following passage (with the text for the anticipated future manipulation provided in brackets; the study was conducted in 2007):

> A recent report released by the CIBC World Markets predicts that in 2010, women will make up 10.2% [*32.2%*] of the top company executives in this country. Some may find it surprising to learn that this number represents a change of only 0.3 percentage points from data reported in the 2001 Canadian census – in other words, over the course of nine years, there will not have been much change in the number of women represented among top Canadian business executives.

Participants in the low-stability conditions read the following passage (note that we kept the proportional change, rather than the absolute change, constant across these two conditions):

> A recent report released by the CIBC World Markets predicts that in 2010, women will make up 2.9% [*32.1%*] of the top company executives in this country. Some may find it surprising to learn that this number represents a whopping decrease of 7 percentage points [*increase of 22.2 percentage points*] from data reported in the 2001 Canadian census – in other words, over the course of nine years, there will have been a decrease leading to there being approximately one third [*an increase leading to there being approximately three times*] the number of women represented among top Canadian business executives.

In all conditions, the report also provided pie charts providing a visual depiction of the states of affairs described for both 2001 and 2010. Pilot testing (described next) confirmed the effectiveness of both manipulations.

Next, participants completed a measure of support for redistributive policies developed by previous researchers (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). This measure assesses participants' support for six policies targeted toward various disadvantaged groups (a tutoring program, a soup kitchen, a job training program, a mentorship program, a crisis hotline, and an adopt-a-grandparent program). None of the programs were relevant to women's role in business and none targeted women specifically. For each program, participants rated their support for the program's creation, and the likelihood that they would vote for government funding for it, volunteer at it, and donate money to it. They completed each of these four ratings for each of the six programs using a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*), which we averaged into a single index of support for social redistributive programs (Cronbach's α of .91).

Although this measure has obvious political and social significance, it does not directly tap legitimation of inequalities. Previous research, however, demonstrates that people's support for social redistributive policies, as assessed by this measure, is inversely related to their justification of social inequalities (Wakslak et al., 2007). In other words, the more people see the social inequalities in their community as justified and deserved, the less they are willing to provide extra help to redress those inequalities. Therefore, if, as we predict, perceiving stability in the domain of gender inequality fosters greater system justification more broadly, then participants in the high-stability conditions should show less support for the redistributive policies designed to attenuate existing inequality (Wakslak et al., 2007).

Results and Discussion

Pilot Testing

A separate sample of 69 participants (31 women, 38 men) pilot tested the manipulations. Participants who read the low-stability manipulations scored higher on a scale that asked them to rate "To what extent is women's place in Canadian businesses changing?" ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 0.79$) compared with participants who read the high-stability manipulations ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 65) = 86.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .57$. Participants who read the socially progressive future manipulations scored higher on a scale that asked them to rate "How much of a role will women be playing in Canadian businesses?" ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.23$) compared with participants

who read the socially regressive future manipulations ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.34$), $F(1, 65) = 49.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .44$. Participant gender failed to moderate either effect.

Primary Analyses

A 2 (stability: high versus low) × 2 (anticipated future: socially progressive versus socially regressive) ANOVA confirmed our predictions: Participants in the high-stability conditions showed less support for social redistributive policies ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.86$) than participants in the low-stability conditions ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.78$), $F(1, 39) = 5.24$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2_p = .12$ (Table 1). No other effects approached significance, both $Fs < 1$ and both $ps > .39$. Including gender as a factor

in the analysis led to no additional effects, all $Fs < 1.68$ and all $ps > .20$, and did not change the main effect of stability, $F(1, 35) = 5.08$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2_p = .13$.

Thus, both men and women showed less support for social redistributive programs after witnessing stability, as opposed to change, in their system. This occurred even though they witnessed either stability or change in a completely unrelated domain. This separation between the domain of stability and the domain of justification is important, as it suggests that it is something about the general concept of stability, rather than its specific features, which drives the effect.

This idea gains further support from the fact that the main effect of stability occurred regardless of the specific state of affairs participants thought would persist: Although pilot testing

Table 1. Participants' willingness to support six social redistributive programs (Study 1)

Condition	High stability		Low stability		Difference	η^2_p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Tutoring						
Support creation	6.09	0.87	6.38	0.80	−0.29	.03
Vote for government funding	5.90	1.11	6.00	0.95	−0.10	<.01
Volunteer	4.32	1.91	5.29	1.45	−0.97*	.08
Donate money	4.55	1.79	4.76	1.76	−0.78	< .01
Tutoring overall	**5.22**	**1.05**	**5.61**	**1.03**	**−0.39**	**.04**
Soup kitchen						
Support creation	6.18	0.85	6.25	0.79	−0.07	<.01
Vote for government funding	5.91	1.23	5.80	1.28	0.09	<.01
Volunteer	4.68	1.81	5.35	1.46	−0.67	.04
Donate money	4.59	1.68	4.85	1.53	−0.26	<.01
Soup kitchen overall	**5.34**	**1.07**	**5.56**	**1.07**	**−0.22**	**.01**
Job training						
Support creation	5.95	0.84	6.00	1.14	−0.05	<.01
Vote for government funding	5.14	1.39	5.19	1.57	−0.05	<.01
Volunteer	3.90	2.04	4.76	1.64	−0.86	.05
Donate money	3.68	1.67	3.71	1.49	−0.03	<.01
Job training overall	**4.67**	**1.06**	**4.92**	**1.13**	**−0.25**	**.01**
Mentorship						
Support creation	6.09	0.87	6.52	0.75	−0.43*	.07
Vote for government funding	5.22	1.15	5.47	1.60	−0.25	<.01
Volunteer	4.31	1.93	5.81	1.25	−1.50***	.18
Donate money	3.45	1.41	4.90	1.58	−1.45***	.21
Mentorship overall	**4.77**	**0.99**	**5.68**	**0.94**	**−0.91*****	**.20**
Crisis hotline						
Support creation	6.00	1.02	6.38	0.26	−0.38	.05
Vote for government funding	5.18	1.50	5.90	0.34	−0.72**	.08
Volunteer	3.68	2.23	5.29	0.49	−1.61 **	.15
Donate money	3.59	1.84	4.52	0.40	−0.93	.06
Crisis hotline overall	**4.61**	**1.28**	**5.52**	**1.09**	**−0.91 ****	**.14**
Adopt-a-grandparent						
Support creation	5.64	1.21	6.43	0.81	−0.79**	.13
Vote for government funding	4.77	1.69	5.43	1.40	−0.66	.05
Volunteer	4.14	1.91	5.19	1.78	−1.05*	.08
Donate money	3.59	1.56	4.23	1.76	−0.64	.04
Adopt-a-grandparent overall	**4.53**	**1.06**	**5.32**	**1.15**	**−0.79 ****	**.12**
All programs						
Support for creation overall	**5.99**	**0.75**	**6.33**	**0.63**	**−0.34**	**.06**
Vote for government funding overall	**5.36**	**1.02**	**5.64**	**0.87**	**−0.28**	**.02**
Volunteer overall	**4.17**	**1.66**	**5.29**	**1.16**	**−1.12****	**.14**
Donate money overall	**3.91**	**1.40**	**4.52**	**1.35**	**−0.61**	**.05**
Overall support for all programs	**4.86**	**0.86**	**5.45**	**0.78**	**−0.59 ****	**.12**

Bolded lines refer to comparisons of the means across the relevant items.
*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

indicated that participants noticed the manipulation of anticipated future, this manipulation produced no significant effects. Granted, our sample size in this study may not have been sufficient to detect a potential Stability × Anticipated Future interaction. We therefore inspected the individual cell means and found that regardless of whether we compared stability with a change in the context of an anticipated socially regressive future ($M_{stability} = 4.94$, $SD_{stability} = 0.92$; $M_{change} = 5.30$, $SD_{change} = 0.89$; simple effect: $F(1, 39) = 1.00$, $p = .32$), or an anticipated socially progressive future ($M_{stability} = 4.78$, $SD_{stability} = 0.83$; $M_{change} = 5.58$, $SD_{change} = 0.68$; simple effect: $F(1, 39) = 5.06$, $p = .03$), participants who read about stability tended to report less support for redistributive policies (although the effect seemed weaker in the socially regressive future condition). Thus, we tentatively conclude that the stability of a given state of affairs, as opposed to the specific nature of the state of affairs itself, drove the effect we observed in Study 1. In Study 2, we seek to add support to this conclusion by manipulating change versus stability in a way that is completely content free.

We also seek to address another limitation of Study 1. Measuring a downstream consequence of the legitimation (i.e., support for redistributive policies) does not directly address our hypothesis about the effects of stability on legitimation itself. Although we observed the pattern of results that would be consistent with our hypothesis, because we did not measure legitimation directly, alternative explanations may still exist. In Study 2, we address this issue by assessing legitimation of social inequality more directly.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we tested the limits of the idea that our effect is driven by something general about the concept of stability, rather than its specific features. We employed a scrambled sentence manipulation to activate either the concept of stability or the concept of change, and then assessed the justification of existing gender inequalities. We reasoned that if the perception of stability is associated with system-justifying tendencies, then the mere cognitive activation of the concept of stability, relative to change, should increase participants' tendency to justify the inequalities present within their systems. Moreover, in Study 2, we employed an open-ended measure to assess people's system-justifying responses to capture their spontaneous, self-generated legitimations of social inequality.

In Study 2, we also considered a potential boundary condition for the effect of stability versus change on the legitimation of inequality. Political conservatism seemed a likely candidate for at least two reasons. First, conservatives already tend to legitimize social inequalities more than liberals do (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008), so a manipulation of stability may not increase their legitimations further. Second, one hallmark feature of conservatism is resistance to change (e.g., Jost et al., 2007). In that regard, conservatives may find change threatening and stability reassuring, which could interfere with the effect we have predicted. If political orientation moderated the influence of perceived stability on the legitimation of social

inequality in Study 1, this went undetected because we had no measure of participants' political orientation. In Study 2, we sought to test this potential moderator and included a measure of participants' political orientation.

Method

Participants

Eighty-three American residents (46 women and 37 men; $M_{age} = 32.7$; 76% Caucasian) from the Mturk online platform participated.

Procedure

Participants first completed a scrambled sentence procedure (Srull & Wyer, 1979) designed to prime either the concept of stability or the concept of change (see the Appendix). Participants then completed a dependent measure based on one used by Laurin and colleagues (2010). They read that according to the US Census Bureau:

> Male college graduates in this country are more financially successful than their female counterparts. For instance, American female graduates are paying off their debt more slowly than their male counterparts. To illustrate, in the US, 60% of males completely pay off their student debt within 2 years. In contrast, only 25% of women manage such a feat. In addition, these men's salaries upon entering their first job after graduating are a full 20% higher than women's starting salaries.

We then asked participants why they thought this was the case. They entered up to six different reasons into separate text boxes. These self-generated reasons formed the basis for our dependent measure. We blinded ourselves by removing all identifying information (i.e., participants' condition, political orientation, demographics, etc.) from each reason participants provided, and sorted these reasons into categories according to whether they were system legitimizing (e.g., "Men tend to go into careers that are more lucrative that females"), system blaming (e.g., "Sex discrimination although less, still exists"), or neither (which were often simple restatements of the information provided, e.g., "Men generally earn more money than women"). Participants generated a total of 307 reasons, or 3.7 reasons each, on average. We calculated the proportion of each participant's explanations that were system legitimizing and the proportion that were system blaming; these formed our dependent measures.

At the end of the session, participants completed a demographics form, which included a five-point scale assessing political orientation (ranging from *very conservative* to *very liberal*). The manipulation did not affect participants' political orientation, $t(81) = 0.78$, $p = .44$.

Results and Discussion

We predicted that participants in the stability-priming condition would express a greater proportion of system legitimizing reasons for gender inequality and a smaller proportion of system blaming reasons, compared with participants in the

change-priming condition. We also considered the possibility that political orientation might moderate this effect, such that it would be stronger among participants who were less politically conservative. To test this prediction, we first combined the within-subjects variables into a single score, subtracting participants' blame proportions from their legitimization proportions, providing us with an overall index of the extent to which participants tended to legitimize, rather than blame.[2] This allowed us to approximate a test for a three-way interaction between priming condition (between subjects), political orientation (between subjects), and explanation type (within subjects; legitimizing versus blaming): We regressed this index onto priming condition (change = −1, stability = 1), political orientation (mean-centered), and the interaction between the two.

This regression yielded an effect of political orientation (conceptually, an interaction between political orientation and explanation type), such that more conservative participants tended to produce more legitimizing, relative to blaming, explanations, $\beta = -.27$, $t(79) = 2.58$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2_p = .08$. Importantly, the Stability × Political Orientation interaction (conceptually, a three-way interaction with explanation type) achieved statistical significance, $\beta = .20$, $t(79) = 1.95$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2_p = .04$ (Table 2). Whereas the stability manipulation had no effect on the extent to which conservative participants (i.e., those scoring 1 standard deviation below the mean on the political orientation measure) tended to generate more legitimizing, relative to blaming, explanations, $B = -.03$, $t(79) = 0.42$, $p = .68$, it significantly increased this tendency among liberals (i.e., those scoring 1 standard deviation above the mean on the political orientation measure), $B = .24$, $t(79) = 2.33$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2_p = .08$. Viewed differently, whereas in the change condition, we found the expected effect of political orientation on the participants' tendency to generate more legitimizing, relative to blaming, explanations, $B = -.24$, $t(79) = 3.42$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .14$; the stability condition completely eliminated this effect, $B = -.03$, $t(79) = 0.42$, $p = .67$, making liberals just as likely as conservatives to legitimize, rather than blame, a gender inequality.

We also broke down the conceptual three-way interaction by conducting two multiple regressions to examine participants' tendency to produce legitimizing explanations separately from their tendency to produce blaming explanations. For legitimizing explanations (Figure 1, left-hand panel), we found a significant interaction, $\beta = .25$, $t(79) = 2.31$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2_p = .05$, mirroring the one reported earlier. For participants' blaming explanations (Figure 1, right-hand panel), the interaction had the expected sign but did not reach statistical significance, $\beta = -.11$, $t(79) = 1.08$, $p = .28$. Nevertheless, we examined the simple effects for participants' blaming explanations and found that among more conservative participants, the manipulation had no effect, $B = -.02$, $t(79) = 0.32$, $p = .75$, whereas among more liberal participants, the stability condition led to marginally fewer blaming explanations than the change condition, $B = -.10$, $t(79) = 1.84$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2_p = .04$.

Thus, in Study 2, we found that exposure to the mere concept of stability can lead to a greater tendency to produce legitimizing explanations for an observed inequality, compared with exposure to the concept of change. Interestingly, we obtained this effect only among politically liberal participants. We speculate further on the reason for this moderation in the General Discussion section, but perhaps a more pressing question is why we did not, in Study 2, also conceptually replicate the unmoderated effect we found in Study 1. In Study 2, this effect would have been represented by either a main effect of stability on the difference score (conceptually, a Stability × Explanation Type interaction) or at the very least a main effect of stability on the proportion of legitimizing explanations. One potential explanation lies in the range of political orientation found in each of our samples. Although we have no measure of political orientation for Study 1 participants, they were young Canadian college students. By contrast, participants in Study 2 were American residents and on average more than 10 years older. The political differences between Americans and Canadians (e.g., Bruce, 1989), and the fact that conservatism increases with age (e.g., Cornelis, Van Hiel, Roets, & Kossowska, 2009; Truett, 1993), indicate that our Study 2 sample was likely more conservative than our Study 1 sample. Indeed, our Study 2 participants scored, on average, right at the midpoint of our five-point scale ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.23$), whereas typical college samples are skewed toward the liberal end of the scale. By extrapolation, we might presume that shifting our Study 2 results toward the liberal end of the scale might have resulted in a main effect of condition, just like in Study 1. Cautiously, then, we conclude that our results suggest that stable systems produce greater legitimation of social inequalities, that this effect is enhanced among more liberal individuals and dampened among more conservative individuals, and that at a certain degree of conservatism, the effect disappears completely.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across two studies, we find support for the idea that the concepts of stability and change can influence people's tendency to legitimize social inequalities. In Study 1, stability in one domain (the number of women in business) reduced participants' support for redistributive programs aiming at correcting inequalities in completely unrelated domains. In Study 2, at least among political liberals, exposure to even the mere concept of stability produced increased open-ended legitimation of an observed gender inequality, rendering these liberals indistinguishable from conservatives on this measure

Integrating the Stability Effect with Previous Literature

These findings build on previous research indicating that people are particularly likely to legitimize the status quo when they believe they cannot escape it. A person's belief that her system is unlikely to change and her belief that she cannot escape her system may both lead that person to perceive the status quo as an inevitable set of circumstances whose potentially negative aspects she neutralizes by rationalizing them (Laurin et al.,

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[2]The two proportion scores were significantly correlated, $r = -.57$, but the correlation was not so large as to indicate that they were completely dependent. Indeed, many of the explanations (25%) provided by participants were coded as neither blaming nor legitimizing. Thus, we considered them as two different variables, not opposite sides of the same coin.

Table 2.   Regression analyses for Study 2 (predicting the index of legitimization)

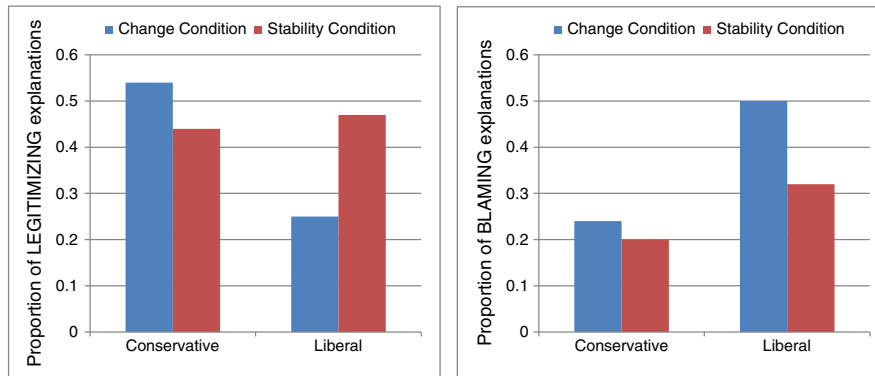| Predictor	Unstandardized coefficient (B)	SE	Confidence interval (95%)	t	p-value
(Constant)	0.11	0.06	(−0.01, 0.23)	1.87	.07
Political orientation	−0.13	0.05	(−0.23, −0.03)	2.58	.01
Condition	0.08	0.06	(−0.04, 0.20)	1.38	.17
Political orientation × Condition	0.10	0.05	(0.00, 0.20)	1.95	.05

Note: The degrees of freedom are 79.

Figure 1.   Proportion of legitimizing and blaming explanations provided by participants primed with change and stability, as a function of political ideology

2010). The present findings also contribute to the growing body of research attempting to identify the conditions under which system justification is most likely (e.g., Johnson & Fujita, 2012; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; see Kay & Zanna, 2009). In particular, our results resonate with recent research on the role of system dependence (Shepherd & Kay, 2012; van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011) and powerlessness (Van der Toorn et al.,). All these findings identify psychological states—perceptions of inevitability, dependence on the system, or a broader sense of powerlessness—that may make any negative aspects of the system especially threatening and necessary to rationalize. This emerging perspective on system justification—that one of its functions is to protect people specifically when it would be threatening for them to acknowledge negative aspects of their system—may be useful in understanding additional boundary conditions of system justification effects and detecting its operation in everyday life (see also Kay & Zanna, 2009).

We can also integrate our research with that on people's responses to "system threat." Many studies find evidence that on the surface appears to contradict what we have found here: When people learn that their system's position within the broader hierarchy is unstable, they respond with increased, not decreased, legitimation of their system's status quo (e.g., Kay et al., 2005; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). The crucial difference, we think, lies in the level at which change or stability is occurring: In the threat literature, the entire system's place within the broader hierarchy is changing and more specifically getting worse. People legitimize their systems more under such circumstances because they are threatened by the notion that their system is losing ground. In our studies, stability or change occurs within the system itself (Study 1), or at the very least nothing cues participants to consider their system within a broader context (Study 2). We suspect, then, that when people are considering their system as its own entity, independent of all others, perceived

stability will lead them to greater legitimation of inequalities within their system, but that when they are considering the broader hierarchy of systems, perceptions that their system is changing in a negative way may be what leads to the greatest levels of legitimation.

Finally, our research adds to recent efforts by Johnson and Fujita (2012) to understand the conditions that promote system change, rather than system justification. In their research, participants who witnessed another person's successful attempt to change the system subsequently showed more willingness to receive negative information about their system and reported a greater motivation for system change. In our research, participants who saw cues of system change showed a lesser tendency to legitimize inequalities in their system. One way of linking these two sets of findings is particularly applicable to Study 2, where liberal participants in the change condition were more willing to produce the very negative information that Johnson and Fujita's participants were more willing to receive. Another potential link proposes a potential mechanism for the Johnson and Fujita finding. If perceiving change reduces system justification, then it may allow people to see problems with existing social arrangements to which they had previously blinded themselves. Seeing these problems may then activate the system improvement motivation proposed by Johnson and Fujita. Future research might seek to integrate these two perspectives on system change.

Caveats and Unanswered Questions

One question that emerges from the results of Study 2 is why, exactly, stability only influenced legitimization among liberals (see Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011, for similar results). Earlier, we discussed two potential reasons why conservatives might not respond in the predicted fashion. On one hand, conservatives might already be at a ceiling level

when it comes to legitimizing inequalities. This would explain why the stability prime did not further increase their tendency to produce legitimizing explanations. On the other hand, because conservatives tend to be resistant to change, they may have found the change condition in Study 2 just as threatening as the stability condition. This would explain why we failed to find a difference between the two conditions. A third potential reason is that conservatives might, by default, perceive the system as more stable than liberals do (Jost et al., 2007). This would explain why the stability manipulation failed to increase their legitimations, and could help explain the baseline difference in legitimation between liberals and conservatives. However, this third reason also suggests that the change condition should have reduced the conservatives' existing tendency to rationalize. In any case, further research is needed before any of these explanations can be retained or discarded.

One caveat to our general pattern of results deserves mentioning here. We have drawn parallels between our findings on the effects of perceived stability and those of Laurin and colleagues (2010) on the effects of perceived inescapability. We speculate, however, that understanding the effects of stability may prove even more practically important than understanding the effects of inescapability: Daily life provides many more cues of the stability versus change of one's important systems than it does cues of their degree of inescapability. We further speculate that effects of stability and inescapability may not be completely independent, and instead that the two variables may be somewhat contingent on each other. In other words, they may to some degree each be necessary but not sufficient conditions to produce justification. For example, if a person perceives that her system is stable, but very escapable, then she may not worry about feeling trapped in a potentially negative system, and therefore, she may not show an increased tendency to legitimize its inequalities. For similar reasons, a different person may feel no special need to legitimize a system he perceives as inescapable, but continually changing. We obtained the evidence we presented here in support of the effects of stability using participants' country as the target system—a system that most people likely perceive as relatively inescapable: The social and material costs of immigrating to another country are daunting to say the least. But this analysis of the relationship between stability and inescapability suggests that in highly escapable systems, the effects of stability may disappear.

Conclusion

Public perceptions of the nature of social inequality can greatly influence the treatment of individuals on both sides of the inequality. A great deal of variety exists when it comes to this public perception, and the research presented here suggests that part of this variety might be explained by perceptions of change versus stability in everyday life. We directly manipulated the participants' perceptions of change versus stability. In real life, however, it is often the case that the same state of affairs can be seen as either change or stability, depending upon the features that one attends to and the timeframe one considers. Understanding the individual differences that predispose people to perceive either stability or change might help us further understand variability in people's willingness to acknowledge the problematic nature of many existing social inequalities.

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APPENDIX: SCRAMBLED SENTENCE PRIME USED IN STUDY 2 (KEY WORDS IN BOLD)

Change condition	Stability condition
committee the door **changing** is Brown play desk the is sponge make **transition** a smooth	committee the door **unchanging** is Brown play desk the is sponge make effort a **continual**
altered four your get pants easily paper store ripped the ball the hoop toss normally key things around **shift** they you art orange **transform** will sky the seamless is ruddy forget not try page to send I mail it over long the today is book seven a computer time **fluctuate** saves into speaker **change** clothes **new**	**durable** buy they get pants easily paper store ripped the ball the hoop toss normally key things keep **permanent** they you art orange **stabilize** will sky the seamless is ruddy forget not try page to send I mail it over long the today is book seven a computer time **unalterable** saves in speaker **remain** clothes **same**
today procedure the was **modified** big chairs they box are	today procedure the is **enduring** big chairs they box are