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Debate

Is a system motive really necessary to explain the system justification effect? A response to Jost (2019) and Jost, Badaan, Goudarzi, Hoffarth, and Mogami (2019)

Chuma Kevin Owuamalam^{1*} , Mark Rubin² and Russell Spears³

¹Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Semenyih, Malaysia

²The University of Newcastle, Canberra, New South Wales, Australia

³University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

The debate between the proponents of SIMSA and SJT does not pivot on whether system justification occurs – we all agree that system justification does occur. The issue is *why* it occurs? System justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 1) assumes that system justification is motivated by a *special system justification motive*. In contrast, the social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018a, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27, 2) argues that there is insufficient conclusive evidence for this special system motive, and that system justification can be explained in terms of social identity motives, including the motivation to accurately reflect social reality and the search for a positive social identity. Here, we respond to criticisms of SIMSA, including criticisms of its social reality, ingroup bias, and hope for future ingroup status explanations of system justification. We conclude that SJT theorists should decide whether system justification is *oppositional* to, or *compatible with* social identity motives, and that this dilemma could be resolved by relinquishing the theoretically problematic notion of a system justification motivation.

At the heart of the debate between system justification theorists (e.g., Friesen, Laurin, Shepherd, Gaucher, & Kay, 2019; Jost, 2019; Osborne, Sengupta, & Sibley, 2019) and social identity theorists (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2019; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001) is whether an autonomous system justification motive is necessary to explain instances of system justification. System justification theory (SJT) assumes that this special system motive exists, and that it is necessary to explain instances of system justification amongst the disadvantaged. In contrast, the social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA, Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018a) questions the existence of an autonomous system justification motive and explains system justification with reference to previously established motives, including the need for an accurate reflection of social reality (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004, p. 826; Spears *et al.*, 2001; Tajfel & Turner,

*Correspondence should be addressed to Chuma Kevin Owuamalam, Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology, University of Nottingham Malaysia, Jalan Broga 43500 Semenyih, Selangor, Malaysia (email: chuma.owuamalam@nottingham.edu.my).

1979, p. 37; Turner, 1980, p. 142) and the need for a positive social identity (Martiny & Rubin, 2016; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; Tajfel, 1981, p. 68). Hence, both SJT and SIMSA agree that people engage in system justification. The key difference between SJT and SIMSA is about *why* they engage in system justification.

Jost (2019) and Jost, Badaan, Goudarzi, Hoffarth, and Mogami (2019) argued against SIMSA's objections to the existence of a special system justification motive and its necessity in explaining the system justification phenomenon. The 'evidence problem' is well articulated in Owuamalam *et al.* (2019), and our response to Jost *et al.*'s (2019) comments on our arguments is summarized in Table 1. Below, we focus on the 'necessity problem'.

The point that Owuamalam *et al.* (2019) made is that personal and social identity motives can explain instances of system justification amongst the disadvantaged, and that it is not necessary to invoke a separate system motive. SIMSA focuses on three social identity-based explanations of system justification: the social reality explanation, the ingroup bias explanation, and the hope for future ingroup status explanation. Jost (2019) objected to each of these explanations. We address each of his objection in turn.

Objections to SIMSA's social reality explanation

According to SIMSA, it is socially maladaptive for the disadvantaged to challenge their unfavourable position within a system when the elevated status of the higher status outgroup is achieved legitimately. We used a football league analogy to illustrate why losing teams might accept rather than challenge their low status position (see Owuamalam *et al.*, 2019, p. 394). Jost (2019) partly agrees and partly disagrees with SIMSA's position. Jost (2019, p. 279) agrees when stating that

the act of 'admitting defeat' – or 'acknowledging objective differences', as Marilynn Brewer (2007, p. 733), put it – does reflect an ideological process of taking for granted (consciously or nonconsciously) the legitimacy of the status quo, even if it involves nothing more than 'complicitous silence' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 188; see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zelditch, 2001). Likewise, in a football game, 'admitting defeat' assumes the legitimacy of the league, rules of competition, the referees' authority and conduct, and the other team's behavior. (Jost, 2011)

However, Jost's (2019; Jost *et al.*, 2019) objection is that our football example trivializes the situation and does not adequately represent the entire spectrum of system justification amongst the disadvantaged. According to Jost (2019, p. 279), the football analogy

drastically misrepresents the psychology of system justification; poor people, women, and sexual minorities, among others, do not feel as if they 'played' and 'lost'. The position taken by Rubin and Hewstone (2004) – and echoed by Owuamalam *et al.* (2019) – trivializes (and therefore seriously mischaracterizes) problems of social and economic inequality – and ignores the many ways in which inequality is legitimated in society. (Costa-Lopes *et al.*, 2013)

We acknowledge that our football league analogy does not sufficiently account for the many ways in which system justification manifests amongst the disadvantaged, which was why we offered two further explanations under the SIMSA framework (i.e., the ingroup bias and hope for future ingroup status explanations). We also acknowledge that a football

Table 1. Response to Jost *et al.*'s (2019) view of the theoretical inconsistencies presented by Owuamalam *et al.* (2019)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owuamalam <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Jost <i>et al.</i> 's (2019) reply	Our response
<p>1. The disadvantaged are likely to support the existing social order most strongly when the system is stable but also most strongly when the system is unstable given SJT's uncertainty assumption. After all, unstable systems should generate greater uncertainty than stable ones, and people should be most motivated to seek stability and order via system justification under such conditions</p>	<p>The point of research by Kay and Friesen (2011) and Laurin, Gaucher, and Kay (2013), it seems to us, is to demonstrate that people are motivated to justify an established social system (the status quo) but not circumstances that are in flux (a system that is not clearly established, that is not experienced as the status quo). This is consistent with the theoretical notion that a stable (seemingly inevitable) social system satisfies epistemic needs for certainty more than a social system that is not clearly established (i.e., a counterfactual possibility). In another line of research, Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost (2012) demonstrated that people who are chronically lower (vs. higher) in the need for cognition (and therefore higher in the desire for certainty) endorsed more conservative, system-justifying beliefs and opinions, and Jost <i>et al.</i> (2012) found that temporarily inducing a sense of uncertainty reduced support for system-challenging collective action even on the part of low system justifiers. There is no inconsistency between these lines of research. People who seek to reduce uncertainty (either chronically or temporarily) are more likely to justify the social system, but this will only satisfy their epistemic motivation when the social system is solidly established and therefore provides a sound basis for the attainment of order, certainty, and closure</p>	<p>The initial evidence that Jost <i>et al.</i> (2019) discussed shows that people are motivated to justify stable social systems (Kay & Friesen, 2011; Laurin <i>et al.</i>, 2013) but not unstable systems. However, the other line of research that Jost <i>et al.</i> refers to shows that, if unstable systems induce a chronic or temporary sense of uncertainty, then people should engage in system justification (Hennes <i>et al.</i>, 2012; Jost <i>et al.</i>, 2012). Hence, as we originally suggested, the inconsistency in SJT is that both stable and unstable systems should motivate system justification. This type of flexibility is problematic because it does not permit the falsification of the theory</p>
<p>2. System justification soothes moral outrage and thereby reduces political mobilization amongst the disadvantaged, but also system justification intensifies anger on the system's behalf, that ultimately results in political mobilization on behalf of the status quo amongst people who feel disenfranchised in some way</p>	<p>Yes, system justification is negatively associated with moral outrage directed at the societal status quo and the desire to participate in system-challenging collective action (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost <i>et al.</i>, 2012; Osborne <i>et al.</i>, 2019; Waksalak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). At the same time, system justification is positively associated with backlash (and anger) against system-challenging forms of protest and the desire to participate in system-supporting protest on behalf of the status quo (Osborne <i>et al.</i>, 2019). There is no inconsistency here as long as one distinguishes</p>	<p>We agree that it is important to distinguish between system-challenging and system-supporting protest. We also agree that the distinction between normative and non-normative protest can be considered as a distinction between non-disruptive and disruptive protest respectively (Jost <i>et al.</i>, 2012, p. 199). However, it remains the case that even system-supporting protest can be disruptive, insofar as it involves strikes and riots and upsets the social order (Jost <i>et al.</i>, 2012, p. 199). For example, supporters of the recent government shutdown in the U.S.A. would claim that,</p>

Continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owuamalam et al. (2019)		Jost et al.'s (2019) reply	Our response
3. System justification 'does not offer an equivalent function that operates in the service of protecting the interests of the self or the group,' but it is beneficial to people's personal well-being		clearly between system-challenging and system-supporting forms of collective action, which the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) does not, but our integrative model does (see Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017)	although the shutdown was disruptive, it was necessary in order to achieve the broader goal of securing the U.S.A's southern border and preventing illegal immigrants from entering the country. In other words, although the shutdown was a disruptive (non-normative) form of protest, it was nonetheless system-supporting. Does SJT predict that, when faced with a threat to their social system, members of disadvantaged groups will engage in this type of disruptive, non-normative protest in order to protect that system, even if this protest poses an additional threat to the system? And does SJT predict that this 'attack the system to save the system' strategy is truly independent from personal and/or group motives amongst the disadvantaged? Our own research suggests that group identification predicts the extent of both non-disruptive (normative) protest and disruptive (non-normative) protest (Owuamalam et al., 2016, Study 3)
		Unlike Owuamalam et al. (2019), we make a clear distinction between objective interests (what is in the rational self-interest of a given social group) and subjective well-being (what makes people feel good). A famous example is Marx's account of religion, which suggests that poor people may embrace religious beliefs as a way of coping with desperate circumstances, and this gives them consolation of an emotional nature. At the same time, it presumably makes	More importantly, it is unclear why defending (or protesting in support of) a system 'on which [people's] livelihoods depend' (Jost, 2017a, 2017b, p.3) constitutes an action that is enacted in the service of a special system motive that works against the personal/group interests of the disadvantaged. So, the contradiction here does not disappear simply because an interest-based collective action is rebranded as being 'challenging' or 'supportive' of the status quo In our paper, we constantly referred to personal (ego) and group (collective) motives, interests, and identities. This personal-social distinction is deeply rooted in the theoretical framework of social identity theory from which SIMSA is derived. Hence, we make a clear theoretical distinction between these concepts. Our point is that, if system justification is beneficial to people's material or subjective interest (i.e., 'what makes people feel good'),

Continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owumalam <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Jost <i>et al.</i> 's (2019) reply	Our response
4. System justification is most likely to occur when personal and group interests are weak, but it is also most likely to occur when people are dependent on their systems for some (personal and/or group-based) benefit	<p>them less likely to participate in collective action that would make their lives better in an economic sense. Thus, there is no inconsistency between the notion that system-justifying beliefs serve a palliative function and, at the same time, undermine objective class interests</p>	<p>then it is possible that system justification is driven by personal motives rather than by a special system justification motivation. As Jost <i>et al.</i>'s (2019) union workers example shows below, system justification may sometimes simply be motivated by the need to feed oneself and one's family (i.e., don't bite the hand that feeds you). Is this need based on a special system justification motive or is it based on a personal motive? We would argue the latter. Also, because Marx observed that poor people might cope with desperate circumstances by embracing religion does not necessarily imply that a natural consequence of such coping would be political demobilization. Martin Luther King Jr., was a religious minister, but he was also a political activist</p> <p>Finally, going back to Tajfel (1978) and our earlier point: social identity theory has always acknowledged the subjective and objective aspects of social identity, inter alia, and indeed the concept social reality constraints makes little sense without recourse to an objective reality and associated interests</p>
	<p>There is no motivational reason for people to justify social systems on which they do not depend (or that do not affect them). In addition, Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) hypothesized that members of disadvantaged groups would be less likely to justify the status quo when personal and group interests are high in salience, because these circumstances would activate opposing ego and group justification motives. Once again, there is no inconsistency between these two ideas. Here is an example: the personal and group interests of workers who lack union representation will be weaker than those who possess union representation, and because of that the former group will be more likely to accept the demands and decisions of management as legitimate and to justify the organizational</p>	<p>In the workers example, Jost <i>et al.</i> (2019) argued that the personal and group interests of non-union workers will be lower than those of union workers. This may be true. However, our point is that the personal interests of both union and non-union workers are intrinsically linked to their financial dependence on their job. Workers cannot be highly dependent on their job to feed themselves and their families and yet, at the same time, have low personal interest in their job. If financial dependence is high then, <i>ipso facto</i>, personal interests are high (see also Owumalam <i>et al.</i>, 2016; Rubin, 2016). As Owumalam <i>et al.</i> (2016) noted, 'researchers have yet to provide convincing evidence that system dependence is conceptually and empirically distinct from personal/group</p>

Continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owuamalam et al. (2019)	Jost et al.'s (2019) reply	Our response
5. Dissonance-based system justification operates consciously, as per cognitive dissonance theory, but also unconsciously, when dissonance is least likely	<p>status quo. This is especially likely if they are financially dependent on the job to feed themselves and their families (van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). However, they will not necessarily be motivated to justify the status quo in some other organization that is irrelevant to them</p> <p>First, it is not entirely clear to us that dissonance-related processes must occur at a conscious level of awareness. Second, we have never suggested that cognitive dissonance reduction and system justification are one and the same. Third, it is true that Jost and Banaji (1994) theorized that system justification may operate either consciously or unconsciously. Is there some reason why it cannot operate at conscious and non-conscious levels of awareness, like many other goal systems?</p>	<p>interests' (p. 3). Consequently, in our view, the evidence that shows that system justification is strongest under conditions of system dependence is also consistent with the SIMSA view that system justification is strongest under conditions of self- and group- interests</p> <p>We have also never said that (a) cognitive dissonance reduction and system justification are one and the same nor that (b) system justification cannot operate at the nonconscious levels. Our point is that dissonance-based system justification is unlikely to operate at the nonconscious level (see also Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018b). We base this argument on the point that dissonance is most likely to occur when people are aware (i.e., not unconscious) of the competing preferences open to them (see Gawronski & Strack, 2004; and classic statements of dissonance theory)</p>
6. Hope-induced system justification helps people to cope with disadvantage, but also hoping that one's outcomes will improve in the future has little to do with system justification	<p>From the perspective of system justification theory, people want to believe that the social systems on which they depend will treat them fairly. In that sense (and perhaps others), system-justifying belief systems do help people to cope with disadvantage (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). But this does not mean that the only reason why people support the capitalist system is because they hope (and hold out faith) that they will benefit directly from the system, such as by becoming rich one day. On the contrary, we find that poor people who are optimistic about their own financial futures are no more likely to justify the social system than poor people who are more pessimistic (Jost, Langer et al., 2017). In any case, it is important to distinguish clearly between the emotion of hope and the expectation of future rewards. We are presently conducting research to investigate the possibility that increasing emotional experiences associated with certain kinds of hope will reduce system justification motivation and promote system-challenging collective action</p>	<p>Jost et al. (2019) explained that the hope that people will benefit directly from the system is not 'the only reason' for system justification. First, we are glad that Jost et al. agree that hope for future improvement may be a reason for system justification. We agree that hope for future ingroup improvement is not 'the only reason'. SIMSA offers two other identity-based reasons for system justification: (a) the reflection of social reality and (b) ingroup bias. But if an interests-based hope for future ingroup status can explain system justification as Jost (2019) acknowledged, then why is a special system justification motivation necessary? In any case, we look forward to the results of Jost and colleagues studies on hope. We recommend that they consider hope for future ingroup status as a key variable in their studies</p>

Continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owumalam et al. (2019)	Jost et al.'s (2019) reply	Our response
7. System justification serves a palliative function for the well-being of the disadvantaged, but it is also negatively related to the well-being of the disadvantaged	<p>Following Kluegel and Smith (1986), Jost and Hunyady (2003) proposed that system justifying beliefs serve the (short-term) palliative function of making everyone – whether advantaged or disadvantaged – feel better about the status quo. Research does indeed suggest that system justification is associated with increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (e.g., Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Wakslak et al., 2007). At the same time, Jost and Hunyady argued that – because system justification is potentially in conflict or contradiction with ego and group justification motives – it may also be associated with depression, neuroticism, ambivalence, and internalization of inferiority over longer periods of time. This is what research by Jost and Thompson (2000) suggested, and recent studies involving sexual minorities suggest that system justification exerts both protective (or palliative) effects as well as deleterious consequences, such as internalized homonegativity (Bahamondes-Correa, 2016; Suppes, Napier, & van der Toorn, 2018). Thus, it makes little sense to assume, as Owumalam et al. (2019) appear to, that system justification must be either good or bad for members of disadvantaged groups. There are costs and benefits associated with it</p>	<p>The point that we were making was that it is in people's personal interest to feel good about themselves in order to function properly. If the system motive <i>does not</i> operate in the service of protecting the psychological interests of the disadvantaged (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 10), then activating this motive should be unconnected to how people feel about themselves. We recommend that system justification theorists clarify their hypotheses in order to explain why system justification is most likely to increase positive affect and why it is also most likely to lead to depression and other negative states, when the system motive is theorized to be unconnected to the psychological interests of the disadvantaged</p>

Continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Theoretical inconsistency pointed out by Owuamalam et al. (2019)		Jost et al.'s (2019) reply	Our response
8. The system justification motive is unconsciously activated only when the system (but not social identity) is threatened, but also that the system motive is unconsciously activated when social identity needs and tendencies are active qua dependency on social systems		<p>In an effort to distinguish system-defensiveness in response to system-level threats (as hypothesized on the basis of system justification theory) from group-defensiveness in response to group-level threats (as hypothesized on the basis of social identity theory), Liviatan and Jost (2014) demonstrated that a threat to the U.S. socioeconomic system (but not a threat to the group of Americans) increased the automatic cognitive accessibility of legitimacy-related words in a lexical decision task. In a separate line of research, Bonnot and Krauth-Gruber (2018) found that women who were made to feel dependent on the social system emphasized their verbal proficiency over math- related proficiency, apparently engaging in self-stereotyping that maintained male hegemony in STEM fields. Based on earlier work using a similar paradigm, Rubin (2016) claimed that the system dependency manipulation could have made French national identification salient, which might have led women to act in ways that are consistent with gender stereotypes. From our point of view, it needs to be clarified why it is part of 'French national identity' that women (but not men) are stronger in verbal than math proficiency. A more likely explanation, it seems to us, is that women in the high (vs. low) system dependency condition are justifying gender disparities in Western societies rather than expressing an identification with France. In any case, we see no obvious incompatibility between these two different research programs</p>	<p>With regards to Bonnot and Krauth-Gruber's (2018) study, Rubin's (2016) point was simply that making French nationality salient may also make French gender stereotypes salient (superordinate identities can after all frame intergroup comparison at the lower level according to self-categorization theory). He had no evidence that the maths and verbal task performance effects observed by Bonnot and Krauth-Gruber could be explained as greater adherence to those stereotypes through a process of social identification. However, neither Bonnot and Krauth-Gruber nor Jost et al. had any evidence against this potential explanation</p> <p>Liviatan and Jost's (2014, Experiment 1b) provided some evidence that threat to America's capitalist economic system (i.e., a 'system threat') produced a system justification effect, whereas threat to America's creativity (i.e., a 'group threat') did not. The researchers concluded that this evidence ruled out an ingroup bias explanation of system justification. However, the null finding for the threat to American creativity does not necessarily imply that the significant finding for the threat to American capitalism is unrelated to national identity. It is possible that some threats to national identity are more effective than others, and that capitalism is more central to the American identity than creativity</p> <p>Nonetheless, the bigger question that Jost et al. (2019) did not address in their response is how and why an unconscious system justification motive can be activated when the system is threatened, but not activated when the social identity—that is based on that system and motivated by system dependence—is threatened</p>

league analogy does not address all the complex ways in which intergroup relations operate amongst the poor, women, and sexual minorities (nor was it meant to). However, neither of these concessions imply that the football league example is irrelevant to cases of system justification amongst the disadvantaged. It remains an example, or analogy, that illustrates a general principle. It does not imply that other more complex principles are also at work. Hence, we are unsure why the basic principle and processes that are illustrated in the football team situation should be discounted as being irrelevant to other situations in which intergroup status hierarchies are achieved via legitimate social competition. We would note that generalizations from simple situations to more complex, serious situations are commonplace in the conduct of psychological science, and system justification theory itself is grounded on the minimal group examples of outgroup favouritism that Jost (2019) now criticizes as being 'trivial'. We would also note that Jost's (2019) criticism does not undermine the logic behind SIMSA's social reality explanation, and that it does not diminish the utility of the empirical evidence that Owuamalam *et al.* (2019) used to support this explanation (e.g., Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016).

Objections to SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation

According to SIMSA, people can sometimes conceive the 'system' as an ingroup and, consequently, they may accept and even support their societal systems as a result of ingroup bias. Again, Jost (2019) appeared to *misunderstand* some aspects of this view but *understand* other aspects. Jost (2019) *misunderstands* SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation when he assumes that it implies that 'poor people would 'identify with' rich people (like Country Club Republicans)' (Jost, 2019, p. 281). SIMSA does not make this assumption or prediction. Instead, SIMSA predicts that, under some circumstances, poor people may identify with a superordinate group ('system') that subsumes poor and rich people. This identification with a superordinate ingroup helps to explain why the poor can support Republican/conservative policies even if those policies are detrimental to their economic prospects. Furthermore, as social identity-based research on the ingroup projection model has shown (Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, & Waldzus, 2003), some subgroups (e.g., Republicans), especially high-status groups (Rubin, 2012), can be seen to represent the superordinate group (e.g., Americans and national interests) better than others (e.g., Democrats). Hence, identifying with the superordinate group 'system' can also entail a bias towards subgroups that are perceived to be more prototypical of that group.

However, Jost (2019, p. 281) understands the ingroup bias explanation correctly when highlighting Shayo's (2009) evidence that:

poor people around the world identify more strongly with their nation (and less strongly with their social class) in comparison with rich people, and those who identify more strongly with the nation are less supportive of economic redistribution than those who do not.

This evidence fits SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation because it shows that, as Shayo (2009) explained, 'people tend to identify more with high-status groups [i.e., nations] than with low status groups [i.e., low social class groups]' (p. 147), and they are willing 'to sacrifice material payoffs in order to enhance group status'. (p. 148). Hence, when lower class people identify with, and show bias towards, their nation, they may also show an ingroup bias in favour of their nation's intergroup hierarchy, resulting in an aversion to economic redistribution. In short, we agree with Jost (2019, p. 281) that Shayo's work

shows that 'social identification and system justification are intertwined'. But, if social identification can explain system justification as Jost (2019) acknowledges via Shayo's (2009) evidence, then why is it necessary to posit a special system justification motive that works against the social identity motive?

Robbie Sutton was a peer reviewer who reviewed Jost's (2019) paper. In his review, Sutton included a detailed critique of Owuamalam, Rubin, and Issmer's (2016) work, including SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation for system justification (Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018a). We are grateful to Jost for passing on this critique to us. Sutton argued that some systems cannot be conceived as groups. In particular, he argued that the university-ranking system used by Owuamalam *et al.* (2016) cannot be conceived as a group. However, this point seems to be based on a misunderstanding of Owuamalam *et al.*'s (2016) research hypotheses and design. Owuamalam *et al.* (2016) did not test SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation for system justification. They only tested (1) a group reputation management explanation and (2) a hope for future ingroup enhancement explanation. Neither of these explanations assumed that the university-ranking system was an ingroup, and Owuamalam *et al.* (2016) never made this claim in their article. Instead, Owuamalam *et al.* (2016) used the university-ranking system to manipulate group status by asking participants to compare their university with another Australian university that had scored either higher or lower on three status-relevant indices: 'university reputation and prestige'; 'course satisfaction of graduates'; and '*graduate salaries, employment and further study*' (p. 11, our emphasis). Note that Jost and Burgess (2000, Study 1) used a similar approach to manipulate group status, also referring to 'average financial income, career advancement and promotions, status of professions entered, rates of admission to graduate and professional schools, and years of postgraduate education completed' (p. 297). But Jost now criticizes the use of this approach in support of SIMSA.

To be clear, although Owuamalam *et al.* (2016) did not treat the university-ranking system as a group in their research, this and other such systems *can* be conceived as social groups. Consistent with self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987), 'any variable such as common fate, shared threat, proximity, similarity, shared interests, co-operative interaction or positive interdependence which could function *cognitively as a criterion of social categorization to produce an awareness of shared social identity* could lead to group formation' (Turner & Bourhis, 1996, p. 34, emphasis in original). Hence, as we explained in our previous article, SIMSA and the social identity approach 'provides a rich and articulated conceptualization of the social group that allows an equally articulated conceptualization of ingroup favouritism' (Owuamalam *et al.*, 2019, p. 369).

Our online supplementary document (Table S1) details our response to the other ancillary critiques raised by Jost (2019; and Robbie Sutton) that are connected to SIMSA's ingroup bias explanation.

Objections to SIMSA's hope for future ingroup status explanation

According to SIMSA, people may accept and justify the status quo (even if it is currently disadvantageous to them), if they believe that there is a realistic hope for them to improve their social status within the system in the long run. Again, Jost (2019) both *disagrees* and *agrees* with this hope for future ingroup status explanation of system justification. Jost's (2019) objection is based on Jost, Langer *et al.*'s (2017) re-analysis of Rankin, Jost, and Waksalak's (2009) survey of low-income Americans. They found that 47% of low-income Americans did not expect to become rich one day, arguing that 'contrary to Owuamalam

and colleagues' supposition, the perceived likelihood of future success – however realistic or unrealistic – does not seem to account for system justification in the economic sphere' (Jost, 2019, p. 280). In response, we would like to point out that SIMSA explains that hope for future ingroup status is most likely to predict system justification when the social system is perceived to be stable in the short term but unstable in the long term (Owuamalam *et al.*, 2018a; system stability caveat). It is unclear whether the low-income Americans in Rankin *et al.*'s study perceived economic mobility ('the American Dream') to be a viable option in the long term. Furthermore, the situation is complicated in the case of socioeconomic status, because social class groups (i.e., 'low-income Americans') are defined by their status. Hence, a low SES group cannot engage in upward economic mobility and become a high SES group without losing its identity as a 'low SES group' in the way that, for example, women or racial minorities might better their social standing in the future while retaining their gender/racial identity.

Jost (2019, p. 283) objected to SIMSA's system stability caveat for its hope explanation by referring to Sutton's argument that it is folly to 'talk about stability through time as anything other than stability in the long term, because 'stable, but only in the short term' seems oxymoronic'. As Owuamalam *et al.* (2018a) explained, 'social systems that are stable in the short term cannot be altered through group members' current actions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) but may, nonetheless, be amenable to change in the longer term' (p. 94). It is unclear why Sutton regards this proposition to be oxymoronic. Take the gender pay gap for example. This pay gap has been relatively stable in Australia for around 20 years. Hence, it is certainly stable in the short term. However, it is currently at a 20-year low and there is a possibility that, in the long term (say over the next 10-20 years), the pay gap can be closed. Hence, although women may feel that their current actions cannot close the gender pay gap in the short term, they may nonetheless feel that the system is mutable in the long term. Consequently, they may appraise Australia's employment system as being sufficiently fair and just in order to support their hope that it will narrow or close the pay gap in the future, thereby improving women's status in the workplace relative to men. SJT researchers would argue that a special system justification motive causes women to evaluate the employment system as fair and just. Instead, following SIMSA, we argue that this system justification supports a hope for future ingroup status that is motivated by longer-term social identity motives.

Despite the above misunderstandings, we are glad that Jost (2019) agrees that hope for future ingroup status (or expectations of upward social mobility) 'could indeed be one of many reasons why people engage in system justification' (p. 280). Jost (2019) justified this apparent shift in position following recent evidence by Day and Fiske (2017) that shows that moderate (or realistic) social mobility expectations explain system justification. According to Jost (2019, footnote 5, p. 280),

another possibility, *which is consistent with the emphasis in social identity theory on beliefs about social mobility* (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), is that people perceive the social system as more legitimate to the extent that it allows for (some) people to improve upon their situation. (our emphasis)

If by 'their situation' Jost is referring to their ingroup's situation, then his position is consistent with SIMSA. However, in this case, it is unclear how this hope for future ingroup status can be regarded as being 'perfectly compatible with system justification theory' (Jost, 2019, footnote 5, p. 280). System justification theory assumes that social identity and system justification motives are *in conflict* amongst the disadvantaged (Jost,

2019, p. 282). In contrast, SIMSA argues that the social identity motive can *cause* system justification amongst the disadvantaged. The incompatibility between these two positions is quite stark. In particular, the hope of future ingroup status explanation assumes that people support the system because they want to improve their ingroup's status and achieve a positive social identity. It is unclear whether Jost now accepts that this social identity motive could be 'one of many reasons why people engage in system justification' (Jost, 2019, p. 280) or whether this explanation is invalid. Before embarking on a further quarter century quest for ways to 'reduce system justification motivation' (Jost *et al.*, 2019, p. 382), it is perhaps useful to understand:

1. why low-income Americans in Rankin *et al.*'s (2009) survey expressed pessimism about their future prospects in the 'land of opportunities', when Day and Fiske (2017) found an optimism-induced support for the system in the same American society, and
2. when a hope-induced system justification is likely or unlikely to emerge.

Concluding remarks

The inconsistencies in Jost's (2019; Jost *et al.*, 2019) critique of SIMSA's approach are reminiscent of the wider theoretical confusion about SJT that has yet to be resolved (see Table 1). One approach to this confusion is to refer back to the wealth of literature on SJT and argue (as Jost *et al.*, 2019 does) that the critics of SJT are confused because they do not have a good understanding of the historical development of the theory. But, the nit-picking over SJT's historical development (see Jost *et al.*, 2019, p. 4) seems relatively unproductive because it neither addresses the *evidential problems* nor the issue concerning the *necessity* of an autonomous system motive raised by Owuamalam *et al.* (2019). What really matters, is the current instantiation of system justification within SJT framework. In this respect, it is useful to note that the list of cognitive, existential, epistemic, and relational motives that are thought to lie behind system justification – and that continue to have close connection to personal/group motives – now totals 11 at our last count (Owuamalam *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, system justification is thought to be caused by:

1. cognitive dissonance and consistency (Jost *et al.*, 2003, p. 15);
2. cognitive conservatism (Jost *et al.*, 2003, p. 15);
3. attributional simplicity (Jost *et al.*, 2003, p. 15);
4. intolerance of ambiguity and illusion of control (Jost *et al.*, 2003, p. 15);
5. needs for order, structure, closure, and control (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, table 2; Jost *et al.*, 2003, p. 15; Jost, Langer *et al.*, 2017);
6. reactions against threats to the system and consequent instability (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, table 2);
7. perception of a dangerous world (e.g., threats of violence, crime, and terrorism; Jost & Hunyady, 2005, table 2);
8. fear of death (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, table 2; Jost, Langer *et al.*, 2017);
9. insecurity and affiliation with similar others (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008);
10. the desire to coordinate social relationships (Jost, Gaucher, & Stern, 2015; Jost *et al.*, 2008); and
11. the need to establish a shared social reality (Jost *et al.*, 2008, 2015; Jost, Langer *et al.*, 2017).

In some ways, it is easier to ask what does *not* cause system justification than what *does* cause it. Another problem with this plethora of antecedents is that it reduces the falsifiability of system justification theory.

The 25-year quest for a special system justification motivation has also generated copious amounts of indirect evidence that do not, in our opinion, conclusively eliminate personal and social identity motives as alternative explanations. Yet, researchers (e.g., Osborne *et al.*, 2019, p.340) are adamant that a special system motivation guides behaviour, stating that

system justification theory has developed into a generative and influential framework that helps to explain when, and under what conditions, *people will fail to act in accordance with their own personal and group-based interests*, but instead respond in ways that maintain the system. (our emphasis)

This statement is remarkable, even when these researchers' own evidence demonstrates that system justification:

1. *advances* the psychological interests of the disadvantaged – as per the palliation hypothesis, the need for uncertainty reduction, and the need for control (Bahamondes-Correa, Sibley, & Osborne, 2019; Jost, 2019; Osborne *et al.*, 2019; see also Owuamalam, Paolini, & Rubin, 2017; Suppes *et al.*, 2018) and, that it
2. manifests mostly strongly amongst people who *depend on*, or are otherwise *invested in* their social systems (see Friesen *et al.*, 2019; Jost, 2019 for a review).

It seems, therefore, that SJT researchers cannot quite make up their minds about whether system-justifying attitudes are *oppositional to* or *compatible with* the personal- and group-based interests of the disadvantaged. Of course, we appreciate the potential dilemma for SJT researchers here: maintaining the position that system justification is oppositional to social identity motives amongst the disadvantaged, ignores the evidence to the contrary (e.g., Owuamalam, Rubin, Spears, & Weerabangsa, 2017; see also Caricati & Sollami, 2017). On the other hand, admitting that system justification is compatible with social identity motives raises questions about the *necessity* of the special system justification motivation, the key distinguishing feature of SJT. We believe that this dilemma can be resolved by relinquishing the theoretically problematic notion of a special system justification motivation that works against the interest of the disadvantaged. However, if the system motive is discarded in favour of a personal- and/or group-based interest explanation such as SIMSA, then there is no more 'mystery' to unravel (Jost, 2017a, 2017b; Jost, 2019; Jost *et al.*, 2019; Osborne *et al.*, 2019), and then there is no further basis for system justification theory as a distinct perspective.

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Supporting Information

The following supporting information may be found in the online edition of the article:

Table S1. Ancillary Issues in the Debate between SJT and SIMSA: The First Column Contains Quotes from Jost (2019) and Jost *et al.* (2019), and the Second Column Contains our Response to them.