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A critical review of the (un)conscious basis for system-supporting attitudes of the disadvantaged

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Abstract

Is support for societal systems amongst the disadvantaged driven by an (un)conscious system justification motive that is independent from self-interests? System justification theory (SJT) is unique in its affirmative answer to this question. SJT proposes (a) that support for societal systems operates in the service of maintaining the status quo, (b) that the evidence for this system justification motive lies with the fact that members of disadvantaged groups (un)consciously support societal systems that are detrimental to their interests, and (c) that these processes are most apparent when group interests are weak. The present article reviews emerging evidence for these propositions and concludes that (a) an unconscious manifestation of system justification is unlikely based on SJT's "strong" dissonance-based predictions, which assumes that competing group and system motives are cognitively salient, and (b) a conscious system justification motive is also unlikely amongst the disadvantaged when group interests are weak. In addition, we suggest ways in which to explain system justification effects amongst the disadvantaged without recourse to an (un)conscious system justification motive.

1 | INTRODUCTION

An entrenched idea in much of the theorizing around social and political behavior is that people are often propelled into acting in one way or the other because their personal interests or the interests of those that they care about may be at stake (e.g., family and fellow citizens). This idea is visible in social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), realistic conflict theory (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), and relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970). So, for example, a proposed increase in student tuition fees could cause social protests by students because they perceive themselves to be victims of a social system that is unfair. Although challenging systems of inequality may

enhance the immediate personal and collective outcomes of the disadvantaged (i.e., through social change), it is sometimes the case that people choose either to do nothing about their disadvantaged situation or even to support such inequality. It is this paradoxical support for social inequality amongst those who are disadvantaged by the inequality that provided the impetus for system justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Indeed, the predictions that SJT makes about support for unequal social systems amongst members of *privileged* groups are practically identical to those made by other identity or interest-based accounts (e.g., SIT). The justification of social systems by members of disadvantaged groups, however, represents a crucial point of distinction between SJT and other theories. Consequently, in the current review, we focus on this single but crucial difference between SJT and competing interest-based accounts of system attitudes amongst the disadvantaged. To begin with, we present a brief overview of the various conceptualizations of the social system. We then consider SJT's auxiliary propositions, including the unconscious basis for system-supporting attitudes amongst the disadvantaged.

1.1 | What constitutes a social system?

The "social system" has a number of different meanings and operationalizations in the system justification literature. It is sometimes regarded as the established order and vested interests of various social groups (e.g., political parties/groups), but it also refers to procedural instruments and regulatory mechanisms/policies (e.g., the legal system and wealth redistribution policies) that, in principle, allow for the possibility of change. At other times, the social system is considered to be a set of cultural and group/gender norms or values that reinforce what is "commonplace" and typically (or ought to be) done in a situation (e.g., descriptive norms; see Jost, Sterling, & Langer, 2015, p. 1288). Finally, a related conceptualization views social systems as organized social, economic, religious, geographical, and political structures that provide certainty and order to the people who are embedded within them (Kay & Zanna, 2009, p. 161; see also Rutto, Russo, & Mosso, 2014).

Accordingly, a typology of social systems can range from the micro-systems of procedural and regulatory mechanisms that prescribe people's relations with the established order; through meso-systems of cultural and group norms that determine the normal and traditional ways of conduct for specific groups of people in different situations; to the macro-systems of social, political, economic, geographical, and religious entities that organize and maintain human civilization (see Figure 1). It is possible to further divide macro-systems into superordinate systems (e.g., Abrahamic faith establishments; see also Jaško & Kossowska, 2013) and sub-systems within this overarching order (e.g., Christian and Islamic faith groups).

1.2 | System justification theory

According to SJT, people are driven by a need to bolster and legitimize their social systems, and to leave things the way they are "even at considerable cost to themselves and to fellow group members" (Jost & Hunyady, 2005, p. 260). So, for example, students may comply with tuition fee hikes, not because they achieve any tangible benefits from doing so but because they have a need to support systems once in place, however badly it serves their personal and collective interests. Proponents of SJT argue that there are several different antecedents to the system justification motive. Original versions of the theory considered (a) cognitive antecedents including dissonance, consistency, cognitive conservatism, attributional simplicity, intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty reduction, and openness to experience; (b) epistemic antecedents, including the needs for order, structure, closure, and control; (c) other motivational factors, including fear of equality, illusion of control, belief in a just world, and system instability and threat; and (d) ideologies, including the meritocratic ideology, the Protestant work ethic, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and political conservatism (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). More recent versions of SJT have also considered existential needs, including the desire to manage threat, insecurity, distress, perception of a dangerous world; and fear of death; and relational motives, including the

FIGURE 1 A tripartite typology of procedural, cultural, and socio-structural systems

desire to affiliate with similar others, coordinate social relationships, and establish a shared social reality (Jost, Becker, Osborne, & Badaan, 2017).

A common denominator of the foregoing antecedents is the desire for a structured, consistent, and certain reality. In the present article, we do not attempt to address all of these various antecedents of system justification. Instead, we focus on cognitive dissonance that best embodies the common denominator. We focus on cognitive dissonance because it provides the rationale for SJT's most theoretically distinctive and informative "strong" prediction regarding members of disadvantaged groups. As Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) explained:

the strongest, most paradoxical form of the system justification hypothesis, which draws also on the logic of cognitive dissonance theory, is that members of disadvantaged groups would be even more likely than members of advantaged groups to support the status quo, at least when personal and group interests are low in salience (p. 909; see also Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003).

This "strongest" form of the system justification hypothesis is sometimes called the *status-legitimacy hypothesis* (Brandt, 2013) because it predicts that low-status groups will be more likely to legitimize social systems than high-status groups. For example, it predicts that support for unequal social systems should be pronounced amongst Muslims and ethnic minorities in the United States compared to Christians and ethnic majority groups in the United States. The rationale for this counterintuitive prediction is based on the principles of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962): The personal and group interests of people who are advantaged by the system are consistent with a social reality in which inequality prevails because maintaining the status quo ensures that their advantaged position within the system is unchallenged. For this reason, SJT assumes that the advantaged should not experience dissonance between their personal/group motives and the status quo. Accordingly, the advantaged should be less likely

to feel that it is necessary to flaunt their advantaged position, especially if their position is perceived to be legitimately achieved within a stable social order.

In contrast, the personal and group interests of people who are disadvantaged by the system conflict with the status quo because the status quo entails the continued subjugation of these interests. Hence, members of low-status groups should experience greater cognitive dissonance than members of high-status groups when they consider their place in the social system. Consequently, members of disadvantaged groups should be more motivated than their privileged counterparts to find a way to rationalize (or justify) the discrepancy between their personal/group interests and the existing social arrangement (cf. Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016). We consider the logic of this cognitive dissonance premise in greater detail later, but first, we consider the evidence for a system justification motive in general and then the status–legitimacy hypothesis in particular.

1.3 | Evidence for a system justification motive

A key problem with SJT research is the lack of direct evidence for a separate system justification motive that operates independently from personal and group motives. The majority (if not all) of current system justification research focus on measures of system justification that tap *ideological positions or support for social systems* rather than the system justification motive itself (cf. Jost et al., 2010). An examination of the items on the typical system justification scale illustrates this point: “In general, I find society to be fair” (Kay & Jost, 2003); “the system rewards individuals ability and motivation ...” (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003); “market-based procedures and outcomes are not only efficient but are inherently fair, legitimate and just” (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003); and “the people in charge of our country govern it well” (Henry & Saul, 2006). None of the items in these scales tap the system justification motive itself (i.e., “I am motivated to defend societal institutions for the sake of those institutions” or “I support system ‘X’ *because* I want it to remain the way it is”). This is an important omission in over two decades of system justification research (Van der Toorn & Jost, 2014).

Evidence for a system justification motive is based on not only indirect measures but also indirect tests of theoretically distinctive system justification predictions (for the same conclusion, see Kay et al., 2009, p. 422). For example, previous research on system justification has focused, *inter alia*, on the tendency for the disadvantaged to

1. acknowledge the superiority of higher status outgroups (i.e., outgroup favoritism) when competing interest-based accounts are interpreted as predicting ingroup favoritism amongst the disadvantaged (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004);
2. engage in complementary stereotyping, which involves endorsements of not only positive but also negative stereotypes about one's own group (e.g., Kay & Jost, 2003; see also Jost & Banaji, 1994);
3. support and legitimize unequal societal systems (Van der Toorn et al., 2015);
4. prefer political inertia (Osborne & Sibley, 2013), even amongst disadvantaged people seeking social (and political) change (Jost et al., 2012); and
5. show unconscious biases against disadvantaged ingroups on implicit association tasks (IAT), which is assumed to reflect an *unconscious rationalization* of the status quo (e.g., Jost et al., 2004) even though quick responses on the IAT implies that there is no inconsistency to *justify* in the first place.

Based on this evidence, there seems little doubt that members of disadvantaged groups consciously and unconsciously accept and support social systems that disadvantage them according to SJT researchers. What is less clear, however, is *why* the disadvantaged support existing social arrangements that may be materially disadvantageous to them. SJT proposes a system justification motive that is separate from personal and/or group interests to explain this paradox. However, the evidence for this completely independent system motive remains unclear.

1.4 | The status–legitimacy hypothesis: Do the disadvantaged support unequal societal systems more than the privileged?

The second key evidential basis for SJT's unique claims of an independent system justification motive relates to its status–legitimacy hypothesis. This hypothesis provides a litmus test for SJT because it predicts that the system justification motive and consequent system justification effects will sometimes be *stronger* for members of low-status groups than for members of high-status groups (Jost, Pelham et al., 2003). Given that members of low-status groups are also likely to have stronger personal and group motives *against* justifying disadvantageous systems, evidence for the status–legitimacy hypothesis is probably the clearest way of demonstrating that the system motive is genuinely separate from personal and group interests.

Some correlational evidence from representative cross-sectional surveys has shown that members of disadvantaged groups do support unfavorable societal systems more than their privileged counterparts (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham et al., 2003). Nonetheless, emerging evidence from other similar cross-sectional data has shown either null effects or effects in the opposite direction (e.g., Caricati, 2017; Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012; Kelemen, Szabó, Mészáros, László, & Forgas, 2014; Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Liu, Pratto, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). This mixed evidence may have resulted because these analyses failed to take into account the degree of cognitive dissonance experienced by group members. Brandt (2013) addressed this issue (although indirectly) in a large representative study across 36 nations by identifying the conditions under which cognitive dissonance was likely to be at its highest and then examining the relationship between social status and trust/confidence in various societal systems (i.e., government) in those conditions. The results were contradictory or null with respect to SJT's status–legitimacy prediction.

Trump and White's (2018) experimental data corroborated Brandt's (2013) null evidence, and Caricati and Sollami's (2017, 2018) experimental evidence suggests that the status–legitimacy effect may be caused by group interests. However, others have pointed out that the null results with respect to the status–legitimacy hypothesis could have been due to methodological artefacts (Sengupta, Osborne, & Sibley, 2015). The argument is that the previous studies used measures of system justification that were not tied to the specific overarching system on which legitimizing beliefs were considered. For example, questions about the legitimacy of the university hierarchy system between subclusters of students and professors should ideally be tied to this specific hierarchy rather than tapping a more generic index of system justification in society at large. Indeed, Sengupta et al. (2015) found evidence in support of this status–legitimation caveat in one wave of a longitudinal series of correlational studies conducted in New Zealand. However, recent experimental evidence that has used specific measures of system justification tied to an overarching Australian university ranking system revealed patterns that were consistent with Brandt's null results (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016, Study 2). Hence, the specificity of system justification measurement does not appear to explain the mixed evidence for the status–legitimacy hypothesis, even if Sengupta et al.'s caveat is potentially helpful.

Interestingly, there are now some indications that the status–legitimacy effect may be more finely tapped at the unconscious implicit level (Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2004). As Jost (2017b) emphasized, “my work focuses on system justification motivation—the tendency to defend, bolster and justify aspects of the societal status quo, *often at a nonconscious level of awareness*” (our emphasis). Below, we examine the key evidence on which the unconscious basis for system justification sits.

1.5 | Unconscious manifestations of the system justification motive

One useful approach to demonstrate the unconscious existence of a system justification motive is to create conditions that presumably activate (a) the system justification motive via threat to the social order and (b) the group motive via threat to social identity and to then compare the readiness with which concepts linked to the legitimacy of the social system are activated in these conditions relative to a control condition in which system and group motives are inactive (Liviatan & Jost, 2014). The existence of an *unconscious* system justification motive is shown

if legitimacy-linked concepts are activated more readily when people perceive tangible threats to the existing social order (relative to a control condition in which such threats are absent), although it should be noted that this rationale seems to apply more to automaticity (i.e., lack of intention or conscious control) than to unconsciousness qua lack of awareness (see Bargh, 1994). To rule out the influence of social identity-related interests and motives, legitimacy concepts should not be readily activated when people are confronted with threats to their social identity relative to a control condition. This pattern of results was precisely what Liviatan and Jost's (2014) data seem to have revealed.

Specifically, Liviatan and Jost (2014) exposed their undergraduate participants to either system threat (criticism of wealth equality in America) or threat to social identity (criticism of the state of geographical science in America [Exp. 1a] or lack of innovation in arts and science as well as perceptions of Americans as dumb [Exp. 1b], see Table 1 for the full details). They further created a control condition in which the threat was directed to a fictitious outgroup system (criticism of wealth equality in Romulan—see Table 1). Liviatan and Jost then measured the speed with which their participants recognized words that were tied to the legitimacy and stability of the social order (e.g., “just” and “fair”) relative to control words that were unrelated to this order (e.g., “vivid” and “sweet”). They found that legitimacy-linked words were more readily recognized than the words unrelated to legitimacy in the system threat condition but that this effect was absent in the social identity and control conditions (see Figure 2).

However, a closer look at Liviatan and Jost's (2014) evidence suggests that identity threat was likely to have been present in the system threat condition because it is possible for participants in that condition to perceive the criticisms of *wealth equality in their country* as being directed towards their ingroup (Rubin, 2016; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). Consequently, the heightened salience of legitimacy-related concepts in that condition relative to an outgroup control condition could be reinterpreted as a form of ingroup bias (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2018; Rubin, 2016).

Aside from the ambiguous empirical evidence, the proposal of an unconscious system justification motive is theoretically inconsistent with the auxiliary cognitive dissonance propositions of the strong version of the system justification hypothesis. SJT proposes that the system justification motive is based on the tension between two opposing cognitions amongst the disadvantaged. But, for this cognitive dissonance to occur, the opposing cognitions need to be cognitively accessible, at least according to classical accounts of dissonance theory. It is unclear why people would experience a dissonance based on competing cognitions of which they are unaware (Festinger, 1962). Indeed, some evidence indicates that cognitive dissonance effects *only* occur at the explicit level, not the implicit level (Gawronski & Strack, 2004). Hence, the system justification motive is unlikely to exist at the unconscious level because cognitive dissonance cannot exist at the unconscious level, at least according to mainstream dissonance theories.

One could argue that it is not entirely inconceivable that the system justification motive might operate unconsciously because goals and motives do not necessarily have to be conscious (i.e., they can be automatic; Bargh, 1994) and SJT's unconscious system justification rests not only on the premise that it is automatic (e.g., implicit outgroup favoritism; Jost et al., 2004) but also on the assumption that it is goal-oriented (Jost et al., 2010; Liviatan & Jost, 2011). Indeed, the evidence shows that goal-directed actions can be guided by unconscious thoughts (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010). For example, some studies have demonstrated an increased brain activity in areas that are predictive of specific actions (e.g., in the frontal and parietal cortex) several seconds before people actually reach a conscious decision to act (Soon, Brass, Heinze, & Haynes, 2008). However, such unconscious goal-directed thoughts require that people would have *attended* to and *processed* elements of the task on which a decision is to be made beforehand (cf. Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; cf. Payne, Samper, Bettman, & Luce, 2008). Hence, for an unconscious system justification to be possible, there must be an *a priori awareness* and *processing* of the dissonant system and group interests.

It is also possible to argue that an unconscious system justification motive could manifest in the form of automatic attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors that have previously been judged to be adaptive without further need for a conscious deliberation (Bargh, 1994). In this sense, system justification might represent an unconscious activation of behaviors that reflects system-justifying stereotypes. Indeed, there is supportive evidence that stereotypes can serve a system-justifying function (e.g., Calogero & Jost, 2011; Cichocka, Winiewski, Bilewicz, Bukowski, & Jost,

TABLE 1 Threat manipulations in Liviatan and Jost (2014, Experiment 1b)

Experimental condition		
System threat	Social identity threat	Control (Romulans fictitious outgroup)
<p>We Americans have always flattered ourselves that we have more of two things than almost any other country in the world: freedom and equality. However, examining our <i>Capitalist economic system</i> seriously calls this belief into question. Over more than two decades, a great deal of evidence points to the fact that <i>America offers less opportunity to its citizens today than in past generations and less opportunity than many other countries offer to their citizens</i>. Moreover, these studies have firmly established that American workers not only are doing more poorly than their parents, but their wages are declining in real terms as well. Although the average national income has remained almost the same between 1973 and 2000, this average hides the fact that the top 20% of families have seen their incomes rise dramatically, while the poorest 20% of families have dropped by the same amount or more. In fact, nearly half of the families in the country are worse off now than in 1973, with millions of children living below the poverty line. But even worse than income inequality is the growing disparity with regard to overall distribution of wealth. Wealth, the net worth of a household, is an even better indicator than income of long-term economic security. Without wealth, a family lives from hand to mouth no matter how high its income. Wealth inequality in the United States is now at a 60-year high, with the top 1% of wealth holders controlling more than the bottom 80% put together! This means that economic growth (the “Capitalist boom”) during the 1980s and 1990s truly benefited a very small minority of the population, a minority that was already rich by anyone’s standards. Is it an accident that when Capitalism “works” best, even more people end up in poverty? I don’t think so. The future does not seem bright for those who cherish equality and freedom in the United States and in the world at large. Wealth inequalities are as dramatic and persistent today as they were decades, maybe even centuries,</p>	<p>We Americans have always flattered ourselves that we have some of the most ingenious minds, more than almost any other country in the world. However, recent studies on creativity of American artists and scientists seriously call this belief into question. Over more than two decades, a great deal of evidence points to the fact that the American people are not as creative today as they were in past generations and that originality amongst American artists and scientists is lower than in many other countries around the world. Moreover, these studies have firmly established that Americans not only are less involved in ground-breaking projects, but their contribution to the emergence of new ideas is declining as well. Although average productivity rates in America have remained almost the same between 1973 and 2000, this average hides the fact that truly innovative ideas represent only 20% of all of Americans’ output, while nearly half of it is simply variations of existing ideas. But even worse than ingenuity rates is the growing number of young American artists and scientists who invest their time and resources conservatively in mainstream ideas that have already been explored extensively. Time and resources devoted to new endeavors are even better indicators than materialized projects of a person’s capacity for creativity. Without the motivation to innovate, people’s creativity remains low no matter how “naturally ingenious” they are. Investment in innovative ideas in the United States is now at a 60-year low point, with more than 80% of time and money going into predictable and non-risky projects! This means that the “creative era” of the 1990s and 2000s was shaped by a minority of Americans, a number so small which only highlights the nonsense that other Americans have generated. Is it an accident that Americans are considered “dumb” by people from other countries? I don’t think so. The future does not seem bright for those of us who cherish the growth of Americans’ “minds.” The decline in imaginative thought on the part of American artists and</p>	<p>We Romulans have always flattered ourselves that we have more of two things than almost any other race in the laid out universe: freedom and equality. However, examining our cybertrading economic system seriously calls this belief into question. For a long time now, a great deal of evidence points to the fact that Romulus offers less opportunity to its citizens today than in past generations and less opportunity than many other galaxies offer to their citizens. Moreover, these studies have firmly established that Romulan workers not only are doing more poorly than their parents, but their wages are declining in real terms as well. Although the average galactic income has remained almost the same between stardates 30.751 and 30.916, this average hides the fact that the top 20% of families have seen their incomes rise dramatically, while the poorest 20% of families have dropped by the same amount or more. In fact, nearly half of the families in the galaxy are worse off now than in stardate 30.751, with millions of children living below the poverty line. But even worse than income inequality is the growing disparity with regard to overall distribution of wealth. Wealth, the net worth of a household, is an even better indicator than income of long-term economic security. Without wealth, a family lives from hand to mouth no matter how high its income. Wealth inequality in Romulus is worse now than ever before, with the top 1% of wealth holders controlling more than the bottom 80% put together! This means that economic growth during stardates 30.800 and 30.900 truly benefited a very small minority of the population, a minority that was already rich by anyone’s standards. Is it an accident that when cybertrading “works” best, even more people end up in poverty? I don’t think so. The future does not seem bright for those who cherish equality and freedom in Romulus and in the universe at large. Wealth inequalities are as dramatic and persistent today as they were ever before. And given the heavy</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Experimental condition		
System threat	Social identity threat	Control (Romulans fictitious outgroup)
ago. And given the heavy concentration of wealth ownership amongst the richest citizens, as I have outlined above, it is not unreasonable to speculate that things will get much worse.	scientists relative to non-Americans is dramatic and persistent. And given the relatively small amount of time and resources devoted to the pursuit of innovative ideas, as I have outlined above, it is not unreasonable to speculate that things will get much worse.	concentration of wealth ownership amongst the richest citizens, as I have outlined above, it is not unreasonable to speculate that things will get much worse.

FIGURE 2 Exposure to system threat increased the speed with which participants recognized words that were related to legitimacy and stability (but not control). Source: An adaptation of Liviatan and Jost's (2014) figure 2

2015; Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003), although this link is not always clear (e.g., De Oliveira & Dambrun, 2007; Owuamalam, Wong, & Rubin, 2016) especially amongst the disadvantaged (Owuamalam, Wong, et al., 2016). However, even if this automatic adherence to system-justifying stereotypes forms the basis for unconscious system justification, it remains unclear how and why system-justifying stereotypes formed in the first place. Again, in order for cognitive dissonance to play a role, these system-justifying stereotypes must be based on conscious consideration of opposing personal/group- and system-based interests.

1.6 | Is system justification likely when group interests are weak?

SJT proposes that personal and group interests sometimes overwhelm the influence of the system justification motive and that, consequently, the attitudinal and behavioral impact of the system justification motive is most likely to be apparent when personal and group interests are weak. In contrast, Owuamalam, Rubin, and Spears (2016) have argued that system justification is most likely to occur when group interests are strong because only people who have strong feelings about their disadvantaged ingroup should experience significant cognitive dissonance about their group's disadvantaged position in the social hierarchy. Disadvantaged group members who do not attach much value or importance to their ingroup (i.e., weak group identifiers) should experience less cognitive dissonance regarding their group's disadvantaged position, and, consequently, they should be less motivated to justify the relevant social hierarchy following SJT's dissonance logic. Owuamalam, Rubin, and Spears' (2016) argument is based on the original statements of cognitive dissonance theory, which propose that the elements of the dissonance-arousing cognitions

need to be *self-relevant* and *important* (Festinger, 1962; see also Aronson, 1994, p. 231). Evidence from competing interest-based accounts (e.g., Caricati & Sollami, 2017; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, Spears, & Weerabangsa, 2017) as well as those of proponents of the system justification theory (Kay et al., 2009; Van der Toorn et al., 2015; see also Jost, 2017a) supports this argument.

Of course, this is not to say that weak group identifiers may not engage in system rationalization at all. Situations may arise in which they do so, contingent upon the level at which they self-categorize. For example, if people have a low level of identification with their subgroup (e.g., as African Americans) but a high level of identification with a more inclusive identity (e.g., as Americans), then they may support the associated superordinate societal system (America) especially strongly due to a group interest that is tied to their inclusive identity rather than their subgroup identity. This form of system justification arguably has more to do with a group enhancement motive than with a system justification motivation. Hence, a conscious system justification motivation is theoretically and empirically unlikely (although not impossible) when group identities and interests are weak, with the implication that an unconscious manifestation of this motive is also unlikely amongst weak subgroup identifiers.

1.7 | Open questions and opportunities for theoretical advancement

Proponents of SJT offer an important counter-position to interest-based theories. Specifically, they argue that people are motivated by a need to defend (even bolster) and preserve the status quo and that this motive operates (un)consciously and against the personal and collective interests of the disadvantaged. However, none of the studies that have been presented to support this system justification thesis have, in our opinion, successfully eliminated personal and group interests (see also Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016). Indeed, the cognitive dissonance assumption that is used to justify SJT's position assumes a *rational* agent: People are confronted with two realities and required to *choose* a reality that works best for them (see also Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003, p. 17). The proponents of the "belief in a just world" thesis that is often used to augment SJT admit that even when people support an order that victimizes or disadvantages others, they often do so in the service of personal interests. In the words of Lerner (1980, p. 14), "people want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in their future" (emphasis added). Trust, hope, and confidence in one's future (or even societal systems) help to satisfy people's psychological needs for clarity, positive reputation, consistency, certainty, and assurance. Hence, these motives are arguably more closely tied to self-interests than to a separate need to resolve uncertainties and inconsistencies "on behalf of the social system" (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003, p. 18).

Perhaps recognizing how "notoriously difficult" it is to "'rule out' theories of self-interest" (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003, p. 14), Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin (2007) now acknowledge that the system justification motive may after all be based on relational and shared reality motives that are part and parcel of social identity processes. As Jost et al. (2007, p. 175) explained:

We propose that [system justifying] ideological convictions are influenced by a motive to establish and maintain a shared view of the world with other people [...]. To the extent that political and religious ideologies are sets of interrelated beliefs and attitudes that can provide many different individuals with the same 'lenses' through which to view the world and thereby communicate with each other, they should be especially useful for building and maintaining a sense of shared reality.

So, for example, if family members vote for the republican party, then one might infer that this ingroup holds conservative beliefs about abortion and so on, and this might motivate such individual to act in similar ways to avoid disruption to valued familial traditions and relationships. Maintaining social bonds and adhering to values associated with social ingroups helps to satisfy basic needs for belongingness, understanding, and self-validation. Hence, it is uncertain how these needs are rooted in a separate system justification motive that "does not [...] operate] in the service of protecting the interests of the self or the group" (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 10). In short, the challenge for

SJT is to explain how these motives are inversely related to personal and group interests amongst the disadvantaged (cf. Jost, 2017a, p. 4) and how they represent the motives of “systems, organizations, and institutions” (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003, p. 32). Again, it is necessary for SJT to meet this challenge in order to make a theoretically distinctive contribution above and beyond other competing identity- and interest-based accounts (see also Owuamalam et al., 2018).

Looking ahead, it is also crucial to establish directly whether the *system justification motive* operates consciously or unconsciously, especially for disadvantaged group members who are either weakly or strongly invested in their social systems. To this end, it might be fruitful to distinguish between an active and motivated form of system justification that is caused by *conscious* deliberation of competing system and group interests (i.e., conscious system justification) and a more passive cognitive form of system justification that merely regurgitates previously formed system justification tendencies as an automatic and implicit response to unconscious primes (i.e., unconscious system justification). With this framework, it is possible to generate theoretically incisive questions about the potential consequences of these two types of system justification for the ways in which people adjust to their disadvantaged position in the social system.

The distinction between conscious and unconscious system justification might help to explain why system justification sometimes has a palliative temporal effect on the psychological well-being of the disadvantaged (Owuamalam, Paolini, & Rubin, 2017; Vargas-Salfate, 2017) but at other times has a detrimental longitudinal effect (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, 2017; Harding & Sibley, 2013; but see Vargas-Salfate, Paez, Khan, Liu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). One reason for this mixed evidence could be that in the here-and-now, *conscious* system justification soothes emotive and aversive feelings of dissonance that occur when people *actively consider* their unjust position in the prevailing social order. In contrast, when system justification occurs at the unconscious level, then there is less likely to be any negative dissonance that needs to be soothed and more likely to be an unconscious internalization of status-legitimizing ideologies that result in self-blame. Consistent with this view, Quinn and Crocker (1999) showed that overweight women who were primed with the Protestant work ethic (a form of status-legitimizing system justification ideology; Jost & Hunyady, 2005) experienced depressed affect, presumably arising from an internalized sense that one is responsible for one's own disadvantage. Future research would therefore benefit from further theoretical and empirical exploration of conscious and unconscious system justification amongst the disadvantaged.

2 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The existence of a separate system justification motive has often hinged on the claim that members of disadvantaged groups sometimes (un)consciously *accept* and/or *support* systems that are detrimental to their personal and group interests and, sometimes, to a greater extent than members of advantaged groups (Jost, 2017a, 2017b; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004). However, the evidence for this claim is debatable. In particular, there is no evidence of a system justification motive that also conclusively eliminates personal and/or group interests as alternative explanations. Consequently, it remains unclear whether system-supporting attitudes and behaviors are driven by a separate system justification motive or by personal and group interests. In defense of SJT, Jost (2017a) proposed that recent researchers have ignored an important caveat of the status-legitimacy hypothesis: that members of disadvantaged groups are not expected to show greater system justification than members of advantaged groups when “system justification *conflicts* with motives for self-enhancement, self-interest, and ingroup favoritism” (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003, p. 17). However, contrary to this position, recent research has been careful to take self-interest and group interest into account when assessing the status-legitimacy hypothesis and has shown that system justification can be positively related to self-interests rather than being oppositional to these interests (see Caricati & Sollami, 2017; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, et al., 2017). Even Cichocka, Górska, Jost, Sutton, and Bilewicz's (2017) evidence demonstrates that system-supporting attitudes can coexist in complementarity with drives for collective enhancement (e.g., collective action).

Jost (2017a, p. 6) further argued that “some researchers have confused the strong, dissonance-based hypothesis with system justification theory itself” and pointed out that this hypothesis represents only a “hybrid of dissonance and system justification perspectives” (p. 6). We agree that SJT is much more than the strong dissonance-based status–legitimacy hypothesis. But the point that we make here is that the status–legitimacy hypothesis rests on the dissonance principle to justify the prediction unique to SJT that disadvantaged groups justify social systems more than the advantaged, and it provides a diagnostic test of SJT’s critical assumption that system justification motivation is separate from personal and group interests, and this is why it represents such a crucial hypothesis in the SJT framework.

We also reviewed the evidence and theory for the conscious and unconscious manifestation of system attitudes amongst the disadvantaged in the context of SJT’s cognitive dissonance assumptions (Jost, 2017a). Our analysis revealed, firstly, and consistent with SJT, that the disadvantaged can consciously hold system-supporting attitudes (see also Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016; Owuamalam, Rubin, & Spears, 2016). However, these system-supporting attitudes seem to be driven by immediate or distal material, psychological or symbolic interests (see Owuamalam, Paolini, et al., 2017; Owuamalam, Rubin, et al., 2017). Secondly, an active, motivated, unconscious form of system justification amongst the disadvantaged is unlikely, at least as a result of unconscious cognitive dissonance. Unconscious system justification is more likely to take the form of a more passive, cognitive repetition of system-justifying stereotypes which can also be explained more parsimoniously by an interest-based perspective (see Owuamalam et al., 2018).

In our view, system justification is a genuine phenomenon rather than a “myth” to be “busted” (Jost, 2017a, p. 2). Our point is simply that it is likely to result consciously from self-interests rather than unconsciously from a special system motive. In this sense, we agree

that most people are motivated (at least to some extent) to defend and justify aspects of the social systems –such as capitalism—on which their livelihoods depend. (Jost, 2017a, p. 3, our emphasis).

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