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System justification: Experimental evidence, its contextual nature, and implications for social change

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We review conceptual and empirical contributions to system justification theory over the last fifteen years, emphasizing the importance of an experimental approach and consideration of context. First, we review the indirect evidence of the system justification motive via complimentary stereotyping. Second, we describe injunctification as direct evidence of a tendency to view the extant status quo (the way things are) as the way things should be. Third, we elaborate on system justification's contextual nature and the circumstances, such as threat, dependence, inescapability, and system confidence, which are likely to elicit defensive bolstering of the status quo and motivated ignorance of critical social issues. Fourth, we describe how system justification theory can increase our understanding of both resistance to and acceptance of social change, as a change moves from proposed, to imminent, to established. Finally, we discuss how threatened systems shore up their authority by co-opting legitimacy from other sources, such as governments that draw on religious concepts, and the role of institutional-level factors in perpetuating the status quo.

Over the past twenty-five years, system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) has provided a unique and generative perspective on many perplexing aspects of human social and political behaviour – such as why people are often inured to injustice, will resist social change, rationalize inequality or disadvantage, and favour outgroup concerns at the expense of their own or group interests (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2011). In this article, we review our research group's collective contributions to the development of system justification theory over the past fifteen years, with an emphasis on our distinctive approach. Much of the work reviewed here originated at the University of Waterloo, Canada, where the first four authors were graduate students in social psychology advised by the final author (2005–2011). First, we describe work highlighting the contextual nature of system justification and how, like other forms of motivated cognition, it can be elicited more strongly in particular

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circumstances. Second, we describe research providing direct evidence for system justification as a motivated process whereby people infer that the current state of affairs ('what is') is the most desirable state of affairs ('what ought to be'). Third, we describe research contrasting how system justification motives might sometimes prompt resistance to social change, while at other times prompting instead rationalization and justification of that change. Finally, we describe the tension between bolstering and dismantling systems.

The contextual nature of system justification

Just as people are motivated to maintain a positive sense of self (Higgins, 1987; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), they are also commonly motivated to see their sociopolitical systems as legitimate – 'nearly everyone is motivated (at least to some extent) to explain and justify the status quo' (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003, p. 350; see also Jost *et al.*, 2010). We use Kay and Zanna's (2009) definition of *systems* as, 'the overarching institutions, organizations, and social norms within which [people] live and the rules that they, to at least some extent, are required to abide' (p. 158; also see Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 11). Systems can be big and broad, such as national governments or cultures, or local and narrow, such as family units; individuals typically operate within multiple overlapping and sometimes concentric systems.

In some circumstances, support for the status quo might not be exclusively driven by system justification. For example, support for a political leader might occur not only because the leader represents the overarching system of government (Kay, Gaucher *et al.*, 2009), but also because this leader protects the self from threats (Asbrock & Fritsche, 2013) or because the leader is a highly prototypical group member (Hogg, 2001). The distinct contribution of system justification theory, however, is to provide the most elaborated explanation for situations where people defend the status quo when it seems against their self- or group-based interests to do so (Jost, 1997; Kay, Gaucher *et al.*, 2009; Milojev, Greaves, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015; Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015; Sibley, Overall, & Duckitt, 2007; for reviews of system- vs. self- and group-justification, see Jost *et al.*, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002), or defend it more strongly than the facts alone seem to warrant (Jost, 2017; Kay & Zanna, 2009).

Moreover, in contrast to other perspectives on status quo bias that tend to be more cognitive in nature (e.g., Eidelman & Crandall, 2009, 2012; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), much of our work has explored and highlighted the motivational nature of system justification. That is, how the strength of the motive ebbs and flows based on contextual factors that heighten or diminish it in that moment. In this way, the system justification motive operates like many other types of goals (Jost *et al.*, 2010; Liviatan & Jost, 2011, 2014) and is, in a sense, a multifinal subgoal (Kruglanski *et al.*, 2002) that satisfies a broad constellation of other psychologically important needs (Hässler, Shnabel, Ullrich, Arditti-Vogel, & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2018; Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Khan, Liu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). These include epistemic needs to see the world as consistent, structured, and orderly (Federico, Ergun, & Hunt, 2014; Jost & Krochik, 2014; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009), existential needs to reduce threat and anxiety (Jost *et al.*, 2007), and relational needs to see the world in the same way that others do (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). Below, we describe three different contextual variables that make people either more or less

motivated to justify their systems (for reviews, see Kay & Zanna, 2009; Kay & Friesen, 2011). These are system threat, system dependence, and system inescapability/stability.

System threat

People who are motivated to maintain a positive sense of self- or social identity will act to restore their worth in response to threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Similar processes occur at the level of social systems, where events that threaten the legitimacy or effectiveness of one's systems, such as terrorism, climate change, economic downturn, and natural disasters, elicit defensive responding to shore up perceptions of that system (Milojev *et al.*, 2015; Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007; Vainio, Mäkiniemi, & Paloniemi, 2014).

Our work has used experimental manipulations of system threat where participants are asked to read a passage ostensibly written by a foreign journalist who criticizes their system (e.g., that America is diminishing in international influence and prestige, and in citizens' outcomes; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). Participants who read this threat have been compared to various control groups including a system affirmation condition where a matched passage praises the participant's system (Kay *et al.*, 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008), a control condition that produces negative affect but is not critical of the system (Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011), an unrelated passage (Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011), and a no passage condition (Kay *et al.*, 2009). After system threat, motivated efforts to restore the perceived legitimacy of the system that have been documented include derogation of people known to criticize the system (Yeung, Kay, & Peach, 2014), endorsement of stereotypes or ideologies that bolster social or gender inequality (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; Kay *et al.*, 2005; Lau *et al.*, 2008), reduced support for legislation that challenges the status quo (Mallett, Huntsinger, & Swim, 2011), increased belief in conspiracy theories (Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton, 2018), and preference for system-supporting consumer products (Banfield *et al.*, 2011; Cutright *et al.*, 2011).

System dependence

System justification theory predicts that when outcomes are consequential and self-relevant, the risks of an illegitimate system become more dire. When people justify their systems, they are striving in part to reduce any existential anxiety or fears about the dangers the world may hold for them. Systems that have a large influence on a person's life could, by definition, wreak more havoc on it, making all the more existentially important for that person to bolster their confidence in that system's legitimacy. In short, people have increased incentive to rationalize away faults or bolster the legitimacy of systems on which they heavily depend, relative to systems on which they depend less. Consistent with this theorizing, van der Toorn, Tyler, and Jost (2011), van der Toorn *et al.* (2015) found that perceived outcome dependence on system authorities (e.g., police officers) was associated with increased perceptions of their legitimacy and deference to their actions.

Our own research has considered the fact that some types of systems have a greater potential to elicit dependence than others. Your day-to-day happiness, for example, might to some extent depend on corporate institutions – such as the company that made your

car, mobile phone, or morning coffee. Relatively speaking, however, people generally have greater dependence on enduring institutions such as governments because the range of consequential outcomes that is the purview of the government is broader than the set of outcomes determined by other institutions such as corporations. This suggests that people should, in general, be more motivated to justify their government systems than corporate systems. Accordingly, our research finds that people are more likely to oppose change-promoting initiatives directed at the government, a system on which people felt more dependence, relative to change-promoting initiatives targeting corporations or non-profits, which are systems on which people felt less dependence (Gaucher, Friesen, Kay, Neufeld, & Dupasquier, 2018).

Finally, experimental manipulations have allowed us to isolate the causal effect of felt dependence while holding the specific system constant. In one study, Kay *et al.* (2009) found that when people were made to feel dependent on their university system, they were more likely to justify a university policy, but not a government policy. In contrast, when participants were made to feel dependent on the government, they were more likely to justify a government policy, but not a university policy. Other outcomes of perceived system dependency include system-justifying memory biases (Bonnot & Krauth-Gruber, 2017; Hennes, Ruisch, Feygina, Monteiro, & Jost, 2016), self-stereotyping (Bonnot & Krauth-Gruber, 2016), and avoidance of threatening information (Shepherd & Kay, 2012).

System inescapability and stability

Cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957) finds that irrevocable or unchangeable decisions are likely to be rationalized and justified (Brehm, 1956; Vroom, 1966). Similarly, at the level of systems and institutions, system justification theory suggests that sociopolitical systems whose influence is unavoidable are more likely to produce motivated defence of the status quo. As folk rocker Stephen Stills sang in 1970, 'If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with'. A system's unavoidable influence might occur because it is *inescapable*, that is, physically difficult or impractical to avoid, or because it is *stable*, that is, unlikely to change in the future.

Our research has found that both inescapability and stability lead to increased system justification. In one study, participants who read that it was becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to leave their country, relative to participants who read that it was becoming easier to emigrate, more strongly defended the legitimacy of an inequality within that system (i.e., the gender pay gap; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). In another series of studies, employees who were told that the current labour market is poor, which suggested that they would have few exit opportunities, were more likely to minimize or ignore negative aspects of their workplace (Proudfoot, Kay, & Mann, 2015). In studies on the effects of system stability, when participants believed that their system was stable and unchanging, they were more likely to support policies that perpetuated existing inequalities (Chernyak-Hai, Halabi, & Nadler, 2014; Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013).

Moderation by system confidence

Some people might read a criticism of their system and respond defensively with forceful countercriticism. Other people, however, might just shrug off that threat – or even prefer methods of system defence that are not so overt as taking on the critic directly. Even though we have emphasized experimental manipulations that typically elicit system-

justifying responses, not all individuals react equally in these contexts. One important individual difference moderator is system confidence. Recall that system justification operates like a goal. Banfield *et al.* (2011) proposed that although most people have a goal of believing that their sociopolitical systems are legitimate (Jost *et al.*, 2010), they differ in the extent to which they have made progress towards that goal – that is, they differ in their baseline levels of confidence in the system. Consistent with this idea, Banfield *et al.* (2011) found that it was specifically people with less confidence in their systems who more strongly engaged in motivated system defence after an experimental threat by preferring domestic over international consumer products and supporting an organization that maintained status quo educational policies.

Building on the above findings, Cutright *et al.* (2011) found that people with higher confidence in their systems are not unresponsive to threat. Rather, these researchers suggested that higher confidence individuals avoid subtle or indirect means of system defence. First, like Banfield *et al.* (2011), Cutright *et al.* (2011) found that after threat, participants lower, but not higher, in system confidence were more likely to engage in indirect system justification by choosing domestic consumer products. Additionally, however, they found that participants who were higher in system confidence were more likely to engage in direct system justification by derogating system critics after threat – a reaction that did not occur for individuals lower in system confidence.

Recent research has found that system confidence can change the reasons why people defend the status quo. Specifically, this research finds that non-defensive responses to negative elements of the system – that is, collective action aimed at spurring change – are strongest among people with moderate, compared to lower and higher, levels of system confidence (Cichocka, Górska, Jost, Sutton, & Bilewicz, 2017). These are the people whose confidence is low enough that they can see the problematic elements, but high enough that they believe their actions can make a difference. From this perspective, people low in system confidence are likely defending the status quo because they see no other alternative, whereas those high in system confidence are likely defending the status quo because they genuinely believe it is good. These findings highlight the complexity of the associations between chronic system confidence, state manipulations of system justification, and status quo support.

Motivated ignorance and system dependence

The work above described contexts, such as system dependence, which lead to increased defence of the status quo. Next, we consider circumstances that exacerbate tendencies to depend more heavily on systems in the first place. There are times when people believe they can deal with life's challenges via their own actions, for example, preventing crime and chaos via gun ownership (Shepherd & Kay, 2018) or extremist ideologies (Kay & Eibach, 2013). In other circumstances, however, people may more likely to depend on systems to provide positive life outcomes. Indeed, one important manifestation of system justification is trusting in the system to be able to perform its intended functions effectively (Napier *et al.*, 2006; Shockley & Shepherd, 2016).

Citizens are often tragically ill-informed about important issues such as the economy, energy, the environment, and foreign affairs (Pew Research Center, 2015). We reasoned that feeling uninformed might be one context which prompts people to increasingly place their trust in the system to take care of things. In turn, this trust can turn into a vicious cycle of system justification and cultivated ignorance. If citizens feel uninformed

about, and therefore trust the government to handle, important affairs, there will be two consequences. First, having offloaded the responsibility for these issues onto the government, they may feel increased dependence on the system. And second, the system justification engendered by this dependence may lead them to avoid learning information that might shake their trust in the system. In turn, this fosters greater ignorance, engaging the cycle again.

In short, we posited that one important antecedent of system dependence is the feeling that one does not understand a particular complex issue or domain, and that one can manage ensuing anxieties and concerns by (1) bolstering trust in the system to manage an issue, and (2) avoiding information that might challenge this trust, resulting in increased dependence. This is comparable to the ways in which people manage interpersonal interdependence by bolstering positive feelings and trust in their partner (de Jong, Van der Vegt, & Molleman, 2007; Murray *et al.*, 2009). More generally, it is consistent with how people avoid or minimize the importance of facts that threaten cherished beliefs (Friesen, Campbell, & Kay, 2015; Hennes *et al.*, 2016; Taber & Lodge, 2006) and how employees downplay problems within their organization when labour alternatives are scarce (Proudfoot *et al.*, 2015). Such a process could perpetuate a cycle of ignorance where problems are outsourced to the system, and then citizens are then motivated to remain unknowledgeable about them so as to maintain favourable views of the system.

Across a series of studies (Shepherd & Kay, 2012), we found that when a variety of issues were described in complex terms (e.g., energy sources, the economy), people reported feeling more dependent on the government to manage those issues, which led to increased trust in the government to also manage them. Moreover, we found that this led to the avoidance of information that would undermine one's bolstered trust in the system. Participants to whom we described issues in complex terms reported a desire to turn a blind eye to the issue and to actively avoid negative information about the issue. They also became less likely to choose to read articles on the issue with negative-sounding titles (e.g., 'Recession is Over, but the Future is Still Grim: Experts'; '7 Problems That Could Derail the Global Recovery'), while there was no change in their interest in articles with vague (e.g., 'Tracking the US Economy') or positive (e.g., 'Economy: The Worst is Behind Us') titles.

Various moderators point to the motivated nature of these effects. One such moderator was self-relevance: Participants' sense that the economic recession affected them directly. Among participants to whom we framed the economy in simple terms, and people therefore felt knowledgeable, this measure of self-relevance predicted an interest in reading negative articles. In other words, in this condition, participants who felt more affected by the economy were interested in learning if things were going badly. By contrast, when we made them feel more ignorant about the economy by describing it in more complex terms, these participants high in self-relevance shut down: They expressed a significantly weaker interest in learning negative information, putting them on par with their relatively disinterested counterparts. This suggests that the driving force in the vicious cycle of ignorance to dependence is indeed the concern with having offloaded responsibility (i.e., accepted system dependence) for a self-relevant outcome.

Another moderator was the urgency of the issue. When we suggested that the United States only has 40 years of economically recoverable oil available, we observed our predicted effect: When we described energy sustainability in complex terms, people wanted to avoid negative and uncomfortable information. By contrast, when we

minimized issue urgency, suggesting that the United States has 240 years of economically recoverable oil available, avoidance did not occur. That is, the avoidance of negative information was most pronounced when it presented an immediate threat and had more potential to undermine trust in the system.

A related series of studies sought to more specifically test whether or not bolstered trust in the government undermines participants' willingness to learn more about and engage with an issue (Shepherd & Kay, 2014). In one study, participants were asked to read an article either describing the government as capable or incapable of managing a recent economic recession. When the government was described as capable and in control of the issue, participants spent less time reading an informative article about the economy and instead opted to engage with other (potentially more boring) tasks. Similarly, when the government was described as being able to manage the BP Gulf of Mexico oil crisis of 2010, participants reported an increased desire to actively avoid negative information about the severity of the issue. Again speaking to the motivated nature of these effects, this effect was particularly pronounced among those participants who lived in closer proximity to the disaster.

In sum, we have highlighted ways in which the system justification motive operates contextually. People are more likely to engage in defensive bolstering of the status quo when their system is under threat, when they feel highly dependent on that system, or when their system seems unescapable or highly stable; there are likely other contexts as well. Moreover, we described one context that elicits felt dependence on a system in the first place. That is, when people feel ignorant about issues because of their complexity, and yet action is required, they increasingly depend on and trust their systems to solve those problems. Unfortunately, this also leads people to put their head in the sand by avoiding the issue altogether – why learn about a problem when the system can be trusted to solve it?

Experimental evidence of system justification

As the previous section foreshadowed, much of our work has taken an experimental approach. In this section, we elaborate further on this aspect of our work and its contribution to the overarching theory.

Early evidence for system justification: A focus on stereotyping

Early theorizing on system justification highlighted the utility of social stereotypes in allowing people to believe that their societies, institutions, and the status quo are legitimate, just and fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). Stereotypes are particularly useful rationalizations for why social inequalities would be natural or inevitable. For example, stereotypes of women as communal justify their occupational disadvantages: It only makes sense that more communal individuals would be better suited to domestic and childrearing roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Similarly, stereotypes of the poor as lazy justify their economic disadvantage: It only makes sense that lazy individuals, who surely do not contribute much to society, deserve a lesser fate than other more hardworking folk (Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Lerner, 1980).

Accordingly, earlier experimental evidence of system justification focused on how exposure to gender and economic stereotypes led to increased perceptions of system legitimacy and defence of the status quo, with a particular focus on complementary

(compensatory) stereotypes (see Kay *et al.*, 2007 for a review). Complementary stereotypes are beliefs about groups wherein positive characteristics are balanced our by negative characteristics, thus creating the perception of equality: No one group possesses all of society's advantages or bears all of its disadvantages (Jost *et al.*, 2001; Lane, 1959; Lerner, 1980). Importantly, though, the positive and negative characteristics are distributed in a systematic fashion (Kay *et al.*, 2005). Stereotypes of higher status groups tend to include positive characteristic that makes them *deserving* of high status, such as intelligence or self-discipline: It makes sense that men are more respected and earn more money than women, because they are smarter and more focused on work. In contrast, stereotypes of lower status groups tend to include positive characteristics that *compensate* for their low status: It is ok that women are less respected and earn less money than men, because, on the flip side, they are so nice and beautiful that everyone likes them.

Initial studies by Kay and Jost (2003) tested these ideas comparing stereotypes of the rich and the poor. When participants read about individuals who embodied these complementary stereotypes, such as somebody who was 'poor but happy' or 'rich but miserable', they experienced fewer implicit justice concerns and were more likely to report their system was legitimate and just relative to participants who read about somebody who embodied noncomplementary stereotypes such as 'poor and miserable'. Subsequent experiments extended these ideas in relation to complementary gender stereotypes (Jost & Kay, 2005) and identified moderating variables such as political orientation (Kay, Czapliński, & Jost, 2009). More recent research in this area has focused on the consequences of holding positive stereotypes (see Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015). For example, Kay, Day, Zanna, and Nussbaum (2013) found that positive stereotypes about African Americans are especially pernicious. These positive stereotypes elicit little concern among those wishing to appear unprejudiced – on the surface, a positive stereotype seems harmless. On a deeper level, though, even positive stereotypes reaffirm the general utility of stereotypes as a basis for interpersonal judgements. In this way, positive stereotypes can ultimately serve to bolster the value of negative stereotypes, and they do so more effectively than negative stereotypes themselves, because they trigger less resistance.

The indirect nature of earlier evidence

This earlier experimental research on system justification, which included our work on complementary stereotypes (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008), and others' findings on outgroup favouritism (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Ni Sullivan, 2003) and depressed entitlement (Jost, 1997), was suggestive of a motive to justify the status quo. Nevertheless, this evidence was indirect. That is, while it clearly showed that stereotypes play a role in perceptions of legitimacy of the system, it did not directly demonstrate the core principle of system justification. That core principle is that people should experience a motivation to view the current status quo, no matter what it is, as the most desirable state of affairs.

At the same time, original theorizing on system justification had described the value of isolating conditions where responses indicated system justification but not ego- or group-justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994). This targeted approach was important because endorsement of a stereotype, or of any other aspect of the status quo such as a policy or institution, is necessarily multidetermined. For example, a belief that justifies an

individual's self-interests, group interests, and system justification goals is likely to be strongly supported by that person. For this reason, there are drawbacks to operationalizing system justification as support for a particular state of affairs: That support might be driven by any number of sources, including system justification, but also group- and ego justification and other motives (e.g., needs for control; Rutjens & Loseman, 2010). Therefore, a more stringent test of system justification would compare support for the status quo under conditions that should, theoretically, vary the strength of the system justification motive (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000).

Direct evidence of a motive to defend the status quo

We undertook a series of experiments (Kay *et al.*, 2009) to address these particular limitations of previous work. First, we tested whether people whose system justification motive was heightened would directly construe 'what currently is' as 'what ought to be'. Put another way, we hypothesized that motivated individuals would view descriptive norms as injunctive norms (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991) and therefore termed this process *injunctification*. Moreover, we took advantage of the manipulations described in the last section to investigate the causal nature of the system justification motive on status quo defence independent from the contributions of other psychological motives such as ego- or group-justification (see also Kay *et al.*, 2005; Laurin *et al.*, 2010).

In this series of experiments (Kay *et al.*, 2009), we heightened participants' motivation to justify the system using manipulations of system threat, dependence, and inescapability, manipulated a descriptive norm (what currently 'is'), and then assessed whether participants construed that descriptive norm as injunctive (what 'ought to be'). Consistently, participants whose system justification motive had been heightened were more likely to deem the status quo as desirable. The 'is-to-ought' process of injunctification was distinct from the more cognitively based status quo bias (Eidelman & Crandall, 2009) because it was motivationally based – individuals only construed the status quo as what ought to be when they were in experimental conditions that elicited the system justification motive.

In these studies (Kay *et al.*, 2009), participants motivated to justify the system injunctified the status quo even though we varied how we depicted that status quo. In one experiment conducted in the context of gender diversity within the Canadian parliament, participants who were led to believe that there are relatively few women in politics were less supportive of women as members of parliament than participants who were led to believe that there are relatively many women in politics. Similarly, participants who were motivated to justify their sociopolitical systems, and who were led to believe that there were relatively few female CEOs in Canada, were less likely to report that women should be CEOs. These studies clearly illustrate how the system justification motive drives people to endorse and legitimize the status quo, *whatever that status quo happens to be*.

Injunctification also lead to discrimination: Participants in the CEO study who injunctified a norm of relatively few women CEOs also rated less favourably a female confederate who presented herself as a business student. It was particularly notable that all participants in this study were women, and so their tendency to bolster an unequal status quo and criticize someone whose choices conflicted with that status quo occurred at the expense of group-based interest – a finding consistent with theorizing about the consensual nature of system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994), depressed entitlement

(Jost, 1997), self-objectification and self-stereotyping (Calogero, 2013; Calogero & Jost, 2011; Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011), and outgroup favouritism (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost *et al.*, 2002).

Other examples of injunctification

In subsequent research (Laurin, Kille, & Eibach, 2013), we found that injunctification also operates within the domain of relationships. When participants believed their relationship status to be stable, and thus were motivated to defend it, they were more likely to injunctify and view their own relationship status as the ideal status for others. Moreover, a subsequent study showed that this process led to discrimination – for example, participants who viewed their current coupled status as ideal were more likely to disparage a job candidate who was single. Recent theoretical work has also noted the implications of injunctification for organizations and businesses (Proudfoot & Kay, 2014).

System justification and social change

We reviewed evidence above that, when motivated, people are more likely to directly bolster and support the status quo by deeming whatever currently 'is' as 'the way it should be'. In those studies (Kay *et al.*, 2009), the status quo was typically presented as unchanging. But in spite of its name, the status quo is hardly static. In the United States, for example, new laws are passed by Congress on a weekly basis when in session (GovTrack.us, 2011). In most countries, at more or less regular intervals, governments change hands from one political party to another. Furthermore, individual citizens can find themselves ruled by a different government as borders and geopolitical alliances shift (TASS, 2014; Wilkinson, 2017). Given that the status quo is not a unitary, stable entity, what does system justification theory have to say about how people's justifications respond to dynamic shifts? Moreover, might some changes be supported if those actions sustain the status quo more broadly? In the research we reviewed above, we followed the intuitive logic that system justification theory predicts people dislike changes to the status quo and seek to oppose them. Indeed, if people see the status quo through a motivated lens which filters it down to its most positive version, then most changes, through that same motivated lens, would seem negative. Our next line of work, however, more closely examines the time course over which changes to the status quo unfold and offers a different answer.

Time course of social change

Only rarely does social change occur overnight. Instead, the majority of social changes occur over time, and most are predictable with varying degrees of certainty before they take full effect. New laws are usually debated before they are adopted, and often even after they are enacted, they roll out gradually. New governments often follow elections the results of which can be anticlimactically foreseeable, and there is often a delay between the election itself, and the day the new leader takes power.

At least in the case of mandated social changes such as new laws and governing bodies, we can chart their time course in three distinct stages. First, there is a pre-decisional stage, which includes for instance the time during which special interests are lobbying for a new law, or the lead up to an election where the incumbent might potentially lose. During this stage, social change is a possibility, but it is by no means certain. Second, there is a

pre-implementation stage which includes for instance the time between when a law is passed and when it is enacted, or the lame duck period between the election of a new leader and her inauguration. During this stage, social change seems like an inevitable future reality. And third, there is a post-implementation stage, which occurs once the law takes effect, or the new leader is sworn in. During this stage, the social change has become the new status quo. Below, we apply system justification theory to this three-stage model of social change, and describe empirical findings on how people do or do not justify or rationalize social changes during the different stages.

Pre-decision stage. This is the stage during which the most obvious system justification prediction, the one we described above, best applies. During this stage, the current status quo might well persist into the future: If the opposition is strong enough, the social change will never happen. Thus, a new law threatens to reorganize existing social arrangements *which could still be preserved*. According to system justification theory, then, proposing this new law should engender a negative reaction. Likewise, if people are motivated to justify their country's current leader, they should by that same token view in a relatively negative light anyone who dares challenge him, *so long as he might still retain power*. Thus, in the same way that system justification theory predicts people should exaggerate the positive qualities of the status quo, it also predicts people should exaggerate the *negative* qualities of a social change that threatens to disrupt that status quo, so long as that threat remains uncertain. This proposition overlaps with the concept of psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974) – the idea that people exaggerate the value of goods or freedoms that they stand to lose.

Empirical work supports this hypothesis (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). For example, in one study, participants learned that pedestrians faced risks from fast-driving cars. Some participants learned no further information; these were control participants. Other participants learned further that their government was considering lowering the speed limits in urban areas, and that in fact, elected officials liked this idea, but that administrative hurdles might prevent them from enacting it. Then, all participants reported their attitudes towards lowering the speed limits in urban areas in their municipality. Consistent with predictions, participants in the pre-decisional condition – who read about a possible new law – reported more negative attitudes towards lowered speed limits, compared to control participants. That is, they reported that they would support such a new law less, and that they would find it more annoying, simply by virtue of it being a real but uncertain threat to the existing status quo.

Pre-implementation stage. During this stage, society is heading towards change at a seemingly unstoppable pace. In other words, it no longer seems merely *possible* that there will be a new status quo; rather, it seems inevitable. This is an important difference: Defending the status quo only meets the epistemic and existential needs of system justifiers if they can count on that status quo to persist indefinitely – it a justified status quo ensures that people will feel certain and safe for an extended period of time. If a new status quo is imminent and certain, these needs are better served by defending this new, anticipated status quo. Thus, system justification theory predicts that people should tend to justify, or view in an exaggeratedly positive light, social changes that seem guaranteed to form the new status quo in the future.

Empirical work also supports this hypothesis. In the same study described above (Laurin *et al.*, 2012), participants in a third condition learned further that their government would *definitely* vote to lower the speed limits in urban areas – although the official vote had not yet taken place, the decision was virtually made. These participants reported more positive attitudes towards lowered speed limits, both compared to participants in the pre-decision condition, *and* compared to participants in the control condition. That is, they reported that they would support such a new law *more*, and that they would find it *less* annoying, simply by virtue of it being certain to replace the current status quo. Consistent with this finding, earlier work had found that participants surveyed before the 2000 US Presidential Election rated Bush more favourably, and Gore less favourably, if they learned that Bush would win the election; their attitudes changed in the opposite way if they learned instead that Gore would win (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002).

Post-implementation stage. During the pre-implementation stage, the change was essentially certain to take place. But, strong objectors could always take comfort in the idea that there would be some intervention: Congress would change its mind at the last minute and repeal the law before it took effect, the President-Elect would not be selected by the electoral college. And for anyone not thinking directly about the future, the system justification motive might still prompt them to justify the current status quo.

During the post-implementation stage, all that has changed: The status quo that was once anticipated has become current. There is no longer any hope that the change will not take place, and even people who tend not to worry about the future are forced to confront this new reality. In other words, the system justification motivation should become stronger: People should rationalize current realities more strongly than they did when those same realities were merely anticipated.

Empirical evidence supports this last hypothesis as well (Laurin, 2018). For example, in one preregistered longitudinal study, participants completed three surveys: One in early December, following the 2016 US Presidential election, one again during the week before the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, and a final survey during the 2 days following the inauguration. In other words, the first two surveys occurred during the pre-implementation stage, while the last survey – even thought it was mere days after the second – occurred during the post-implementation stage. As expected, participants' attitudes towards Donald Trump were more positive during the final survey, than during the previous two. Remarkably, these improved attitudes emerged *even among participants who reported that Trump performed poorly during the inauguration*. That is, even though they disliked his performance, participants preferred to have a more positive impression of President Trump than they had of President-Elect Trump.

The possibility of system-sanctioned change

Although the system justification motive is often a barrier to the acceptance of social change, at least until a tipping point where that change appears inevitable or irrevocable (Kay *et al.*, 2002; Laurin, 2018), a burgeoning line of research finds that under some circumstances, the system justification motive can also be harnessed to promote change or, at least, lessen resistance to it. Some proposed social changes inevitably represent a threat to the status quo – for example, the argument that humanity requires a significant reduction in the number of children, or even a global

one-child policy, to prevent climate change catastrophe (Biello, 2007; Rieder, 2017). But occasionally, less drastic social change might aim to *sustain* prevailing institutions and systems and thus preserve the status quo more broadly. For example, the climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* advocated the use of energy-efficient lightbulbs, a relatively smaller behavioural change, because it would help the broader goal of *not* changing human society.

Could the system justification motive make some social change more palatable if that change is thought necessary to sustain broader institutions and systems? Research by Feygina, Jost, and Goldsmith (2010) supports this idea, which they termed *system-sanctioned change*. They found that people were more likely to take pro-environmental actions when those actions were framed as consistent with protecting the status quo (i.e., the American way of life). Our recent work provides additional evidence for the prospect of system-sanctioned acceptance of immigration – a phenomenon potentially associated with substantial social change (Zárate, Shaw, Marquez, & Biagas, 2012). Using nationally representative samples conducted in Canada (Gaucher, Friesen, Neufeld, & Esses, 2018), we found that when system authorities (e.g., Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) stated that migration supports the status quo (e.g., that being welcoming is the 'Canadian way'), citizens were correspondingly more positive towards migrants, relative to a representative sample conducted when the government was not pro-migrant. This effect was particularly strong for individuals higher in the chronic tendency to justify their sociopolitical systems and did not occur for individuals lower in chronic system justification tendencies. Recent work by Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, and Sibley (2018) dovetails with these results, finding that chronic system-justifying tendencies were negatively associated with collective action that challenged the system (i.e., protest marches and demonstrations) but positively associated with system-supporting collective action (i.e., willingness to enlist in the military if needed). Together, these findings suggest that system-sanctioning – when a change is linked to system-level values or receives support from system authorities – can produce a context where the system justification motive promotes, rather than inhibits, acceptance of change (also see Gaucher & Jost, 2011; Jost *et al.*, 2017).

Bolstering the system and changing it when necessary

Above, we outlined programs of research that: (1) described the contextual nature of system justification; (2) provided direct evidence of a motivated process whereby people construe the status quo as what ought to be; (3) described how the system justification motive operates in relation to proposed, imminent, and established changes to the status quo. To conclude, we review two lines of research that illustrate the power of system justification theory in developing our understanding of institutions, and the conditions surrounding their maintenance as well as change.

How systems recover from threats to their legitimacy

Despite their system-justifying tendencies, events occur that undermine people's confidence in their systems. For example, although some people responded to Hurricane Katrina with the system-justifying response of victim blaming (Napier *et al.*, 2006), others viewed the outcome of the storm as a substantial failure on the part of the US federal government (United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2006). When confidence in some aspects of the system is low, it may be beneficial or necessary for systems such as governments to recruit or leverage other aspects of the

system whose legitimacy is not currently threatened, to shore up the perceived legitimacy of their own institution. In our research, we find that religion is a particularly powerful source of legitimacy. Confidence in government and agents of the sociopolitical system varies over time, but belief in an omniscient, omnipresent, and moral god(s) has been an enduring feature of societies, and belief in this kind of God remains high in the United States (Barna Group, 2009).

Might the government be able to essentially 'piggyback' off of people's less wavering belief in God, who, for many, is the ultimate source of legitimacy and trust? Certainly historical and contemporary examples are suggestive of this kind of process, from divinely ordained monarchies to theocratic governments. Even in the contemporary United States, presidents routinely invoke God in their addresses to the public. As evidence of this idea, we analysed 367 Presidential addresses to the public covering 75 years of American history (Shepherd, Eibach, & Kay, 2017). Using a variety of coding sources, we found that presidents increasingly referenced a controlling God, prayer, and symbolically associated the nation with God (e.g., suggesting that God has a plan for the United States) during times of threat and uncertainty, that is, times when the public's confidence in the government to manage issues might be challenged. These results suggest that, whether intentionally or not, agents of the sociopolitical system may leverage religion as a means of maintaining public confidence in the system.

What effect do such alignments between nation and God have on the public? In a series of experiments (Shepherd *et al.*, 2017), we primed participants with a patriotic quote from a former president that symbolically aligned the nation with God, or with the same quote with the reference to God removed. Participants then rated the trustworthiness of several unknown ostensibly American politicians, based solely on a photograph. When primed with a quote that symbolically aligned the nation with God, religious Christians (but not non-religious participants) rated the politicians on average as more trustworthy, even in the absence of information that would normally signal trustworthiness (e.g., a smiling expression). These effects did not occur in a condition where people were simply primed with God, and only occurred for system-relevant American politicians: Our manipulation had no effect on participants' ratings of politicians ostensibly from other countries. Finally, an archival analysis of a representative American sample found that unsurprisingly, as perceptions of national decline increased, overall confidence in the system decreased. However, among people who thought that God had a plan for the United States, this pattern was attenuated, and system confidence was maintained at high levels.

Institutional contributions to status quo maintenance

It seems that embattled institutions within a system, or authorities of that system, can use symbolic links to other beliefs to regain their legitimacy (Shepherd *et al.*, 2017). This may be important, for example, in times of national crisis when a loss of system confidence presents a greater risk than allowing institutions to falter. However, given that institutions can be a source of injustice (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), it is important to also investigate institutional contributors to status quo maintenance from a system justification perspective, to understand which institutions might benefit from being bolstered, and which should be challenged and changed.

System justification research has primarily focused on the *individual* level, in the form of beliefs (e.g., stereotypes) or actions (e.g., victim blaming) that rationalize and

legitimize the status quo. In contrast, *institutional*-level contributions to status quo maintenance (cf. Bonam, Taylor, & Yantis, 2017; Kaiser *et al.*, 2013; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) have received relatively less empirical attention within a system justification framework (but see Feygina & Tyler, 2009). By institutional level, we mean contributors to inequality that exist outside the heads of individuals and become manifested within the policies, procedures, practices, traditions, documents, and physical spaces of institutions. Institutional factors can originate via both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processes (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). For example, the physical spaces in an organization might be determined by managers' policies, or by employees arranging their workplaces in a hierarchical way that continues to be used by future employees.

We investigated institutional contributors to status quo maintenance within the domain of occupational inequality and the ways in which job advertisements are systematically written (Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011). Job advertisements might be created by individuals, but are an institutional contributor because they often reflect policies and standardized practices within organizations and occupations. In a textual analysis, we found that job advertisements for male-dominated occupations, relative to female-dominated occupations, were imbued with wording that reflects masculine stereotypes, which we referred to as *gendered wording* (Gaucher *et al.*, 2011). In a series of subsequent experiments described in the same paper, we found that gendered wording perpetuated occupational inequality. In particular, when jobs were described using masculine instead of feminine wording, but otherwise matched in terms of qualifications and experience, female participants estimated more gender inequality in those jobs (i.e., more men, fewer women) and judged them as less appealing.

Social psychologists are increasingly investigating the implications of institution-level contributors, such as physical spaces, for racial and gender inequality (Bonam, Bergsieker, & Eberhardt, 2016; Bonam *et al.*, 2017; Murphy & Walton, 2013). Moreover, our recent work has found that too much focus on the individual, rather than systemic, contributors to inequality may have pernicious consequences. Specifically, we found that exposure to individually focused messages which promoted women's empowerment to overcome 'internal barriers' (e.g., a lack of confidence and ambition) that prevent workplace success (e.g., to 'lean in'; Sandberg & Scovell, 2013) led to increased attributions that women were responsible for both creating and solving the problem of gender inequality (Kim, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2018). Collectively, these findings suggest that when the institutional-level contributors to inequality are overlooked, potentially harmful individual-level blame might occur.

Future directions

Finally, we offer suggestions for future research directions within a system justification framework. First, consider the fact that system justification and related theories often make similar predictions. For example, both system justification theory and social identity theory predict that external threats create support for authorities, either because they represent a group prototype or because they represent the status quo (Hogg, 2001; van der Toorn *et al.*, 2011). Future research would do well, when possible, to focus on the unique contributions of system justification above and beyond other related motives, especially using experimental designs (e.g., Cutright *et al.*, 2011; cf. Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). For example, a leader who

emphasizes the legitimacy of one's system even in the absence of group-based interests should be supported more strongly under conditions that elicit the system justification motive. In contrast, a leader that advocates substantive social change to achieve group-based interests should experience increased support when group-based concerns are salient, but decreased support when system justification concerns are salient. Consideration of when the system justification motive will elicit general or domain-specific status quo defence (Jost & Kay, 2005) is also important; recent research has suggested that this distinction moderates the relationship between social status and system justification (Sengupta *et al.*, 2015; see also Brandt, 2013; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Liu, Pratto, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018).

Second, much previous research has investigated contexts that elicit system justification using single manipulations in isolation (e.g., system threat or stability). It is interesting to consider circumstances where these contexts occur in combination with each other – in a sense, to investigate the intersectionality of justification-eliciting contexts. For example, reading criticism of one's nation would typically be perceived as a threat that elicits status quo defence, and the actions of system authorities (e.g., leaders) are often justified and rationalized (e.g., Laurin, 2018). But what happens system criticism originates with system authorities? The press has traditionally been considered the fourth estate, an important aspect of the American sociopolitical system, but it has recently been the target of heavy criticism from United States President Donald Trump (Baker & Ember, 2017). Would status quo defence, in this case, mean defence of the press or defence of the president? More nuanced elaboration of the theory may be required before system justification theory can make clear predictions about different individuals' responses to this kind of inter-system conflict.

As another example, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, a system authority, has been critical of and apologized for injustices committed by past governments (Canadian Press, 2017). Would system justification produce acceptance of the system authorities' positions (see Gaucher *et al.*, 2018), or defence of the historical status quo and the nation's past actions? Ultimately, these are empirical questions, but we expect that answers will require the following: (1) consideration of individual differences in existential or epistemic motives (e.g., need for cognitive closure or psychological reactance; Federico *et al.*, 2014; Knight, Tobin, & Hornsey, 2014) and (2) a more nuanced understanding of non-linear relationships between constructs of interest such as system confidence (Cichocka *et al.*, 2017) or social stability (Day & Fiske, 2017).

Conclusion

There are times when the system needs stabilizing – belief in the system's legitimacy fulfils such a wide swath of existential and epistemic needs (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008; Kay *et al.*, 2008), and functional societies and institutions need predictability, stability, and structure if they are to accomplish long-term goals (Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014; Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014; Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011). And yet, motivated defence of the system can have serious costs for individuals and the cause of social equality. A compelling feature of system justification theory and the research inspired by it is the deep understanding it has provided for the conditions and context surrounding both status quo maintenance and social change.

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