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Debate

Revisiting 25 years of system motivation explanation for system justification from the perspective of social identity model of system attitudes

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Do the disadvantaged have an autonomous system justification motivation that operates against their personal and group interests? System justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994, *Br. J. Soc. Psychol*, 33, 1) proposes that they do and that this motivation helps to (1) reduce cognitive dissonance and associated uncertainties and (2) soothe the pain that is associated with knowing that one's group is subject to social inequality. However, 25 years of research on this system justification motivation has given rise to several theoretical and empirical inconsistencies. The present article argues that these inconsistencies can be resolved by a social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018, *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci*, 27, 91). SIMSA assumes that instances of system justification are often in alignment with (rather than opposed to) the interests of the disadvantaged. According to SIMSA, the disadvantaged may support social systems (1) in order to acknowledge social reality, (2) when they perceive the wider social system to constitute a superordinate ingroup, and (3) because they hope to improve their ingroup's status through existing channels in the long run. These propositions are corroborated by existing and emerging evidence. We conclude that SIMSA offers a more coherent and parsimonious explanation for system justification than does SJT.

About 25 years ago, Jost and Banaji (1994) proposed a new way of thinking about how people cope with inequality and disadvantage. At the heart of their argument is the idea that people possess an inherent motivation to support societal systems and to view them as legitimate, fair, and just, even at the expense of the personal and collective interests of those who are disadvantaged by the system. Jost and Banaji (1994) were particular about the distinction between this system justification motivation and other personal (ego) and group-based motivations, maintaining that,

> unlike ego-justification or group justification views which postulate a psychologically adaptive mechanism (protection of the ego or the extended collective ego), system-

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justification *does not* offer an equivalent function that *operates in the service of protecting the interests of the self or the group* (p. 10; our emphasis).

This point is as evident in early formulations of system justification theory (SJT; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) as it is in more recent writings (e.g., Jost *et al.*, 2017), and it represents a fundamental departure from prior theories of intergroup relations such as social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1982) and realistic conflict theory (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), which locate the motivation for social conduct in collective identity and interests.

Contrary to SJT, we argue that system justification can be interpreted as a psychologically adaptive mechanism that operates in the service of the social self or social identity. To begin with, we revisit the theoretical grounds for assuming that there is a system justification motivation that operates independently from personal and group motives.

The system justification motivation

According to Jost *et al.* (2004), most people have a fundamental need to justify, rationalize, and live with existing social arrangements 'even at considerable cost to themselves and to fellow group members' (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, p. 260). A key reason for this motivation is traced to the tendency for people to avoid uncertainty. People are naturally disposed to oppose social change, even if it has the potential to improve their outcomes, because change could potentially destabilize a reality that is known and familiar. Consistent with this reasoning, earlier versions of SJT emphasized the cognitive and epistemic antecedents for system justification that are mostly rooted in the need to reduce uncertainty (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). These antecedents include cognitive dissonance and consistency, cognitive conservatism; attributional simplicity, intolerance of ambiguity and illusion of control, needs for order, structure, closure, and control, and reactions against threats to the system and consequent instability.

More recent versions of SJT have added existential and relational needs to this list, including the desire to manage threat, perception of a dangerous world, and fear of death, insecurity and affiliation with similar others, the desire to coordinate social relationships, and the need to establish a shared social reality (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Jost *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, these needs continue to have close connections with uncertainty reduction. Even the ideological underpinnings of the system justification motivation (e.g., the meritocratic ideology, the Protestant work ethic, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and political conservatism; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005) are related to the desire for a structured, stable, and certain reality. Hence, people justify their social systems, it seems, because it helps to alleviate uncertainty, cognitively, existentially, socially, or ideologically, irrespective of the potential costs to their personal and collective interests.

SJT proposes that most people possess a system justification motivation that operates separately from personal and group justification motives and that this is true for not only those who are largely advantaged by the prevailing order (e.g., the relatively wealthy) but also those who are disadvantaged by such systems (e.g., the poor). According to SJT, the fact that members of disadvantaged groups trust and support their government (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003) and sometimes even oppose policies that should improve their immediate material interests (e.g., wealth redistribution) is testament to the existence of a system motive that operates independently from personal and collective interests. Otherwise, why would low-income earners, the less educated, and African

Americans support systems that seem complicit in their material disadvantage (cf. Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003)? Indeed, SJT researchers have cited similar seemingly counterintuitive occurrences amongst the disadvantaged to support the existence of an autonomous system justification motive that works against the interests of the disadvantaged, including amongst others:

1. Complementary stereotyping, involving the endorsement of not only positive ingroup stereotypes, but also negative ingroup stereotypes (e.g., Kay & Jost, 2003; see also Jost & Banaji, 1994).
2. Political inertia in the face of inequality, when a group-interested account would ostensibly predict political revolt (see also Jost *et al.*, 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013).
3. Legitimation of unequal social arrangements (Van der Toorn *et al.*, 2015).
4. Holding biases that favour higher-status outgroups over their ingroup (i.e., outgroup favouritism, Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost *et al.*, 2004) or, in some cases, attitudinal ambivalence towards the ingroup (Jost & Burgess, 2000).

The fact that these phenomena are sometimes observed amongst the disadvantaged is highlighted by SJT researchers in both early writings (e.g. Jost *et al.*, 2004) and recent writings (Hoffarth & Jost, 2017) as important evidence that an autonomous system justification motivation exists (but see cf. Pinsof & Haselton, 2017 for a rebuttal).

The 'strong' version of the system justification thesis proposes that the disadvantaged sometimes support the status quo *more strongly* than the advantaged (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003; Van der Toorn *et al.*, 2015). The logic behind the strong version of the system justification thesis is rooted in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962; Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003). The personal and/or group interests of those who are advantaged by existing social arrangements are congruent with the status quo, and so cognitive dissonance is absent. In contrast, personal/group motives are in opposition to the status quo for people who are disadvantaged by the system, and so cognitive dissonance is present. That is, the disadvantaged are proposed to experience a cognitive dissonance between the personal and group motives to improve oneself and one's group and the awareness that 'through our acquiescence, my group and I are contributing to the stability of the system' (Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003; p. 16). The disadvantaged are confronted with at least two choices to resolve their dissonance: (1) they can seek a change to the prevailing order in ways that advance their personal and collective interests, or (2) they can choose to justify and support the existing social arrangements. SJT assumes that the disadvantaged often choose the second option because it is easier for people to adjust their own attitudinal preferences than it is to change the world around them, especially when the existing order is seen as legitimate and stable in both the short and long run (Jost *et al.*, 2012; Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013). Hence, as Jost *et al.* (2003, p. 16) explained, 'a hybrid of dissonance theory and system justification theory would predict that those who suffer the most also have the most to explain, justify, and rationalize'.

There are empirical problems with this 'strong form of the system justification hypothesis' (Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003; p. 18). Contrary to SJT, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that system-justifying attitudes are more strongly held by those who are advantaged by the existing order rather than those who are disadvantaged by it (e.g., the subjectively and objectively higher classes in 36 nations, Caricati, 2017; attractive people, Westfall, Millar, & Lovitt, 2018; see also Bratanova, Loughnan, Klein, & Wood, 2016) or 'most often directly contrary' to the strong version of the system justification thesis

(Brandt, 2013, p. 765), and this null evidence persists even when inequality is experimentally manipulated (Trump & White, 2018). It is possible, then, that the initial observations in support of the strong system justification thesis could have been unrepresentative or even a false-positive result as Brandt (2013) has pointed out.

Nonetheless, Sengupta, Osborne, and Sibley (2015) have suggested the alternative possibility that the unsupportive evidence for the strong system justification thesis may have occurred because researchers used measures of system justification that were too general. Consistent with this explanation, Sengupta *et al.* found that the disadvantaged (Asian and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand) legitimized the status quo to a greater extent than their advantaged European New Zealand counterparts when justification was tied to a specific interstatus system that seemed relevant to their ethnic group rather than to the overall political system. However, Sengupta *et al.*'s measurement specificity explanation failed to receive support from a recent study that included measures of specific system justification but continued to find unsupportive evidence for the strong diagnostic version of the system justification thesis (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016).

Importantly, many of the studies that have tested the strong version of the system justification thesis have failed to consider SJT's requirement that personal and group identities and interests must be weak. As Jost *et al.* (2004) emphasized,

> the strongest, most paradoxical form of the system justification hypothesis, which draws also on the logic of cognitive dissonance theory, is that members of disadvantaged groups would be even more likely than members of advantaged groups to support the status quo, *at least when personal and group interests are low in salience* (p. 909; emphasis added).

The rationale for this caveat relates to the presumed conflict between personal/group interests and the system justification motive amongst the disadvantaged. The system motive is only likely to prevail over the otherwise overwhelming influence of personal and group interests when people are less/weakly invested in their personal/group identities. However, Owuamalam, Rubin, and Spears (2016) identified a theoretical inconsistency between this caveat and cognitive dissonance theory, arguing that dissonance-induced system justification is most likely to occur when the dissonant elements are relatively strong and important to people (Festinger, 1962). In other words, contrary to SJT, dissonance-based system justification should occur when group interests are strong and salient, not weak and inaccessible. Consistent with this view, accumulating evidence now shows that the disadvantaged are most likely to support their social systems when:

1. Group identities and interests are strong rather than weak (Caricati, 2017; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, Spears, & Weerabangsa, 2017).
2. People are concerned about their group's moral reputation (Hässler, Shnabel, Ullrich, Arditti-Vogel, & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2018).
3. People's interests are aligned with and/or dependent on the social system (Kay *et al.*, 2009).
4. People embrace the wider social system (a form of superordinate identification) in order to alleviate threats to their (sub-)group identities (Caricati & Sollami, 2017; Study 3; see also Caricati, 2018).

As we discuss below, the foregoing cases of system justification seem more prominent when social identification is strong rather than weak, a finding that has received support in

a recent 19-nation study by Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Liu, Pratto, and Gil de Zúñiga (2018) and a modest but still positive support in 66 independent laboratories spread across 30 nations (Brandt *et al.*, 2018). Hence, an autonomous system justification motivation that works against the collective interests of the disadvantaged does not seem theoretically viable (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016) or empirically evident when the optimal conditions for cognitive dissonance are considered (Brandt, 2013). It also does not manifest when group interests and identities are relatively weak, even in the odd instances where the disadvantaged justify the system more than the advantaged (Owuamalam, Rubin *et al.*, 2017, Study 1). These inconsistencies are not easily explained by Sengupta *et al.*'s (2015) measurement specificity argument.

Perhaps in response to the foregoing issues, recent revisions of SJT now emphasize that the system justification motivation mostly operates at the nonconscious level. According to Jost (2017a, our emphasis): 'My work focuses on system justification motivation — the tendency to defend, bolster and justify aspects of the societal status quo, *often at a nonconscious level of awareness'*. As we have argued elsewhere (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, in press), the system justification motivation is also unlikely to manifest at the nonconscious level because this will preclude the occurrence of cognitive dissonance: dissonance occurs when people are aware (not unconscious) of the competing preferences open to them (Gawronski & Strack, 2004).

To be clear, we acknowledge that the strong dissonance-based version of system justification is only a part of the broader system justification theory (Jost, 2017b). Nonetheless, there is a reason why this strong version has been a particular research focus in recent years (e.g., Brandt, 2013; Brandt *et al.*, 2018; Caricati, 2017; Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012; Caricati & Sollami, 2017; Henry & Saul, 2006; Kelemen, Szabó, Mészáros, László, & Forgas, 2014; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016; Owuamalam *et al.*, 2017; Trump & White, 2018; Van der Toorn *et al.*, 2015; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Liu *et al.*, 2018; Yang, Guo, Hu, Shu, & Li, 2016). The reason is not only because it provides the most distinctive prediction of system attitudes relative to other theories, such as social identity theory, but also because it is, in our view, the *litmus test* for an autonomous system justification motivation (see also Brandt, 2013 for a similar view). Without 'the strongest, most paradoxical form of the system justification hypothesis' (Jost *et al.*, 2004; p. 909), we are left with a much weaker form of the hypothesis that makes predictions that coincide with many of the interest-based predictions made by social identity theory. For example, and as we discuss further below, both SIT and SJT predict that members of both high- and low-status groups can favour the high-status group (Jost *et al.*, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). However, only the strong version of SJT proposes that when members of low- and high-status groups judge one another, members of low-status groups will show less ingroup favouritism and/or more outgroup favouritism than members of high-status groups (i.e., show greater system justification). Hence, the strong version of SJT is also the version that makes the most diagnostic predictions and, consequently, the version that most researchers are interested in testing.

We also accept that there are some cases in which members of disadvantaged groups expect and desire their social systems to function properly and to serve them well, in much the same way that people desire a just and fair world (see Lerner, 1980). However, the point that we would like to make is that system-supporting attitudes amongst the disadvantaged are not necessarily oppositional to their personal and collective interests and that, consequently, it may not be necessary to explain these attitudes with recourse to

an autonomous system justification motive. To explain further, we now elaborate the social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA; Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018).

Social identity model of system attitudes

SIMSA is an umbrella model that unites an unfolding series of social identity-inspired explanations for system-supporting attitudes, including the occurrence of system justification. Central to SIMSA is the idea that group-based motives and interests (i.e., social and/or psychological interest) are strong motivational forces that can provide a satisfactory explanation of instances of system justification independent of an autonomous system justification motive. Figure 1 illustrates three key pathways identified thus far, by which these motives may account for instances of system justification.

The social reality explanation

According to this explanation (see left hand pathway, Figure 1), the disadvantaged may acknowledge the superiority of a higher-status outgroup on status-related dimensions because it would be inaccurate to deny this social reality, especially when the status hierarchy is perceived to be stable, legitimate, and fair (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004, p. 826; Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001, p. 341; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 37; Turner, 1980, p. 142). For example, it might be difficult (though not impossible) for university students to credibly claim to know more than their professors, at least on the specific subjects that the professor is presumed to hold expertise. Similarly, it could be difficult for a football team at the bottom of the league table to proclaim that they are league champions when the reality clearly presents a different picture (see e.g., Leach & Spears, 2008). Hence, although poorly performing teams may hold the ambition of becoming league champions in the future (which explains their continued participation in the football league), the existing social reality compels them to acknowledge the objective status of the actual league
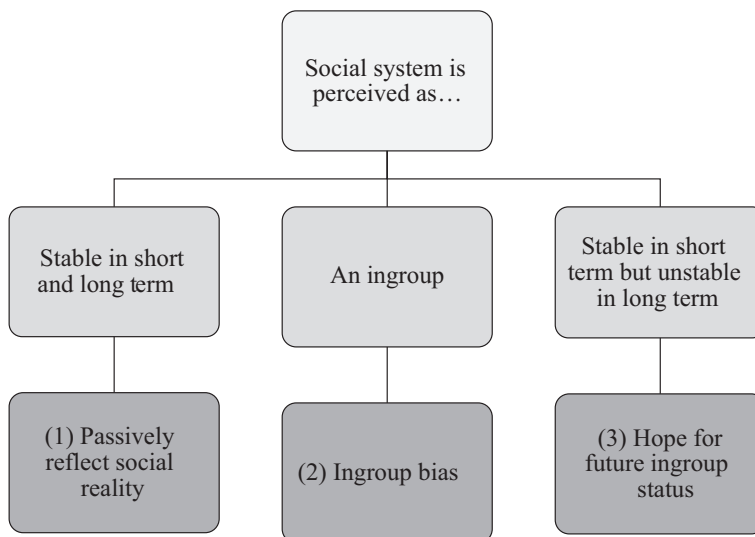
Figure 1. The social identity model of system attitudes. Source: Owuamalam *et al.* (2018).

champions. Importantly, there is no reason to assume that this acknowledgement is motivated by a need to actively *justify* the social system, as SJT argues (Jost, 2011). This reality principle reflects a *passive* acceptance of the intergroup status hierarchy (passive to the extent disadvantaged groups are not motivated to justify the hierarchy or the system and may even try to resist and overcome this disadvantage in line with SIT).

In sum, we argue that group members, including low-status group members, are motivated to represent and report the intergroup status hierarchy as they view it. Of course, this reality principle will be counteracted to some extent by the social identity motive to enhance the ingroup's status (see the 'being vs. becoming' theme in Spears *et al.*, 2001). Hence, members of high-status groups are likely to perceive their group as having a higher status than the rest of society and members of low-status groups are likely to perceive their group as not having quite as low status as the rest of society views it. Nonetheless, social reality constraints entail members of both groups accepting that the high-status group has a higher status than the low-status group, and, in relation to the low-status group, this could be interpreted as a form of system justification in a very loose sense, but is more accurately, *system acceptance*.

As discussed above, the motive for a positive social identity is likely to influence the way in which the disadvantaged accept and interpret social reality (and thus 'the system'). In particular, a concern about the ingroup's reputation may inhibit non-normative collective action against the system. For example, it is pointless for a losing football team to contest the superior position that the champions have legitimately won, and such contest could be seen as *whining* (e.g., poor losers, Kaiser & Miller, 2001) which could further undercut the ingroup's reputation. Consistent with this analysis, Owuamalam *et al.* (2016, Study 1) demonstrated that system justification was especially strong amongst the disadvantaged when their support for the prevailing order was communicated in the presence of an outgroup – a context that ordinarily intensifies social identity concerns (Klein & Azzi, 2001) – and that this system justification was driven by a strong concern for a positive ingroup reputation.

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model: Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Spears & Lea, 1994) makes similar predictions: members of a disadvantaged group are likely to avoid claims that could antagonize powerful outgroups especially when they are identifiable to them and lack social support for the validity of such claims. Strategic ingratiation to higher power is hardly a new phenomenon (Jones, 1964), but does not necessarily mean that such deference implies acceptance or internalized inferiority by the ingroup. Indeed, strategic ingratiation might benefit the interests of relatively privileged subgroups of the disadvantaged (e.g., 'house' vs. plantation slaves). Moreover, there is emerging evidence that members of disadvantaged groups affirm their group's worth at the implicit level (implicit ingroup bias) when this might not be easy or possible at the explicit level (De Lemus, Spears, Bukowski, Moya, & Lupianez, 2013; Spears, Greenwood, De Lemus, & Sweetman, 2010; Van Breen, Spears, Kuppens, & De Lemus, 2018).

It is useful to consider what the alternative might be to passively accepting the system. The framing of SJT might appear, by contrasting itself with SIT, to imply that SIT countenances the opposite of system justification, which is presumably some form of 'system rejection' (cf. Jost *et al.*, 2012). However, SIT, and by extension SIMSA, has never made such a claim. Indeed, rejecting the system might sometimes represent a very radical strategy, because it implies uncertain and unlikely outcomes, which can be equated with revolution and thus ideologies akin to revolutionary socialism or anarchism. Although some groups *might* follow this radical route, the conditions under which the system might

be rejected in this sense are well beyond the scope of SIT and SIMSA at present, and most groups are likely to first consider how they can use the system to their advantage in line with the existing 'rules of the game' before considering such options. The 'social change' focus of SIT refers to direct competition or conflict with *the outgroup*, but not rejection of the system as a whole. This explains why SIMSA proposes that group identity motives are closely aligned with system support, even amongst the disadvantaged, which may seem paradoxical from a SJT perspective (see 3, below). The point is that the system will more likely be seen as a vehicle for addressing group concerns, and only rejected as a last resort, because of the difficulty and costs that such rejection implies. This point is also important when we consider the hope of change argument (see 3).

Of course, SIMSA's social reality explanation is only one answer to the question of why the disadvantaged hold system-supporting attitudes. It does not explain all instances of system justification amongst the disadvantaged. It is possible to argue, for example, that the social reality principle may not sufficiently address cases of system justification in which the disadvantaged seem to go beyond merely acknowledging the reality of the status differences and more actively support the prevailing social order. SIMSA invokes the ingroup bias and hope for future status explanations to address these types of situations.

The ingroup bias explanation

Rubin and Hewstone (2004) suggested that it is possible to reinterpret the system justification effect as a 'common ingroup favouritism effect': that is, a bias in favour of a common ingroup or 'system' that is based on a superordinate categorization that subsumes the original ingroup and outgroup (e.g., Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; see also Rubin, 2016). As Rubin and Hewstone (2004, pp. 834–835) explained,

> what appears to be a case of system justification from the researchers' perspective may actually be a case of ingroup favoritism if participants perceive the system to be their ingroup. So, for example, support for George W. Bush and the U.S. government after the 9/11 terrorist attacks may be reinterpreted as an instance of ingroup favoritism following ingroup threat, rather than system justification following system threat (cf. Jost *et al.*, 2004).

For example, poor Americans may vote for political parties that are against the increased subsidization of national health care, and they may vote for these parties because they identify highly with America, they perceive free market capitalism to be a defining value of this national ingroup, and they are motivated to engage in behaviours (including voting) that support these values. Hence, in some cases, participants may recategorize their ingroup membership at the superordinate level (e.g., Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998) and then engage in ingroup favouritism at this level (for an illustration, see Rubin, 2016).

It is important to note that the social identity approach (including the self-categorization theory, SCT – Turner, 1999) provides a rich and articulated conceptualization of the social group that allows an equally articulated conceptualization of ingroup favouritism. In particular, from an SIT/SCT perspective, social groups do not simply categorize people. They also include social norms, ideologies, and values that prescribe ingroup members' behaviour. For example, members of a conservative social group are motivated to behave in conservative ways, and they are more likely to behave in conservative ways as a positive function of the extent to which they identify with their

group. In addition, social groups may include internal intergroup status hierarchies that organize the subgroups that they contain. For example, historically, America has had a racially based intergroup status hierarchy that prescribes the lower status of the African Americans subgroup. Hence, from an SIT perspective, ingroup favouritism is not limited to favouring ingroup members over outgroup members. It may also manifest as support for the ingroup's norms, ideologies, values, and inter-subgroup status systems. Consequently, ingroup favouritism may account for some cases of system justification.

The common ingroup favouritism account of system justification can also explain why members of low-status groups might show the greatest levels of system justification (see Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003; strong form of the system justification hypothesis above). According to SIT, members of low-status groups can mitigate the impact of their low group status on their social identity by adopting cognitive identity management or 'social creativity' strategies (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43). One such strategy is recategorization at the superordinate level (e.g., in terms of national identity). Hence, SIT predicts that members of low-status groups may be most likely to re-identify with their superordinate ingroup (i.e., the 'system') and, consequently, to favour this group (which includes higher-status outgroups). Indeed, this prediction was confirmed in an independent study by Jaśko and Kossowska (2013, Study 2) who found that system justification was greater amongst disadvantaged religious nonbelievers in Poland when they were strongly (rather than weakly) identified with their superordinate national ingroup, which includes the higher-status (religious believers) outgroup.

Jost (2011, p. 239) responded to this common ingroup bias explanation in two ways. First, he noted research that showed that system justification can occur at an implicit, unconscious level, arguing that:

> the nonconscious effects of belonging to a given social, economic, or political system are not fully captured by a theory [SIT] that emphasizes the salience of levels of self-categorization as the key explanatory variable, because salient self-categorizations are by definition conscious, explicit, and subjectively acknowledged (p. 239).

However, this point is based on a misinterpretation of 'salience' as used in the SIT or SCT literature. According to this literature, salience means that an identity is 'cognitively active' at either a conscious or a unconscious level (see Spears *et al.*, 2001). Jost's (2011) argument neglects evidence that social identities can be primed at the unconscious level (e.g., Liu, Wu, & Hou, 2015; Randolph-Seng, Reich, & DeMarree, 2012; Suleiman, Yahya, Decety, & Shamay-Tsoory, 2018). Indeed, even resistance, affirming group identity amongst the disadvantaged, can occur unconsciously, and threats to group identity can also be detected when subliminal (Van Breen *et al.*, 2018). The implication that SJT has an advantage over SIT/SIMSA in the unconscious realm therefore seems overstated, also given the earlier point that this undermines the link to dissonance reduction mechanisms.

Jost's (2011) second point is to note that threats to systems can sometimes reinforce distinctions between subgroups rather than dissolve them. But this evidence does not necessarily contradict a common ingroup favouritism explanation of system justification. It only points to variability in the effects of superordinate recategorization that have already been highlighted and explained by SIT theorists (e.g., Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). The SIT explanation is that superordinate recategorization can sometimes pose a threat to the subgroups and that people who identify highly with the subgroups are most likely to show greater inter-subgroup bias when a superordinate category (or 'system') is made salient (Crisp *et al.*, 2006; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; see also

Jaśko & Kossowska, 2013). However, people who are less strongly invested in their subgroup identities are likely to be more willing to recategorize at the superordinate level, identify strongly with this common ingroup, and show common ingroup bias. Hence, SIMSA predicts that people who show low subgroup identification and high common ingroup identification will show the greater common ingroup favouritism, which can explain system justification (Jaśko & Kossowska, 2013).

The hope for future ingroup status explanation
SIMSA also explains system justification in terms of group members' hope that the social system will bring about future improvements to their ingroup's status and, consequently, their social identity. Again, this route can explain why the disadvantaged might, at times, support social systems that seem currently disadvantageous to them. Going back to the football league example, teams that have not won the league title may be currently disadvantaged, but they should nonetheless support the legitimacy of the football league system if they are hopeful that, at some point in the future, they may be able to reverse their team's present misfortune. Indeed, the more fair and just they perceive the league system to be, the more hopeful they should be that they will have an opportunity in the future to progress up the league table and improve their ingroup status. Indeed, without the league system, there would be no opportunity to prove their football prowess at all. Hence, the need for a positive social identity should motivate members of low-status groups to perceive their social system as being fair and legitimate because this perception allows them to hope for a better group status in the future and to anticipate feeling proud in their accomplishment when it happens.

Importantly, SIMSA distinguishes between short-term stability and long-term stability in order to operationalize its hope for future ingroup status explanation (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin *et al.*, 2017). Short-term stability refers to whether or not group members perceive intergroup status hierarchies to be changeable as a result of their current actions. Long-term stability refers to whether or not group members perceive the status system to be changeable at all, including over the long term. SIMSA predicts that hope for future ingroup status is most likely to lead to system justification amongst the disadvantaged when the social system is perceived to be stable in the short term but unstable in the long term. Under these conditions, members of low-status groups are unlikely to protest against the system because they believe that such collective action may not address their ingroup's current status. Instead, they are likely to perceive the system as fair and just and to support the system in the hope that, in the long term, it will yield a fairer outcome for their group by improving its social status. Again, this explanation is underpinned by a social identity motive and not by a system justification motive. Empirical support for the hope for future ingroup status explanation comes from Owuamalam, Rubin, and Issmer (2016), who showed that university students who were primed to feel that their university was lower in the university ranking system supported this ranking system especially strongly because they were hopeful that their university's fortunes would be better in the future, but only when the system was perceived to be mutable in the long term rather than being stable in the short and long term (see also Sollami & Caricati, 2018).

It is important to point out that we are not the first to advance a hope for future ingroup status explanation for system justification amongst the disadvantaged. Others, including the proponents of SJT (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2003, p. 148), have pointed out that 'there are many reasons why one might accept the potential costs that come from embracing system

justifying ideologies [including] the preservation of hope'. However, some SJT propo-
nents now seem to oppose the hope explanation on the grounds that it is more in
alignment with an interest-based account than a system motive account. For example,
consistent with our hope explanation, Jost *et al.* (2017, pp. e3–e4) pointed out that

> commentators on the political left and right routinely float the notion that members of the
> working class keep the faith, especially in the United States, that they will 1 day become
> wealthy—and that this explains their support for conservative economic policies.

Jost *et al.* (2017) proposed instead that 'conservative ideology is often more attractive
than progressive ideology because people are motivated to defend, bolster, and justify
aspects of the societal status quo as something that is familiar and known' and because
conservatism 'can also lead people to downplay injustices and other social problems as
they seek to maintain valued traditions' (p. e2).

It is also worth contrasting SJT and SIMSA's treatments of hope in the context of system
stability. SJT assumes that system justification will be most apparent when the system is
perceived to be stable (Jost *et al.*, 2012; Kay & Zanna, 2009), even though dissonance
should be higher when conditions are *unstable*, such that own actions (e.g., system
justification) could be effective in resolving associated uncertainties (Festinger, 1962). If
the system is perceived to be stable, then hope for future ingroup status is illogical and
futile going by the assumptions underlying SJT. By contrast, SIMSA makes the prediction
that hope for future ingroup status will cause an active endorsement of the system as fair
and just when the system is perceived to be stable in the short term but unstable in the
long term, giving hope some scope. At first glance, this analysis would seem to suggest that
stable low status could lead groups to accept their inferiority and justify the system.
However, recent research shows that under conditions of stable low status or
disempowerment the disadvantaged may actually embrace more radical or extreme
resistance strategies because they have 'nothing to lose' by doing so (e.g., Scheepers,
Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006; Tausch *et al.*, 2011). In short, the motive to resist the
implications of group disadvantage seems remarkably resilient.

It is important to stress that SIMSA agrees with SJT that people sometimes can and do
passively accept and even actively support the social system. The key difference between
SIMSA and SJT is about the *reasons* for this acceptance and support. SJT assumes that
system justification is motivated by a system motive that operates independent from, and
sometimes in opposition to, personal and group motives. In contrast, rooted in SIT, SIMSA
assumes that system acceptance and support are rooted in the need for a positive social
identity, and it challenges the idea that a separate system justification motive is necessary
to provide a satisfactory explanation. In this sense, we regard SIMSA's social identity
explanation as more parsimonious than SJT's system motive explanation because it
explains the system justification phenomenon using two constructs (personal and group
motives) whilst SJT explains it with three constructs ('ego' [or personal], group, and
system motives).

Consequences of system justification: The palliation hypothesis

SJT assumes that rationalizing social inequality may be one means by which the
disadvantaged soothe uncomfortable thoughts about their disadvantaged position within
the system. That is, rationalizing unequal social arrangements as being just and fair allows
people (particularly the disadvantaged) to make peace with a reality that works against

their personal and collective interests. It follows from SJT that such people should escape the ordinarily negative physical and psychological consequences of constantly dwelling on social rejection (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002): As Jost *et al.* (2008, p. 186) explain,

> those who are disadvantaged are hypothesized to experience distress (including anger and frustration) because of the inequality to which they are subjected. Thus, the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies should be associated with (a) *reduced emotional distress* (especially moral outrage) [. . ..]).

In short, making peace with one's disadvantaged position within the system is a good thing according to SJT, because it helps to alleviate uncertainties about one's place in the social order, and the pain associated with the knowledge that one is the target of social rejection. This palliation hypothesis has received empirical support in large national surveys where disadvantage was operationalized in terms of ethnicity (Osborne & Sibley, 2013) or geographically via regional inequality (Sengupta, Greaves, Osborne, & Sibley, 2017) and even amongst the disadvantaged who are least invested in their group (O'Brien & Major, 2005).

However, SJT also claims that the palliation hypothesis is moderated by group status and specifically that system justification is only beneficial for members of *high*-status groups and that it is detrimental for members of low-status groups. As Jost and Hunyady (2003) explained:

> (H14) System justification will be associated with (a) increased self-esteem for members of advantaged groups, and (b) *decreased self-esteem* for members of disadvantaged groups.

> (H15) System justification will be associated with (a) decreased depression for members of advantaged groups, and (b) *increased depression* for members of disadvantaged groups.

The reason for this alternative palliation hypothesis is traceable to the types of attribution that system justification could enlist amongst the advantaged and disadvantaged. Believing that the prevailing order is fair and just and that people are able to get ahead if they work hard is likely to enhance the self-esteem of people who are advantaged by the system because it allows them to attribute their current success to personal strivings and merit (Yang *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, accepting that the prevailing order is fair and just potentially indicts the disadvantaged for their social mobility failures, and this may undermine their well-being rather than improve it (Kuppens, Easterbrook, Spears, & Manstead, 2015; Quinn & Crocker, 1999; see also Yang *et al.*, 2016).

Hence, SJT can be interpreted as making contrasting predictions with regard to the palliative effects of system justification for members of low-status groups. On the one hand, system justification should ease the uncertainty of members of low-status groups, thereby alleviating the distress caused by the perceived injustice of their position. On the other hand, perceiving the social system to be fair and just should highlight their own inadequacies vis-à-vis upward social mobility and, consequently, lower their self-esteem. This flexibility in SJT's predictions is problematic because it can be used to accommodate mixed evidence for the palliation hypothesis.

Harding and Sibley (2013) have attempted to resolve these theoretical inconsistencies in a time-course palliation hypothesis, arguing that system justification offers short-term respite to the well-being of the disadvantaged, but ultimately worsens their well-being in

the long run. Consistent with this hypothesis, Harding and Sibley (2013) have reported longitudinal negative effects of system justification on well-being amongst the disadvantaged (see also Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, 2017). However, recent evidence from 18 nations shows the opposite pattern: system justification had a longitudinal positive effect on well-being regardless of whether people were advantaged or disadvantaged in the system (Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Khan, Liu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Hence, even the time-course palliation hypothesis has generated mixed evidence.

SIMSA's hope for future ingroup status explanation offers an alternative viewpoint on these theoretical and empirical inconsistencies. The differing effects of system justification on well-being (especially amongst the disadvantaged) may have more to do with the perceived stability of the inequality. If people perceive that their disadvantage is ongoing and unlikely to end in the long term, then they will have little hope of a brighter future, and this will negatively impact on their subjective well-being in both the short and long run (cf. Bahamondes-Correa, 2016; Harding & Sibley, 2013), provided they have not disconnected their self-esteem from their devalued social identity (Crocker & Major, 1989). In contrast, if the system is perceived to be disadvantageous and stable in the short term, but people may be hopeful that their outcomes will improve in the long term, then adopting a system-justifying mindset (qua vehicle for change) is likely to produce the positive effects that previous research has reported amongst the disadvantaged in both the short term (Owuamalam, Paolini, & Rubin, 2017; cf. Bahamondes-Correa, 2016) and the long term (Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Khan *et al.*, 2018). Again, SIMSA's hope-driven proposition with regards to the well-being of the disadvantaged is different from SJT's hope account (Jost & Hunyady, 2003) because SJT assumes an autonomous system justification motivation that runs counter to the psychological interests of the disadvantaged (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p.10).

Challenges and areas of consideration for researchers

The 25 years of system justification theory has been predicated on the crucial assumption of an autonomous system justification motivation that aligns with the interests of the advantaged, but that is oppositional to the interests of the disadvantaged. According to our interpretation of SJT, the litmus test for the existence of this separate system justification motivation is the fact that the disadvantaged, at times, support societal systems that are detrimental to their personal and group interests. However, both the evidence and logic suggest that the conditions that are assumed to bring this motivation to the fore (such as weak group identity and interests and short- and long-term stability of the social order) are the conditions under which the system justification phenomenon is least likely to be visible (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin *et al.*, 2017; Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018).

Attempts to address these issues have inadvertently created a theoretical minefield (Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018; see also Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin *et al.*, 2017; Owuamalam *et al.*, in press) that future research could clarify. For example, following SJT, it is possible to argue that:

1. The disadvantaged are likely to support the existing social order most strongly when the system is stable (Kay & Friesen, 2011; Laurin *et al.*, 2013) but also most strongly when the system is unstable given SJT's uncertainty assumption (Jost *et al.*, 2012). After all, unstable systems should generate greater uncertainty than stable ones, and

people should be most motivated to seek stability and order via system justification under such conditions.

2. System justification *soothes* moral outrage and thereby reduces political mobilization amongst the disadvantaged (Jost *et al.*, 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013), but also that system justification *intensifies* anger on the system's behalf, that ultimately results in political mobilization on behalf of the status quo amongst people who feel disenfranchised in some way (Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, 2018).

3. System justification '*does not* offer an equivalent function that operates in the service of protecting the interests of the self or the group' (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 10), but it is beneficial to people's personal well-being (Jost & Hunyady, 2003).

4. System justification is most likely to occur when personal and group interests are weak (Jost *et al.*, 2004), but it is also most likely to occur when people are *dependent* on their systems for some (personal and/or group-based) benefit (Kay *et al.*, 2009; Van der Toorn *et al.*, 2015; cf. Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016).

5. Dissonance-based system justification operates consciously, as per cognitive dissonance theory (Jost, Pelham *et al.*, 2003), but also unconsciously, when dissonance is least likely (Jost *et al.*, 2004; Mentovich & Jost, 2008; cf. Owuamalam *et al.*, in press).

6. Hope-induced system justification helps people to cope with disadvantage (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; p. 188), but also that hoping that one's outcomes will improve in the future has little to do with system justification (Jost *et al.*, 2017).

7. System justification serves a palliative function for the well-being the disadvantaged (Jost *et al.*, 2008), but it is also negatively related to the well-being of the disadvantaged (Jost & Hunyady, 2003).

8. The system justification motive is unconsciously activated only when the system (but not social identity) is threatened (Liviatan & Jost, 2014), but also that the system motive is unconsciously activated when social identity needs and tendencies are active *qua* dependency on social systems (Bonnot & Krauth-Gruber, 2018; cf. Rubin, 2016).

These shifting and/or contradictory theoretical propositions may have become necessary in the light of new data, but they could also be symptomatic of the wider confusion regarding what a social system really is. For example, it is possible to imagine *microsystems* of procedural and regulatory mechanisms that prescribe people's relations with the established order; *mesosystems* of cultural and group norms that determine the normal and traditional ways of conduct for specific groups of people in different situations; and *macrosystems* of social, political, economic, geographical, and religious entities that organize and maintain human civilization. Within these macrosystems, finer distinctions with regards to superordinate systems (e.g., Abrahamic faith establishments, see also Jaśko & Kossowska, 2013) and subsystems (e.g., Christian and Islamic faith groups) are possible. As we have pointed out earlier, all of these operationalizations of a social system align more closely with SIT's/SIMSA's view concerning the attributes, functions, and categorization of social groups.

Similarly, one objection with regards to the inconsistencies concerning SJT's palliation hypothesis is that well-being is operationalized too loosely and likely that the effects envisaged by SJT are limited to some and not all well-being measures. For example, subjective well-being is sometimes construed as personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, life satisfaction, and/or mental health (such as depression and anxiety). It is entirely possible, therefore, that system justification's palliative effects might be evident with regards to the more mundane indices of well-being (e.g., general positive affect) but not the clinical and more substantive ones (e.g., depression), even when different

operationalizations of a construct should theoretically yield similar patterns of results (see also Jost *et al.*, 2012, p. 200 for a similar logic).

Concluding remarks

System justification theory is truly revolutionary in not only the breadth of the research programmes that it has inspired over the last 25 years but, perhaps more importantly, also for generating the debates that continue to expand scholarship on the seemingly paradoxical system-justifying attitudes amongst the disadvantaged. Nonetheless, both theoretical and empirical inconsistencies in SJT research warrant a rethink of the proposition that an autonomous system justification motivation operates in opposition to the interests of the disadvantaged. Accordingly, SIMSA assumes that system justification is rooted in collective motives and that these interests/motives have an influence over the short and long term, which is why the disadvantaged can endure an immediate cost to their social identity in the hope that this can be corrected in the future, so long as mobility is possible within the system in the long run (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin *et al.*, 2017).

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