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DOES STATUS MATTER? TESTING HYPOTHESES FROM STRONG FORM OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY

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Does status matter? Testing hypotheses from strong form of System Justification Theory

*Le statut social importe-t-il ?
Une évaluation d'hypothèses dérivées de la forme extrême
de la théorie de la justification du système*

*Luca Caricati**
*Fabio Lorenzi-Cioldi***

Abstract

System justification theory posits that people are motivated to see prevailing social systems as just and fair. This tendency is typically more pronounced among the advantaged, as they benefit the most from the current system. However, a strong form of the theory predicts that, in order to reduce feelings of deprivation and to rationalize their inferior position, disadvantaged people may justify the system to a greater extent than the advantaged. Analyses of data from an international survey (25 nations) showed that, contrary to expectations derived from the strong form of system justification theory, ego-deprivation increased, and system justification decreased, with the increase of either individual, or national, disadvantage.

Résumé

La théorie de la justification du système postule que les gens sont motivés à juger le système social dans lequel ils vivent comme juste et légitime. Cette tendance est généralement observée chez les membres des groupes dominants, qui tirent avantage de leur position hiérarchique favorable. Toutefois, une version plus extrême de la théorie prédit que les membres des groupes subordonnés entretiennent ce jugement de justice de manière plus prononcée que les membres des groupes dominants, et ce dans le but de rationaliser leur infériorité et de réduire leurs sentiments de privation relative. Une analyse de données secondaires issues d'une enquête menée dans 25 nations montre que, contrairement aux prédictions de la théorie extrême de la justification du système, le sentiment de privation relative augmente, et la tendance à justifier le système diminue, avec l'affaiblissement du statut individuel et national.

Key-words

System justification,
relative deprivation,
ideology, social
inequality, status
differences

Mots-clés

Justification du
système, privation
relative, idéologie,
inégalité sociale,
différences de statut

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Social psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and economists maintain that virtually all societies are organized into status and power hierarchies (e.g., Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1901/1979; 1935; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993; Weber, 1947). However, despite this consensus, there is much disagreement about when and how status hierarchies impact on individuals' behavior.

Most social-psychological theories share the assumption that group behavior is primarily oriented toward social conflict. A typical illustration is realistic conflict theory (Sherif, 1966), which asserts that group competition for the possession of either material or symbolic scarce resources enhances ingroup solidarity and prejudice against the outgroup (Campbell, 1965). Another illustration is relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Gurr, 1970; Runciman, 1966), which is rooted in the idea that people experience frustration and resentment when their outcomes cannot be favorably compared to those of relevant others (Cook, Crosby, & Hennigan, 1977; Gurr, 1970; Martin, 1981). At the group level, such comparisons foster outgroup hostility and social protest (Dambrun & Guimond, 2001; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Runciman, 1966). An increasingly popular conflict perspective is social dominance theory, which proposes that societies are pervaded by ideologies that either promote or attenuate group hierarchies (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The motive to see social groups arranged along a superiority-inferiority dimension is typically more pronounced among members of high-status groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals, Ashkenazic Jews) than among members of the corresponding low-status groups (women, Blacks and Latinos, homosexuals, and Sephardic Jews, respectively). Finally, social identity theory assumes that people strive to acquire or maintain positive views of themselves by favoring the ingroup over a relevant outgroup on valued social dimensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In sum, classic perspectives on intergroup relations assume that group members struggle for material and symbolic resources, serve their own interests, express strong preference for ingroup members and hostility and prejudice toward outsiders. In sharp

contrast to such perspectives, Jost and Banaji (1994) proposed system justification theory (SJT). SJT is rooted in philosophical approaches (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Lukács, 1920/1971) that emphasize the collaborative game between high- and low-status groups in the maintenance of status hierarchies.

System justification theory

SJT concedes that people strive for ego and ingroup enhancement, but it puts emphasis on people's motive to enhance fairness and legitimacy of their social system. Members of high-status groups have no difficulties in judging that the social system in which they occupy an advantageous position is fair and legitimate. With respect to low-status groups, the theory elaborates on the notion of false consciousness (Gramsci, 1971; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970).

The focal psychological mechanism propounded by SJT is that members of low-status groups, contrary to members of high-status groups, experience incongruence between the motives to enhance ego and ingroup, on the one hand, and the social system that puts them at a disadvantage, on the other hand (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000). Acceptance of structural inequality, outgroup favoritism, victim blaming, and beliefs in meritocracy (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; Kay & Jost, 2003) are primary sources for reducing distress associated with experiencing social inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). In such circumstances, the disadvantaged do not report lower self-esteem when facing discrimination (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). Furthermore, they report reduced feelings of personal entitlement (O'Brien & Major, 2009; see also Jost, 1997), reduced emotional distress (Jost et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2007), increased endorsement of stereotypes that justify their disadvantage (McCoy & Major, 2007), and increased acceptance of one's poorer economic standing (Jost et al., 2003).

The strong form of system justification theory

SJT suggests a general psychological process by which people support existing social hierarchies (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Nonetheless, its advocates have claimed a strong form of the theory, according to which members of disadvantaged groups may provide even more support for the social system and its authorities than do members of advantaged groups (Jost et al., 2004). This counterintuitive hypothesis rests on the assumption that “those who suffer the most also have the most to explain, justify, and rationalize” (Jost et al., 2003, p. 16; see also Jost & Hunyady, 2002; 2005). People who experience incongruence between ego, group, and system enhancements (typically, members of low-status groups) are more motivated than other people to rationalize their condition. This hypothesis has received some empirical support. Using a large representative national sample, Henry and Saul (2006) showed that Mestizo and Indigenous people in Colombia were more likely to support government policies than the Hispanic high-status group. Sniderman and Piazza (1993) found that African Americans subscribed to unfavorable stereotypes of their own group more than European Americans did. Jost et al. (2003) conducted a series of surveys considering a variety of status criteria. They found converging tendencies of the low-status groups to justify the system more than the corresponding higher status outgroups. African Americans were highly supportive of limitations of the rights of citizens, and of criticisms to the government (Study 1). Low-income Latinos were trustful in the US government, and believed that the government worked for the benefit of all (Study 2). Low-income respondents believed that large differences in pay “are necessary to get people to work hard” (Study 3). Finally, low-income respondents and African Americans conceded that economic inequality is both desirable and justified (Study 4).

The present research

The present research examined predictions derived from the strong form of SJT with respect to two main target variables: Ego-deprivation and system justification beliefs. Ego-deprivation

was measured as the discrepancy between a person's actual income and the income the person thinks s/he deserves. System justification was assessed by the beliefs that the current social system is fair, and that group differences in the access to economic resources are acceptable. Predictors consisted of individual and macro-level characteristics.

At the *individual level*, we considered the following status cues: sex, personal income, and the subjective assessment of one's social class membership. We deemed it important not to limit our analysis to personal income, as done by Jost et al. (2003), for the following reasons. First, social status is not fully accounted for by people's earnings (Bourdieu, 1986; Weber, 1958); second, as it has been shown by relative deprivation theorists, subjective perception of one's own social status hardly mirrors objective conditions of life (Runciman, 1966; Walker & Smith, 2001); third, from a social-psychological perspective, subjective perceptions may be more relevant than objective conditions (Cook et al., 1977; Folger, 1987; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011).

At the *societal level*, we considered two macroeconomic national descriptors: prosperity, as measured by the pro-capita Gross Domestic Product in terms of purchasing-power parity (GDP-PPP), and inequality, as measured by the Gini-index (see Table 1). GDP-PPP provides information about the countries' economic development and wealth, and Gini indicates the degree to which wealth is shared among citizens (with zero representing perfect equality). The Gini coefficient across all world's nations is estimated between .56 and .66. Typically, poor countries have Gini coefficients ranging from low to high values, whereas wealthy countries have more homogeneous, intermediate values, ranging between .24 and .36 for European countries, and reaching its highest in the US (.41). The lowest Gini values are found in Scandinavian countries, and in Eastern Europe.

In sum, the present research attempted to analyze the impact of individual and societal variables on system justification processes. Some previous research investigated cross-cultural variation in system justification, or in related constructs such as happiness or subjective well-being (e.g., van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010; Napier & Jost, 2008). For example, Napier and Jost (2008, Study

3), using large representative US samples from 1974 to 2004, found that, over time, an increase of Gini was associated with a decrease of personal happiness. This research, however, did not consider the joint effects of national characteristics and social status on system justification, or the relation between system justification and relative deprivation. Accordingly, to our knowledge, this is the first study attempting to directly examine the effect of societal (in particular national inequality and wealth) and social variables, as well as their interactions, on system justification processes.

Ego-deprivation and system justification

Hypotheses at the individual level

As discussed above, there is evidence that higher justifiers perceive their income as fairer, and are more satisfied with their economic standing and their lives in general (Jost et al., 2003; van der Toorn et al., 2010). Accordingly, the most general hypothesis derived from SJT is that the more people consider the system as just and fair, the less they should experience ego-deprivation (Hypothesis 1).

An additional, thought-provoking prediction derived from the strong form of SJT posits that members of disadvantaged groups should resort to the palliative function of system-justifying beliefs to a larger extent than members of advantaged groups. Hypothesis 2 thus predicts that the negative relationship between system justification and ego-deprivation should be of stronger magnitude among disadvantaged people than among the advantaged.

Hypotheses at the societal level

We make parallel hypotheses concerning the role of societal variables. Following the strong form of SJT, the palliative function of system justification should be more prominent in poorer and inequalitarian nations, because in such nations people have the most to justify. Thus, both GDP-PPP and Gini should affect the strength in which perceived social fairness is negatively associated with ego-deprivation (Hypothesis 3).

Analogously, poor and inegalitarian contexts could amplify the need of the disadvantaged to rationalize the social system. Indeed, in line with the strong form of SJT, the motive to justify the system should be most severe for people living in poor and inegalitarian countries. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 predicts that GDP-PPP and Gini moderate the interaction between perceived social fairness and individuals' status characteristics.

Perceived social fairness

A second set of hypotheses concerns the impact of individual and societal variables on system justification tendencies. As for the societal variables, it is important to note that we are not assuming that people are motivated to justify a "worldwide" or "global" system, or that they compare their nation with other richer or poorer nations. Rather, we assume that different national contexts may impact on people's tendency to justify the social system in which they live.

At the individual level, Hypothesis 5 asserts that, according to the strong form of SJT, system justification beliefs should increase with the decrease of the individuals' social status (in terms of sex, income, and subjective social class). At the societal level, it is reasonable to anticipate that GDP-PPP negatively affects the level of perceived social fairness inside each country (Hypothesis 6). Analogously, people living in relatively inegalitarian nations (i.e., high Gini) should show more system justification. Thus, Gini should directly and positively influence the level of perceived social fairness (Hypothesis 7). Furthermore, we expect that individual and societal features interact to produce different levels of system-justifying beliefs. Accordingly, if disadvantaged people are more prone to justify the system in order to restore consonance between their own social condition and the social system, this process should emerge more conspicuously in less wealthy (low GDP-PPP) and more inegalitarian (high Gini) nations. Thus, we expect that both GDP-PPP and Gini moderate the effect of our status variables on perceived social fairness (Hypothesis 8).

Method

Sample

We took data from the 1999 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) about social inequality (see Uher, 2000). The survey involved 27 nations, but Great Britain and Northern Ireland were not considered, as some important questions were lacking for these countries. We also excluded participants with missing values and with values of system justification greater or smaller than 2 standard deviations from national mean. The final sample size was 27,127 (see Table 1). Women comprised 51.7 % of the total sample; participants' mean age was 45 years of age, $SD = 16.58$, ranging between 16 and 96 years. Fifty-three percent of the sample came from urban areas, 21% from suburban areas, and 26 % from rural areas.

Measures

The 1999 ISSP questionnaire comprised 86 items asking for substantial issues, and 50 items asking for demographics (sex, age, family and personal income, hours worked weekly, father's and mother's occupation, etc.). Among the substantial issues, the survey asked participants to indicate criteria for social mobility, reasons for, and acceptance of, social inequality, self-assessment of payment suitable for performance, estimation of actual and adequate income, and government's responsibility to reduce income differences (for a detailed description of the questionnaire, see <http://www.issp.org>). The first set of items refers to opinions toward "the way in which things go in nation" (from which we took items measuring perceived social fairness). Another set of items asks for job, income and social conflict (from which we took items measuring relative ego-deprivation). The final set of items asks for opinions about the just income for several occupations, and demographic characteristics of respondents. We coded all measures so that high values indicate high levels of the measured attribute. ISSP data were collected through stratified random samples of respondents, by means of standardized interviews and questionnaires.

Country	National descriptors				Mean	
	N	M/F ratio	GDP-ppp ^a	Gini ^a	PSF	RED
Australia	1337	.95	25212	.324	2.98	3.45
Austria	935	.73	26195	.292	2.59	3.52
Bulgaria	925	.96	5890	.275	1.60	4.14
Canada	837	1.66	27074	.326	2.91	3.69
Chile	1398	.79	9086	.556	2.67	4.15
Cyprus	937	.97	20340	.290 ^b	2.72	3.82
Czech Rep.	1735	.83	13910	.250	2.30	3.78
France	1617	1.37	23703	.279	2.38	3.67
Germany E ^c	446	.99	24732	.283	2.56	3.69
Germany W ^c	818	1.03	24732	.283	2.92	3.47
Hungary	1126	.78	12062	.267	2.31	4.03
Israel	1143	.90	19454	.392	2.59	3.88
Japan	1219	.94	25594	.337	2.85	3.80
Latvia	1003	.81	7013	.326	2.21	3.89
New Zealand	923	.88	19445	.362	2.85	3.59
Norway	1124	.95	29324	.258	2.80	3.69
Philippines	1144	1.00	3872	.461	3.27	3.91
Poland	963	.78	8984	.329	2.44	4.15
Portugal	1081	.90	17168	.385	2.38	4.12
Russia	1516	.85	7650	.385	1.71	4.37
Slovakia	729	.95	11265	.268	1.67	4.26
Slovenia	912	.97	16825	.284	2.29	3.82
Spain	1098	1.03	19234	.347	2.62	3.76
Sweden	1020	.93	23698	.250	2.81	3.83
United States	1141	.79	33445	.408	3.12	3.70
Total	27127					

TABLE 1:
Country descriptive
statistics.

Note: PSF = mean of Perceived Social Fairness; RED = mean of Relative Ego-Deprivation; ^a = mean of value from 1998 to 2001 (from The World Bank and Eurostat); ^b = mean of 1997 and 2003 Gini index (from Eurostat); ^c = since ISSP maintained the distinction between East and West Germany, we also report here this distinction.

Dependent measures

System justification. To assess perceived social fairness, we used six items: “In [respondent’s country] people get rewarded for their efforts”, “In [respondent’s country] people get rewarded for their intelligence and skills”, “To get all the way to the top in [respondent’s country] today, you have to be corrupt” (reverse), “Inequality still exists because it benefits the rich and powerful” (reverse), “Large differences in income are necessary for

[respondent's country] prosperity", and "Differences in income in [respondent's country] are too large" (reverse) (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*). As one can see, the content of these items is similar to the content of the items currently used in system justification research (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). A confirmatory factor analysis on the whole sample, with robust standard error estimation, produced a good fit for a single component solution (CFI = .997; TLI = .990; RMSEA = .024, 90% C.I.: .020 - .028 $p = .99$). Perceived social fairness scores were therefore computed as the mean of the six items (factor determinacy = .78).

Ego-deprivation. Ego-deprivation was assessed by averaging two items ("Would you say that you earn...", and "Is your pay just? We are not asking about what you do earn, nor what you would like to earn - but what you feel is just given your skills and effort. Is your pay...") (1 = *much more than I deserve*; 5 = *much less than I deserve*). Items were averaged into one single score ($\alpha = .77$; $r = .66, p < .0001$).

Independent measures

Individual level. Participant status consisted of three separate indicators: sex, income, and subjective class membership¹. ISSP coded personal income in deciles (1 = lowest decile; 10 = highest decile). Social class consisted of 6 categories (1 = *lower*, 2 = *working*, 3 = *upper-working*, 4 = *middle*, 5 = *upper-middle*, and 6 = *upper*). Personal income and social class were correlated, but this correlation was rather moderate ($r = .32, p < .0001$), allowing for the simultaneous introduction of these predictors in further analyses².

Societal level. Human Development Reports and Eurostat provided the GDP-PPP and Gini indexes. In order to use a reliable estimation of the economy's trend, we considered, for each

1. We considered participant education as a status cue. However, its effect was completely accounted for by other variables. Thus, we chose to exclude level of education from all analyses.

2. Furthermore, personal income was highly correlated with family income ($r = .63, p < .0001$). We ran the analyses by considering this latter variable, and the results were virtually identical to those using personal income.

country, the average value of GDP-PPP from 1998 to 2001. Furthermore, since Gini was not available in the same years for all countries, we averaged the available scores over several years (see Table 1).

Results

Data analysis strategy

The main analyses consisted of hierarchical linear models, which were performed with the HLM 6.0 software. Hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) provides a multi-level regression approach that is suitable when observations are nested within larger units (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). One level of analysis pertained to participant characteristics (individual-level variables: sex, income, and subjective social class). These variables were nested within the higher-order countries' characteristics (societal variables: GDP-PPP and Gini). The HLM approach examines the pattern of individual variables inside each country, and the way in which the countries' features moderate this pattern.

We tested two distinct hierarchical models. Model 1 examined the hypothesis that the relationship between perceived social fairness and relative ego-deprivation would be negative, and stronger among disadvantaged people. Relative ego-deprivation was the dependent variable, while perceived social fairness and its interactions with social class, personal income, and sex, were the individual independent variables. Analysis of individual variables permits: a) the verification of the direct impact of perceived social fairness on relative ego-deprivation, and b) whether this impact is moderated by participant statuses. Analysis of societal variables, namely countries' GDP-PPP and Gini, permits to verify: a) whether national levels of GDP-PPP and Gini moderate the relation between perceived social fairness and relative ego-deprivation, and b) whether the interactions between perceived social fairness and each one of the participant statuses predict relative ego-deprivation differently depending on the country's GDP-PPP and Gini.

Model 2 tested the hypothesis that social disadvantages in terms of participant statuses, national development, and inequality,

drives people's tendencies to support the existing social system. Perceived social fairness was the dependent variable, while social class, personal income, and sex (at the individual level), and GDP-PPP and Gini (at the societal level) were the predictors. Analysis of individual variables permits to verify whether participant statuses show a consistent pattern of influence on perceived social fairness across nations. Analysis of societal variables permits to verify: a) whether national levels of perceived social fairness vary according to both national GDP-PPP and Gini, and b) whether the effect of participant statuses on perceived social fairness is moderated by countries' GDP-PPP and Gini (or, stated otherwise, whether the slopes of social class, personal income, and sex, change according to national wealth and national inequality).

In all of these analyses, individual and societal variables were centered at their grand means, so that intercepts could be interpreted as the predicted outcome of a person with average characteristics inside an average country, in terms of GDP-PPP and Gini.

Social fairness and relative ego-deprivation across statuses and countries

The strong form of SJT maintains that system justification tendencies and feelings of deprivation should show an inverse relationship. Considering the context of the present research, the theory then allows for the additional prediction that the palliative function of system justification should be stronger among the disadvantaged, and in poorer and inegalitarian countries. Accordingly, the relationship between perceived social fairness and relative ego-deprivation should be more prominent among women, poor people, and members of low social classes, as well as in poor and inegalitarian countries.

Model 1 tested these predictions. The results indicated that, controlling for all other variables, and consistent with Hypothesis 1, social fairness was negatively related with relative ego-deprivation (see Table 2). However, contrary to Hypothesis 2, this relation was not affected by any interaction with participant status. It is apparent from Figure 1 that the perceived social fair-

	Main effects on RED	Effects on slope of			
		PSF	PSF X Social Class	PSF X Pers. income	PSF X Sex
	<i>Coef (S.E.)</i>	<i>Coef (S.E.)</i>	<i>Coef (S.E.)</i>	<i>Coef (S.E.)</i>	<i>Coef (S.E.)</i>
Intercept	3.901(.042)**	/	/	/	/
GDP-PPP	-.014(.005)*	-.000(.001)	-.000(.001)	.001(.001)	-.001(.001)
Gini	.613(.425)	.492(.357)	-.060(.035)	.020(.058)	.025(.064)
PSF	-.251(.044)**	/	/	/	/
PSF X Social Class	.011(.011)	/	/	/	/
PSF X Pers. Income	-.004(.005)	/	/	/	/
PSF X Sex	-.009(.018)	/	/	/	/

Note: * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$.

Sex: 0 = woman, 1 = man

TABLE 2:
Results from HLMs on
relative ego-deprivation
(RED) as dependent
variable and perceived
social fairness as
independent variable
(unstandardized
coefficients).

ness slopes were similar for women and men ($bs = -.25$ and $-.29$, respectively, $ps < .001$), for people from all social classes ($bs = -.15$; $-.26$; $-.25$; $-.26$; $-.21$; $-.19$, respectively, all $ps < .001$), and for all the levels of personal income ($bs = -.20$; $-.18$; $-.23$; $-.23$; $-.33$; $-.29$; $-.37$; $-.38$; $-.43$; $-.41$, respectively, all $ps < .001$). Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that, contrary to hypotheses 3 and 4, GDP-PPP and Gini did not affect the strength of the relationship between perceived social fairness and relative ego-deprivation, or the interactions involving participant statuses. Finally, we notice that relative ego-deprivation was significantly affected by country GDP-PPP ($-.014$, $p < .01$), but not by Gini ($.613$, $p = .16$). Thus, relative ego-deprivation was lower in highly developed countries, but it was not affected by national inequality.

In sum, Model 1 was not supportive of the strong form of SJT. Although, consistent with SJT, system justification attenuated feelings of deprivation, social or societal advantages did not moderate the attenuation effect of perceived social fairness on relative ego-deprivation.

FIGURE 1: Relationship between relative ego-deprivation and perceived social fairness according to social class and sex

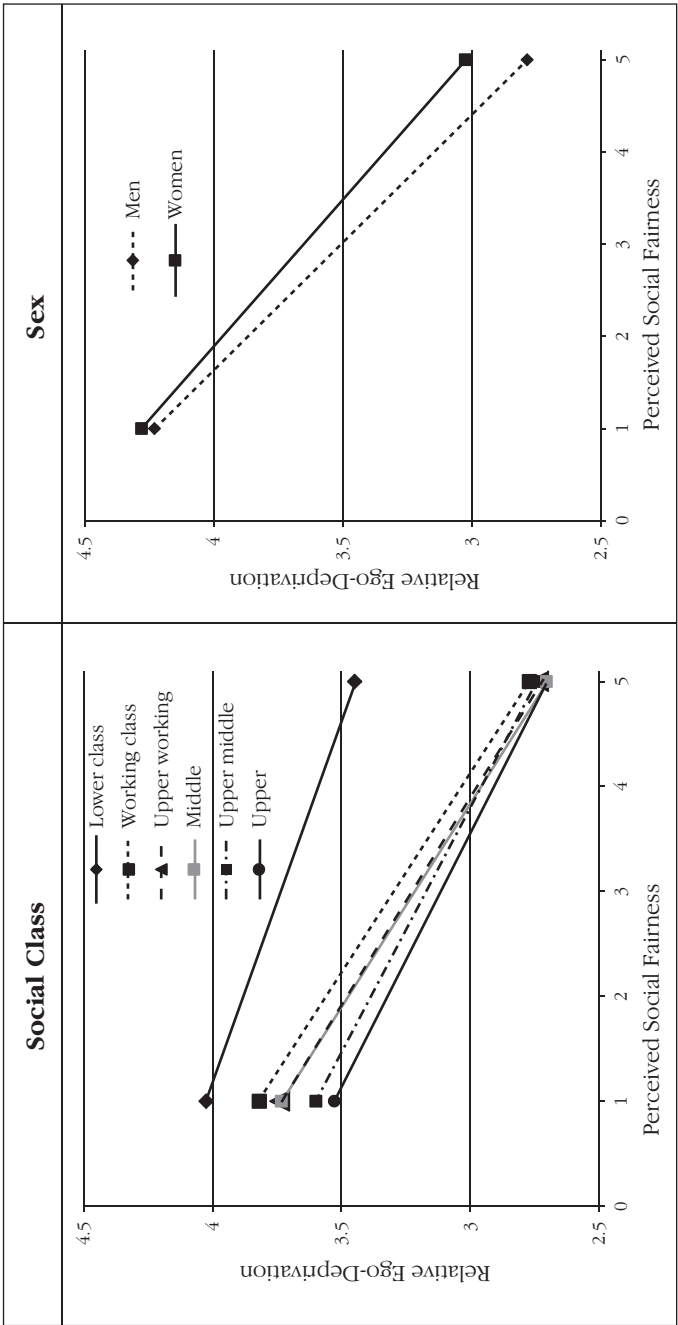
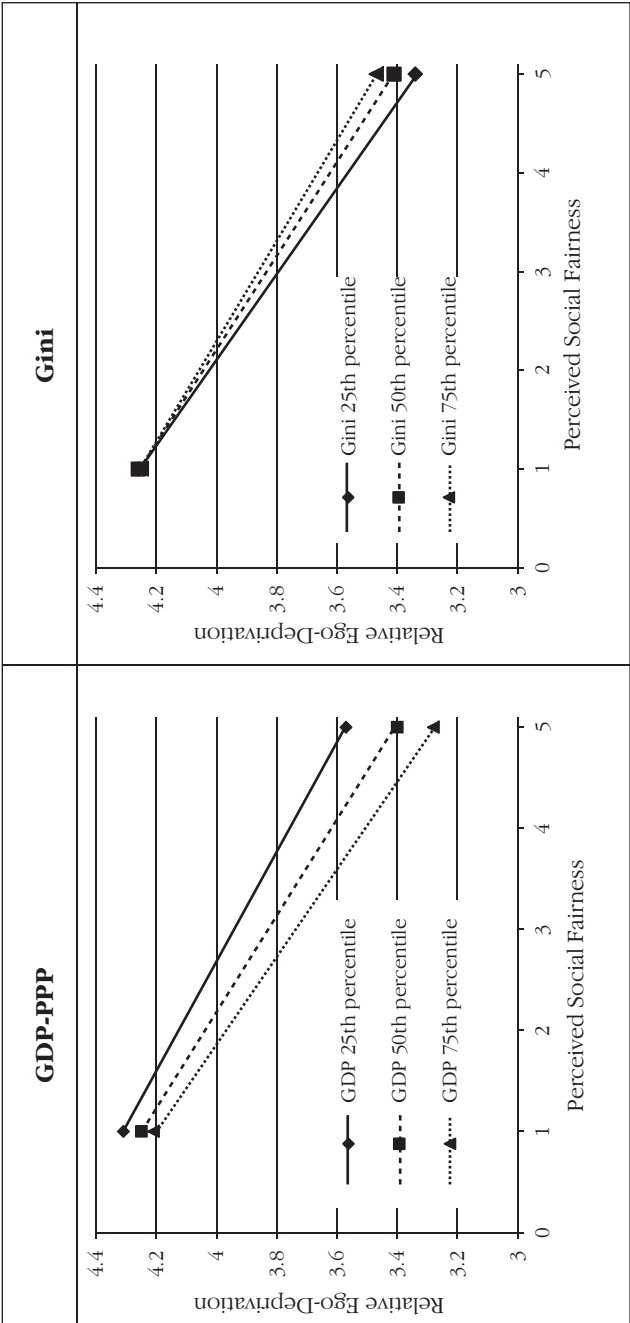


FIGURE 2: Relationship between relative ego-deprivation and perceived social fairness according to national GDP-PPP and Gini.



Perceived social fairness

Table 3 shows HLM results for perceived social fairness (Model 2). All indicators of participant status (sex, income, and subjective social class) contributed positively to social fairness. Contrary to Hypothesis 5 – that the disadvantaged would justify the system more than the advantaged – these findings suggest that the higher the social position, the more people attribute fairness to the current social system. Country GDP-PPP and Gini affected perceived social fairness in the same direction. This is an intriguing result, insofar as a positive relation between GDP-PPP and perceived social fairness (i.e., higher perceived social fairness in more wealthy countries) is inconsistent with Hypothesis 6 (and with the strong form of SJT), whereas a positive relation between Gini and perceived social fairness (i.e., higher perceived social fairness in more inegalitarian countries) is in line with Hypothesis 7 (and SJT).

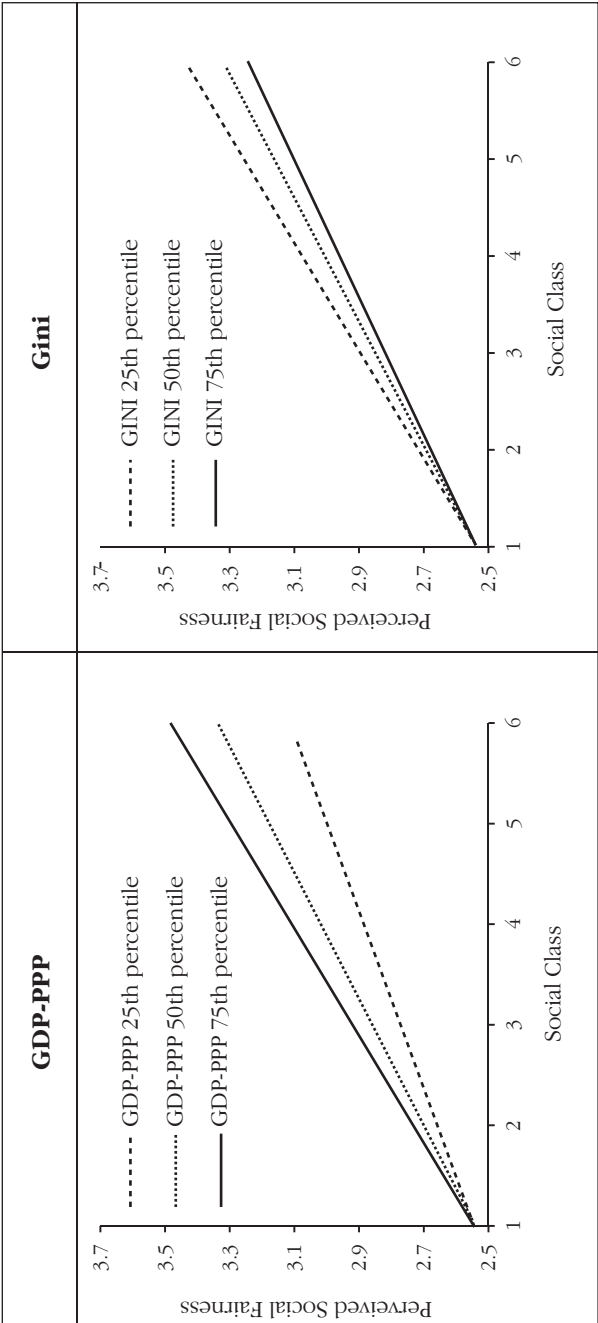
TABLE 3:
Results from HLMs on
perceived social
fairness (PSF) as
dependent variable
(unstandardized
coefficients).

	Main effects on PSF	Effects on slope of		
		Social class	Pers. income	Sex
	Coef (S.E.)	Coef (S.E.)	Coef (S.E.)	Coef (S.E.)
Intercept	2.520(.059)	/	/	/
GDP-PPP	.032(.009) **	.020(.010)**	.010(.006) ^	.030(.010)**
Gini	2.693(.989)*	-.277(.080)**	-.161(.042)**	-.028(.082)
Social Class	.069(.006)***	/	/	/
Pers. income	.013(.004)**	/	/	/
Sex	.028(.008)**	/	/	/

Note: ^p = .10; *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001.
Sex: 0 = woman, 1 = man

Furthermore, Table 3 shows that GDP-PPP and Gini influenced the effects of participant status on perceived social fairness in the unexpected direction. This finding is not compatible with Hypothesis 8. First, members of low social classes were more likely to judge their system as unfair when they were living in poorer countries, or in less egalitarian ones. As shown in Figure 3, the positive relation between social class and perceived social fairness becomes stronger with the increase of national wealth (left panel), and with the decrease of national inequality (right

Figure 3: Relation between social class and perceived social fairness depending on national GDP-PPP and Gini.



Note: Intercepts have been made equal in order to highlight differences in slopes of lines

panel). A similar pattern emerges for personal income, although the influence of GDP-PPP was, in this case, only marginally significant. Second, GDP-PPP influenced the relation between sex and perceived social fairness: Women were less supportive of the social system when living in poorer countries.

In sum, the only support for the strong form of SJT was the effect of Gini on perceived social fairness: National inequality, indeed, boosted the tendency to perceive the current social system as fair. However, Model 2 did not provide support for the hypotheses derived from the strong form of SJT. On the one hand, advantaged people, compared to the disadvantaged, attributed more fairness to the social system. On the other hand, more favorable national contexts, in terms of global prosperity and social equality, increased the tendency of advantaged people to attribute fairness to the social system.

Discussion

The present research was aimed at testing hypotheses derived from the so-called strong form of system justification theory, using data from a large international survey on social inequality. To our knowledge, this research is the first attempt to take systematically into account the effects of people's advantage and of national features on system justification processes.

Classical perspectives on intergroup relations make the typical prediction that members of high-status groups are the ones who justify the social order, in order to secure their privileges and to perpetuate the status quo (e.g., Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2006; 2009; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SJT contends this view, by claiming that conflict perspectives fail to account for "the degree to which psychological responses to the social and political status quo are characterized by active bolstering and system justification, especially among members of disadvantaged groups." (Jost et al., 2004, p. 885).

Following SJT logic, it was expected that: a) system justification tendencies and feelings of ego-deprivation would be negatively related; b) system justification would be stronger among low-

status people, and in less developed and more inegalitarian countries; and c) system justification would attenuate feelings of ego-deprivation among disadvantaged people more than among the advantaged, and in poorer as well as inegalitarian countries. The findings showed, at the individual and the societal levels, that system justification and relative deprivation are negatively associated, suggesting that system justification is an explanation, or a rationalization, of social inequalities. This negative association is in line with previous evidence showing that system justifying beliefs induce people to experience more satisfaction and positive emotion, and to experience depressed entitlement (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Wakslak et al., 2007). Also consistent with the strong form of SJT, we found that, controlling for all other variables, high national inequality favored people's perception of their national system as fair: People living in nations in which wealth is unequally distributed are indeed those who justify the most.

The remaining findings were not supportive of the strong form of SJT. First, the general tendency for more ego-deprived participants to attribute less fairness and legitimacy to the social system was not affected by any social or national advantage. It is worth noting that, given the correlational nature of the present data, it is equally likely to advance that the more people feel gratified, the more they believe that the social system is just. This may appear as a truism, precluding any theoretical sophistication. However, the lack of interactions between this relationship and our status variables draws attention to two important aspects. First, as stressed by various theorists (e.g., Pettigrew, 2002; Runciman, 1966), relative deprivation and gratification are not necessarily contingent on an individual's position in the social hierarchy. Second, the reasons for which gratification leads to the judgment of fairness is not attributable to system justification motives, given that a social system which allows individuals to feel gratified should not ask for justification. Therefore, this finding is more consistent with theories suggesting that system justification stems from the motive to secure personal and collective advantages.

Second, participant statuses were positively, *not* negatively, related to system justification. The higher the status, the more

participants attributed fairness to the social system, revealing that lower status positions imply more critical opinions about the social order. Third, the tendency to believe in a legitimate social system increased with the increase of national wealth. Fourth, inspection of the interactions between individual and societal variables showed that country wealth boosts the tendency to justify the system among men, among the richest, and among members of high social classes. In other words, to possess an advantaged social condition in a highly developed country makes it more likely for people to support the existing social system.

Collectively, these findings are at variance with the idea that disadvantaged people, having the most to justify, use system justification strategies to a greater extent than advantaged people. Quite on the contrary, the advantaged are those who justify the most. It may indeed be easier for the dominants to justify the system because ego, group and system justifications are congruent to each other (Jost & Banaji, 1994) or, according to more classical conflict perspectives, because the dominants are motivated to support a system that confers them an advantage. For example, social dominance theory claims that the dominants exercise “soft” forms of social control by propagating shared, consensual beliefs that legitimate the social hierarchy in the eyes of the subordinates (e.g., meritocratic beliefs). Likewise, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) claims that when group boundaries are impermeable, and the social hierarchy is stable and legitimate, members of high-status groups feel entitled to stress their superiority, and members of low-status groups do not question the status quo, even tending to favor the outgroup on status-relevant dimensions (e.g., Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001). In such circumstances, the subordinates engage various types of social creativity strategies in order to satisfy social identity needs (e.g., Lemaine, 1974; Mummendey, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel, & Blanz, 1999; van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 1990). A similar expectation has recently been investigated within the SJT framework, considering the level of inescapability from the system – a notion conveying the idea of the impermeability and stability of group boundaries. When people think that their social condition is inescapable, they are more likely to judge the social hierarchy as fair and legitimate (Kay et al., 2009; Laurin, Kay, Gaucher, & Shepherd, 2009).

Sociological analyses (e.g., Hadler, 2005; Kelley & Evans, 1993) clearly indicate that people differ in the extent to which they are inclined to accept social inequality, and that national as well as individual ideologies have a strong impact on this process. SJT concedes that system justification motives are not universally at work. Indeed, SJ scholars argue that system justification processes are more likely to occur when ego and group justification are not salient (Jost & Hunyady, 2002), when the social system is threatened (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), or when people perceive their condition as inescapable (Kay et al., 2009; Kay & Zanna, 2009). The present findings suggest that, all else being equal, an increase of social status fuels the tendency to justify the national system, and that national wealth bolster the general tendency, as well as the tendency of the advantaged, to perceive the system as just and fair.

A difficulty with the notion of social system is worth mentioning. System justification theorists use the word “system” to designate a quite broad set of social aspects. In some cases, system is represented by the hierarchical group relationships (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000). In other cases, it is represented by the government policies, and system justification is meant as the support for those policies (Jost et al., 2003). Still in other cases, system is represented by “the way in which things go” (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay et al., 2005). To our opinion, this variety of meanings is quite problematic, and may account for the discrepancy of SJT results and ours. For example, Jost et al. (2003, Study 3) measured system justification with the belief that large differences in income are necessary to get people to work hard and to provide an incentive for individual effort, and found higher scores for people in lower-status positions. In this case, system refers to the need to get different salary for improving work and motivation (see also Schlenker, Chambers, & Bonnie’s, 2012, discussion about the alternative meaning of items measuring meritocracy). Thus, it is not surprising to find that lower income people (i.e., those who need money the most) strongly agree that efforts should be highly rewarded. Similar argumentations can be advanced for Jost et al.’s (2003) Study 5, showing that African Americans and poorer people agreed more with the

opinion that large differences in income are necessary for the country's prosperity.

We do not dispute Jost and colleagues argument that low-status people may believe that their disadvantage is just, or that they deserve what they possess. This is also acknowledged by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), at least in stable and secure social stratifications. We also agree that people, in certain situations, do not blame the system for their disadvantage. However, we advance the possibility that this does not imply that low-status people are bolstering the social system. As suggested by Huddy (2004) and by Spears et al. (2001), the fact that disadvantaged people do not overtly question the social system may be due to aspects such as social control or institutional barriers, which do not necessarily imply a motivated rationalization of the social system. In this sense, more attention is needed to explore the possibility that people feel themselves incapable of modifying the system. In this instance, system justification is indeed likely to emerge (Kay et al., 2009; Kay & Zanna, 2009).

Limitations

Even though our findings are quite consistent, the present research suffers from several limitations. The main limitation is the correlational nature of the data used, which does not permit strong causal conclusions. Another limitation is about how we measured relative deprivation. As noted above, relative deprivation is often intended as the difference between one's own income and the income of another person, or of the average of another group. In the present case, instead, relative deprivation was measured as the difference between one's actual income and the income the respondent believed him or herself to deserve. Thus, it was about discrepancy with one's own standards. This implies that no direct interpersonal or intergroup comparisons were made salient, and that relative deprivation was intended at an egoistic level. Further, we took into account national indexes which we deemed relevant for our purposes (i.e., GDP-PPP and Gini index). However, there are other important macro-social variables which should be addressed. For example, press freedom may be relevant in the expression of disagreement toward the

social system. Also, economic growth may be relevant with respect to the feeling of relative deprivation and system justification, as well as the fact to exit from a past communist regime. Finally, an insolvable limitation is the lack of important measures in the survey itself. In particular, future research might supply measures of the participants' representations of the social hierarchy, notably in terms of its permeability, stability, and inescapability.

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