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System justification in organizational contexts: How a Motivated preference for the status quo can affect organizational attitudes and behaviors



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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we put forth the premise that people's motivated tendency to justify and defend their external systems has important, and largely unexplored, implications for the field of organizational behavior. Drawing on recent theoretical and empirical work emerging from System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), we propose that people's desire to view prevailing structural arrangements in a positive light may uniquely contribute to our understanding of the psychology of people in organizational settings. We begin by specifically highlighting System Justification Theory's implications for: organizational change, employee citizenship behaviors, and integration of a diverse workforce. We then review empirical work on the situations in which people's system-justification motive is likely to be particularly pronounced and discuss how these situations may manifest in organizational contexts. Following this, we describe several streams of research on the consequences of the system-justification motive, with a focus on the implications of these findings for organizational members' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in the workplace.

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System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) posits that people possess a motivated tendency to view the status quo in a positive light. Specifically, the theory maintains that people want to believe that the prevailing structural arrangements that constitute the status quo (e.g. their socio-political systems, institutions, and organizations) are desirable and legitimate, and in order to maintain this belief, they often engage in motivated cognitive processes aimed at (i) psychologically bolstering these systems and (ii) rationalizing away these systems' defects. At its core, people's *system-justification motive* is thought to arise from the psychological threat or anxiety produced by acknowledging that a particular system one is embedded in may be flawed or illegitimate (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Broadly, System Justification Theory advances the idea that people's underlying motive to justify their systems and avoid acknowledging their system's faults may be responsible for shaping a diverse range of cognitions and behaviors directed toward the system itself as well as other people within the system.

Despite the clear application of System Justification Theory's basic tenets to the psychology of people embedded in work organizations, research emerging from this perspective has neglected to directly explore the dynamics of the system-justification motive in the workplace. Foundational research on people's motivated tendency to justify the status quo largely focused on the theory's implications for stereotyping and out-group attitudes and thus was limited in the extent to which it could be applied to the study of work organizations (e.g. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002). However, a new wave of theoretical and empirical work has extended this focus by demonstrating the role of the system-justification motive in driving a broader range of individual perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, many of which, we suggest, have significant consequences for organizational life.

Hence, in this chapter, we seek to demonstrate that people's motivated tendency to justify and defend their external systems has important, and largely unexplored, implications for the field of organizational behavior. Drawing on emerging research on the antecedents and consequences of the system-justification motive, our goal in this chapter is to review what we now know about (i) the organizational contexts in which the system justification motive is likely to be particularly pronounced and (ii) how this motive may manifest itself in organizational members' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in the workplace. Throughout the chapter, we highlight how this work can

uniquely contribute to our understanding of diverse range of organizational phenomena. We explore both how individuals' motivated tendency to justify their systems can contribute to smooth and effective workplace functioning and how it can have detrimental consequences for an organization and its members.

We begin by providing a brief conceptual and historical overview of System Justification Theory. In so doing, we distinguish the theory from related perspectives and we elaborate on how organizations fit contemporary definitions of what constitutes a "system." We then spotlight System Justification Theory's implications for three key domains of organizational behavior research and practice: organizational change, employee citizenship behaviors, and integration of a diverse workforce. Following this, we review the demonstrated triggers of the system-justification motive (system inescapability, system dependence, system threat and low personal control) and suggest how they may manifest in organizational contexts. We then describe several streams of research on the consequences of the system justification motive and discuss their organizational implications. Finally, we outline some ways in which studying system justification processes in organizational contexts may provide compelling directions for future research.

1. System Justification Theory

System Justification Theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994) provides a social psychological account of how and why the status quo is perpetuated and supported despite the fact that the systems that constitute the status quo are often flawed and disadvantageous to the individuals embedded in them. SJT posits that people possess a motivated tendency to justify and defend existing structural arrangements and that this tendency has a soothing "palliative function" (Jost & Hunyady, 2003), insofar as it helps people avoid the psychological threat or anxiety produced by acknowledging that the system they are embedded in may be flawed, corrupt, or otherwise suboptimal.

1.1. SJT and related perspectives

Individuals' motivation to justify their systems is theoretically and empirically distinct from a purely cognitive status quo bias as well as psychological processes related to social identity and cognitive dissonance. First, although behavioral economists have

noted the existence of a biased tendency to prefer the status quo (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), this type of status quo bias is understood to be driven by cognitive factors, such as loss aversion, wherein people use the status quo as a reference point, and thus, any deviation from it is perceived as a loss (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). SJT, by contrast, focuses on how individuals' desire to justify and defend their systems can manifest in a *motivated preference* for the status quo – that is, the existence of a heightened preference for the status quo stemming from individuals' desire to see the current state of affairs positively. In the sections that follow, we review experimental evidence demonstrating that contexts which trigger individuals' system justification motive can enhance their preference for the status quo, suggesting the existence of a context-dependent motivated defense of current state of affairs, above and beyond a purely cognitive status quo bias (also see Kay et al., 2009).

Second, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and SJT both examine the motivational underpinnings of individuals' attitudes and behavior; however, the theories differ in what they perceive those motives to be. Social identity perspectives argue that individuals are motivated to belong to positively valued social groups as a way to maintain high self-esteem. SJT, however, posits that while people are indeed motivated to view themselves and their groups positively, individuals are also motivated to see their systems in a positive light. SJT thus suggests a distinction between personal, group and system motives and the potential for these motives to conflict, resulting in attitudes and behavior that are not necessarily in the interest of oneself or one's ingroup (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Furthermore, empirically, contexts that enhance people's motivation to justify their systems (e.g. system threat, dependence, low personal control) often have no effect on individuals' self-esteem or their collective group esteem, demonstrating that system justification effects are not due to enhanced self- or group-identity needs (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008; Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). Finally, while SJT bears similarities to theories of cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 1973; Festinger, 1957) in that both explain individuals' tendency to psychologically rationalize and justify choices after they have been made, the theories differ in the types of choices they focus on and thus on the motivations underlying these rationalization processes. Cognitive dissonance research mainly focuses on individuals' rationalization of hypocritical or counter-attitudinal actions that *they themselves* have taken – that is, their tendency to adopt new attitudes or beliefs in order to avoid the ego threat associated with inconsistency between one's beliefs and one's actions (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Staw, 1976). Conversely, SJT examines how individuals' system justification motive drives their rationalization of their system's actions and the choices imposed on them by their system. Thus, in SJT, rationalization processes stem from a desire to view one's system positively, rather than a desire to view oneself as a consistent or competent person.

1.2. Historical overview

The majority of theoretical and empirical work on system justification has focused on people's tendency to justify and defend their socio-political systems and the consequences of this tendency for the perpetuation of social and economic inequality (Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Zanna, 2009). While earlier work within the perspective of SJT examined the role of outgroup favoritism and stereotypes in providing ideological support for the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003), more recent developments within SJT have focused on identifying and experimentally inducing the conditions under which people's system justification motive is likely to be heightened (e.g. system inescapability, dependence, threat, and low personal control; cf. Kay & Friesen, 2011) and demonstrating individuals' generalized tendency to rationalize and defend the current state of affairs (i.e. Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). Though some empirical work has shown that people defend and justify small-scale systems (such as their universities) much in the same way that they defend larger-scale socio-political systems (i.e. Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011), little research has explored the system justification motive in organizational contexts.

1.3. Organizations as systems

We argue that work organizations can be thought of as 'systems' in that they share many of the same psychological properties as the systems typical of most system justification research (such as the government and related social institutions). Specifically, both types of systems provide individuals with structure, order, predictability, and resources. Much like the government imposes laws and policies on its citizens that constrain and guide individuals' behavior and access to resources on a daily basis, organizations impose rules and guidelines on its employees that similarly structure individual action and outcomes. Thus, psychologically, both types of systems supply people with an assigned set of roles (e.g. citizen, employee), interrelationships with other people and structures (e.g. membership in a local municipality, position within the organizational hierarchy), and norms that make daily life orderly and predictable. Similarly, just like people's welfare is, to some extent, dependent on the effective functioning of their governments, it is also dependent on the effective functioning of their organizations. For these reasons, we suggest that the basic tenets of SJT can be fruitfully applied to the study of employees' attitudes and behavior in work organizations.

While people tend to move between work organizations more frequently than they do between socio-political systems, we argue that, psychologically, individuals often feel strongly dependent on their current organization, particularly when they lack employment alternatives. Importantly, SJT predicts that perceived system dependence, rather than increasing individuals' motivation to improve their organization, may actually enhance their desire to justify and defend the way that system currently

operates. We explore these ideas further in the sections that follow.

2. Three especially relevant domains of organizational behavior

Before moving on the nuts-and-bolts of the system justification motive's causes and consequences, we thought it best to briefly review three domains of organizational behavior research that SJT seems, to us, to be particularly apt for informing and advancing. Our goal in this section is not to provide an exhaustive list of all the theory's implications for organizational behavior, but rather to supply the reader with an initial sense of the relevance of SJT to contemporary workplace and management issues – especially those issues that are topical and mainstream within the field.

2.1. Organizational change

An organization's ability to change in response to shifting environmental conditions is essential to its survival and growth. Thus, a key challenge facing organizational scholars is how to cultivate internal support for, and interest in, organizational change (Argyris, 1993; Baldrige & Burnham, 1975). An abundance of sociological and economic theories exist that seek to explain why organizations tend toward structural inertia as well as the factors that may stimulate organizations to evolve and adapt (cf. Aldrich, 1999). SJT and associated empirical work provide unique insight into the psychological processes that may hinder and promote interest in organizational change. Contrary to popular wisdom within management circles that communicating a sense of organizational 'crisis' may provide an opportune context for instigating change (e.g. Baldoni, 2009; Friedman, 2008), and consistent with Staw and colleagues (1981) threat-rigidity thesis, research emerging from SJT suggests that such crisis-based support for change may be difficult to induce. Stemming from the basic idea that people have a desire to defend and legitimize the current state of affairs, research emerging from SJT demonstrates that, generally, because deviations from the status quo are psychologically threatening, they are unlikely to be supported, especially in contexts where people's system-justification motive is heightened, such as when their system is faced with external threats to its legitimacy (cf. Kay & Friesen, 2011). Furthermore, people have been shown to have a motivated bias toward perceiving the existing state of affairs as how things ought to be (Kay et al., 2009). That is, they use information about how things are currently done to inform their beliefs about how things *should* be done, and thus existing organizational structures and policies are likely to be psychologically idealized and reinforced, rather than questioned and changed.

In addition to suggesting the intrapsychic processes that may block support for organizational change, other research emerging from SJT looks at how people's system-justification motive can be harnessed to enhance employees' acceptance of change. This research shows that people are often motivated to adjust their perceptions and

attitudes in order to maintain a positive view of prevailing structural arrangements. For instance, individuals' level of support for system changes has been shown to increase as departures from the current way of doing things are perceived as increasingly likely to occur; that is, people evaluate future changes as more desirable when they seem inevitable (Kay et al., 2002). Furthermore, people have been shown to react less negatively to policy changes when these changes are communicated to be non-alterable or absolute (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). This research suggests the existence of various kinds of psychological rationalization processes, whereby people cognitively adjust their beliefs and attitudes to align with their desire to view the status quo positively.

Beyond employees' support for imposed structural changes, System Justification Theory can enhance our understanding of the individual-level psychological factors that may affect an organization's ability to learn from its mistakes, engage in trial and error, and undertake the experimentation necessary for growth and innovation (Cyert & March, 1963; March, 1991). This kind of organizational learning largely depends on its employees' tendency to voice criticisms or provide suggestions to management regarding how their workplace could be improved (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). SJT can help advance understandings of the conditions that favor or inhibit employees' vigilance to organizational flaws, as has been called for recently in the literature (cf. Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2011), and thus the circumstances that facilitate or hinder organizational learning. The psychological tendency to rationalize away system flaws or to avoid perceiving them at all (because of the anxiety they produce) may be an important factor preventing organizational learning from occurring.

Hence, organizational change is one domain within organizational behavior to which SJT may significantly contribute. As we will describe in further detail in the sections that follow, several streams of research and theory emerging from SJT have important and novel implications for understanding the psychological obstacles and facilitators of organizational change and learning.

2.2. Organizational citizenship behaviors

Employees are said to engage in organizational citizenship behavior when they go above and beyond their stated job description to contribute to the effectiveness of their organization (Organ, 1988; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Since variance in employees' engagement in these discretionary actions has been shown to significantly impact organizational performance (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009), there is substantial interest in the factors that may foster and discourage these kinds of behaviors (cf. Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Much of this research has been limited to the role of employee personality traits and leadership characteristics in predicting citizenship behaviors among workers (cf. Organ & Ryan, 1995; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). However, emerging research on the consequences of people's motivation to justify their systems may provide new insight into how organizations may

facilitate or hinder employees' tendency to go beyond their explicit job description to benefit their workplace. Specifically, SJT contributes a fresh perspective to the occurrence of two specific types of organizational citizenship behaviors: sportsmanship and compliance.

Sportsmanship is characterized as employees' willingness to tolerate less than ideal workplace circumstances without complaining (Organ, 1990). SJT suggests that observed instances of sportsmanship may not always be a result of employees' conscious decision to quietly endure less than optimal organizational functioning while privately acknowledging that these conditions are suboptimal. Rather, SJT research shows that people have a motivated tendency to altogether avoid acknowledging negative aspects of their systems and to downplay the significance of their system's flaws because of the anxiety that acknowledging system weaknesses produces (cf. Laurin, Kay, Proudfoot, & Fitzsimons, 2013; Proudfoot, Kay, & Mann, 2013). Thus, the system-justifying tendency to deny the existence of organizational problems may also contribute to the occurrence of attitudes and behaviors deemed to be sportsmanship.

SJT may also help explain the occurrence of a subset of citizenship behaviors known as *compliance* or *contentiousness* (Organ, 1990; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Compliance involves employees' adherence to organizational rules and regulations (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Employee compliance with workplace rules and regulations is vital to smooth organizational functioning (Tyler, 2004). At the same time, mindless compliance with procedures can result in ineffective or unethical behavior (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003; Staw & Boettger, 1990). Hence organizations must be attentive to monitoring issues related to compliance. SJT provides insights into why unethical behavior in the workplace may be ignored and, more broadly, the conditions under which employees are more or less likely to accept organizational rules and policies. First, people are likely to legitimize the actions of those in power and ignore their faults, to the extent that organizational leaders are perceived as representatives of the system (Van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). Furthermore, people are less likely to react against rules and regulations when they are perceived to be unchangeable (Laurin et al., 2012). Laurin and colleagues (2012) demonstrate that people are more likely to rationalize policy changes that are perceived to be absolute and react against changes that are perceived to be non-absolute. This implies that organizations who wish for their employees to comply with certain rules and procedures should communicate that they are non-alterable. However, organizations with a goal of eliciting employees' critical feedback on new policies would be better off to construe workplace rules as changeable.

Hence, in addition to its implications for organizational change, SJT also provides fruitful insight into organizational citizenship behaviors. Specifically, research emerging from SJT suggests some unexplored antecedents, and potential psychological mechanisms, underlying two important classes of organizational citizenship behavior – sportsmanship and compliance. The research underlying

these links will be further explored in the sections that follow.

2.3. Integration of a diverse workforce

Organizations are employing an increasingly demographically diverse workforce, with women and ethnic minorities now constituting the majority of the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Whether out of concerns about fairness, or in an effort to harness the performance advantages of employing a diverse workforce, many business scholars and practitioners are keenly interested in uncovering what disrupts the achievement of demographic diversity in the workplace (e.g. Ely & Thomas, 2001; Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Nemetz & Christensen, 1996). Managing workplace diversity requires attention to issues such as potential intergroup conflict, acceptance of new organizational members, and the persistence and perpetuation of social inequalities within organizational hierarchies (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Stockdale et al., 2004). SJT provides novel perspectives on managing diversity issues in the workplace, specifically those related to discrimination against minority groups and acceptance of new demographically diverse organizational members.

While a substantial body of research on organizational justice explains why people sometimes respond very negatively to injustice (cf. Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), perspectives emerging from SJT provide a psychological account for why people, at times, may downplay or justify unfairness. First, building on Lerner's (1980) just-world theory, empirical work emerging from the perspective of SJT shows that people tend to lionize winners and derogate losers, attributing their success or failure to their own dispositions, such as their intelligence or laziness (Kay et al., 2005). This tendency is thought to result from individuals' need to believe that the world is a just place, in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Miller, 1978). In addition to this general motivated tendency to derive information about others' dispositions from their social status, individuals' motivation to see their systems as fair has been shown to impact the way people explain specific forms of social inequality. For instance, Laurin and colleagues (2010) provide evidence that when people's system-justification motive is heightened, they increasingly rationalize and defend the gender wage gap, increasingly attributing it to differences in the abilities that men and women possess. Importantly, these kinds of attributions may serve to legitimize unequal outcomes in the workplace and obscure potential systemic discrimination against minority employees.

Other SJT research suggests that people may be motivated to endorse stereotypes about different groups of people so as to justify unequal social relations (e.g. Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003; Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Such system-justifying stereotypes characterize low status social groups in such a way that legitimizes their disadvantaged position and thus provides a means of avoiding holding the system responsible for perpetuating inequality. These stereotypical beliefs have important consequences for individual employee outcomes in the

workplace – impacting the kinds of the roles that certain groups of employees are assigned to and the type of work they are given, as well as the advancement opportunities they are deemed suitable for.

Together, these lines of research suggest that specific ideologies and beliefs that people hold about the state of the world and their tendency to want to see their systems in a positive light may hinder efforts to successfully integrate diverse organizational members, especially at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy. Additionally, people's motivation to defend the status quo has been shown to result in derogation of individuals who violate status quo norms. For instance, experimentally inducing people's system justification motive leads to increasingly negative evaluations of business-oriented women when few women are perceived to currently be leaders in business (Kay et al., 2009). Hence, SJT suggests that people's motivated tendency to prefer the existing state of affairs over alternatives may cause backlash against changes that upset existing workplace demographic compositions.

Hence, workplace diversity is a third major facet of organizational life for which SJT has strong implications. In the sections that follow, we elaborate further on research pointed to in this section, to suggest not only what SJT can tell us about the factors inhibiting successful integration of a diverse workforce but also how perspectives emerging from SJT suggest solutions to challenges related to workplace diversity.

3. Triggers of the system justification motive

While individual differences exist in how strongly people tend to engage in system justification (cf. Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a), a growing body of experimental research has demonstrated that people's motivation to justify their systems may be largely contextual in nature. That is, people's system-justifying tendencies have been shown to be heightened by specific circumstances, namely those situations that facilitate feelings of system inescapability, system dependence, system threat, or low personal control. The following section describes research on the situational antecedents of the system justification motive and speculates on how these situations may manifest themselves in organizational contexts.

3.1. System inescapability

People have been shown to increasingly defend systems with few exit opportunities (cf. Laurin et al., 2010). The basic theoretical idea underlying this effect is that when people find themselves in a system that they cannot escape, it is particularly psychological threatening for them to acknowledge that system's flaws. In other words, when leaving one's system is not feasible, people's desire to accept and support the status quo is enhanced. This perspective provides a counterpoint to Hirschman, 1970 seminal theoretical work on the relationship between exit opportunities and employees' decision to voice criticism within their organization. Hirschman postulates that when

employees are unable to leave their place of work, they respond by becoming increasingly critical of how their organization is run. System Justification Theory, however, suggests the opposite relationship – namely that restricted exit opportunities, rather than enhance people's motivation to criticize their systems, may actually heighten individuals' psychological desire to deny their system's negative characteristics.

Laurin et al. (2010) present experimental evidence in support of this notion. In their studies, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions in which they were told that it was either difficult or easy to leave their system (in this set of experiments, their country or educational institution). In one study, undergraduate students were told that it was difficult (or easy) to transfer out of their university (Laurin et al., 2010, Study 3). Students who were informed that their university system was difficult to leave were shown to be less supportive of a student group aimed at criticizing the university, compared to students who perceived their university system to be relatively easy to leave. In another study, Canadians who were told that it was becoming difficult to emigrate out of Canada, compared to Canadians who were told that leaving Canada was easy, increasingly attributed a negative aspect of the Canadian social system (gender inequality) to genuine differences between men and women, rather than societal discrimination (Laurin et al., 2010, Study 1). A study using a similar paradigm showed that perceived system inescapability led Canadians to increasingly report that income inequality in Canada was due to legitimate, justifiable causes (Kay et al., 2009).

Our research in progress shows initial evidence of the effect of system inescapability specifically on employees' motivation to defend their work organizations (Proudfoot et al., 2013). Through an online panel, we sampled people working at a range of organizations in the United States in order to experimentally test whether employees' perceived inability to leave their workplace would enhance their system-justifying tendencies. To manipulate perceived system inescapability, we showed employees information describing projected U.S. unemployment rates. These materials were designed in a way that manipulated the perceived scarcity of job alternatives in the labor market. One group of employees were exposed to information indicating that unemployment rates were declining and the job market was becoming more favorable, while the other group of employees saw information suggesting that unemployment rates were forecasted to remain high and thus few alternative job opportunities existed. After exposure to these materials, participants were asked to report on the level of inefficiency in their organization. Results from these studies were consistent with the prediction put forth by System Justification Theory – compared to employees who believed they were facing an increasingly number of job alternatives, employees who were led to believe there was a scarcity of job alternatives available to them exhibited increased denial of organizational inefficiencies.

External labor market trends, therefore, to the extent that they signal a lack of job alternatives, may heighten employees' sense of system inescapability and thus trigger

their system justification motive. But it is unlikely this is the only organizational analog of system inescapability. Industry-level variables, such as being employed in an industry in which it is difficult to move between firms or being a member of a highly specialized profession, may also instigate feelings that one's current place of work is inescapable and thus provide a context in which system justification is most likely to occur. In general, feelings of workplace inescapability may be triggered by any organizational policy or communication that decreases employees' perceptions of comparable job alternatives in the market. This point is important in that it suggests an unexamined consequence of the policies that many organizations use to manage turnover of their workforce. Organizations often take steps to reduce turnover of their workforce by implementing policies aimed at decreasing the favorability of job alternatives (through the use of incentives such as perks). While limiting employee turnover has clear organizational benefits, including lowering the costs associated with training new employees (Staw, 1980), facilitating organizational learning (March, 1991) and strengthening company culture (Batt & Valcour, 2003), SJT suggests some unexamined psychological consequences of organizational policies aimed at retaining their workforce by reducing employees' intention to turnover. To the extent that policies aimed at managing turnover reduce perceptions of comparable opportunities at other organizations, they may also increase employees' motivation to justify and defend their organization's faults, which can hold mixed consequences.

3.2. System dependence

In today's world, people are necessarily dependent on the systems they are embedded in, in that these structures provide people with resources and largely shape their life outcomes. Yet the extent to which an individual is dependent on a particular system may vary. For instance, specific systems, like governments, social institutions, and organizations can exert more or less control over people's daily lives and general well-being. Perceived system dependence, or the degree to which individuals believe that their personal outcomes are contingent on a given system, has been demonstrated to enhance people's tendency to justify and defend that system (Kay et al., 2009; Van der Toorn et al., 2014, 2011). The logic here is that feeling especially dependent on your system increases the anxiety produced by acknowledging that your system may not be operating in your best interest. Thus, feelings of system dependence are likely to intensify people's system justification motive.

Kay and colleagues (2009) experimentally manipulated people's perceived dependence on different systems and then measured the extent to which they then justified these systems. In one such study, students were made to feel either more or less dependent on their university system and then were asked to rate their support for the university's funding policies. Students who were told that their university had a strong influence over their life outcomes (e.g. access to resources, job opportunities, social networks) exhibited increased defense of their university's

funding policies, regardless of whether these policies were described as merit-based or equality-based. Importantly, when students' feelings of dependence on their country, rather than their university, was enhanced, they increasingly defended their country's policies, but not those of their university, indicating that the system-justifying effect of dependence is specific to the system on which individuals believe they depend. In addition, these effects cannot be reduced to social identity concerns – in this study, manipulating participants' perceived dependency of their university or government was found to have no discernible impact on their social group identification. In a different set of studies, people's feelings of system dependence enhanced their perceptions of the legitimacy of system representatives, such as university professors, government officials, and the police, as well as the extent to which they trusted them (van der Toorn, Tyler, et al., 2011).

Several factors may influence the degree to which people feel dependent on their work organizations. Many people quite literally depend on their workplaces to provide them (as well as their families) with income, as well as benefits such as health insurance and pensions. Field research by Brief and colleagues (1997) supports this idea – they found that feelings of workplace economic dependence were greatest for low-income employees and for employees who had families. Beyond material resources, many people likely depend on their organizational systems for the non-material benefits they provide, such as access to social networks and meaningful work. To the extent that these resources, both material and immaterial, are perceived by employees to have a significant influence over their happiness and quality of life, they are likely to strengthen people's sense of dependence on their organization. Hence, official policies that explicitly increase an organization's influence over workers' and their families' life outcomes, such as healthcare and retirement plans, as well as programs aimed at achieving work-life integration (such as child-care provision), may enhance their system-justification tendencies. Furthermore, factors exogenous to the organization may increase people's psychological dependence on their workplace. For instance, individuals living in socio-political systems that lack social safety nets may sense that they depend more on their work organization than individuals residing in contexts with strong social welfare programs in place.

3.3. System threat

People often react to external criticism of their systems by increasingly defending that system's policies and values. Attacks by outsiders that are perceived by insiders as threatening their system's legitimacy may instigate a defensive psychological reaction, heightening people's system-justification motive and leading them to increasingly bolster and defend their system. External threats to the United States, for instance, such as acts of terror and criticisms of the government's response to natural disasters, have been shown to be associated with a marked increase in Americans' system-justifying tendencies, demonstrated through their enhanced endorsement of

system-supporting ideologies (Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006) and increased support for U.S. political leaders and their policies, including those unrelated to the aspect of the system under attack (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Willer, 2004).

System threat has also been experimentally induced by exposing people to an outsider's critique of their system (cf. Kay et al., 2005). In one typical manipulation of system threat, American participants are asked to read an article ostensibly written by a foreign journalist who recently visited the United States. Some participants read a version of the article that is complementary of America (low system threat condition) while other participants read a version of the article wherein the journalist is highly critical of the U.S.'s system of government and ideals (high system threat condition). This kind of system threat manipulation has been shown to lead to increased endorsement of system-justifying stereotypes and ideologies (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer & Hunyady, 2003b; Kay et al., 2005), derogation of people who deviate from the status quo (Kay et al., 2009), and enhanced support for institutional structures, people, and products that uphold the system (Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Day et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2008).

System threat can take on many forms in organizational contexts. Mergers and acquisitions, competitors' marketing campaigns, and negative attention in the media can all be constitute organizational threats, to the extent that they are perceived by organizational members as an external attack on the legitimacy of their organization system. In one field study conducted at a German health-service organization that had recently been involved in a scandal, it was observed that employees' perceptions of the severity of the scandal impacted their system-justifying attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, the more employees perceived the media coverage of the scandal to be damaging to their organization's reputation, the higher their affective commitment to the organization and the more they engaged in citizenship behaviors aimed at bolstering their organization's effectiveness and legitimacy (Riketta & Landerer, 2005). In addition, a qualitative field study looking at reactions to *BusinessWeek's* rankings of business schools found that MBA students who encountered information in these rankings that threatened their positive image of their school responded by downplaying the dimensions upon which the rankings were based (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). While these studies did not frame themselves as examining system threat, we see initial evidence in these findings that organizational members may react to external criticism or threats to their system by increasingly defending their organizations and downplaying its negative qualities.

3.4. Low personal control

People tend to find disorder, chaos, and the idea that events occur in a random or haphazard way to be extremely aversive (Pennebaker & Stone, 2004). They generally prefer to believe that they possess control over their lives, and if they cannot be in control, there is emerging evidence to suggest that people want to believe

that someone, or something, has things under control (cf. Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2010). This tendency to compensate for personal lack of control by psychological outsourcing control to external systems (i.e. the government, religion, organizations) has been shown to result in increased support for, and trust in, external systems when personal control is low (Kay et al., 2008). Hence, contexts that diminish people's feelings of personal control may also enhance people's tendency to reinforce their systems.

Kay et al. (2008) provide evidence that fluctuating levels of personal control may explain variation in support for external systems. In one experiment, participants were asked to either think of a recent event over which they possessed control or one over which they did not have control. They then rated the extent to which they were supportive of system change (in this case, change to the current Canadian socio-political system). Results showed that, compared to individuals who thought of a time when they were in control, individuals whose sense of personal control was diminished increasingly resisted system change in favor of the status quo (Kay et al., 2008, Study 5). Interestingly, this effect was moderated by how well-intending participants thought the Canadian government was – low personal control led to increased support for the current governmental system only when this system was perceived to be benevolent. A similar effect was observed in another study using archival cross-national data from the European and World Values Survey – feelings of low personal control were associated with increased feelings of dependence on government institutions perceived to be benevolent (Kay et al., 2008, Study 3). Inducing feelings of low personal control has also been shown to lead to increased support for leaders who communicate a message of stability and order (Shepherd et al., 2011). Consistent with this notion that individuals look to benevolent sources of external control to avoid the aversive feelings that come with lacking personal control, people have been shown to increasingly convert to more controlling religious organizations during times of economic instability (Sales, 1972).

In work organizations, workers' sense of personal control can fluctuate as a function of their position within the organizational hierarchy, the nature of their job, or other factors that communicate people's ability (or inability) to influence what happens in their environment. Employees low in socio-economic status or those near the bottom of the organizational chain of command are likely to feel that they possess less personal control than workers above them in the hierarchy (Snibbe & Markus, 2005), and thus, despite being those who are likely receiving the fewest material benefits from their organization, low status members may still look to their organization as a source of external control, and thus provide support it. Employees in jobs that involve supporting and providing information to others (i.e. staff jobs) are also likely to have a diminished sense of personal control compared to workers employed in roles that involve direct control over essential organizational activities (i.e. line jobs). Organizational climates that communicate that workers do not have the efficacy to influence organizational outcomes

or enact changes may also foster a sense of low personal control (Tannenbaum, 1968). According to the emerging evidence, all of these factors may contribute to increased system justification.

Furthermore, the extent to which an organization communicates to its employees that it is a stable and benevolent source of external control may moderate the effect of these structural factors on employees' tendency to depend on, and thus justify, that system. While there is research demonstrating that feelings of low personal control can foster negative workplace attitudes (e.g. Fox, Dwyer, & Ganster, 1993; Karasek, 1992), this work tends to focus on the interactive effect of perceived personal control and work demands on job satisfaction, with low personal control leading to lower job satisfaction when combined with high levels of job stress (Fox et al., 1993). Thus, much like low personal control does not enhance support for governments perceived to be malevolent; it is possible that feelings of low personal control in the workplace only facilitates increased support for one's organization when that organization is perceived to be benevolent.

4. Consequences of the system justification motive

Up to this point, we have explored, in depth, the antecedents, or triggers, of the system justification motive. In the section that follows, we review some of the demonstrated consequences of people's motivated tendency to justify their systems. We focus on the effect of the system-justification motive on the injunctification of system norms, psychological rationalization of the status quo, and attention to system flaws.

4.1. Injunctification of system norms

Research by Kay and colleagues (2009) suggests that one powerful way in which the system-justification motive manifests itself is in people's tendency to use their beliefs about how their system currently operates to define their ideals about how the system *should* function – a psychological process termed *injunctification*. People are said to engage in injunctification of system norms when they use descriptive norms (i.e. information about what constitutes the current state of affairs) to determine prescriptive norms (i.e. how they think things ought to be). Kay et al. (2009) research suggests that the people's tendency to injunctify norms is not merely a case of anchoring, but is a motivated process, instigated by individuals' desire to see that which constitutes the status quo as the most reasonable state of affairs.

In one illustrative study conducted in Canada (Kay et al., 2009, Study 4), participants were brought into the laboratory and exposed to a commonly used system threat manipulation – an article about Canada written by a foreign journalist. Participants in the High System Threat condition read a version of the article that was highly critical of Canada, while participants in the Low System Threat condition read a version of the article that was complementary toward Canada. Participants were then assigned to one of two groups, with each group receiving different information about what constituted the status

quo in terms of gender composition in business. One group read that women were very underrepresented in high-level business positions in Canada (i.e. there were very few female CEOs) while the other group read that there were many female CEOs in Canada. All participants were then asked to indicate their level of support for gender equality in Canada. Following this, the female experimenter running the study explained to participants that she was a business student from a nearby university and asked participants to fill out an evaluation form regarding her performance, which, participants were told, would be sent directly to her supervisor. Results from this study showed that participants who read that there were few female CEOs were less supportive of gender equality than participants who read that there were many female CEOs, but only when their system justification motive was heightened – that is, after they had read an article that was highly critical of Canada. These results suggest that system threat enhanced people's tendency to injunctify what they perceived to be status quo norms. Furthermore, participants who were exposed to system threat and told that women were underrepresented in business gave the female business student experimenter significantly lower performance ratings than participants in the other groups did, demonstrating a direct action by these participants aimed at maintaining what they believed to be the status quo.

In another study, following a manipulation of socio-political system inescapability, participants were shown information suggesting that a high-level governmental body was mostly made up of high-income individuals (Kay et al., 2009, Study 1). Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which they thought this government body should be made up exclusively of wealthy people. Results indicated that heightened perceptions of system inescapability were associated with increased injunctification of system norms – people who were told it was difficult to leave their socio-political system more strongly endorsed that wealthy people *should* be those in positions of political power than people who were told that it was easy to leave their system. In yet another study, high system dependence increased injunctification of university funding policies (Kay et al., 2009, Study 2). Students who were made to feel dependent on their university increasingly thought that their university's current funding policies were fair and desirable (regardless of what they were told these prevailing policies were) compared to students who were not made to feel dependent on their university.

This research has a number of strong implications for understanding employees' attitudes toward changes in the workplace. A clear take-away from these studies is that one reason why organizational change may be unlikely to occur is that people tend to see what is as what should be. While extremely poor organizational performance may increase support for change (e.g. Romanelli & Tushman, 1994), when the organizational performance is perceived to be relatively stable, the tendency to injunctify system norms may be heightened under conditions of external system threat, dependence, and inescapability. Therefore, these contexts do not provide opportune situations in which to garner support for change. Furthermore, employees' support

for organizational change may be enhanced to the extent that they are unaware of how a proposed change deviates from the status quo. In large organizations, this may be possible, since employees' knowledge of the existing state of affairs is unlikely to be comprehensive.

These findings also provide specific insight into several issues related to workplace diversity, including the criteria by which new employees are selected, existing employees' reactions to changing workplace demographics, and the success of affirmative action policies. First, as Kay et al. (2009) study on beliefs regarding the type of people that should hold positions of political power suggests, organizations may derive their selection criteria for new employees from the traits, skills, and demographic backgrounds of their existing employees, regardless of whether these qualities are most likely to contribute to organizational success. The implications of this study are thus consistent with elements of Schneider's (1987) Attraction–Selection–Attrition model, whereby new employees are selected who resemble an organization's existing workforce, thus reducing the likelihood of organizational change. Not only might such a process potentially hinder optimal organizational functioning, it also likely perpetuates and legitimizes discrimination against members of social groups traditionally under-represented in specific workplace roles.

Second, the results from Kay and Zanna, (2009) study on women in business suggests that, once hired, people are likely to be more accepting of demographically diverse organizational members to the extent they perceive the new demographic composition to be representative of the status quo. Hence, if employees believe, for instance, that top management positions are largely occupied by women and minorities, they are likely to be more accepting of specific women and minority group members occupying these positions (also see Kay et al., 2005). Emphasizing the existence of diversity in top management teams is, of course, only possible in contexts where a certain level of diversity exists. Hence, in organizations in which women and visible minorities do occupy some top management positions, strongly communicating to employees the existence of this demographic diversity in management will likely enhance their acceptance of new diverse management team members. However, in organizations in which employees are aware that current management is made up solely of white men, this tactic is clearly not feasible.

Furthermore, Kay et al. (2009) results also suggest that affirmative action programs framed as aiming to increase workplace demographic diversity are less likely to garner existing employees' support than affirmative action programs framed as having the goal of maintaining workplace demographic diversity. That is, affirmative action policies construed as preserving an organization's existing demographic diversity, rather than changing it, are likely to be interpreted as reinforcing, rather than threatening, the status quo.

4.2. Psychological rationalization of the status quo

In addition to demonstrating a straight-forward motivated preference for the status quo, people have also been

shown to engage in more complex cognitive processes aimed at justifying and rationalizing the current state of affairs. Research shows that individuals may adopt new attitudes or ideologies, rely on system-justifying stereotypes, or endorse explanations and attributions that help them avoid seeing their systems negatively. This psychological rationalization of the status quo not only allows people to manage their own anxiety related to their system's potential faults, but also gives rise to taken-for-granted belief systems that directly or indirectly act to legitimize and perpetuate prevailing system arrangements.

While proposed changes to the status quo are psychologically threatening and thus are unlikely to be supported, people have been shown to adjust their attitudes related to system changes as the change increases in likelihood (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002) and appears more permanent (Laurin & colleagues 2012). For instance, as the perceived likelihood of a university policy change increased, students rated the change as more desirable (Kay et al., 2002, Study 2). This *anticipatory rationalization* of the status quo was also shown for the election of political leaders – that is, as the election of a particular leader was perceived as increasingly probable, the subjective desirability of this election outcome increased (Kay et al., 2002, Study 1). People also tend to downplay the subjective importance of situations that are perceived to be unchangeable (Laurin et al., 2012, also see Crosby, 1984). In one study, participants were told about a policy change that restricted their cell phone while driving. Compared to participants in the control condition (who were given no information regarding how permanent the policy change was), participants who were told that this policy change was absolute indicated that this change was less bothersome to them. However, participants who were told that the policy change was in fact alterable reacted by indicating that the change was *more* bothersome to them than did participants in the control condition. Thus, people's perception of the extent to which change constitutes a permanent feature of the prevailing system triggers their motivation to rationalize away or downplay the negative qualities of the change.

Furthermore, Laurin, Gaucher, and Kay (2013); Laurin, Kay, et al. (2013) present evidence that people's tendency to rationalize system changes may be an implicit cognitive process, occurring mainly in contexts where people's cognitive resources are limited or when their attention is not directed toward the unfavorable nature of the change. In one experiment demonstrating this effect, some student participants' cognitive resources were taxed by asking them to keep a series of digits in memory (a standard manipulation of cognitive load) (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013; Study 4). These participants reacted less negatively to a policy that restricted their ability to choose their class schedule than another group of student participants whose cognitive resources were not taxed. A similar effect was obtained in another study in which participants were asked to rate their attitudes toward an organizational policy that restricted their vacation time (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013; Study 1). In this study, undergraduate student participants were asked to imagine that they worked at a

company that annually allotted three weeks of vacation time to its employees. Participants were initially told that this vacation time could be taken at any point during the year. Half of these participants were then told that this vacation time policy was being restricted – their boss had decided that, going forward, they would no longer be able to take their vacation time during the first two weeks of every month. All participants then rated the extent to which having flexibility in determining when they took their vacations was important to them. Results revealed that participants who were told that their vacation time was being restricted rated having flexible vacation time as less important than participants who were given no restriction information. In an additional experiment, people's attention either was or was not drawn to the restrictive nature of an emigration policy. Results from this study showed that people rationalized the policy only when their attention was not focused directly on the policy's restrictive nature. When their attention was drawn specifically to on the negative implication of the policy, they reacted negatively to it (Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013; Study 2).

Together this evidence suggests that, in organizations, employees are likely to adopt increasingly positive attitudes toward policies that are communicated to be very likely to occur and are non-alterable. Workers may also be more likely to engage in rationalization of changes when they are distracted or otherwise cognitively busy, as well as when the unfavorable nature of the change is not emphasized. Furthermore, research by Feygina, Jost, and Goldsmith (2010) suggests that people are less likely to react negatively to system problems and are more likely to support change when this behavior is “system sanctioned” or framed as preserving the system, rather than changing it. Conversely, employees are more likely to react critically to a policy when their attention is directed to its unfavorable nature and to the extent that the policy is portrayed as changeable. Perceived policy changeability might be enhanced to the extent that management presents new policies as trial runs or employees see different policies come and go.

Beyond influencing people's attitudes toward new organizational policies and other structural changes, people's tendency to engage in psychological rationalization of the status quo has been shown to shape their attitudes and behavior toward other people in the system. First, there is strong evidence to suggest that one's desire to see the system as legitimate heightens support for and confidence in leaders, in so far as these leaders are perceived as representatives of the system (e.g. Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Kay et al., 2002, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2011; Van der Toorn et al., 2011). People's desire to view systemic hierarchies as fair and legitimate has been demonstrated to influence the traits they ascribe to those occupying positions of power. For instance, Kay, Jost, and Young (2005) present evidence that people attribute causally relevant traits (i.e. intelligence) to those who occupy high status positions within a hierarchy, especially when the system justification motive is heightened.

People may also adopt system-justifying ideologies that help them avoid blaming the system for unfairness or

injustice. For instance, people have been shown to increasingly endorse essentialist explanations for gender inequality (i.e. differences between men and women have a biological basis) rather than blame gender inequality on systematic factors (Laurin et al., 2010).

In addition to the effect of perceived permanence on policy support (Laurin et al., 2012), this kind of rationalization of inequality has been shown to increase as a function of the perceived stability of the status quo (Laurin, Gaucher, et al., 2013). In one study, participants who were told that women's representation in top business executive positions was projected to remain stable were less likely to support programs aimed at redressing unrelated system inequalities than participants who were told that women's representation in executive positions was projected to change (Laurin, Gaucher, et al., 2013; Study 1). In this study, participants in the high stability condition were either told that women were predicted to retain a substantial presence in business or they were told that women were predicted to retain a minor presence in business. Conversely, participants in the low stability condition were either told that women's representation in business was predicted to either substantially increase or substantially decrease in years to come. All participants were then given a list of programs aimed at helping disadvantaged groups and asked to rate their support for these groups (i.e. how much they would be willing to donate money to them and volunteer for them). Results showed that participants in the high stability condition (regardless of whether they were told that women's representation in business would remain high or low) showed less support for these programs than participants in the low stability condition (regardless of whether they were told that women's representation in business was increasing or decreasing).

In another study, merely priming the concepts of stability and permanence, rather than change, led people to spontaneously produce more system-legitimizing, rather than system-blaming, explanations for extant gender inequality. In this study, participants completed a scrambled sentence task in which the concept of stability was primed or the concept of change was primed. Following this, they read information about the salary gap between male and female college graduates. Participants were then asked to generate up to six reasons for why this gap existed. Results showed that when participants were primed with the concept of stability, they generated more reasons for the gender pay gap that avoided blaming the system (i.e. men go into higher paying professions than women), than held the system responsible (i.e. sex-based discrimination exists) when compared to participants who were primed with the concept of change (Laurin, Gaucher, et al., 2013; Laurin, Kay, et al., 2013; Study 2). These studies indicate that people are more likely to rationalize away unequal outcomes for other individuals in the system when the status quo is perceived as relatively permanent and unchanging.

Furthermore, people's motivated desire to avoid seeing systemic inequalities and discrimination has been shown to manifest itself in the existence of “complementary stereotypes” – beliefs that distribute positive and negative

traits across groups of people generally occupying different positions with the system hierarchy. Exposure to complementary stereotypes about the rich and poor, as well as men and women, has been shown to have a system-justifying function (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). For instance, people who were shown information indicated that men are better managers than women and were then exposed to the stereotype that women are more friendly, cooperative, and warm than men, showed heightened endorsement of the American system compared to participants who were not exposed to this complementary ascription of positive qualities across the genders. More generally, people's desire to maintain the belief that their systems are fair and just has been shown to bias the way they interpret and remember information about others. For example, bad people are remembered to win less money in a lottery than good people and threatening people's belief in a just world enhanced their biased recall of others' undeserved rewards (Callan, Kay, Davidenko, & Ellard, 2009).

Thus, in organizational contexts, people's motivation to justify existing structural arrangements may have significant downstream consequences for attitudes and behavior toward other organizational members. Employees' motivation to avoid blaming their organizational system for perpetuating social inequalities (for instance, gender discrimination) may affect how they explain status differences between groups of demographically diverse organizational members as well as the traits they ascribe to different employees. More broadly, people's desire to view existing organizational hierarchies as legitimate may cause them to use others' positions within the organizational hierarchy to infer the kinds of characteristics they possess – that is, people are likely to see those in power as competent and thus deserving of their high status position.

4.3. Attention to system flaws

While most empirical work on the consequences of the system-justification motive has focused on people's belief systems and attitudes, there is also initial evidence to suggest that people's desire to avoid seeing their systems in a negative light may have more basic cognitive and perceptual effects, impacting their attention to system-threatening information. For instance, Shepherd and Kay (2012) show that people's system justification motive may inhibit information gathering, especially when there is a chance that information could reflect poorly on their system. Specifically, they found that people avoided reading negative news stories about problems related to the economy and the environment when these problems were perceived to be complex, and the perceived complexity of the problem enhanced people's trust in, and dependency on, the government to take care of these problems.

For instance, in one study conducted during the United States' economic recession (spring 2010) participants were given either a simple or a complex description of the U.S. economy. Following this, all participants' general feelings of dependence on the government were measured as well as the extent to which they trusted the government to

effectively manage the economy. Participants were also asked to indicate their desire to avoid learning more information about the economy (Shepherd & Kay, 2012, Study 5). Results from this study showed that participants who read complex information about the economy felt increasingly dependent on the government compared to participants who read simple information, and this increased sense of dependency resulted in an enhanced desire to avoid further information about economic issues. Importantly, the relationship between enhanced government dependency (following complex information about the economy) and increased avoidance of further economic information was mediated by participants' increased trust in the government to handle economic issues. Overall, these results suggest a feedback loop whereby encountering complex information related to a system problem increases people's reliance on that system, and thereby decreases their motivation to attend to information related to the problem. There is also evidence that this effect may be intensified to the extent that people feel personally connected to a system problem. For instance, Shepherd and Kay, (2014) show that people living in states along the Gulf Coast of the U.S. were more likely to avoid information about the BP oil spill than people living further away from where the oil spill occurred.

Furthermore, our research in progress (Proudfoot et al., 2013) suggests that employees may avoid perceiving flaws in their organization when their system-justification motive is heightened. In one study, we investigated employees' self-reported perceptions of inefficiency in their workplace. Consistent with the idea that employees should be increasingly motivated to overlook flaws with their organization when their system-justification motive is triggered, we found that employees who were placed in a high system inescapability condition perceived significantly less inefficiency in their organization compared to employees who were placed in a low system inescapability condition. In another study, we examined employees' tendency to selectively recall inefficiency problems in their workplace. Selective recall paradigms are used in research on motivated cognition as a measure of biased memory away from information that is inconsistent with individuals' current goals or motivations (also see Gaucher et al., 2010). Hence, when people's system justification motive is heightened, we would expect them to recall fewer system flaws. Consistent with this prediction, we found that employees who were told that the labor market was not improving (high system inescapability condition) listed significantly fewer inefficiency problems in their organization compared to employees who were told that the labor market was improving (low system inescapability condition). Together, results support the idea that triggering employees' system justification motive may lead employees to defensively deny the existence of inefficiency in their workplace.

5. Directions for future research

Earlier in this chapter, we argued that work organizations possess the same kinds of psychological properties as the systems typical of most existing system justification

research and thus are likely to be justified and defended. That is, organizations, much like socio-political systems and related institutions, are external systems whose effective functioning the individuals embedded in them are dependent on, both for the resources they provide and as sources of order and structure. However, not precluding these important similarities, work organizations also tend to have properties that make them distinct from other types of social systems, several of which provide compelling launching points for future system justification research.

Organizations are relatively bounded systems situated within a broader sociocultural, political, and economic environment. This feature of organizations makes them unique contexts in which to study how a system's shifting external environment may influence the system-justifying tendencies of those embedded in that system, by indirectly enhancing individuals' sense of dependence on their work organization. As our research on the impact of labor market conditions on the system-justifying tendencies of organizational members suggests, the dynamics of the economy, in restricting access to employment alternatives, can have an indirect effect on employees' desire to avoid acknowledging their current organization's flaws (Proudfoot et al., 2013). Furthermore, an abundance of existing work delineating the different types of environmental uncertainties faced by organizations (i.e. legal and competitive challenges) may also provide important insights on the types of exogenous factors that may trigger the system justification motive (cf. Duncan, 1972; Milliken, 1987; Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). While previous system justification research has shown that external criticism or attacks directed at a system trigger system defense (e.g. Kay et al., 2005; Napier et al., 2006), the role played by generalized shifts in a system's outside environment in instigating the system justification motive has been largely unexplored, perhaps because of the tendency of previous research to focus on large-scale social systems.

Furthermore, organizations can be thought of as systems embedded within larger systems. An individual employed at an organization is not only situated within that system, but is also embedded in a larger socio-political system, and both of these have the potential to constrain the individual's access to resources, shape his or her outcomes, and provide an external source of order and structure. Drawing on Kay and colleagues (2008, 2010) compensatory control model, individuals' tendency feel particularly dependent on, and thus justify, their work organizations may vary as a function of their sense of dependence on other more macro-scale systems – such their nation and its associated institutions. Thus, the formal features of the macro-level systems that organizations operate within, such as the extent to which governmental policies strongly determine individuals' outcomes, may alter the degree to which individuals' look to their work organizations as an important external system on which they especially depend. Moreover, structural characteristics of a particular organization itself, such as its stability, permanence, and size, may also moderate the extent to which it is viewed as a significant external structure that must be justified and defended.

Finally, while work organizations are comparable to more macro-level social systems in that individuals depend, to some extent, on the effective functioning of both, they are distinct in terms of what defines their effectiveness, and thus in the types of system flaws that are likely to be psychologically defended. As previous system justification research suggests, in the context of socio-political systems, individuals are likely to justify and defend societal problems, such as injustice and inequality, as these problems present a threat to the legitimacy of the existing social structure. Most work organizations, however, tend to be formal systems with purposes beyond achieving social outcomes. That is, they have explicit functional goals such as those related to profitability or adherence to specific ethical standards. Thus, organizations present a context in which other types of system flaws or weaknesses, specifically those relevant to the ability of the system's structure and processes to optimally achieve its stated goals, may be psychologically defended and rationalized away by its members.

6. Summary and concluding remarks

Broadly, the theory and research reviewed in this chapter suggests that people's motivated tendency to defend and bolster their external systems has a number of strong implications for several key domains of organizational behavior research and practice. As we have demonstrated, System Justification Theory can help us better understand the psychological factors that block and facilitate support for organizational change, why employees may or may not engage in specific types of organizational citizenship behavior, and potential barriers to the integration of a diverse workforce. Beyond linking SJT research to these three key domains, we have drawn on extant research to further discuss the varied ways in which people's system justification motive may manifest itself in organizational contexts – whether through the injunctification of system norms, the psychological rationalization of system faults, or the tendency to avoid acknowledging system flaws at all. We have also outlined the organizational contexts in which these tendencies may be heightened, pointing to the role that system inescapability, system dependency, system threat, and low personal control may play in creating situations in which people's system-justification motive is most likely to be engaged. Finally, we have provided some key directions for future research on system justification in organizations.

Throughout this chapter, we have attempted to make the case for why managers and business scholars alike should take into consideration people's motivation to defend their systems as a unique and powerful driver of workplace-related perceptions, attitudes and behavior. As much of the research we have discussed suggests, people's motivated preference for the status quo may have consequences that are both beneficial and detrimental to both organizations themselves and their individual members. While people's psychological tendency to idealize and justify existing ways of doing things and avoid critiquing their system may enhance organizational stability and thus, in some cases, promote effective

workplace functioning, this tendency can also have undesirable, and often unnoticed, consequences – impeding the integration of new structures, processes, and perspectives needed for organizations and their members to succeed and flourish.

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