

Addressing Evidential and Theoretical Inconsistencies in System Justification Theory with a  
Social Identity Model of System Attitudes

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## Abstract

System justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994) proposes that people have an inherent motive to support societal systems, even at the expense of their personal and group interests. However, the evidence for this *system justification motive* is mixed, and a close examination of the relevant propositions yields some important theoretical inconsistencies. To address this mixed evidence and theoretical inconsistency, we introduce a social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA). SIMSA integrates a cluster of different social identity processes and proposes that system justification can occur among members of low-status groups (a) due to a passive reflection of social reality, (b) as a form of ingroup bias (at the superordinate level), and (c) in the hope that ingroup advancement is possible in the future within the prevailing system. It is concluded that SIMSA provides a more comprehensive and theoretically-consistent explanation of system justification than SJT.

*Keywords.* social identity theory; system justification; SIMSA; legitimacy and stability.

## Addressing Evidential and Theoretical Inconsistencies in System Justification Theory with a Social Identity Model of System Attitudes

System justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994) revolutionized the entrenched theorizing around social and political behavior by proposing a novel motive that drives human behavior beyond personal and group interests – the *system justification motive*. According to SJT, people have an inherent need to support societal systems and to maintain the status quo, even when doing so comes at some cost to their own personal and/or group interests. SJT assumes that justification of the status quo stems from a need to reduce uncertainties that would otherwise arise from disruptions to what is known and familiar. Uncertainty weakens the extent to which people feel that they can control their lives. Hence, people try to avoid uncertainty by rationalising and supporting the status quo.

SJT makes the distinctive prediction that system justification should be more apparent among members of groups that are *disadvantaged* by the system than among those that are *advantaged* by it, provided that (a) the social status hierarchy is legitimate and stable (Jost et al., 2012), and (b) people's personal and group interests are not in direct opposition to the system (i.e., personal and group interests should be weak; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

SJT's propositions have evoked a healthy discussion with proponents of other theoretical perspectives on intergroup relations, including social identity theorists (SIT; e.g., Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001; Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). In the present article, we consider some existing and new theoretical objections to SJT. But first we consider the current state of the evidence for SJT.

### **Evidence for System Justification**

Some evidence supports the view that members of disadvantaged groups sometimes act against their self- and group-interests (for reviews, see Jost et al., 2004; Jost, Gaucher, & Stern, 2015). For example, system justification research has focused on the tendency for members of low-status groups to show a preferential bias in favour of higher status outgroups (Jost et al., 2004). This *outgroup favouritism* is thought to be so ingrained in the psyche of members of low-status groups that it even occurs at the implicit unconscious level (Jost et al., 2004; Jost, Pietrzak, Liviatan, Mandisodza, & Napier, 2007). Other research has focused on more volitional outcomes such as political inertia amongst the relatively deprived (Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013) or greater ideological support for the status quo amongst members of disadvantaged communities relative to more privileged groups (Henry & Saul, 2006). Indeed, evidence suggests that these processes are ostensibly driven by a need to retain the prevailing order (Jost et al. 2010).

More recently, research has investigated SJT's distinctive prediction that system justification should be most apparent among members of disadvantaged groups – the so-called *status legitimation hypothesis* (Brandt, 2013). The evidence for this hypothesis has been mixed, with some studies yielding a positive result (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost et al. 2003) and others yielding no support (Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2016; Kelemens et al., 2014; Trump & White, 2015). A potential explanation for these mixed results is that measurements of system justification have been too broad and not tied closely enough to the specific hierarchical systems in which high- and low-status groups are embedded (Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). However, this account fails to explain why the status legitimation hypothesis is unsupported when measurement specificity has been taken into account (e.g., Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer,

2016a). The mixed evidence may be less likely due to measurement issues than it is to theoretical issues (Klein, 2014), and it is to these theoretical issues that we now turn.

### **Theoretical Dissonance with Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

**Personal and group motives need to be weak *and* strong?** SJT distinguishes between three motives that have the potential to influence system attitudes and behavior: personal motives (“ego justification”), group motives (“group justification”), and the system justification motive (“system justification;” Jost et al., 2004, p. 887). In the case of people who are privileged by the system, the system justification motive aligns with personal and group motives because supporting the system benefits their personal and group interests. However, in the case of people who are disadvantaged by the system, the system justification motive conflicts with personal and group motives because supporting the system is detrimental to their vested personal and group interests. Consequently, SJT assumes that the system justification motive exerts a unique influence on attitudes and behavior among members of disadvantaged groups, and this influence should only be apparent when their personal and group interests are *relatively weak* (e.g., Jost et al., 2004, Hypothesis 17). It is only under these circumstances that the system justification motive can prevail over the otherwise overwhelming personal/group interest motives.

However, SJT’s proposal that members of disadvantaged groups will show system justification when personal and group interests are weak is theoretically inconsistent with its proposal that system justification is motivated by cognitive dissonance (Jost et al., 2004; see also Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016b). According to SJT, members of disadvantaged groups experience a relatively high degree of cognitive dissonance because “those who suffer the most from the system are also those who have the most to explain, justify, and rationalize” (Jost et al., 2004, p. 909). This cognitive dissonance is thought to promote system justification. However,

according to cognitive dissonance theory, dissonance should be greatest when dissonance-arousing cognitions are *self-relevant* and *important* (Festinger, 1962). Hence, from a cognitive dissonance perspective, members of disadvantaged groups should experience the greatest dissonance when their personal and group interests are particularly *strong* and *important*. Consequently, SJT's prediction that members of disadvantaged groups are most likely to show system justification when their personal/group motives are *weak* and *unimportant* contradicts the underlying principles of cognitive dissonance theory (see also Jost et al., 2003, p. 32). If members of disadvantaged groups do not care about their personal or group interests, then there should be not only no countervailing personal and/or group motives working against the system justification motive, but also no reason for the system justification motive to operate. Consistent with cognitive dissonance theory but not SJT, emerging evidence demonstrates that system justification is strongest when group interests are *strong* rather than *weak* (Owuamalam, Rubin, Spears, & Weerabangsa, 2017) and when people and/or their group are dependent on the system for some benefit (Kay et al., 2009; van der Toorn et al., 2015).

**Social systems need to be stable *and* unstable?** SJT's explanation is also inconsistent with cognitive dissonance theory when considering predictions about the *stability* of social systems. SJT proposes that system justification is more likely to occur when social hierarchies are perceived to be *legitimate* (Jost et al., 2012) and *stable* in both the short- and long-term (Kay & Zanna, 2009). The requirement for system stability makes sense because people are unlikely to challenge social systems that cannot be changed (see also SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Hence, a motivation to rationalize and live with the status quo seems most likely to prevail over the group motive for advancement when the social order is stable.

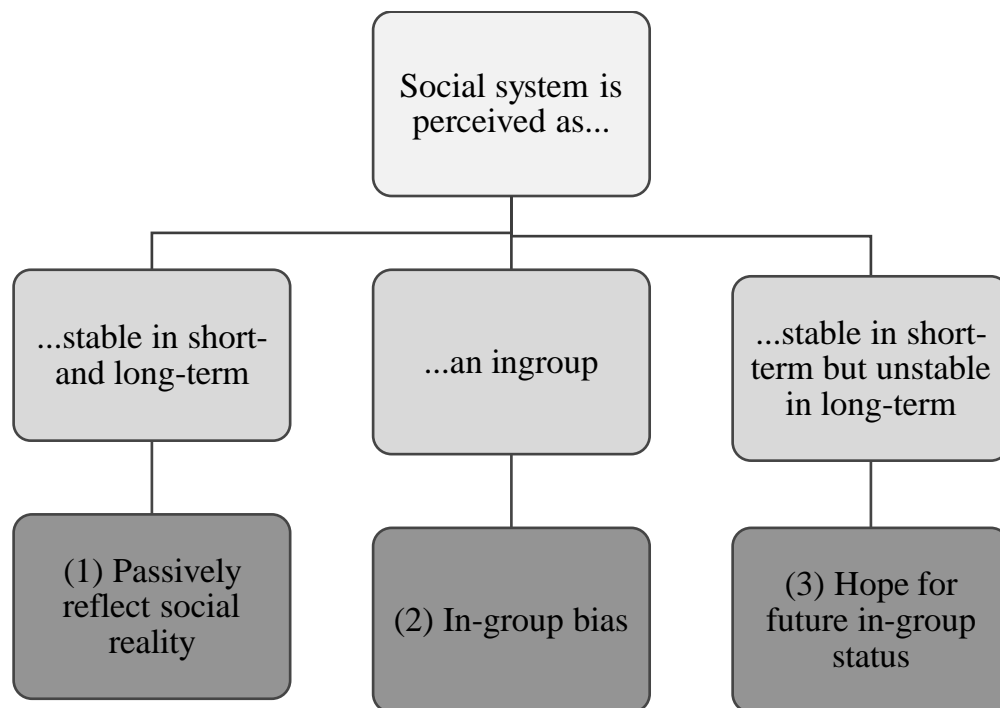
Again, however, SJT's stability caveat is inconsistent with the principles of cognitive dissonance theory because if the system is perceived to be stable, then the potential for uncertainty and associated dissonance will be low, and so the motive for system justification should be weak and relatively ineffective. In contrast, if the system is perceived to be unstable, then the potential for uncertainty and thus cognitive dissonance is high, and the system justification motive should be strong and more effective (see also Brehm, 2007). In summary, SJT's prediction that the system justification motive should be more effective under stable conditions is contradicted by the assumptions of cognitive dissonance theory.

### **A Social Identity Model of System Attitudes (SIMSA)**

Recent research has found that system justification can sometimes be explained in terms of protecting group interests (Caricati & Sollami, 2016; Owuamalam et al., 2016a, Study 1; Owuamalam, Rubin, Spears, & Weerabangsa, 2017) -- findings that are directly opposed to SJT. These issues have inspired an unfolding series of alternative explanations of system justification effects that we have collected together in a *social identity model of system attitudes*, or SIMSA. SIMSA is an umbrella model that integrates a series of social identity-based explanations for why members of disadvantaged groups may, at times, *passively* and *actively* support social hierarchies and societal systems that, *prima facie*, disadvantage their social identities.

As shown in Figure 1, SIMSA provides explanations of system justification that are more parsimonious because they do not invoke a separate system justification motive but instead develop previous insights from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). First, people may reflect the reality of social hierarchies by acknowledging that high-status outgroups are better than low-status ingroups on specific status-related dimensions (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spears et al., 2001). For example, people with a low socioeconomic status (SES) may acknowledge that

people with a higher SES have better education and income. This acknowledgement represents a tacit or *passive* acceptance of social reality rather than an *active* endorsement or “justification” of the intergroup hierarchy. It is in this situation that the adoption of socially creative strategies to manage one’s reputation and devalued social identity are also likely to be apparent (Owualamam et al., 2016a; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).



*Figure 1.* The Social Identity Model of System Attitudes (SIMSA). These explanations largely concern system support amongst strongly identifying members of low-status groups in situations where social stratification is perceived to be legitimate.

Second, people may interpret the overarching system (e.g., country) to be an extension of the ingroup that includes the higher status outgroup and, consequently, engage in ingroup bias (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). For example, low-SES people may perceive sub-systems (e.g.,



healthcare, democratic values and institutions) in their country to be better than similar systems in other countries (e.g., Rubin, 2016).

Finally, people may justify systems as fair and equitable in order to support their hope that, in the longer term, the system may allow their group to improve its social status (Owuamalam et al., 2016a). For example, low-SES people may perceive the SES system to be fair in order to support their perception that the system will allow them, or their children, to improve their education and income in the future. Importantly, in order to operationalize this “hope for future ingroup status” route to system justification, SIMSA distinguishes between *short-term stability* and *long-term stability* (Owuamalam et al., 2016a, 2017). Social systems that are stable in the short-term cannot be altered through group members’ *current* actions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) but may, nonetheless, be amenable to change in the longer term. In contrast, social systems that are stable in the long-term (e.g., the caste system) cannot be altered through group members’ current or future actions. If a social system is perceived to be *stable* in the *short-term* but *unstable* in the *long-term*, then people who are currently disadvantaged by that system may be motivated to view it as fair and just, or at least usable, in order to validate their belief that the system will benefit them in the future. This is precisely what Owuamalam et al. (2016a, Study 2) found in the context of a legitimate university ranking system in Australia: Contrary to SJT but consistent with SIMSA, strongly identifying students at the University of Newcastle exposed to a manipulation that ranked their university relatively lower than the Australian National University supported the ranking system more strongly when also led to believe that this system was unstable in the long term, compared to when told that positions within the system were relatively fixed in the long term. Consistent with SIMSA, students who were led to believe that the ranking

system was unstable in the long-term were also most hopeful that their university's ranking would increase in the future.

We also think that it is worth noting that the alternative to accepting a social system is to reject it, and that, in most cases, such a rejection is likely to be regarded as being unrealistic because it implies a revolution and anarchy that could invoke much greater uncertainty and threat than the alternative of dealing with dissonance. Hence, those invested in their group identities and interests may choose to explore all options for group advancement in the prevailing system *before* considering the revolutionary road of system rejection. Thus although a key principle for SJT is that uncertainty and dissonance drives support for the system, we think that rejecting the system is potentially *more* threatening which is precisely why strong group identifiers may be most likely to avoid it and pursue the hope of change within the system.

### **Moving Forward: System Justification *Without* the System Justification Motive?**

System justification theory sets the stage for the study of system attitudes by documenting a series of seemingly theoretically-anomalous findings that competing frameworks, such as social identity theory, are presumed to be ill-equipped to handle (e.g., the tendency for low-status groups to hold evaluative biases in favour of higher status outgroups, or *outgroup favouritism*). However, a number of the conditions under which system justification is predicted to occur for low-status groups (i.e., weak personal and group motives; stable social hierarchies) are exactly those conditions under which the system justification motive should be at its weakest from a cognitive dissonance perspective. These theoretical inconsistencies are compounded by correspondingly weak evidence for SJT's most distinctive predictions (e.g., Brandt, 2013, Caricati, 2016).

One approach to these theoretical and empirical discrepancies is to try to assimilate them into a theoretical paradigm that continues to assume the existence of a separate system justification motive. An alternative approach is to expand that paradigm to include group motives as potential drivers of system justification phenomena. We adopt this second approach. Specifically, we complement SJT with SIT-based insights in order to offer a social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA). SIMSA is able to account for both passive and active support for social hierarchies in a theoretically consistent manner and without recourse to the theoretically problematic notion of an independent system justification motive. In these respects, we believe that SIMSA plugs some of the theoretical and empirical holes in SJT and offers a new SIT-based perspective for developing research in this important area.

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- Starmans, C., Sheskin, M., & Bloom, P. (2017). Why people prefer unequal societies. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1: 0082. doi:10.1038/s41562-017-0082. This paper makes an important, but often ignored argument that acceptance of social inequality may not necessarily equate to the acceptance of unfair systems.