

for our explanatory apparatus to sink its teeth into. But whatever we think of these alternatives, C&S have done the field a service by carefully tracing the strands of inherence winding their way through so many of the phenomena we study and, in so doing, generating many promising avenues for future investigation.

Why does the “mental shotgun” fire system-justifying bullets?

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Abstract: We suggest that people privilege explanations relying on inherent rather than contingent factors not only because of an innate cognitive tendency to monitor reality, but because doing so satisfies the desire to perceive the societal status quo as legitimate. In support, we describe experimental studies linking the activation of system justification motivation to the endorsement of inherence-based (essentialist) explanations.

Cimpian & Salomon (C&S) argue provocatively and convincingly for a “deep-seated motivation to uncover the underlying structure of reality” (sect. 2.2, para. 1) that leads human beings – especially children and those relatively low in cognitive ability or motivation – to explain patterns of covariation in the social (and physical) world in terms of stable, inherent, essential characteristics of subjects and objects. They propose that the “mental shotgun,” which rapidly generates the most accessible associations and inferences, leads people to conclude, for instance, that women are more likely than men to stay home to raise children *because they are naturally (i.e., biologically and psychologically) well suited for caregiving activities* (cf. Eagly & Steffen 1984; Hoffman & Hurst 1990; Jost & Banaji 1994). In this way, the authors suggest that the “inherence heuristic” provides the “cognitive bedrock on which people can build a motivated system-justifying ideology” (sect. 3.2, para. 3).

There is much to admire about C&S’s smooth, sophisticated, aesthetically pleasing synthesis of major strands of cognitive, developmental, social, personality, and political psychology. And we agree heartily that essentialist thinking about social groups contributes to the development and maintenance of beliefs and ideologies that justify the societal status quo (see also Jost & Hamilton 2005; Keller 2005).

It is less clear to us why a *cognitive* evolutionary adaptation (or a purely *epistemic* goal) to *perceive and understand reality accurately* would so disproportionately yield quasi-tautological, stereotypical explanations that serve inherently conservative ends – in the sense of accepting and maintaining rather than critically thinking about differences and disparities among individuals and social groups. To extract “the underlying structure of reality,” it seems to us that people would need to consider both inherent (internal, stable) and contingent (external, malleable) causes of hierarchy, division of labor, social order, and so on. Indeed, the authors point out that some individuals (liberals, progressives, and those who enjoy engaging in effortful thought) are much more likely than others (conservatives and those who dislike effortful thought) to incorporate historical and situational factors when considering social inequality. But they have not really addressed the question of *why* the mental shotgun would (more often than not) fire system-justifying bullets that perpetuate rather than challenge existing systems of inequality and oppression,

such as the caste system in India (Jost & Banaji 1994; see also Blanchar & Eidelman 2013; Mahalingam 2003b). A satisfying account must incorporate contextual factors arising from the societal or systemic level of analysis, in addition to individual and group levels of analysis (Solak et al. 2012).

System justification theory holds that most individuals privilege explanations that stress inherent rather than contingent factors, not because of an innate cognitive tendency to monitor reality, but because doing so satisfies the desire to perceive the societal status quo as legitimate and stable. If dispositional characteristics of victims of environmental disasters, for instance, can be cited to explain their plight, then there is no reason to blame (or change) the social, economic, or political system (Lerner 1980; Napier et al. 2006). C&S tantalizingly assert – but have yet to demonstrate empirically – that the process of generating system-justifying attributions “is no different than the process that leads people to conclude, say, that orange juice is consumed for breakfast because of its inherent properties (e.g., its energizing smell, its vitamin C content)” (sect. 3.2, para. 4).

It strikes us as difficult, if not impossible, to construct a definitive test of the hypothesis that the psychological process of generating inherent explanations about orange juice is “no different than” the process of essentializing Untouchables (or women, etc.) to justify their discrimination or exploitation. However, it may be relevant that specific situational factors – such as feelings of system dependence (or inescapability) and exposure to system criticism – are known to affect thinking about social groups (Jost et al. 2015; Kay & Friesen 2011), and it would be surprising if these same factors were to affect thinking about orange juice.

Laurin and colleagues (2010) convinced Canadian women that it would be extremely difficult to emigrate from Canada and subsequently presented them with national statistics indicating that men’s starting salaries were 20% higher on average than women’s starting salaries. Compared to a control condition (in which leaving Canada was described as relatively easy), these women were more likely to attribute economic inequality between men and women to “genuine differences between men and women” and less likely to attribute it to “unfairness in society” (p. 1076). Furthermore, Brescoll et al. (2013) exposed American men and women to a passage criticizing the United States and found that it caused them to score higher on various measures of biological essentialism with respect to gender differences (see also Gaucher et al. 2013). Additional manipulations of system justification motivation (e.g., goal contagion) produced parallel results. In all of these cases, temporarily activating the motivation to defend and bolster the societal status quo caused individuals to endorse inherence-based (essentialistic) explanations for gender inequality.

Would a heightened sense of system dependence or a threat directed at the legitimacy of the social system similarly cause people to endorse inherence-based explanations for the popularity of orange juice at breakfast? If so, this would be pretty surprising, and it would lead us to wonder whether orange juice at breakfast has become as symbolically significant to the “American way of life” as, say, apple pie. In any case, we recognize that two or more psychological processes could share a common cognitive-developmental antecedent and yet possess distinctive moderators.

At the same time, we feel that much more evidence is required to determine whether and, if so, *why* – in the absence of social and motivational considerations – the mental shotgun fires system-justifying bullets. An evolutionary account based exclusively on the need for perceptual or cognitive accuracy seems incomplete at best. The evidence is fairly clear: The activation of system justification motivation affects the endorsement of those inherence-based (essentialist) explanations that preserve the legitimacy of the status quo. It seems unlikely that the ideological function of such explanations could be chalked up simply to the heuristic processing of information designed to “uncover the underlying structure of reality.”

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