Motivated employee blindness: The impact of labor market instability on judgment of organizational inefficiencies

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ABSTRACT

While employees might be expected to be especially vigilant to problems within their organization during times of economic instability, we build on motivational perspectives put forth by System Justification Theory to propose the opposite effect, namely that economic instability enhances employees' tendency to defensively ignore and diminish organizational problems. We experimentally manipulated perceptions of labor market trends and asked participants to report on problems within their own actual organization. As predicted, an ostensibly weak external labor market led employees to perceive their organization as less inefficient (Study 1), identify fewer organizational efficiency problems (Study 2), downplay the impact of organizational inefficiencies (Study 3), and generate a greater ratio of pros to cons regarding how their organization is run (Study 4), compared to employees exposed to relatively favorable labor market information. Results suggest an enhanced motivation to deny the existence of organizational flaws when employment alternatives are perceived to be scarce.

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1. Introduction

An organizational system's ability to detect inefficiencies is essential to its survival and profitability, particularly during periods of economic instability, when resources are scarce and organizational success is more tenuous (Cyert & March, 1963; Galbraith, 1973; Peteraf, 1993). While the task of fixing inefficiency is often officially assigned to specific individuals or units within an organization, all employees can play a valuable role in helping their organization identify efficiency problems (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). For instance, an assembly line worker on the factory floor may notice a mechanical flaw that is producing unnecessary physical waste, or an office worker completing a report may recognize a way that the reporting process could be re-organized to reduce redundancy. In the current paper, we draw from contemporary motivational perspectives (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994) to explore the relationship between economic instability and employees' attention to organizational problems, such as inefficiencies. That is, we investigate how specific economic factors may influence individuals' likelihood of noticing or recalling flaws within their organizational system.

While, intuitively, managers might expect their employees to be especially vigilant to organizational shortcomings during periods of economic instability, especially given that in an unstable economy with few job opportunities employees are increasingly dependent on their current organization's success, we provide theoretical and empirical support for the opposite hypothesis: that economic instability may actually *decrease* individual-level vigilance to organizational problems. That is, inspired by theory on individuals' motivated tendency to defend and justify their systems (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay & Friesen, 2011), we propose that economic instability, in signaling a scarcity of employment alternatives in the external labor market, may trigger a motivated tendency for employees to deny and downplay flaws within their current organization. We outline the reasoning for this prediction below.

System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) posits that people are motivated to maintain a positive view of the external systems they find themselves in, even when those systems are suboptimal or flawed. The theory was originally concerned with justification of unfairness in the context of hierarchical relationships between groups—that is, individuals' tendency to view group-based differences in status and power as fair—and thus the theory initially considered the structure of intergroup relations as the 'system' (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004). Now, the meaning of 'system' within the theory has evolved to include not only intergroup arrangements, but any external structure within

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which people function, such as governments or institutions (cf. Kay & Friesen, 2011; Jost et al., 2010). Furthermore, while early work on system justification focused on defense of societal unfairness, the theory has evolved to suggest that individuals may be motivated to justify and defend all system flaws that undermine the system's viability.

The *system justification motive* is thought to stem from individuals' need to manage the psychological threat evoked by weaknesses or faults in the systems upon which they feel dependent (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay & Zanna, 2009). Empirical work examining people's tendency to justify their social and political systems suggests that, rather than trying to change or improve these systems, people are often more concerned with avoiding the psychological threat produced by acknowledging these systems' negative characteristics. Thus, individuals often engage in motivated psychological processes – defending and justifying their system by rationalizing away or ignoring its shortcomings (e.g. Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006; Shepherd & Kay, 2012).

Furthermore, individuals' tendency to engage in system justification has been shown to be enhanced as their perceived dependence on that system increases. For instance, when people are made to believe that their current socio-political system exerts a powerful influence over its citizens' life outcomes, they increasingly justify the way that system currently operates and defend system faults (Kay et al., 2009). Thus, while conceptualizations of individuals as rational actors might predict that a strong sense that one's welfare depends on a system's effective functioning should increase individuals' desire to improve that system, a system justification perspective suggests the opposite effect – namely that greater system dependence, in enhancing the potential psychological threat aroused by acknowledging system problems, motivates increased defense of the way that system currently operates.

In the current paper, we draw from this theoretical framework to explore how people will respond in the context of work organizations and the individual-level identification of organizational problems. We investigate, broadly, whether perceived fluctuations in the labor market may trigger employees' motivation to defend their current organization and how this may manifest in employees' perceptions and attitudes toward flaws in their workplace. While one might naturally expect that decreased favorability of external labor market conditions would increase employee vigilance, we instead predict that it may enhance employees' motivation to ignore and downplay organizational shortcomings. We test this prediction across four experimental studies, conducted in the United States, in which we manipulate the favorability of labor market information shown to employees and measure their perceptions of inefficiency in their own organization (Study 1), their recall of efficiency problems in their own organization (Study 2), their tendency to rationalize away previously identified inefficiencies in their own organization by deeming them unimportant (Study 3), and the ratio of pros to cons they generate when asked to consider how their organization currently operates (Study 4).

The current research aims to extend theoretical conceptions of the triggers of the system justification motive by experimentally investigating how an organizational system's changing external environment may indirectly enhance or diminish employees' system-justifying tendencies. In our research, rather than conceiving of system justification as emerging as a result of individual differences or properties of the system being defended (cf. Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Kay & Friesen, 2011), the unique features of work organizations allow us to explore the role of exogenous economic trends in altering perceived system dependence and thus potentially triggering the system justification motive. While previous work has shown that external criticism or attacks directed at a system may heighten system defense (e.g. Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Napier et al., 2006) and that threatening the overarching status quo can enhance individuals' tendency to justify subcomponents of the system (e.g. Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011), our research is the first to examine the role played by changes in a system's broader institutional environment in indirectly affecting individuals' system justification motive.

Furthermore, our work adopts a fresh methodological approach to studying the psychological effects of labor market fluctuations. Prior research on employees' reactions to lack of employment alternatives is limited in its reliance on correlational data and scenario studies (e.g. Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988; Withey & Cooper, 1989). Our research is novel in that we conduct experiments wherein we manipulate employees' perceptions of the favorability of actual external labor market conditions, allowing us to isolate the unique psychological effects of fluctuations in the availability of job alternatives on employees' perceptions of their own organizations.

Second, by studying system justification in work organizations, we expand notions of what constitutes a threat to a system's effective functioning. System justification research to date, rooted in a socio-political context, has focused on individuals' tendency to defend social problems, such as injustice or climate change, as such problems pose a threat to the legitimacy and sustainability of social and political arrangements (e.g. Feygina et al., 2010; Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003). While we conceptualize work organizations as psychologically similar to social and political institutions in that individuals depend on the effective functioning of both types of systems, we also argue that organizations may be distinct in the types of problems or flaws that present a threat to the system's effective functioning. Specifically, in our research, we postulate that, unlike a relatively informal social system whose perceived effectiveness is determined by the legitimacy of the social outcomes it produces, a work organization represents a formally bounded system with a functional purpose beyond social goals. That is, work organizations exist in order to achieve a specific set of tangible outcomes, usually related to the production of goods or services. Thus, a particular organization's continued existence and success may be understood as dependent on its ability to effectively achieve its functional goals. Thus, in our research, we focus mainly on basic inefficiency in an organization's operations as a potential threat to an organization's effective functioning and thus something that may be psychologically defended by its members. We suggest that organizational inefficiency problems may threaten employees' sense that their organization operates in a way that is desirable and is a stable system that will last.

Third, our work is among the first to provide direct evidence of the implications of System Justification Theory for work organizations. The system justification motive has mainly been studied in the context of citizens' tendency to defend and bolster their social and political systems (cf. Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Friesen, 2011). Some initial studies have examined how individuals' tendency to justify their social-political system predicts their perceptions of fairness in workplace scenarios (van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010). Our goal is to demonstrate how a system justification perspective can provide unique insight into other phenomena of interest to organizational researchers and practitioners (cf. Proudfoot & Kay, 2014), such as actual employees' vigilance to toward inefficiency in their own organizations and how this might vary as a function of fluctuations in the external labor market.

2. Theoretical background

System Justification Theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994) provides a social psychological explanation for why external systems persist

and are supported despite the fact that these structures are often flawed or suboptimal. In early versions of the theory, the 'system' referred to the way social groups are organized within the broader societal context; however, SJT has since expanded to refer to 'systems' more generally as external structures that control people, such as the government and social institutions. SJT posits that people are motivated to maintain the belief that these systems are desirable, legitimate, and viable; that is, that they function in an optimal way. SJT further suggests that this motivation stems from the psychological threat created by acknowledgment of system problems or weaknesses (cf. Kay & Zanna, 2009). Thus contemporary perspectives on system justification suggest that people possess a motivated tendency not only to see their system as fair and legitimate, but also as functional, effective, and enduring. Individuals' system justification motive has been shown to provoke the use of psychological strategies aimed at defending and rationalizing away negative aspects of their systems in order to continue viewing them in a positive light (e.g. Kay et al., 2009; Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Laurin et al., 2010). This tendency is argued to have a soothing "palliative function" (Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

Previous theoretical and empirical work on system justification mainly focused on people's tendency to defend their socio-political systems and the consequences of this for individuals' attitudes and beliefs about social problems (cf. Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Zanna, 2009). Some empirical work has shown that people justify their smaller-scale social systems (such as education institutions and family networks) much in the same way that they defend larger-scale social systems (such as their nation state) (e.g. Laurin et al., 2010; Wakslak et al., 2011).

We propose that work organizations can be thought of as 'systems' in that they share many of the same psychological properties as the systems typical of SJT research. That is, individuals' well-being and success are largely dependent on the effective functioning of their work organizations, much like individuals are dependent on the effective functioning of their social, political, and economic systems. For instance, much like people depend on their socio-political system for access to resources and opportunities, people depend on their work organizations for income and, often, for achievement of their career goals. Thus, we suggest that System Justification Theory's basic tenet that individuals' perceptions and attitudes about the systems upon which they depend are often influenced by a psychological need to believe that these systems are functional and effective, may be applicable to the psychology of individuals in work organizations.

Yet, while organizations may be similar to social and political systems in some ways, they also have features that may make them psychologically distinct from these types of systems. Compared to socio-political systems, work organizations may be perceived as much easier systems to leave and become independent of. Thus individuals may not sense that their workplace is an inescapable structure in the same way that their socio-political system may be. Furthermore, because the success of an individual's work organization may be perceived as affecting his or her livelihood in much more direct, short-term way compared to that of his or her socio-political system, it is possible that individuals may react rationally, rather than defensively, to organizational flaws, attempting to address them instead of ignoring and downplaying them.

This line of reasoning is consistent with previous theoretical frameworks that cast organizational members as rational and self-interested – predicting that when employment alternatives are scarce, employees will react by increasingly participating in improving their organization (e.g. Hirschman, 1970; Rusbult et al., 1988). However, our work challenges this perspective by considering a less rational and more counterintuitive response to

lack of alternatives – namely that when faced with an unfavorable labor market, employees may react by avoiding acknowledgment of problems in their current workplace and instead, increasingly viewing the way that things are currently done in their organization as functional and efficient.

2.1. Triggering the system justification motive

Individuals' system-justifying tendencies may be enhanced in certain contexts. Situations that foster feelings of system dependence, such as those that make people feel that a particular system strongly controls their outcomes, have been shown to trigger, or increase, individuals' desire to maintain a positive view of that system (cf. Kay et al., 2009; Kay & Friesen, 2011). For instance, when people perceive that they lack free choice and personal control over their outcomes, they increasingly report feeling dependent on their current socio-political system to provide for them and are more likely to defend that system's policies (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). Moreover, when people are directly induced to believe that a particular system, or that system's authorities, controls their access to desired resources, they increasingly perceive that system and its representatives as reasonable and legitimate (Kay et al., 2009; Van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). In the current investigation, we leverage these findings to examine how fluctuations in the availability of employment alternatives in the external labor market, by affecting individuals' sense of dependence on their current organizational system, may similarly trigger individuals' system justification motive.

2.1.1. Labor market instability

Individuals' perceptions that they depend on a particular system may be enhanced when leaving that system is unlikely or unfeasible. Under such conditions, acknowledging system flaws is likely to be particularly psychologically threatening. Thus, being embedded in a system with few exit opportunities may increase one's motivation to see that system as desirable and defend its shortcomings (Laurin et al., 2010). Laurin et al. (2010) report evidence that system inescapability heightens system justification in a political context, showing that, compared to individuals who were told that emigration out of their socio-political system was relatively easy, individuals who were made to believe that emigration was difficult increasingly defended their current socio-political system, rationalizing away its problems, such as gender inequality, and derogating groups that were critical of the system.

In our research, we draw an organizational analog to consider the factors influencing individuals' perceptions of how difficult it would be to leave their current organization. March and Simon (1958) theorize that the state of the economy is the most important predictor of individuals' perceived ease of movement in the labor market. Consistent with this, our research takes labor market favorability as a key signal of the availability of employment alternatives outside of individuals' current organization. That is, poor external labor market conditions, characterized by few jobs and high levels of unemployment, are likely to restrict individuals' perceived ease of movement out of their current organization compared to more favorable labor market conditions, such as those characterized by low unemployment and increasing job growth. Thus, to the extent that System Justification Theory can be used to understand and predict individuals' response to external labor market fluctuations, we expected that, compared to employees facing a relatively favorable labor market, employees facing a weak labor market may be more motivated to psychologically defend and bolster their current organization. That is, we suggest that the motivation to avoid acknowledging problems that threaten a system's viability should be heightened when the system's survival

is perceived to be increasingly meaningful to the individual actor, as would be the case in a weak labor market in which few job alternatives exist.

2.2. Consequences of the system justification motive

System justifying tendencies emerge from the desire to, "imbue the status quo with legitimacy and to see it as good, fair, natural, desirable, and even inevitable" (Jost et al., 2004, pg. 887). That is, people want to see existing systems not only as fair and legitimate, but also as effective and lasting in a more general sense. The desire to psychologically defend external systems has been shown to have a diversity of effects on individual perception, cognition and behavior (e.g. Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay et al., 2005, 2009; Shepherd & Kay, 2012). In the current research, we focus on two key consequences of individuals' system justification motive that should be of considerable relevance to organizational behavior: (i) their attention to system flaws and (ii) their tendency to psychologically rationalize system problems.

2.2.1. Attention to system flaws

Perception and cognition are largely shaped by an individual's current goals or motivational states (cf. Bruner, 1957; Kruglanski, 1996; Kunda, 1990). People tend to psychologically construe their environment in a way that makes the world fit their desired view. For instance, fans of opposing sports teams have been shown to differentially interpret the meaning of fluke events during games, with fans of losing teams, but not winning teams, construing flukes as evidence of their team's ability (Gilovich, 1983). Furthermore, people often engage in information-gathering strategies that favor goal-consistent information over goal-inconsistent information (e.g. Dijksterhuis, Van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, & Schaper, 1996; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). For instance, individuals' motivation to see the world was a just and fair place has been demonstrated to influence their recall of past events involving 'good' and 'bad' people. Specifically, bad people are remembered to win less money in a lottery than good people (Callan, Kay, Davidenko, & Ellard, 2009). In sum, research on motivated cognition demonstrates that, despite the fact that individuals tend to think of themselves as objective, rational perceivers of the world (Ross & Ward, 1996), their basic perceptions and cognitions are often colored by their motivations to arrive at particular conclusions.

Individuals' desire to view the systems they are dependent upon in a positive light can be seen as a goal, directing and shaping their cognitive processing (Jost et al., 2010). Contexts that trigger people's system justification tendencies can be thought of placing individuals in a motivational state in which they gather and process information in a way that helps them achieve their goal of believing that their system is desirable and well-functioning. Thus, when individuals' system justification motive is triggered, such as when they find themselves in a system with few exit opportunities, they may exhibit biased processing of system-relevant information in a way that makes positive information more salient and negative information less salient. Consistent with this notion, people's tendency to justify their political systems has been shown to inhibit their gathering of information that reflects poorly on that system (Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Shepherd & Kay, 2012).

In our research, we focus mainly on individuals' vigilance toward efficiency problems in order to provide a consistent picture across studies using an outcome measure that is important but has not yet been examined within system justification research. We suggest that inefficiency threatens employees' sense that their organization functions in an optimal way and is a system that is stable and will not fail. We also present a final study that examines individuals' more general tendency to attend more to their organization's positive features than its negative features. In general, we propose that triggering employees' system justification motive

may increase their desire to avoid acknowledging their organization's weaknesses – a prediction derived from SJT's main contention: that people are motivated to view the system as better than it actually is across whichever dimensions might threaten that specific system's viability.

Hence, under conditions where employees' system-justifying tendencies are enhanced, such as when employment alternatives are scarce, we might expect them to be increasingly motivated to perceive their current organization as a place where inefficiency is not a problem.

Hypothesis 1. Employees facing an unfavorable labor market will perceive less inefficiency within their organization compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market.

Such conditions may also lead employees to exhibit biased memory recall – inhibiting retrieval of information about inefficiency in their organization.

Hypothesis 2. Employees facing an unfavorable labor market will recall fewer efficiency problems within their organization compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market.

Furthermore, when exit opportunities are few, we might expect individuals to focus more on their organization's strengths rather than its weaknesses. That is, under such conditions, we predict a motivated tendency for employees to attend more to gathering information about the benefits of how their organization operates compared to information about its drawbacks.

Hypothesis 3. Employees facing an unfavorable labor market will generate a greater ratio of pros to cons about how their organization currently operates compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market.

2.2.2. Psychological rationalization of system problems

People tend find ways to rationalize and justify problems that they do recognize in their systems (Feygina et al., 2010; Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013; Laurin et al., 2010, 2012). That is, sometimes, rather than ignoring or avoiding a problem, people may adjust their attitudes and beliefs surrounding the problem in order to maintain a positive view of their system. Consistent with this, we expect that, in addition to employees' system justification motive inhibiting their vigilance to organizational problems, they might also exhibit a motivated tendency to rationalize away problems that they do encounter, downplaying these flaws in a way that allows them to maintain the belief that their system is operating well.

Hypothesis 4a. Employees facing an unfavorable labor market will diminish the negative organizational impact of efficiency problems compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market.

Moreover, given that more serious organizational problems are obviously more threatening than smaller, more trivial ones, to the extent this effect is driven by needs to manage threat, employees (under unfavorable labor market conditions) may be more strongly motivated to diminish the perceived relevance of larger inefficiencies compared to smaller inefficiencies.

Hypothesis 4b. The effect proposed in Hypothesis 3a will be stronger for more serious problems.

The psychological mechanism underlying all our hypotheses is the same – that is, whether employees avoid attending to problems or adopt beliefs that help them rationalize these problems as

inconsequential, they can be thought of as taking psychological steps to minimize the threat that these problems provoke and thus maintain a relatively positive view of their organizational system.

3. Overview of the present research

In the present research, we examine whether a weak external labor market leads employees to deny and downplay problems within their own organization. We conducted four experiments in which we sampled individuals currently employed at organizations in the United States. In all studies, we experimentally manipulated the favorability of the U.S. labor market, varying whether participants were led to believe they were facing a weak market with few jobs or a relatively strong market. In each study, following our manipulation, we included a different measure of individuals' tendency to ignore or psychologically minimize the existence of problems within their organization. In Study 1, we examined employees' self-reported perceptions of how inefficient their organization was. In Study 2, we investigated employees' selective recall of organizational inefficiencies. In Study 3, we measured employees' tendency to diminish the perceived organizational relevance of inefficiencies they themselves had previously identified. In Study 4, we compared how many pros and cons employees generated when they were asked to analyze how their organization was run.

3.1. Samples

Our samples were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a national panel that allows individuals to sign up to participate in online surveys in exchange for a small payment, which they receive through their Amazon.com account.[1] Through this panel, we recruited individuals employed in full-time jobs at organizations in the United States. We limited our samples to individuals working at organizations with more than ten employees in order to screen out people who were self-employed. All participants completed our surveys anonymously – no identifying information was collected. Before taking part in our studies, all participants were reassured that no identifying information would be collected with their study data and that no individual participant would be identified when the study results are reported. This was done so as to limit the potential that participants might have been concerned that their responses would be seen by their employers. Consistent with Amazon Mechanical Turk's payment norms (Buhrmester et al., 2011), all participants were compensated fifty cents for survey completion.

We recruited our samples online through Amazon Mechanical Turk for two reasons. First, by recruiting employees through Amazon Mechanical Turk, we were able to experimentally manipulate perceptions of labor market trends while testing our hypotheses using diverse samples of workers employed in a range of occupations at different organizations across multiple industries. Had we tested our predictions using laboratory experiments instead of experiments conducted online, it would have been much less feasible for us to collect data on actual employees' perceptions of their own organizations. Furthermore, online experiments have been demonstrated to be as effective as laboratory experiments for capturing cognitive biases (Crump, McDonnell, & Gureckis, 2013; Germine et al., 2012).

Second, conducting our experiments via Amazon Mechanical Turk allowed us to specifically measure employees' perceptions

of flaws in their organization, rather than their willingness to speak up about them within their workplace. Within most organizations, these two issues are often indistinguishable, since employees may not report problems to management because of a reluctance to speak up about problems (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson, 1999), rather than a motivated denial of their existence. Hence, by collecting data anonymously from employees recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, rather than partnering with a particular organization to collect data from their workforce, we were able to avoid this potential confound.

3.2. Manipulation of labor market favorability (Studies 1–3)

Data collection for Study 1 through Study 3 took place between April and July of 2012. The unusual economic instability present in the United States during this time provided us with a unique opportunity to investigate our research question, in that we were able to realistically manipulate employees' perceptions of projected labor market favorability. During this period of time, the United States' economy was still in the process of recovering from the recession of 2008–2009. This recession saw the national unemployment rate spike to 10%, doubling the three year pre-recession average of 5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). By April–July of 2012, the U.S. labor market was showing some signs of improvement; however, the economy was still perceived as unstable and its future relatively uncertain (Pew Research Center, 2013). Importantly, unemployment rates during this period of time were still high at slightly above 8% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Therefore, in order to manipulate perceived labor market favorability, participants in studies 1–3 were either informed that experts predicted that unemployment would drop over the next year, indicating that the labor market was improving, or that experts predicted that unemployment would remain high over the next year, indicating that the labor market was not improving.

Thus, in each of these three studies, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving). Participants in both conditions were instructed that their first task would be to evaluate the presentation style of newly developed educational materials. We included these instructions in order to expose participants to our experimental manipulation without rousing suspicion regarding the validity of the materials or eliciting demand characteristics. We selected this subtle exposure manipulation, rather than something more overt or dramatic, because our goal was to emulate how individuals are usually exposed to this kind of information in the real world (e.g. via mentions in the news media).

Participants in the Labor Market Improving condition were asked to evaluate information indicating that the U.S. labor market was expected to improve and unemployment was projected to drop in the next year. Specifically, participants saw the following text and were asked to evaluate how clear and informative it was:

> Recent analyses by economists at University of Chicago, Brookings Institution and Harvard University indicate that the U.S. economy continues to recover and the job market is improving. According to these experts, the evidence suggests that we should see a substantial increase in the number of jobs in the next year. Unemployment rates continue to drop at a predictable rate in all sectors and at all levels. As the figures below indicate, this trend will persist over the next 12 months.

Participants also saw two charts depicting historical data on the national unemployment rate from 2006 to present, with unemployment projected to steadily decline from present until 2013 (see Appendix A for materials) and were asked to select the chart style they preferred.

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[1] Data from Amazon Mechanical Turk samples has been demonstrated to be of similar quality to data obtained through traditional survey methods (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) and the panel has been shown to produce demographically and geographically diverse samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012).

Participants in the Labor Market Not Improving condition were asked to evaluate information indicating that the U.S. job market was not expected to improve and unemployment was projected to remain high in the year. Specifically, participants were asked to evaluate clarity and informativeness of the following text:

Recent analyses by economists at University of Chicago, Brookings Institution and Harvard University indicate that while the U.S. economy continues to recover, the job market remains stagnant. According to these experts, there is little evidence to suggest that we should see a substantial improvement in unemployment in the next year. Unemployment rates continue to remain high in all sectors and at all levels. As the figures below indicate, this trend will persist over the next 12 months.

Participants also saw two charts depicting historical data on the national unemployment rate from 2006 to present, with unemployment projected to remain high from present until 2013 (see Appendix A for materials) and were asked to select which chart style they preferred.

In order to minimize possible inattention to these stimuli materials, we included a multiple choice comprehension question at the end of each of our studies asking participants to identify the main message of the materials they had seen. Participants who failed the comprehension question were excluded from our analyses, as is recommended in online panel survey research (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2012).

3.2.1. Pre-test

In order to confirm that this experimental manipulation of labor market favorability influenced participants' perceived ease of movement within the market, we conducted a pre-test with a separate sample of employees.

For the pre-test, we recruited fifty-nine employees (42% female) via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants' mean age was 28.52 ($SD = 7.09$). Eighty-one percent of participants identified as Caucasian, 7% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, 7% as Hispanic, 4% as Black/African American, and 2% identified their ethnicity as Other. Thirty percent identified their highest level of education as College Graduate, 13% as Some College, 6% as High School Graduate, 5% as Some Post Graduate, and 4% as Post Graduate Degree. Participants were employed in seventeen different industries, with the most frequently represented industries being IT/Software Development (17%), Education/Training (12%), and Accounting/Finance/Insurance (10%). Participants' tenure at their organization ranged from three months to twenty years. Participant demographics did not interact with our findings, so they will not be discussed further.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of our two experimental conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving). Following exposure to our labor market favorability manipulation, participants were asked to complete three items. Participants were asked to rate how difficult it would be to find a new job in the next year on a 1–9 scale ranging from 1 "Very easy" to 9 "Very difficult". They also rated how risky leaving one's job would be in the next year on a 1–9 scale ranging from 1 "Not risky at all" to 9 "Extremely risky". Finally, they were asked to estimate how many months it would take someone to find new job if they wanted to leave their current job in the next year. Following completion of these items, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

Participants in the Labor Market Not Improving condition evaluated finding a new job to be significantly more difficult ($M = 6.89$, $SD = 1.25$) compared to participants in the Labor Market Improving condition ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(57) = 2.79$, $p = .007$, $d = .73$. Participants in the Labor Market Not Improving condition also judged leaving one's job to be significantly more risky ($M = 7.41$, $SD = .97$) compared to participants in the Labor Market Improving condition ($M = 6.50$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(57) = 3.00$, $p = .004$, $d = .80$. In addition, participants in the Labor Market Not Improving condition estimated that it would take significantly more time (as measured in months) to find a new job ($M = 11.81$, $SD = 4.85$) compared to participants in the Labor Market Improving condition ($M = 8.94$, $SD = 4.83$), $t(57) = 2.27$, $p = .027$, $d = .59$. Together, these results assured us that our manipulation was effective in influencing employees' perceived ease of movement with the labor market.

4. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to test whether labor market favorability impacted employees' self-reported perceptions of inefficiency in their workplace. Since we expect that increasing the perceived scarcity of employment alternatives will enhance employees' desire to view their current organization positively and ignore its negative characteristics, we predict that employees facing a weak labor market will report less inefficiency within their organization compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market (H1).

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

One hundred and five adults employed in full-time jobs at organizations in the United States were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Fifteen of these individuals failed the comprehension check question at the end of the study, so they were excluded from the sample. Thus, our final sample consisted of ninety employees (53% female). Participants' mean age was 30.1 ($SD = 8.35$). Seventy-nine percent of participants identified as Caucasian, 8% as Black/African American 7% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, 4% as Hispanic, and 2% identified their ethnicity as Other. Thirty-eight percent identified their highest level of education as College Graduate, 34% as Some College, 14% as Post-Graduate Degree, 9% as High School Graduate, 6% as Some Post Graduate, and 1% as Some High School. Participants were employed in twenty-three different industries, with the most frequently represented industries being Education/Training (14%), Sales/Retail/Business Development (11%) and Medical/Health (8%) and IT/Software Development (8%). Participants' tenure at their organization ranged from one month to thirty-nine years. Participant demographics did not interact with our findings, so they will not be discussed further.

4.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two labor market conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving). Following exposure to the manipulation stimuli, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with five items measuring their perceptions of inefficiency within their organization. The items were, "Waste is a problem in my organization", "I think management is effective at minimizing waste in my organization." (reverse coded), "My organization has a reasonably low level of waste compared to other organizations." (reverse coded), "My organization is run efficiently compared to other organizations." (reverse coded), and "Things could be done in a more efficient way in my organization." Participants indicated their level of agreement with each of these statements on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree". The five items shared a univariate factor structure and had high inter-item consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. Thus, we computed a composite perceived organizational
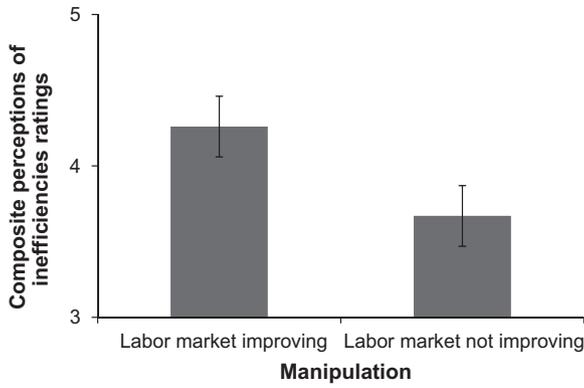
Fig. 1. Effect of labor market manipulation on perceived organizational inefficiency (Study1).

inefficiency index using mean ratings on these five items, with higher scores indicating greater perceived inefficiency. Scores on this index ranged from 1 to 7 ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .88$). Following completion of these items, participants completed a series of demographic measures and were debriefed.

4.2. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, employees who were told that the labor market was not improving perceived significantly less inefficiency in their organization ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.42$) compared to employees who were told that the labor market was improving ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(88) = 2.28$, $p = .025$, $d = .48$ (see Fig. 1). These results provide preliminary support for our general prediction that increased scarcity of employment alternatives motivates employees to deny the existence of problems in their organization. However, because of the limitations inherent in using self-report scale items to measure employees' motivated denial of organizational inefficiency, in Study 2 we sought to conceptually replicate this effect using a more widely validated measure of motivated cognition.

5. Study 2

Study 2 examined employees' recall of specific efficiency problems in their workplace. Biased recall of information is commonly used in social psychological research as an indicator of motivated cognitive processing (see Bruner, 1957; Dijksterhuis et al., 1996; Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Gaucher, Hafer, Kay, & Davidenko, 2010; Kunda, 1990; Sanitioso et al., 1990). This research has demonstrated that people exhibit motivated memory biases, wherein they are more likely to remember information that is consistent with their current goals and less likely to remember information that is goal-inconsistent. In our research, given that we predict that increased scarcity of employment alternatives may enhance people's goal to maintain a positive view of current organization and ignore its flaws, we predict that employees facing an unfavorable labor market will recall fewer inefficiency problems within their organization compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market (H2).

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

Eighty-three adults employed in full-time jobs at organizations in the United States were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Fifteen individuals failed the comprehension check question at the

end of the study, so they were excluded from the sample. Thus, our final sample consisted of sixty-eight employees (43% female). Participants' mean age was 27.1 ($SD = 6.88$). Seventy-two percent of participants identified as Caucasian, 19% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, 4% as Black/African American, and 3% as Hispanic. Forty-one percent identified their highest level of education as College Graduate, 38% as Some College, 9% as High School Graduate, 6% as Post-Graduate Degree, 4% as Some Post Graduate, and 2% as Some High School. Participants were employed in sixteen different industries, with the most frequently represented industries being Food Services/Hospitality (13%), IT/Software Development (12%) and Education/Training (10%). Participants' tenure at their organization ranged from six months to twelve years. Participant demographics did not interact with our findings, so they will not be discussed further.

5.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two labor market conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving). Following exposure to the manipulation, participants read the following introductory information:

All organizations face challenges related to efficiency. Problems with efficiency can include things like the amount of physical waste your organization produces, as well as how employees' time and energy are used, the way decisions are made, or how resources are allocated. Think about the different ways that your organization could be more efficient.

As a measure of participants' biased recall of efficiency problems, we employed a listing measure (see Gaucher et al., 2010) in which participants were asked to list as many problems related to efficiency in their organization as they could think of. The total number of inefficiencies listed was computed for each participant. Following this, participants completed a series of demographic measures and were debriefed.

5.2. Results and discussion

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, employees who were told that the labor market was not improving listed significantly fewer inefficiency problems in their organization ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 3.34$) compared to employees who were told that the labor market was improving ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 2.35$), $t(66) = 2.27$, $p = .026$, $d = .55$ (see Fig. 2). These results provide additional support for our prediction that unfavorable labor market conditions motivate employees to defensively deny the existence of flaws in their workplace. Taken together with the results of Study 1, these findings demonstrate that, in addition to perceiving their organization as less inefficient,
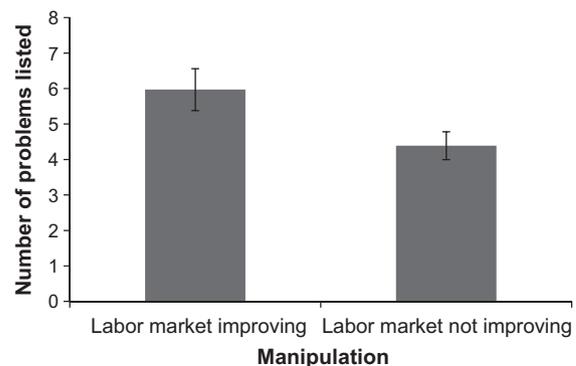

Fig. 2. Effect of labor market manipulation on number of efficiency problems listed (Study 2).

unfavorable labor market conditions may create a biased tendency for employees to avoid recalling efficiency problems in their workplace.

In addition to heightening employees' feelings of dependence on their current organization, it is possible that our manipulation of labor market favorability could also have increased participants' fear that, in a bad economy, they themselves could be fired or laid off from their organization, which might prompt them to avoid recalling issues related to their own inefficiency at work. It is important to distinguish here between employees' job security concerns stemming specifically from worry about personally being fired or laid off and job security-related concerns stemming from worry about their entire organization failing. While the psychological threat induced by the idea that one's entire organization could fail is what we suggest may prompt employees to deny the existence of organizational efficiency flaws, the threat of personally being let go from one's organization is a separate concern and an alternative explanation for our findings.

Thus, we sought to confirm that the effect we found was driven by employees' motivation to avoid recalling problems that posed a threat to the general viability of their organization rather than a reluctance to recall problems that might threaten their own job or position (such as those inefficiencies suggesting that, for instance, their own jobs were unnecessary or that employees waste time at work). We therefore had two coders (blind to our hypothesis and study condition) examine participants' lists and generate a coding scheme of the types of inefficiencies listed. The two coders then independently coded the number of times each type of inefficiency was listed. To assess inter-coder reliability, we computed intra-class correlations (ICCs; McGraw & Wong, 1996). Averages of the two coders' scores for each inefficiency type were then used in our analysis.

We found that, across the two conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving), participants referred to five categories of organizational inefficiencies: physical waste (ICC = .96), poor decision making/bureaucracy/communication (ICC = .84), low employee productivity/motivation (ICC = .77), outdated technology (ICC = .80), and how employment time was spent/how roles and responsibilities were defined (ICC = .65). Across conditions, poor decision making/bureaucracy/communication was the commonly listed type of inefficiency, comprising 39% of problems listed, followed by low employee productivity/motivation (20%), how employment time was spent/how roles and responsibilities were defined (20%), physical waste (11%), and outdated technology (10%). We found no significant differences in types of problems generated across experimental conditions. Importantly, there was no evidence that the effect of our manipulation on the number of inefficiencies listed was due to employees' unwillingness to report the kind of inefficiency that could result in them personally being fired or laid off when the labor market was unfavorable. That is, we found that inefficiencies potentially related to employees' own job (i.e. low employee productivity/motivation or how employees' time was spent/how roles and responsibilities were defined) were reported at similar rates across experimental conditions ($ps > .2$ for all chi square tests) which is consistent with the notion that Study 2's results are indeed due to a motivated tendency to deny the existence of organizational flaws when exit opportunities are perceived to be scarce, rather than a desire to avoid acknowledging or reporting the kinds of efficiency problems that could put employees at risk of being let go.

6. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that decreased labor market favorability led employees to report lower levels of organizational inefficiency and generate fewer instances of inefficiency in their organization. The evidence presented so far suggests that, when exit is increasingly unlikely, employees' enhanced desire to view their organization in a positive light may manifest itself in their perceptions of workplace inefficiency and their retrieval of efficiency-related problems from memory. In Study 3, our goal was to examine whether employees' motivation to view their organization positively under unfavorable external labor market conditions might enhance their tendency to rationalize away organizational inefficiencies that they do encounter. That is, since acknowledging that one's organization might have flaws is likely to be particularly psychologically threatening when exit opportunities are scarce, we expect that, in addition to avoiding acknowledgment of inefficiencies, employees will be increasingly motivated to rationalize away workplace inefficiencies that they do encounter by diminishing their importance or relevance to their organization's success (H4a). Furthermore, employees (under unfavorable labor market conditions) should be more strongly motivated to diminish the perceived relevance of larger, more threatening inefficiencies they have identified compared to smaller, less threatening inefficiencies (H4b).

Hence, in this study, prior to reading information about the state of the labor market, we asked employees to identify three efficiency problems in their workplace. We then asked them to indicate which of these three problems was the most inefficient and which was the least inefficient. Subsequently, we exposed employees to our labor market manipulation. Following the manipulation, we showed employees the three problems they had generated at the beginning of the study and asked them to asked them to rate how much of an impact they thought each inefficiency would have on organizational success.

Study 3's design also allowed us to address an alternative explanation of Study 1 and Study 2's results—that in a poor economy, in which all organizations are struggling, participants may judge their own organization as relatively free of problems via a process akin to social comparison. In Study 3, if participants were simply using the economy as a baseline to determine the actual impact of problems on their organization's success, instead of being motivated to deny problems that are threatening, we would not expect the pattern of moderation we predict, whereby participants facing a relatively weak labor market should diminish the impact of larger organizational problems more than smaller ones.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

Fifty-one adults employed in full-time jobs at organizations in the United States were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. Ten people failed the comprehension check question at the end of the study, so they were excluded from the sample. This left a final sample of forty-one employees (51% female). Participants' mean age was 29.29 ($SD = 7.36$). Eighty-two percent of participants identified as Caucasian, 7% as Black/African American, 5% as Hispanic, 2% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 2% as Native American/Alaska Native. Forty-four percent identified their highest level of education as College Graduate, 22% as Some College, 20% as Post Graduate Degree, 12% as High School Graduate, and 2% as Some Post Graduate. Participants were employed in fifteen different industries, with the most frequently represented industries being Sales/Retail/Business Development (12%), Administrative/Clerical (10%) and Medical/Health (10%). Participants' tenure at their organization ranged from one to twenty-eight years. Participant demographics did not interact with our findings, so they will not be discussed further.

6.1.2. Materials and procedure

First, participants read the same introductory information about organizational inefficiency that was used in Study 2. They were then asked to list exactly three ways in which their organization could be made more efficient. Following this, they were asked to rank these three efficiency problems from (#1) most inefficient to (#3) least inefficient. This ranking provided us with a measure of how serious participants perceived each problem to be, with problems increasing in perceived seriousness as their rank increased. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the two labor market conditions (Labor Market Improving vs. Labor Market Not Improving). Following exposure to the manipulation, participants saw the following instructions:

> At the beginning of the survey, you listed various ways in which your organization faces challenges related to efficiency. In the long term, some types of efficiency problems are highly consequential in terms of how successful an organization ultimately is, while others have little or no impact on an organization's success. To what extent is each of the following issues relevant to your organization's future success?

Participants were then presented with the list of efficiency problems they generated at the beginning of the study. They were then asked to rate the extent to which they thought each of the problems would ultimately impact their organization in a meaningful way on a 1–9 scale ranging from 1 "Not at all" to 9 "To a large extent", thus giving them the opportunity to diminish the potential threat induced by the problems they had earlier generated and ranked. These three ratings were averaged to create a composite perceived impact score for each participant. Following this, participants completed a series of demographic measures and were debriefed.

6.2. Results and discussion

To investigate Hypothesis 4a, we examined participants' composite perceived impact scores across our labor market conditions. Supportive of our hypothesis, participants who were told that the labor market was not improving evaluated the three efficiency problems they had generated at the beginning of the study to be, on average, less impactful on organizational success ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 1.39$) compared to employees who were told that the labor market was improving ($M = 7.72$, $SD = .87$), $t(39) = 2.01$, $p = .05$, $d = .90$ (see Fig. 3). Together with Study 2's results, these findings provide evidence that when faced with an unfavorable labor market, employees are not only less likely to identify workplace inefficiencies but are increasingly motivated to diminish the impact of previously-acknowledged inefficiencies.
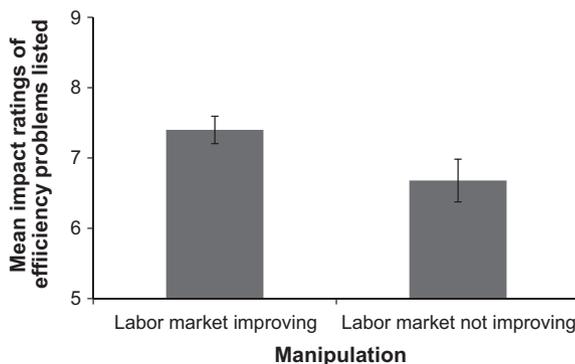
To investigate Hypothesis 4b, instead of looking at participants' composite impact score, as we did above, we examined participants' individual impact ratings for each of the efficiency problems they listed. Recall that prior to the labor market manipulation, participants were asked to rank the three inefficiency problems they had generated from (#1) most inefficient to (#3) least inefficient. Comparing these three within-subjects perceived impact ratings, we found a pattern consistent with Hypothesis 4b, in that the labor market manipulation appeared to have a stronger effect as problems increased in seriousness (as measured by rank) (see Fig. 4).

Specifically, examining the problem that employees had ranked as most inefficient (#1), we observed a significant effect of our labor market manipulation, whereby participants in the Labor Market Not Improving condition rated this problem as significantly less impactful on organizational success ($M = 7.24$, $SD = 1.89$) compared to participants in the Labor Market Improving condition ($M = 8.30$, $SD = .98$), $t(39) = 2.24$, $p = .03$, $d = .70$. However, for the problems ranked as 2nd and 3rd most inefficient, while we see trends in the expected direction, we found no significant effects of labor market condition on how impactful these problems were judged to be. Examining impact ratings for the problem participants' second most inefficient (#2), we found a pattern that was consistent with the predicted effect, but was not statistically significant, $M_{\text{market not improving}} = 6.76$, $SD = 2.07$ vs. $M_{\text{market improving}} = 7.55$, $SD = 1.23$, $t(39) = 1.47$, $p = .15$, $d = .46$. Similarly, for the problem participants ranked as third most inefficient (#3), though there was a trend in the predicted direction, no significant difference in impact ratings was found across labor market conditions, ($M_{\text{market not improving}} = 6.04$, $SD = 1.86$ vs. $M_{\text{market improving}} = 6.40$, $SD = 1.95$), $t(39) = .592$, $p = .56$, $d = .19$.

When the effect sizes across the three ranked problems are compared using the conventions suggested by Cohen (1992), we observe a small effect size for the #3 ranked problem ($d = .19$) and a moderate effect size ($d = .46$) for the #2 ranked problem and a much more substantial effect size for the #1 ranked problem ($d = .70$). Thus, the overall pattern of observed effect sizes as problems increase in serious is consistent with our proposed effect, whereby the impact of unfavorable labor market conditions on employees' tendency to diminish the impact of organizational problems increases in what appears to be a linear fashion as the seriousness of the problem becomes greater, and thus more threatening.

Overall, the findings of Study 3 support our general prediction that exposure to unfavorable labor market projections enhance employees' tendency to diminish the impact of organizational inefficiencies that they had previously identified. Our study design allowed us to demonstrate the motivated nature of this effect – employees facing fewer perceived exit opportunities increasingly
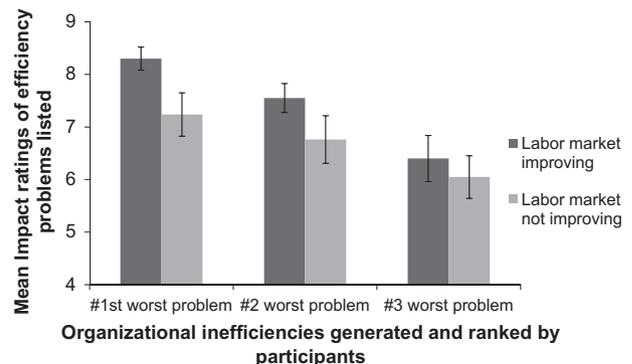

Fig. 3. Effect of labor market manipulation on perceived impact of efficiency problems listed (Study 3).

Fig. 4. Effect of labor market manipulation on perceived impact of efficiency problems listed, by problem rank (Study 3).

downplayed the impact of organizational problems as they became more serious and thus more psychologically threatening.

7. Study 4

Studies 1–3 demonstrated that increased scarcity of job alternatives, as suggested by a labor market with high rates of unemployment, leads workers to defensively deny and downplay efficiency-related problems in their own organizations, when compared to workers facing a more favorable labor market characterized by decreasing unemployment rates. In designing Study 4, our goals were three-fold. First, we sought to test whether our effects were robust to a different manipulation of labor market favorability. Second, we aimed to demonstrate that employees' motivation to maintain the belief that their organization was functional and effective can influence organizationally-relevant outcomes beyond those specifically related to perceptions of, and attitudes toward, inefficiency. Third, we sought to further rule out two alternatives—specifically, that our effects could be explained by (i) participants' worry about being fired or laid off from their jobs and (ii) a comparison-based account whereby a poor economy might lead participants to believe that their organization was relatively free of problems. We aimed to account for these alternatives by directly measuring participants' concerns about losing their job and by describing the economy to all participants as improving while specifically manipulating labor market favorability.

The manipulation of labor market favorability employed in studies 1–3 took advantage of a historically unique point in time – the United States' recovery following the 2008–2009 economic recession. While this particular context was well-suited for our research question in that it allowed us to realistically manipulate labor market projections and thus create a controlled environment in which to test our predictions, we wanted to confirm that our results were generalizable and not a historical artifact. Thus, in Study 4, conducted after the U.S. economy had largely recovered from the recession, we crafted a new manipulation of labor market favorability, one which varied the scarcity of job alternatives available to American workers while keeping the reported state of the economy constant.

Turning to our outcome measure, we were interested in examining whether employees' enhanced motive to view their organization positively when job alternatives were scarce would extend beyond denial of inefficiency problems to a wider range of judgments about their organization's operations. That is, given the theoretical reasoning underlying our hypotheses, we should expect that a scarcity of job alternatives would lead to a more general tendency for employees to gather information about their organization in a way that allowed them to draw favorable conclusions about the way their organization was run. Specifically, in Study 4, we predicted that employees facing an unfavorable market with few job alternatives would generate more pros relative to cons regarding how their organization operated compared to employees facing a more favorable labor market (H3).

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

Eighty adults employed in full-time jobs at organizations in the United States were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study. Six people failed the comprehension check question at the end of the study, so they were excluded from the sample. Therefore, the final sample consisted of seventy-four employees (46% female). Eighty-one percent of participants identified as Caucasian, 7% as Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, 5% as Black/African American, 5% as Hispanic, and 2% identified their ethnicity as 'Other'. Forty-seven percent identified their highest

level of education as College Graduate, 25% as Some College, 15% as Post Graduate Degree, 6% as High School Graduate, and 6% as Some Post Graduate. Participants were employed in twenty-two different industries, with the most frequently represented industries being Sales/Retail/Business Development (11%), IT/Software Development (10%), and Administrative/Clerical (10%) and Education/Training (10%). Participant demographics did not interact with our findings, so they will not be discussed further.

7.1.2. Materials and procedure

Data were collected in October 2014. At this point in time, the U.S. economy was relatively stable. The national unemployment rate was at 6% and following a downward trend (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two labor market conditions (Many job alternatives vs. Few job alternatives). This study employed different stimuli manipulating labor market favorability than used in the previous studies reported. Participants in both experimental conditions were led to believe that their task was to evaluate a recent news article about current events in terms of how clear and how interesting the information presented was.

Participants in the "Many job alternatives" condition read an article entitled "Finding a New Job: It's Easier than You Think". This article outlined a newly released set of studies indicating that Americans largely underestimated the number of job alternatives available to them. The article then described how employed Americans, whatever type of work they did, would find it quite easy to move between jobs or organizations if they were to try to do so in the next few years (see Appendix B for materials).

Participants in the "Few job alternatives" condition read an article entitled "Finding a New Job: It's Harder than You Think". This article outlined a newly released set of studies indicating that Americans largely overestimated the number of job alternatives available to them. This article then described how employed Americans, whatever type of work they did, would find it quite difficult to move between jobs or organizations if they were to try to do so in the next few years (see Appendix B for materials). In both conditions, the news article stated that the U.S. economy continued to recover. The article's general wording remained identical across experimental conditions with the exception of whether the article communicated that it was easy or difficult for American workers to find a new job.

Following exposure to this manipulation, participants were asked to rate how hard they thought it would be for them, right now, to find a job comparable to their current job, on a 1–9 scale ranging from "Very easy" to "Very difficult". Following this, participants were told that, in the next survey, they would be asked some questions about the organization that they currently worked at. They were then prompted to think about the pros and cons of how their organization currently runs. Specifically, they read the following instructions:

> Think about how your organization currently operates. Consider the pros and cons of the way your organization is currently run. In the space below, list these pros and cons. Specifically, create a list of the pros of the way your organization is run and a list of the cons of the way your organization is run.

A ratio of pros to cons score was created for each participant by dividing the total number of pros listed by the total number of cons listed.[2] Following creation of their pros and cons lists,

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[2] Four participants listed zero cons. Because a ratio with a denominator equal to zero is unbounded, these participants were given a ratio score equal to the number of pros they listed so that they could be included in the analysis. When these four participants are excluded from the analysis, the results remained statistically significant, $p < .05$.
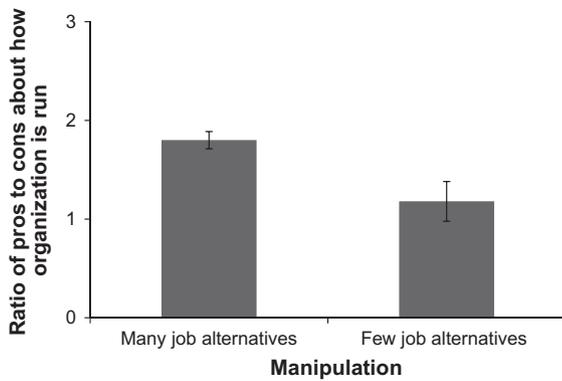
Fig. 5. Effect of labor market manipulation on ratio of pros to cons listed regarding way organization operates (Study 4).

participants were asked to rate how worried they were about losing their job within the next year on a 1–7 scale ranging from "Not at all worried" to "Extremely worried" and how likely they thought they were to lose their job within the next year on a 1–7 scale ranging from 1 "Not at all likely" to 7 "Extremely likely". These two items had a Cronbach's alpha of .88 and were therefore combined to form a composite job concern index. At the end of the study, demographic information was collected and participants were debriefed.

7.2. Results and discussion

As expected, participants in the "Few job alternatives" conditions believed it would be more difficult for them, personally, to find a new job comparable to their current job ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 2.2$), compared to participants in the "Many job alternatives" condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.98$), $F(1,72) = 4.43$, $p = .039$, $d = .49$, with mean responses on either side of the midpoint of our 9-point scale. This result assured us that our manipulation had the intended effect on perceived scarcity of employment alternatives.

To test our hypothesis—that fewer job alternatives should lead employees to list a greater amount of pros relative to cons about their current organization—we compared the ratio of pros to cons generated by participants as a function of condition. We included participants' job concerns score as a covariate in this analysis in order to account for the potential effect of this variable on our outcome measure. As predicted, participants in the "Few job alternatives" condition generated lists with a greater ratio of pros to cons ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.2$) about how their organization operated compared to participants in the "Many job alternatives" condition ($M = 1.18$, $SD = .54$), $F(1,71) = 8.03$, $p = .006$, $d = .67$[3] (see Fig. 5). That is, when given the opportunity to analyze their organization's strengths and weaknesses, participants facing a weak labor market generated open-ended responses that gave more weight to the favorable aspects of the organization than areas that might need improvement. Participants facing a relatively favorable market, however, generated, on average, a more balanced number of pros and cons, with roughly equal weight given to their organization's positive and negative characteristics (see Table 1 for means and

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[3] The means and p value remain virtually unchanged when job concerns is not included as a covariate, $M_{many\ jobs} = 1.18$, $SD = .54$ vs. $M_{fewjobs} = 1.80$, $SD = 1.21$, $F(1,72) = 8.26$, $p = .005$, $d = .66$. Furthermore, mean job concern scores did not vary as a function of condition ($M_{many\ jobs} = 2.40$, $SD = 1.37$ vs. $M_{fewjobs} = 2.29$, $SD = 1.49$, $F(1,72) = .123$, $p = .72$).

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for number of pros and cons listed by condition.

	Condition			
	Many job alternatives		Few job alternatives	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pros	3.08	1.2	3.89	1.8
Cons	3.03	1.7	2.56	1.4

standard deviations of number of pros and cons listed by condition).

Taken together with the results of studies 1–3, Study 4 demonstrates that a weak labor market leads employees to deny and downplay their organization's flaws, while, at the same time, bolstering its strengths. That is, we see evidence that scarcity of job alternatives not only triggers employees to deny efficiency problems when prompted to consider them, but also to spontaneously construct a more favorable global evaluation of their organization. Importantly, the design of Study 4 allowed us to extend our previous studies' findings by providing a conceptual replication of our effects using a different manipulation of labor market favorability and showing that the mechanism underlying our effects impacts judgments about other features of employees' organizations beyond inefficiency.

8. General discussion

Across four experimental studies, we provide evidence in support of our prediction that employees are motivated to ignore and diminish problems within their organization when employment alternatives are scarce. We demonstrate that, compared to employees facing a relatively favorable external labor market, employees facing an unfavorable labor market perceived their organization to be less inefficient (Study 1), reported fewer inefficiency problems (Study 2), and diminished the organizational impact of inefficiencies they had previously identified, particularly those likely to be the most psychologically threatening (Study 3). We also show that this motivation can result in evaluations of one's organization that favor its positive qualities over its shortcomings (Study 4). Together, our results suggest that restricted opportunities to leave one's current organization, due to fluctuations in the external labor market, may enhance employees' motivation to ignore and defend their current organization's flaws.

8.1. Theoretical implications

By drawing on perspectives provided by System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) to understand the psychology of employees, our research takes a fundamentally new theoretical approach to examining how external labor market conditions shape the perceptions and attitudes of organizational members. The evidence we present demonstrates a previously unexamined psychological consequence of restricted ease of movement in the labor market – an increased motivation to view one's current organization positively. Furthermore, our work points to the important role played by motivated cognitive processes, specifically those stemming from individuals' system justification motive, in influencing their vigilance to flaws in their organizational system.

Our work makes two key theoretical contributions. First, existing perspectives on the triggers of the system justification motive conceptualize perceived system dependence as emerging from the characteristics of a system itself (cf. Kay & Zanna, 2009; Kay

& Friesen, 2011). That is, a system's internal structure or policies are conceived of as determining the extent to which individuals feel dependent on given system's effective functioning and thus their system-justifying tendencies (Kay et al., 2009; Laurin et al., 2010). By studying work organizations as relatively bounded systems situated within a dynamic socio-political and economic context, we are able to explore how diffuse shifts in a system's external environment, rather than localized events or properties pertaining to the system itself, might influence the tendency of those embedded within that system to justify and defend it.

Second, we explored a novel type of system problem that individuals may be motivated to defend – inefficiency. System justification research to date has focused on individuals' tendency to justify and defend social problems, such as the existence of socio-economic inequalities or climate change, as these issues present potential threats to the legitimacy of existing social and political arrangements (e.g. Feygina et al., 2010; Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003). In our research, we conceptualized work organizations as different from social and political systems in that they exist in order to achieve specific functional ends beyond those related to the social goals that constitute the main purpose of societies. Hence, in our research, we examined system inefficiency as a problem that could pose a threat to an organization's ability to achieve it functional purpose and thus one likely to be defended.

Our research also has important implications for two interrelated literatures within organizational behavior: (i) work building on Hirschman (1970)'s seminal theorizing on the relationship between voice and exit in organizations; (ii) work delineating the factors influencing employees' provision of improvement-orientated suggestions.

First, we present theory and supportive empirical evidence which points to a previously unexamined reaction to being employed in a flawed organization – engagement in motivated denial and defense of that organization's problems. Hirschman (1970) argued that when faced with a declining organization, employees react either by exiting the organization or voicing their concerns and participating in addressing the organization's problems. Other scholars (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1988; Withey & Cooper, 1989) have extended this framework to include loyalty and neglect as other potential reactions to an organization in decline. Importantly, these models predict that restricted exit opportunities leave employees with the options of voice, loyalty, or neglect.

We suggest that, while employees may indeed engage in one of these reactions when forced to remain in an organization with flaws, these reactions, critically, assume prior acknowledgment of those flaws. That is, existing models' treatment of voice, loyalty (wherein employees optimistically wait for conditions to improve) and neglect (characterized by loss of interest in performing one's job) all assume that employees' reactions to restricted exit stem from an accurate and objective perception of their organization weaknesses, both in how these concepts are theorized and how they are measured (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1988). Thus, put simply, our work challenges and extends these models by suggesting that when exit is not an option, an alternative exists to voice, loyalty, or neglect – namely defensively ignoring and psychologically rationalizing organizational flaws.

Second, by focusing on employees' basic vigilance to organization problems, our research extends existing theory on the antecedents to employees' provision of improvement-oriented suggestions to management. There is a substantial body of literature examining the variables that predict employees' tendency, or willingness to voice their suggestions to management on how their workplace could be improved (e.g. Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson, 2003; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). While a few studies have included whether or not employees *have ideas* as a variable in their modelspredicting voice (e.g. Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Frese, Teng, & Wijnen, 1999), this facet of suggestion provision has been largely under-theorized within the existing literature. Our work indicates that employees' motivation to justify their organizational system may help explain variance in their attendance to the ways in which their organization could be improved, which we would argue, is a necessary antecedent to voicing improvement-oriented suggestions.

8.2. Limitations, future directions, and practical implications

Our research is not without its limitations, many of which provide fruitful directions for future research. First, in the current research, we were specifically interested in investigating employees' *perceptions* of organizational problems, and thus, our work, while focusing on a critical psychological step in the process of employees' assistance in fixing problems, does not directly address how a motivated tendency to psychologically deny and diminish organizational flaws impacts employees' actual behavior in the workplace. While this question was beyond the scope of the current research, it presents an especially fruitful and important direction for future studies. Such work could investigate whether perceived lack of employment alternatives diminishes not only employees' vigilance to organizational problems, but also their tendency to engage in voice and other types of citizenship behavior (cf. Organ, 1990; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) in an effort to help address organizational shortcomings.

Second, it is possible that our effects could be, in part, explained by the fact that a poor economic outlook might make problems in employees' own organization seem relatively small. That is, in studies 1–3, the unfavorable labor market information given to participants portrayed the future of the U.S. economy as fairly dire. Thus, it is possible that, by comparison, this forecast made employees' own organization seemed relatively functional and its shortcomings more minimal. While this kind of psychological process cannot account for Study 4's results (wherein the fact that the U.S. economy as improving was held constant across experimental conditions), nor can it easily explain the pattern of moderation found in Study 3, it provides an interesting alternative interpretation of how economic instability may lead employees to diminish problems within their own organization. Importantly, this kind of comparison-based process, whereby in a weak labor market, employees use the general state of the economy as a reference point when judging the relative effectiveness of their own organization, is not incompatible with the general premise we put forth— that, in an unfavorable labor market, employees may be motivated to find ways to continue to view their organization positively. Examining whether employees' motivation to psychologically defend their organization's shortcoming leads them to favor negative external points of comparison suggests a worthwhile direction for future research.

Furthermore, as organizations may be conceptualized as both systems as well as groups, it is also important to account for the possible role that social identity processes could play in explaining our effects. While it is conceivable that our findings could be interpreted as evidence of a motivation to view one's group positively, social identity theory predicts different effects than the ones observed in the current research. Specifically, social identity theorists have suggested that individuals who find themselves in

groups that they cannot leave should be increasingly motivated to engage in collective action to *improve* the group's condition, not deny its flaws (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), or, when group boundaries are perceived as highly restrictive but not completely closed (as might be the case in a weak but not non-existent labor market), individuals may attempt to continue to try to improve their own personal condition, separate from their current group (Wright, 2001; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). That said, it is certainly possible that the esteem that people derive from their organizations may lead them to act defensively in some ways, too, and these processes may jointly contribute to magnitude of these effects in the real world. This would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

In terms of practice, our research has two main take-ways for managers and organizations. Managers who are interested in eliciting their employees' suggestions and critical feedback need not only attend to factors inhibiting employees' tendency to speak up, but also factors affecting their basic attention to problems. Furthermore, while managers might assume, or expect, that their employees would be especially interested in making sure their organization was operating efficiently during economic downturns, or under other conditions when their employment alternatives are few, our results suggest that such climates may actually foster an increased psychological tendency for employees to deny and downplay the existence of organizational problems.

Appendix A

A.1. Condition 1: Labor market improving
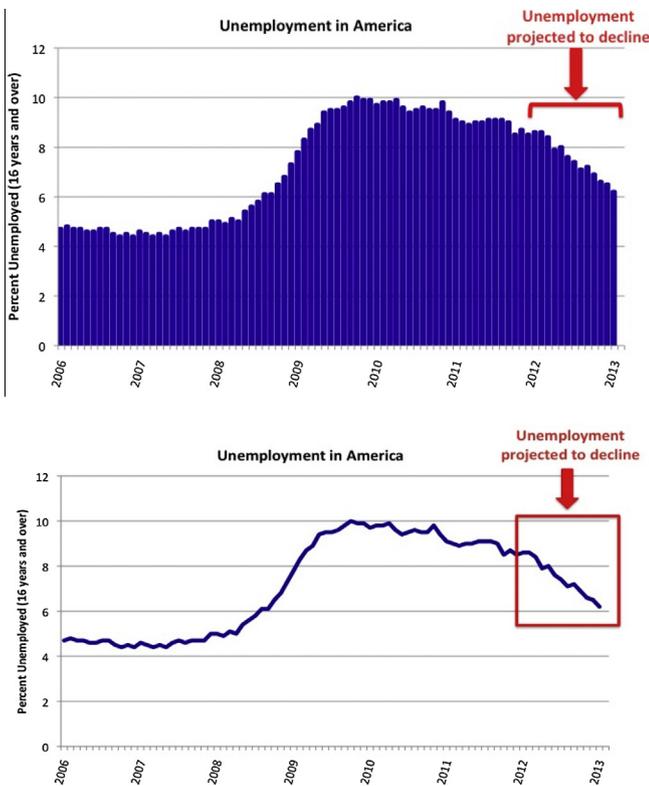
A.2. Condition 2: Labor market not improving
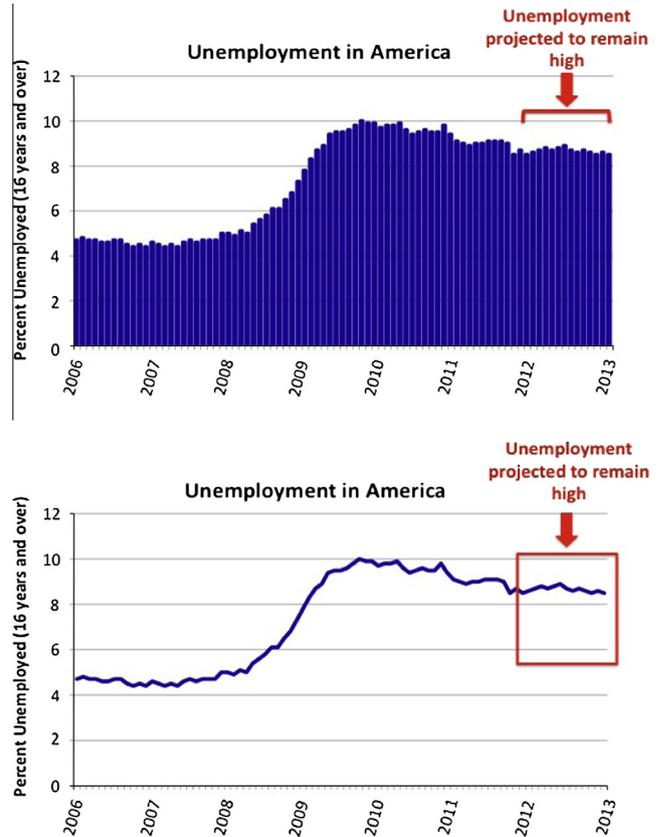
Appendix B

B.1. Condition 1: Many job alternatives

B.1.1. Finding a New Job: It's Easier than You Think

While the U.S. economy continues to slowly recover, a new report suggests that finding a new job is actually a lot easier than you think.

A newly released set of studies commissioned by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that Americans largely overestimate how difficult it would be for them to find a new job comparable to their current job. Based on the surveying of a representative sample of U.S. workers, these studies show that, despite a persistent influx of new job openings across industries in the U.S., Americans largely believe that it would be relatively difficult for them, personally, to move between companies or organizations if they wanted to.

"Most American workers would be surprised to learn how many alternatives to their current job there really are out there for them," says Dan Stevenson, labor economist and senior researcher at the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics. Stevenson also points out that people tend to erroneously think that their own type of job is immune to broader trends in the labor market – "People tend to look at national job trends and believe that their own industry or occupation would not be affected, but the increase in jobs at the national level has a real impact on individuals' flexibility in terms

of their own job options. It's likely that employed Americans, whatever type of work they do, would actually find it quite easy to move between jobs or organizations if they were to try to do so in the next few years."

B.2. Condition 2: Few job alternatives

B.2.1. Finding a New Job: It's Harder than You Think

While the U.S. economy continues to slowly recover, a new report suggests that finding a new job is actually a lot harder than you think.

A newly released set of studies commissioned by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that Americans largely underestimate how difficult it would be for them to find a new job comparable to their current job. Based on the surveying of a representative sample of U.S. workers, these studies show that, despite a persistent shortage of new job openings across industries in the U.S., Americans largely believe that it would be relatively easy for them, personally, to move between companies or organizations if they wanted to.

"Most American workers would be surprised to learn how few alternatives to their current job there really are out there for them," says Dan Stevenson, labor economist and senior researcher at the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics. Stevenson also points out that people tend to erroneously think that their own type of job is immune to broader trends in the labor market – "People tend to look at national job trends and believe that their own industry or occupation won't be affected, but the scarcity of jobs at the national level has a real impact on individuals' flexibility in terms of their own job options. It's likely that employed Americans, whatever type of work they do, would actually find it quite difficult to move between jobs or organizations if they were to try to do so in the next few years."

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