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Why Do People from Low-Status Groups Support Class Systems that Disadvantage Them? A Test of Two Mainstream Explanations in Malaysia and Australia

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The recent global recession revealed a huge social-class divide between the economic outcomes of the affluent and their less endowed counterparts. Although this divide has bred social unrest in some societies, in many others such disturbances have been absent. Two mainstream theories of intergroup relations offer competing propositions for this paradox. System-justification theory (SJT) proposes that people from lower status groups are most likely to support class systems that disadvantage them when their group interests are weak. In contrast, we put forward an explanation based on social identity theory (SIT) that proposes that class-system

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justification is an identity-management strategy that should be most apparent amongst individuals from lower-status groups when group interests are strong. Results from three experiments (combined N = 626), conducted in Malaysia and Australia, which varied subjective social class, provided stronger support for the SIT-based explanation that lower-status individuals endorse societal class systems more strongly when group interests are strong (Studies 1 a-b) and when the class system is perceived to be unstable in the long-term (Study 2).

Introduction

Recent years have seen a major global economic crisis, the Great Recession, in which the outcomes of the well-off have improved, while those of the less well-off took a downward turn. This growing social-class gap between those with high and low socioeconomic status in society has led to social unrest from the Occupy Movement, economic-related disturbances in Spain and Greece, and Anna Hazare's anticorruption movement directed at the political elite in India. However, despite the possibility that a collective uprising or civil disobedience could bring about change to a system of inequality, members of the disadvantaged class are often reluctant to challenge systemic unfairness and, in some cases, actually support inequitable systems. The question is *why*? The present research contrasts the explanations for this paradoxical social stasis put forward by system-justification theory (SJT: Jost & Banaji, 1994), with a new alternative based on social identity theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

System-Justification Theory

A central argument of SJT is that at least some people have an inherent need to support the status quo to reduce the uncertainties that would arise from challenging a system of inequality. SJT holds that members of disadvantaged groups (such as subjectively lower social classes) are likely to legitimize systems that negatively affect them as much as, or even more than, members of advantaged groups that benefit from these systems (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The reasons for this *system justification* are traced back to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), which proposes an intrinsic motivation to align one's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as to reduce conflict and uncertainties arising from dissonant cognitions. According to the dissonance perspective, people can achieve homeostasis (harmony between their cognitions and reality) in a number of ways, including: (a) altering one's expectations and interests so that they align reality (i.e., group disadvantage) or (b) cognitively justifying reality so that it concurs with one's expectations. For subjectively lower classes, it may be easier to align personal and group interests to fit with the prevailing social order than the other way round. Hence, drawing on dissonance theory, SJT assumes that people from subjectively lower-class groups

have the strongest motive to justify the status quo, because their group interests directly oppose a system that objectively disadvantages their ingroup. Consequently, SJT proposed that, “members of disadvantaged groups would be even more likely than members of advantaged groups to support the status quo” (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004, p. 909)—the *status-legitimacy hypothesis* (Brandt, 2013). Note that SJT emphasizes that such support should be specifically evident when subjectively lower classes are conscious of their disadvantage because only in this situation should the proposed friction between their group and system interests be influential.

However, empirical evidence for SJT’s status legitimization hypothesis is inconclusive. Some studies have found evidence for it (van der Toorn et al., 2015). Others have found null effects (Brandt, 2013), and some have found that higher- (not lower-) class groups are more likely to support societal systems (Kelemen, Szabó, Mészáros, László, & Forgas, 2014). Surprisingly, no prior research has considered that these inconsistent research findings may have been resolved by considering a key moderating variable: the strength of *group interest*.

According to SJT, group and personal interests directly oppose system-justification motives amongst subjectively lower classes. Consequently, SJT maintains that subjectively lower-class groups are most likely to engage in system justification “when individual and group needs and interests are low in salience or strength” (Jost et al., 2004, p. 909). More specifically, SJT argues that people from subjectively lower-class groups should support class-status systems that disadvantage them, only when group interests are *weak* because it is only in this situation that their motive to improve their class group’s social status does not overpower their motive to justify the systems that disadvantage them. In contrast, when group interests are *strong*, SJT assumes that subjectively lower classes should be less likely to bolster the status system because “group justification motives overcome the strength of system-justification needs and tendencies” (Jost et al., 2004, p. 887). Thus, a conclusive test of SJT would demonstrate that subjectively lower classes justify disadvantageous systems when group interests are *weak*, not strong.

Social Identity Theory

An alternative explanation for system justification among subjectively lower classes derives from SIT (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT typically focuses on group behavior when group interests are *strong*—that is, when people are highly invested in their group identity for either chronic reasons (e.g., high group identification) or situational reasons (e.g., high group salience). Subjective class membership is key in SIT.

SIT predicts that, when group interests are strong, group members will strive to create, maintain, and protect a positively distinct social identity and protect against a negative group identity. The approach that highly invested group members use to

achieve a positive social identity depends to some extent on the perceived stability of the status systems within which their group exists. When status systems are perceived to be *unstable*, and therefore mutable, highly invested individuals from subjectively lower-class groups may engage in behavior such as social competition (ingroup favoritism) in an attempt to improve their group's social status and, consequently, the positivity of their social identity.

However, when status systems are perceived to be *stable* and unchangeable, at least in the short term, highly invested individuals from subjectively lower-class groups may resort to cognitive rather than behavioral methods of supporting their social identity. In particular, they may engage in identity-management or "social creativity" strategies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Following Owuamalam et al. (2016), system justification might represent one such identity-management strategy, serving group interests (i.e., social identity) rather than system interests.

But how can endorsing a system that disadvantages a group operate to support the social identity of its members? Endorsing a status system as fair allows the subjectively lower classes to *hope* that the system will permit them to achieve a higher social status in the future (Owuamalam et al., 2016; cf. Wiederkehr, Bonnot, Krauth-Gruber, & Darnon, 2015). The more one believes that a status system is fair, the more one can hope that the system will allow changes that improve one's group outcomes in the future. Thus, system justification can be reinterpreted from an SIT perspective as a cognitive social-identity strategy that involves the endorsement of a system that currently disadvantages the subjectively lower-class ingroup but that, if perceived as just, may provide prospects of a positive future social identity (Zhang, Jetten, Iyer, & Cui, 2013). This SIT-based explanation of system justification differs from an SJT account because system justification is motivated by concerns at *the group level* rather than *the system level* and, consequently, should occur when group interests are *strong* rather than *weak*.

Our novel SIT-based explanation of system justification also suggests predictions regarding the *stability* of status systems. According to SIT, individuals identified with lower-class groups should employ identity-management strategies when they perceive the status system to be *stable*. Our SIT-based explanation builds on this assumption by distinguishing *short-term* and *long-term* system stability (Owuamalam et al., 2016). Short-term stability refers to the perception that the system can or cannot be altered through group members' current actions (e.g., social competition), and it is the type of stability that Tajfel and Turner (1979) referenced in their original explanation of SIT. In contrast, long-term stability refers to the perception that the system can or cannot be altered at some point in the more distant future.

To illustrate this distinction, consider a football team that has just lost a match. The team may perceive the status system to be stable in the short-term because they have lost the match, and nothing they can do will change the outcome and associated status ranking (Leach & Spears, 2008). However, they may also perceive

the status system to be unstable in the long-term because of future matches that they can try to win and affect their future status ranking. Our SIT-based explanation of system justification predicts that individuals from subjectively lower-class groups will most likely engage in system justification when they perceive status systems to be *stable* in the *short-term* but potentially *unstable and mutable* in the *long-term*. Consistent with SIT, short-term stability forces individuals from subjectively lower-class groups to engage in identity-management strategies to address their lower status, rather than more direct behavioral approaches that aim for social change, such as social competition. In addition, long-term instability provides the necessary conditions for system justification to contribute to a future positive social identity. After all, an unstable but fair and legitimate status system provides the best hope for improved future ingroup status. Note that this SIT-based prediction is contrary to SJT's prediction that people are *most* likely to legitimize inequality when they perceive the social system to be *stable* in both the short- and long-term (Laurin, Gaucher, & Kay, 2013).

Tentative support for parts of our SIT-based explanation already comes from previous research. System justification was evident among students from low-status backgrounds whose meritocracy beliefs were strong, because support for the *prevailing* social order allowed them to be positive that they would be personally deserving of *future* accomplishments (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Similarly, "belief in meritocracy may pose a benefit to the self-esteem of members of low status groups because it is consistent with the perception that advancement is possible" (McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013, p. 308). Our approach differs from this previous work by shifting the emphasis on *personal* interests to *group* interests.

Definitions and Overview of the Present Research

Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, Lopez, and Reimers (2013, p. 79) defined social class as "the higher order construct representing an individual or group's *relative position*" within an economic, social or cultural hierarchy, and often "denoting power, prestige, and control over resources." Diemer et al. (2013) further distinguish subjective social class (e.g., prestige) and objective social class (e.g., power or socioeconomic status). Following Diemer et al. (2013), we operationalized social class in terms of the *subjective* value connotations of one's ethnic identity (Study 1a and b) or socioeconomic background (Study 2), reasoning that both should yield similar outcomes if they tap the underlying subjective social-class construct. In short, we wanted to simulate a sense of collective disadvantage that conceptually mirrors the misfortunes that people experienced during the global recession, and then to examine how individuals from different social-class divides respond based on the explanations put forward by SJT and SIT.

Studies 1a and 1b tested our predictions in the context of social-class differences between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Malaysian society. Although ethnic Malays are politically powerful relative to other groups in Malaysia by virtue of their numeric dominance, ordinary Malays typically identify with the lower rungs of the social-class ladder in Malaysia, compared to the Chinese who largely control commerce and means of production (Owuamalam et al., 2016). Thus, within Malaysian society, politics and the economy are divided along ethnic lines, and the Malays are accorded less social prestige compared to their wealthier (*bourgeoisie*) Chinese counterparts by virtue of their dependency on government patronage. We capitalized on this double-edged social-class divide implied by this interethnic context, to amplify a sense of subjective higher or lower social class among Malays (see below). Consistent with SJT, we further manipulated a sense of group disadvantage, in order to test whether Malays would react to this disadvantage with system justification when group interests were weak.

Study 2 tested our predictions in another context of social class. Specifically, we examined the reactions of students from lower subjective class backgrounds to a university rankings system that ranked their university either high or low relative to other universities. After all, subjectively lower-class individuals are often embedded within systems that amplify a sense disadvantage, and, consistent with the current focus on the global recession, we wanted to understand their system-justification motives when confronted with systems that devalue the outcomes of their identity groups. Crucially, Study 2 aimed to test the moderating role of long-term system stability by its experimental manipulation. Hence, we investigated whether group interests were positively related to system justification and whether this relation was strongest when the university rankings system was perceived to be (un)stable in the long-term.

Study 1a

SJT proposes that, “system justification levels will be higher in societies in which social and economic inequality is more extreme rather than less extreme” (Jost et al., 2004, p. 896). Hence, we chose to conduct our first study in Malaysia because it has one of the highest divides between subjectively higher and lower social classes in Southeast Asia. We took advantage of the existing social-class divide between ethnic Malays and Chinese in Malaysian society to test the SIT-based assumption that system justification would be most apparent when a sense of one’s lower-class position was strong and when group interests were strong. Although ethnic Malay people in Malaysia (the majority group) dominate political power compared to the more economically successful Chinese (the minority group), they nurture a deep sense of economic deprivation relative to the Chinese, whom they argue are not Bumiputras (translated “sons of the soil”; i.e., indigenous to the area). This context presented an opportunity to meaningfully manipulate a

sense of social class among ethnic Malays using a priming approach (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). That is, Malay participants could credibly view themselves as higher in social class relative to the Chinese (Malay are politically more powerful) or lower in social class than the Chinese (Malay are economically less successful). This experimental manipulation can obtain causal evidence of the effect of subjective social class on system justification.

Furthermore, and in line with SJT's cognitive dissonance assumption, the conflict between group and system motives should be particularly apparent when people contemplate ingroup deprivation relative to competing groups. Hence, we agree with van der Toorn et al. (2015, p. 94) that a *sense of one's subjective social class* and "*objective state of disadvantage*" can differ, even if often positively correlated. One can be aware of one's group's lower-ranked position without necessarily feeling disadvantaged by it. Hence, we orthogonally manipulated a sense of social class and ranked group disadvantage.

Support for SJT would need to demonstrate (a) that a sense of one's group's lower-class position *increases* system justification relative to a sense of one's group's upper-class position, and that such an effect is most apparent (b) when group interests are weak rather than strong and (c) when group disadvantage is present rather than absent. Support for an SIT-based explanation of system justification would need to demonstrate that system justification appears under the same conditions except more pronounced when group interests are *strong* rather than *weak*.

Method

Participants and design. A total of 116 Malay Malaysian students at the University of Nottingham's Malaysia Campus were recruited on campus (68 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.04$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.21$). They were randomly assigned to one of four cells of a between-subjects design orthogonally manipulating a sense of social class (lower vs. upper) and group disadvantage (present vs. absent) (lower-class conditions: group disadvantage $n = 29$, group advantage $n = 30$; upper-class conditions: group disadvantage $n = 28$, group advantage $n = 29$). Group interest (the moderator) and system justification (the dependent variable) were measured.

Materials and procedure. Methods followed established precedents.

Subjective social class. Following Lammers et al. (2008), we went beyond the social class implied by ethnic group to manipulate a sense of subjective social class: exposing participants to primes associating their ethnic Malay ingroup with descriptors that were subjectively either lower or upper social class. We described this part of the research as a memory experiment, to disguise the experimental hypothesis. Participants were to remember as many word pairings as possible,

on the understanding that a memory test would follow after distractor tasks (i.e., information about a donation appeal that manipulated group disadvantage).

Following Demiers et al.'s (2013) definition of social class, participants in the lower subjective social-class condition ($n = 59$) read primes that associated their Malay ethnic identity with lower-class-relevant adjectives ("minor," subordinate," "secondary," "powerless," "ordinary," "underprivileged," and "inferior"), while pairing the Chinese outgroup with upper-class descriptors (e.g., "elite," "superior," "noble," "influential," "powerful," "privileged," and "supreme"). The subjectively upper-social-class condition ($n = 57$) reversed the primes to pair the Malay ingroup with the upper-class descriptors, and the Chinese outgroup with the lower-class descriptors. Each participant received one trial via PsychoPy, and each category-descriptor pairing was on-screen for 2,000 milliseconds followed by a fixation cross for 500 milliseconds. The ingroup and outgroup labels had chances equal to the social-class descriptors of appearing at the top, bottom, left, or right sides of the screen. Presentation of primes was randomized to avoid order effects.

Lammers et al. (2008) have already shown the effectiveness of this manipulation in enhancing or deflating a sense of social class in the context of power relations. Consequently, the current study was more concerned with whether or not the primes were stored in memory as participants completed the experimental protocols. Hence, participants wrote the class-relevant adjectives associated with their Malay ingroup. The actual number of adjectives that were paired with their Malay ingroup was seven, and we reasoned that participants retained the effect of the manipulation if they remembered at least half (3.5). This assumption was confirmed: Recall rates in the low ($\bar{d} = 0.76$, $t[57] = 2.66$, $p = .010$) and high ($\bar{d} = 1.55$, $t[56] = 4.67$, $p < .001$) social-class conditions were greater than criterion.

Group disadvantage. Having primed participants with a sense of subjective social class, we manipulated group disadvantage using bogus feedback: a resource distribution by various societal outgroups (including the Malaysian Chinese) either favored (group advantage) or disfavored (group disadvantage) a predominantly Malay ingroup charity (Yayasan Hati Kelantan) relative to a predominantly outgroup charity (Love & Care Johor). Johor is a majority Chinese village in Malaysia, and we used this subtle manipulation to enhance believability. Similarly, we used a label that was written in Bahasa language for the Malay ingroup charity to signal affinity with Malay identity. Specifically, participants were told that:

In November 2013, University of Nottingham's Malaysia Campus established a charity fund to educate and inform the public concerning the needs of people with disabilities. If you decide to take part in this survey, you would have a chance to choose how much money the university is able to pledge on your behalf to the charities chosen for this study. This would normally not exceed RM 10.

Participants were then informed that the University had chosen two charities (Love & Care Johor and Yayasan Hati Kelantan) to be the recipients of the funds generated in this exercise because they were completely dependent on external donations to meet their costs. Note that this approach is conceptually similar to the aftermath of the Great Recession where varying levels of U.S. government funding were allocated either to the top “1%” (Wall Street bailout) or to the “99%” via capital projects.

To reinforce the subtle label manipulation of group identities for these charities, we superimposed a pie chart containing the ethnic composition for each charity on pictures of either Chinese children (for Love & Care Johor charity) or Malay children (for Yayasan Hati Kelantan). Before participants could choose how much they wanted the university to allocate to each of the two charities, we presented them with fictitious data concerning the ways in which previous donors had allocated funds to the two charities in the past. Because people may not have felt disadvantaged if fellow group members did the allocations, we described the donors as 80% Chinese (i.e., the outgroup) and 20% from other unknown ethnicities, to be surer that our group disadvantage manipulation was effective. In the ingroup-disadvantage condition ($n = 57$), the chart was manipulated so that more funds were awarded to the Chinese outgroup charity (RM 1,000) at the expense of the Malay ingroup charity (RM 340). In the ingroup advantage condition ($n = 59$), these funding allocations were reversed. Participants were then to indicate how much they thought that the university should allocate to each of the two charities (from RM 0 – RM 10). Participants’ recommended allocations tested the effectiveness of our group disadvantage manipulation. Group members should be most likely to allocate more resources to the outgroup charity in the ingroup-advantage condition, in line with the norms of reciprocity, and to show ingroup favoritism in the ingroup-disadvantage condition, consistent with group interest.

Group interest. We measured chronic group interest in terms of concerns over their ethnic group’s *prestige*, adapting three items from Hornsey and Imani (2004): “When I feel that someone has a negative view of Malay Malaysians, I can get quite upset”; “It is important for me that others have a positive view of Malay Malaysians”; and “I care about how others perceive Malay Malaysians” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .75$).

System justification. Sengupta, Osborne, and Sibley (2015) suggested that researchers measure system justification using items that specifically relate to the status divide. Following this suggestion, we selected two items to tap justification in relation to economic systems and sociopolitical fairness because these issues are at the heart of the historically difficult relations between Malay and Chinese Malaysians. Specifically, participants indicated their levels of agreement with the

following statements: “In general, I find society to be fair,” and “Overall, economic positions are legitimate reflections of people’s achievements” (Jost & Thompson, 2000; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $r[114] = .31, p < .0001$).

Results and Discussion

Group disadvantage manipulation check: resource allocation. To establish the effectiveness of the ingroup disadvantage manipulation, we performed an ANCOVA with group disadvantage as a between-subjects factor and the difference between the resource allocations to the ingroup (Malay) versus outgroup (Chinese) charities as the dependent variable. On this measure, positive difference scores indicated ingroup favoritism and negative scores indicated outgroup favoritism. Centered group interest was included as a continuous moderating covariate in the ANCOVA (i.e., including interactions in the fully factorial design). We performed this analysis separately for the subjectively upper- and lower-class conditions in order to determine whether our group disadvantage manipulation was equally effective in each condition.

In the subjectively lower-class condition, there was a significant group disadvantage $\times$ group interest interaction, $F(1, 55) = 7.14, p = .010, \eta_p^2 = .12$. When group-interest concern was low ($M - 2 SD$), participants favored the outgroup more in their resource allocation when group disadvantage was absent ($\bar{d} = RM -2.42, SE = RM 1.01, p = .020, \eta_p^2 = .10$). In contrast, when group interest was high ($M + 2 SD$), participants favored their ingroup compared to the outgroup when group disadvantage was present ($\bar{d} = RM 2.39, SE = RM 1.00, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .09$). This interaction was not significant in the subjective upper-class condition, $F(1, 53) = 0.15, p = .703, \eta_p^2 = .003$ (i.e., the group disadvantage manipulation was not effective in this condition).

Thus, our group-disadvantage-present condition was successful in enacting group interested behaviors—for the subjective lower class at least—when concern over group interest was also strong, whereas the group-disadvantage-absent condition successfully enacted outgroup-favoring allocations when concerns over the group interest was low, consistent with both SIT and SJT.

System justification. A moderated regression analysis specified the main and interaction effects of social class, group disadvantage, and group interest as predicting system justification.

There was a main effect of subjective social class on system justification, $\beta = 0.42, SE = 0.20, p = .042$: Consistent with SJT, participants in the subjectively lower-class condition justified the system more strongly ($M = 5.11, SD = 0.14$) than participants in the subjectively upper-class condition ($M = 4.69, SD = 0.15$). However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between social class, group disadvantage, and group interest, $\beta = -0.94, SE = 0.37, p = .013, R^2 = .13$.

Fig. 1. The relationship between group interest and system justification when group disadvantage is present or absent for people with a sense of lower (a) or upper (b) social class. Error bars are standard errors.

To decompose this interaction effect, we probed the relationship between group interest and system justification when group disadvantage was present or not for each social-class condition.

The subjectively lower-class condition. There was a group disadvantage by group interest interaction effect on system justification, $\beta = -0.55$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .036$. In line with SIT-based explanations, a sense of group disadvantage increased system justification among subjectively lower-class participants, but only when group-interest concern was strong, $\beta = 0.37$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .036$ (Figure 1a). This effect disappeared when group disadvantage was absent, $\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .350$.

The subjectively upper-class condition. Here, system justification increased with increasing group-interest concern, provided group disadvantage was absent, $\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .026$, rather than present, $\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .945$ (see Figure 1b). However, we advise caution in the interpretation of these trends because the two-way interaction between group disadvantage and group interest in predicting system justification did not reach significance for this condition. This null interaction effect may reflect, as the manipulation check showed, the group disadvantage manipulation was ineffective in the subjectively upper-class condition.

Summary. Study 1a found that (a) a subjective sense of ingroup lower-class position increased system justification and (b) this system justification positively

related to concerns about one's group interest. Thus, we not only replicated van der Toorn et al.'s (2015) finding that a sense of low social status drives system justification, but also qualified their results, namely, that this system justification only occurs when group interest concerns are strong. This evidence is consistent with SIT but does not support SJT.

Study 1b

To assess the robustness of Study 1a's findings, a conceptual replication study used different measures of group interest concerns and system justification. We used an identical experimental protocol as in Study 1a and recruited 135 Malays (107 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.50$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.12$). Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (subjective social class: lower vs. upper) $\times$ 2 (group disadvantage: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. Group interest was in this case operationalized using a six-item affective investment/identification scale: for example, "Being a Malay is important to my sense of who I am" (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*, $\alpha = .90$, 95% CI = [0.88, 0.93]) (see Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). System justification was measured using an eight-item social dominance scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): for example, "It is probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom" (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*, $\alpha = .80$, 95% CI = [0.75, 0.85]). This scale has measured system justification in several prior studies (e.g., Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Contrary to SJT, the main effect of subjective social class on system justification was not significant, $\beta = -0.05$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .803$, although the trend was generally in line with Study 1a. Similar to Study 1a, there was a social class $\times$ group disadvantage $\times$ group interest interaction, $\beta = 1.11$, $SE = 0.38$, $p = .004$. Consistent with our SIT-based explanation (but not SJT), a sense of lower social class fostered a positive relationship between group interest concerns and system justification, but only when participants were exposed to group disadvantage, $\beta = 0.47$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = .031$, and not when group disadvantage was absent, $\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = .522$. As in Study 1a, a sense of ingroup upper-class position fostered a positive relation between group-interest concern and system justification when group disadvantage was absent, $\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .044$, rather than present, $\beta = -0.19$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .243$. Although the effect in the subjectively upper-class condition is interesting, it is not diagnostic with respect to the competing predictions made by SIT and SJT. Like SIT, SJT predicts that group interests motivate system justification among subjective upper classes. Thus, the major contribution of Study 1b is to replicate Study 1a's finding that group interests predict system justification among those primed as lower class with disadvantage, and to do so using different measures of group interest and system justification.

Study 2

Studies 1a and 1b provide evidence that group interests motivate system justification among subjectively lower-class groups when group disadvantage is salient. However, neither study addressed the key moderator variable of system stability. Study 2 aimed to address this issue using secondary data from an experiment reported in Owuamalam et al. (2016). In that experiment, long-term system (in)stability was manipulated in a context with status-system short-term stability (a university ranking system). In this context, group disadvantage (i.e., low rank to one's university) was stable in the short-term because one's current actions (e.g., ingroup favoritism) would have no effect on group status. However, the perceived long-term stability of the disadvantage could be manipulated because the status system could be portrayed as being either (a) prone to change from year to year or (b) quite stable in the long term. According to SJT, group interests should *negatively* predict system justification, especially when the system is perceived to be *stable in the long term* (Laurin et al., 2013). Under these conditions, there is no potential for improving the ingroup's outcomes in the long term, so system justification helps subjective lower classes to live with the status quo. In contrast, according to an SIT-based explanation (Owuamalam et al., 2016), group interests should *positively* predict system justification, especially when the system is perceived to be *unstable* in the long term. Under these conditions, system justification may act as an identity-management strategy because it portrays the system as legitimate and, therefore, capable of elevating the status of the currently disadvantaged ingroup. Below, we redescribe the methods of Owuamalam et al. (2016) while capitalizing on the measure of subjective social class that had not been previously analyzed to test the foregoing predictions.

Method

Participants and design. Three hundred and seventy-five undergraduate psychology students at the University of Newcastle, Australia took part in this study (297 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.59$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.96$ years). In terms of ethnic composition, 90.7% were Caucasian, 2.1% Aboriginal, 0.3% African, 1.9% Asian, and 4% did not disclose their ethnicity.

Procedure and materials. Participants were informed that the study was about "students' perceptions of the Australian university ranking system."

Subjective social class. In line with Diemer et al. (2013), participants indicated the social-class background that best described them: "working class" ($n = 54$); "lower middle-class" ($n = 37$); "middle class" ($n = 172$); "upper-middle class" ($n = 88$); and "upper class" ($n = 3$). Thus, participants were largely from

subjectively lower social classes ($n = 91$ working class + lower-middle class), through middle-class, to upper-middle classes ($n = 91$ upper-middle class + upper class). Twenty-one participants did not include their subjective social-class backgrounds and were excluded from further analysis. Consistent with Studies 1a and b, our interest here is primarily on people from subjectively lower classes who composed roughly the lower third of this index.

Group disadvantage. Students from the three subjective social classes were asked to engage in either an upward or downward intergroup comparison between their university and other Australian universities in a university rankings system (see Jost & Burgess, 2000, Study 1 for a similar approach). According to Diemer et al. (2013), educational attainment is one attribute that differentiates social classes, and we wanted to examine how students from subjectively lower social-class backgrounds, in particular, responded to inequality within systems that may be responsible for their future social status.

In the group disadvantage condition ($n = 189$), participants read about a university (the Australian National University; ANU) that scored relatively highly on three indices used to make university rankings in Australia. These three indices were “university reputation and prestige,” “course satisfaction of graduates,” and “graduate salaries, employment, and further study.” In the group advantage condition ($n = 186$), the comparison was changed so that it now related to a lower-ranked university (Southern Cross University; SCU) on the same status dimensions. To reinforce this manipulation, participants in the group disadvantage condition were told that the higher status outgroup (ANU) was ranked 1st out of 39 Australian universities and the ingroup (Newcastle) was ranked 21st out of the 39 universities. In the group advantage condition, the ingroup’s ranking was the same, but the outgroup (SCU) ranking was worse (39th place). This manipulation produces a sense of group disadvantage (Owuamalam et al., 2016).

Long-term system stability. Next, we manipulated participants’ perceptions of the long-term stability of Australian university rankings. In a low-stability condition ($n = 191$), participants were told “there is a fair degree of variability in [the ranking system’s] rankings from year to year. Some universities move up and down several places depending on their annual performance.” In a high-stability condition ($n = 184$), participants were informed that “rankings remain fairly stable across the years, and that very few universities increase or decrease their rankings substantially from year to year.” The effectiveness of this manipulation was examined using a four-item scale: for example, “The Australian University Rankings system is quite reliable, and ranking positions don’t change much from one year to the next.” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .78$). This manipulation has been shown to be effective in enacting the desired psychological states (Owuamalam et al., 2016).

Group interests. Group interest was framed around the subject of group disadvantage rather than subjective social-class per se, given the current interest on how group outcomes shapes reactions to markers of social position. Thus, to operationalize group interests, we used Luthanen and Crocker's (1992) public collective self-esteem scale. This measures symbolic group interests as group members endorsing, and investing in, their university's public prestige: for example, "Overall, the University of Newcastle is considered good by others." (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .82$).

System justification. A 23-item scale included (a) an adapted version of O'Brien, Major, and Gilbert's (2012) nine-item measure of system-justification beliefs concerning societal fairness and equity (e.g., "Differences in status between Australia's universities are fair;" $\alpha = .75$); (b) an adapted version of Kay and Jost's (2003) six-item measure of economic system justification (e.g., "The Australian University Rankings system is the best possible system;" $\alpha = .84$); and (c) Rubin, Badea, and Jetten (2014) eight-item perceived status system legitimacy scale (e.g., "The Australian University Rankings system is: 'justified', 'legitimate', and 'sensible'"; $\alpha = .87$, 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha_{\text{aggregate}} = .84$).

Results and Discussion

A 2 (group disadvantage: disadvantage vs. advantage) $\times$ 2 (long-term system stability: stable vs. unstable) ANCOVA included group interest as a moderating covariate. We performed this analysis, first, for the target subjectively lower social classes, and then repeated for the other social classes for the sake of completeness.

Subjectively lower classes. Results revealed a significant group disadvantage $\times$ stability $\times$ group interest interaction, $F(1, 83) = 5.47$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. We investigated the simple effect of stability and found that individuals from subjectively lower-class groups endorsed the system more strongly when the rankings system was unstable in the long-term ($M \pm SE$; 4.50 ± 0.15) rather than stable (4.02 ± 0.18 ; 95% CI = [0.01, 0.95]) and, that this effect was visible in the group disadvantage condition when group interest was strong, $F(1, 83) = 4.06$, $p = .047$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. This system stability effect was absent under group disadvantage when group interest was weak (unstable = 4.22 ± 0.20 vs. stable = 4.34 ± 0.29 , $F(1, 83) = 0.12$, $p = .727$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$).

Other classes. Identical analysis for the subjective middle class found that the group disadvantage $\times$ stability $\times$ group interest interaction did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 164) = 3.13$, $p = .079$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Similarly, for the subjective upper-middle classes, the results revealed, again, that the group disadvantage $\times$ stability $\times$ group interest interaction did not reliably effect system justification,

$F(1, 83) = 0.61, p = .438, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Thus, social class did not significantly affect system justification depending on the conditions specified here.

Summary. Consistent with an SIT-based explanation, group interests positively predicted system justification among individuals from subjectively lower-class groups, but only when they perceived a system that currently disadvantaged them to be unstable in the long-term, providing scope for change within the system.

General Discussion

As economic inequalities widen across the world, especially after the Great Recession, it is important to consider why members of subjectively lower-class groups might support status systems that disadvantage them. This article investigated this issue from the perspectives of two social psychological theories of intergroup relations, contrasting the standard SJT explanation of system justification with a novel SIT-based explanation.

Consistent with SJT, Study 1a found that people with a sense of lower social class justified the system more than those with a sense of being upper social class. However, what initially looked like support for SJT was more consistent with an SIT-based explanation overall, taking into account the moderating effect of group interest. Under conditions of *strong* (not weak) group interest, system justification was most apparent among individuals with a subjectively lower-class background (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1994). We replicated this positive relation between group interest and system justification in subsequent studies where the main effect of subjective social class was absent (Studies 1b and 2) as in Brandt (2013). Thus, we showed that system justification is most likely when group interest is *strong* (not *weak*).

This evidence is contrary to SJT predictions but supportive of a SIT-based explanation proposing that system justification represents an identity-management strategy that operates in the service of social identity motives and group prospects. Study 2 also showed that the positive relation between group interests and system justification was strongest when group members perceived the status system to be unstable in the long-term (giving hope and scope for change, assuming a fair system). Again, this evidence fits the SIT-based explanation but not SJT.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A key strength of the present research is that it demonstrates key effects in two intergroup contexts (ethnicity and university affiliation as strong correlates of subjective social class), in two cultures (Malaysian and Australian), using

two operationalizations of subjective social class (trait priming and self-reported class), three operationalizations of group interests, and three measures of system justification. Hence, it is unlikely that our results are limited to the particular contexts, cultures, manipulations, or measures employed here.

A key limitation of our research is that, in Study 1a, we used a two-item measure of system justification and those two items were not strongly correlated. However, this may not necessarily be a problem given that Study 1a's findings correspond with those in Study 1b where a reliable and multiple-item measure of system justification was used and in Study 2 where multiple scales were used (including scales that were developed by SJT scholars). In addition, the r value of .31 for the system-justification scale in Study 1a is within the range of values that Cohen (1988) defines as a moderate coefficient. The fact that the two items are moderately correlated is consistent with the idea that although the items are not the same, they nonetheless have a sufficient relation for us to be confident that they go together. That being said, future studies could aim to develop and use behavioral and/or physiological measures of system justification to more directly tap cognitive dissonance as people contemplate competing group and system interests. In the same spirit, such studies could, in addition, examine whether the effects we report here also occur in the context of more objective measures of social class (e.g., by using big data from cross-national studies).

Conclusion

The present research findings have both specific, theoretical, and broader societal implications. At the theoretical level, the present research reinterprets system justification as a group-based motive that serves to foster hope for future positive outcomes for those from lower-class groups, rather than a process that operates to perpetuate their disadvantaged social position. That is, for disadvantaged groups, the "system" is not just a source of stasis and oppression, but may also, perhaps paradoxically, be a vehicle for social change. A challenge for SJT, therefore, is to empirically distinguish genuine system justification (e.g., false consciousness) from group-interested strategies and to show that group motives do not explain our findings.

At a broader societal level, the current research implies that the politically and economically disadvantaged (e.g., the so-called "99%") are motivated to do better for themselves, rather than embracing their current disadvantaged situation, even if this motive is sometimes expressed as support for systems that currently disadvantage them. It is this motive for upward mobility, as a group member as well as individual, that we believe provides the greatest hope for a more equitable society as people navigate the aftermath of the Great Recession and other instances of social inequality.

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