

How Social Inequality Affects System-Justifying Beliefs Among Low-Status Individuals

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Date: 2022-02-07T11:09:32+00:00

Abstract

Social inequality may either weaken or strengthen system-justifying beliefs among low-status individuals, with these two relationships being driven by self-interest motivation and system justification motivation, respectively. Furthermore, both relationships depend on low-status individuals' perceptions of social inequality, specifically realistic threat and symbolic threat. Making inequality salient at the individual or group level activates realistic threat, which in turn activates self-interest motivation, thereby leading individuals to oppose the system status quo (i.e., the weakening pathway); conversely, making inequality salient at the system level activates symbolic threat, which in turn activates system justification motivation, thereby leading individuals to uphold the system status quo (i.e., the strengthening pathway). This dual-pathway model offers an integrative framework for explaining current theoretical controversies and warrants further empirical examination and theoretical development.

Full Text

How Social Inequality Affects System-Justifying Beliefs Among Low-Status Individuals: A Dual-Process Model

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Abstract

Social inequality may either weaken or strengthen system-justifying beliefs among low-status individuals, with these opposing relationships driven by

self-interest motivation and system justification motivation, respectively. Moreover, both relationships depend on how low-status individuals perceive social inequality, specifically through the lenses of realistic threat and symbolic threat. When inequality highlights realistic threats at the individual or group level, it activates self-interest motivation, leading individuals to oppose the status quo (the weakening path). When inequality highlights symbolic threats at the systemic level, it activates system justification motivation, leading individuals to defend the status quo (the strengthening path). This dual-process model provides an integrative framework for explaining current theoretical controversies and requires further empirical testing and development.

Keywords: social inequality, system-justifying beliefs, system justification motivation, self-interest motivation, social governance

1. Introduction

The ancient adage “people worry not about scarcity but about inequality” expresses deep-seated concerns about social inequality. Yet nearly three decades ago, system justification theory proposed a counterintuitive hypothesis: in more unequal (rather than equal) societies, people—including low-status individuals—are more likely to “rationalize inequality” and exhibit stronger system-justifying beliefs (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004). This seemingly paradoxical perspective attempts to explain various social psychological phenomena where inequality does not necessarily provoke discontent among the disadvantaged (Costa-Lopes et al., 2013; Jost et al., 2015). Indeed, numerous studies have found that inequality does not always generate dissatisfaction among low-status groups (Buchel et al., 2021); they may instead tolerate or even support the unequal status quo (Cheung, 2016; Whyte, 2009). Naturally, this view has faced substantial challenges (Brandt, 2013; Trump & White, 2018). Protest movements such as France’s Yellow Vest movement (Lüders et al., 2021) and countless group incidents stemming from inequality (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020; Power et al., 2020) appear to support classic theories like social identity theory, which argue that inequality motivates low-status groups to seek change rather than rationalization. So does inequality strengthen or weaken system-justifying beliefs among low-status individuals? Today, rising economic inequality is recognized as one of the world’s most pressing social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017; Thompson, 2020), and “unbalanced and inadequate development” constrains people’s aspirations for a better life (Xu et al., 2019). Therefore, examining this relationship and its underlying mechanisms is essential.

This article first reviews two “opposing” theoretical perspectives and their empirical research, then analyzes potential directions for resolving theoretical disagreements. Rather than viewing these theories as contradictory, we argue they collectively explain the “full picture” of how inequality affects low-status individuals’ system-justifying beliefs. The question is not simply whether inequality “strengthens or weakens” these beliefs, but rather identifying the different conditions (cognitive bases) and underlying mechanisms (motivational bases) under

which each perspective holds. Exploring these issues will help us develop more targeted approaches to contemporary social psychological construction (Yang & Guo, 2017). It should be noted that the concept of system-justifying beliefs originates from system justification theory. However, as a multidisciplinary social science concept, it has rich connotations and extensions that were widely discussed before the theory's emergence. Previous research examining inequality's impact on system-justifying beliefs has used dependent variables beyond the concept itself, including support for existing social systems (e.g., political trust, perceived social fairness) and opposition to changing them (e.g., supporting existing inequality, opposing redistribution). Therefore, this article adopts a broader definition, interpreting system-justifying beliefs as people's perceptions of social system fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability, along with corresponding attitudes of support and maintenance (Kay & Jost, 2003).

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives: The Self-Interest Orientation

Individual psychology and behavior serve self-interest, which encompasses both material pursuits (wealth, rights, well-being) and psychological needs (maintaining positive self-image and self-esteem) (Sears & Funk, 1991; Hogg, 2016). In forming social attitudes, people often learn or shape attitudes favorable to themselves and their in-groups based on self-interest considerations (Darke & Chaiken, 2005). From this "self-interest orientation," theories such as social identity theory, realistic group conflict theory, and social dominance theory posit that self-interest motivation drives individuals of different statuses to develop corresponding adaptive strategies within social hierarchies (Lee et al., 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). For low-status individuals, severe inequality conflicts with their motivation to protect self and in-group interests, leading them to oppose the unequal status quo and exhibit lower system-justifying beliefs.

Thus, from the self-interest perspective, people form attitudes toward inequality based on their social positions (Lee et al., 2011). Realistic group conflict theory suggests that individuals strive to maximize gains and minimize losses associated with their social positions and group identities (King et al., 2010). Similarly, social dominance theory proposes that high-status individuals maintain and amplify inequality to preserve their advantages, while low-status individuals seek to reduce inequality to improve their disadvantaged positions (Pratto et al., 2006). This pattern is reflected in attitudes toward redistributive policies: disadvantaged group members are more likely than advantaged groups to support redistribution that reduces inequality and advances their interests (Bai et al., 2021). Social identity theory systematically explains low-status individuals' psychological and behavioral responses to inequality (Hogg, 2016). Severe inequality undermines their ability to maintain positive self-concepts and identity belonging. When they perceive intergroup boundaries as permeable, they may employ individual strategies (e.g., upward mobility) to improve their status; when boundaries are impermeable, they may use social creativity strategies (e.g., downward comparison) to protect self-esteem or engage in social competition

(e.g., collective action) to resist injustice (Akfirat et al., 2016).

Relative deprivation theory further elaborates the psychological processes underlying this negative relationship. According to this theory, inequality activates social comparison processes, making low-status individuals aware of their undeserved disadvantaged position. The resulting sense of relative deprivation triggers anger and ultimately develops into psychological and behavioral opposition to inequality (Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Pettigrew, 2014). Numerous empirical studies show that rising economic inequality intensifies social comparison and enhances perceptions of social competition (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017), creating a breeding ground for relative deprivation (Osborne et al., 2015; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). As an adaptive response to inequality, this individual or group-level relative deprivation becomes a motivational mechanism for low-status individuals to resist the status quo (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020; Power et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2012).

2.2 Empirical Evidence

The self-interest perspective provides theoretical explanations for objective phenomena of human opposition to inequality. Empirical research has primarily employed three approaches to examine inequality's impact on low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs. First, researchers have investigated the relationship between socioeconomic status and system-justifying beliefs within contexts of inequality, demonstrating that low-status individuals hold weaker system-justifying beliefs than high-status individuals (e.g., Lee et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2016). Second, studies have examined interaction effects between inequality and socioeconomic status, focusing on inequality's moderating role—that is, how the relationship between status and system-justifying beliefs differs under high versus low inequality (e.g., Li & Hu, 2021). Third, other research has examined the same interaction but focused on socioeconomic status's moderating role—that is, how inequality affects high- versus low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs (Curtis & Andersen, 2015). Depending on the specific indicators of system-justifying beliefs, studies have focused on distributive fairness perceptions, opportunity fairness, political trust, and collective action. These studies provide empirical support for the self-interest perspective.

For instance, Lee et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis found that members of relatively disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, low-power racial groups) exhibited lower social dominance orientation—meaning greater opposition to group-based inequality—than advantaged group members (e.g., men, high-power racial groups). Using World Values Survey data, Curtis and Andersen (2015) found that in societies with low income inequality, working-class individuals who stood to lose more from inequality were more likely to oppose it. As inequality increased, middle-class individuals also became more inclined to reduce inequality. Moreover, even when people viewed the current unequal status quo as generally legitimate, they still preferred reducing inequality if it would improve their own economic position (see also García-Castro et al., 2020). Beyond distributive

fairness and attitudes toward inequality, inequality's detrimental effects on system-justifying beliefs also manifest in opportunity fairness perceptions (McCall et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2015). Recent research by Li and Hu (2021) using China Family Panel Studies data found that in regions with lower socioeconomic development and higher economic inequality, low-status individuals held weaker meritocratic beliefs—that is, they were less likely to believe that personal effort and ability lead to success. Conversely, in regions with higher development and lower inequality, low-status individuals were more likely than high-status individuals to endorse meritocracy.

Political psychology research also demonstrates that social inequality significantly reduces political trust and other system-justifying beliefs. Based on the 2011 Latino Barometer survey across 18 countries, Zmerli and Castillo (2015) found that both macro-level economic inequality (Gini coefficient) and micro-level perceptions of distributive injustice significantly reduced political trust (see also Goubin & Hooghe, 2020; Guinjoan & Rico, 2018). Similarly, Zhao and Li (2017) analyzed 2012 China Family Panel Studies data and found that perceived wealth gaps significantly reduced trust in officials and evaluations of government performance among marginal middle-class and highly educated groups. At the behavioral level, inequality's impact on system-justifying beliefs is evident in collective action and protests opposing the status quo. In late 2018, French government fuel tax increases ignited public discontent over income disparities and social contradictions, triggering the Yellow Vest movement. Lüders et al. (2021) found that widespread relative deprivation and resulting populist ideology were deep psychological drivers of support for the movement. The Yellow Vest movement exemplifies opposition to inequality in Western societies, with relative deprivation serving as a psychological mechanism that also pushes many disadvantaged groups toward extreme violence (Sidanius et al., 2015; Kunst & Obaidi, 2020).

3.1 Theoretical Perspectives: The Value Orientation

From the self-interest perspective, people develop adaptive strategies toward inequality primarily based on their social positions to protect self and in-group interests (Lee et al., 2011). However, many studies find that low-status individuals actually tolerate or even support unequal status quos (Cheung, 2016; Whyte, 2009). Researchers recognize that while protecting self and in-group interests is important, psychological processes are also strongly influenced by deeply held values (Sears & Funk, 1991). These values reflect people's beliefs about how the world "ought to be." When low-status individuals confront the "is" of inequality and injustice, internal conflict emerges—stemming both from the discrepancy between reality and self-interest and from the inconsistency between reality and "ought" values. The "rational solution" offered by the self-interest orientation is to improve one's status or change society to protect self and in-group interests. In contrast, value-oriented theories propose an "irrational solution": people may change their perceptions of reality (rather than reality itself) to preserve

their values.

Belief in a just world theory was among the first to examine these irrational responses to injustice. It posits that maintaining a “sense of justice” is a fundamental human need—people must believe that individuals “get what they deserve,” where “deserve” implies control over one’s fate (Lerner, 1980). This belief has positive psychological functions, fostering perceptions of the world as predictable, controllable, and fair. However, this motivational tendency, termed a “fundamental delusion,” has a double-edged effect (Zhou & Guo, 2013). When confronted with injustice, people’s just-world beliefs are threatened; to alleviate the resulting distress, they may reinterpret the causes and consequences of injustice to maintain cognitive perceptions of fairness—a process called “rationalization.” Extensive research on “victim-blaming” provides evidence for this irrational response (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

This theory profoundly influenced John T. Jost and colleagues (Jost et al., 2015), who, while studying stereotypes, developed system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The theory similarly posits a rationalization motive but expands the “just world” boundary to various “systems” in which people are embedded and widely influenced. Specifically, it proposes a universal “system justification motivation” to maintain, rationalize, and support all aspects of the status quo—including social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements—even at the expense of self and in-group interests (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Costa-Lopes et al., 2013). Initially, this motivation uniquely explained low-status individuals’ “out-group favoritism.” Unlike social identity theory’s micro-level focus on individuals and intergroup relations, system justification theory argues that low-status individuals’ disadvantaged position conflicts not only with self and in-group interests but also with their beliefs about system fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability. When self-interest motivation is not salient or strong, they may exhibit stronger system justification motivation to reduce cognitive dissonance, leading them to tolerate or even support unequal status quos (Jost et al., 2004). The theory further proposes that in more unequal (rather than equal) societies, this conflict experience is greater, and people—including low-status individuals—exhibit stronger system justification motivation (Jost et al., 2004; Jost et al., 2015).

3.2 Empirical Evidence

Do low-status individuals rationalize inequality and thus support social systems more strongly? Several studies provide empirical support (Jost et al., 2015; Malahy et al., 2009). Yoshimura and Hardin (2009) examined Japanese attitudes toward U.S.-Japan geopolitical relations, showing that making unequal disadvantaged status salient strengthened system-justifying beliefs. They experimentally manipulated Japan’s weak (or strong) position in the relationship by asking participants to write about Japan’s disadvantages (or advantages) compared to the U.S., then measured positive political attitudes toward both countries. Results showed that when Japan’s weak position was made salient,

ideologically conservative participants exhibited stronger out-group favoritism, demonstrating greater rationalization of the unequal geopolitical relationship. Van der Toorn et al. (2015) provided more direct evidence, finding that even when facing high levels of inequality (racial, economic, gender, power), those in disadvantaged positions within power hierarchies were more likely to support inequality. Recently, Jost and colleagues further confirmed that when exposed to information about economic inequality, participants with higher (versus lower) economic system justification showed less inequality aversion (Goudarzi et al., 2020; see also Friedman & Sutton, 2013).

Malahy et al. (2009) extended these findings from the laboratory to real-world contexts. Their meta-analysis of 31 independent studies from 1975 to 2006 (totaling 6,120 participants) found that just-world beliefs increased significantly over time, positively correlating with widening income inequality. This result remained robust even after controlling for income, political ideology, and other factors (see also Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012). Solt et al. (2016) analyzed U.S. national survey data and found that Americans living in areas with higher economic inequality exhibited stronger meritocratic beliefs—greater confidence that hard work leads to success—compared to those in more equal areas. Buchel et al. (2021) provided supporting evidence using International Social Survey Programme data from nearly 50,000 respondents across 28 countries. They found that in areas with higher inequality (Gini coefficient), lower family income predicted stronger agreement that “income gaps are necessary for national prosperity” and weaker agreement that “national income gaps are too large” — indicating stronger system-justifying beliefs. Zmerli and Castillo (2015) also found that macro-level economic inequality reduced (rather than enhanced) the detrimental effect of distributive injustice on political trust. Paradoxically, the damaging effect of distributive injustice on political trust was weaker among those with lower subjective social class (see also Lee et al., 2020). Similarly, using 2012 China Family Panel Studies data, Cheung (2016) found that economic inequality in rural China (rural Gini coefficient) positively predicted life satisfaction among rural residents (see also Whyte, 2009). These domestic and international studies demonstrate that low-status individuals do exhibit irrational reactions that rationalize inequality.

However, some studies have failed to support system justification theory or have found opposite evidence (e.g., Brandt, 2013). For example, Trump and White (2018) manipulated economic inequality levels experimentally and measured system-justifying beliefs (including general system justification, institutional trust, and economic system justification). They found that economic inequality had no significant effect on general system justification or institutional trust but significantly negatively predicted economic system justification. Moreover, the study did not confirm that inequality made low-status individuals exhibit higher system-justifying beliefs than high-status individuals.

4. Opposition and Integration: Directions for Resolving the “Disagreement”

Thus far, we have presented two “opposing” perspectives on how inequality affects low-status individuals’ system-justifying beliefs, along with their empirical support. Social identity theory and other self-interest-oriented theories adopt an individual or intergroup perspective, arguing that self-interest motivation drives low-status individuals to oppose inequality. System justification theory takes a more macro-level perspective, highlighting the limitations of self-interest motivation and arguing that system justification motivation drives low-status individuals to rationalize inequality. Empirical research has supported both theoretical orientations while also facing numerous challenges. How should we approach these theoretical disagreements, and what explanatory power do they hold for objective reality? Previous research offers at least two approaches to this question, providing directions for investigation, while we propose a third approach.

4.1 First Approach: From an Opposing Perspective

The first approach directly tests the two theoretical perspectives from an oppositional standpoint, using larger, more diverse samples or meta-analytic methods, while also examining potential boundary conditions. For example, Vargas-Salfate et al. (2018) conducted a large-scale cross-cultural survey of 14,936 participants from 19 countries across the Americas, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Oceania. They tested whether national-level economic inequality (Gini coefficient) moderated the relationship between socioeconomic status and system-justifying beliefs, finding a significant interaction between income and Gini coefficient. In more unequal countries, lower income predicted higher system-justifying beliefs, supporting system justification theory. However, Brandt (2013) found inconsistent results. Analyzing three representative databases (American National Election Studies, General Social Survey, and World Values Survey) with multiple inequality indicators (Gini coefficient, gender inequality index), socioeconomic status measures (income, education, class, gender, race), and system-justifying belief measures (government trust, confidence in social institutions), Brandt found that inequality did not significantly strengthen system-justifying beliefs, nor was there sufficient evidence that low-status individuals exhibited higher system-justifying beliefs than high-status individuals under high inequality (see also Curtis & Andersen, 2015; Li & Hu, 2021).

Addressing these inconsistent findings, García-Sánchez et al. (2021) proposed based on cognitive dissonance theory that rationalization of inequality is more likely to occur in more equal and democratic societies. In such contexts, the poor have more opportunities for success, making inequality more likely to create cognitive dissonance that people must rationalize. However, this view also faces challenges. Lee et al. (2011) provided contradictory evidence in a meta-analysis

of 118 published and 25 unpublished studies from 1992 to 2009, finding that the positive relationship between social status (gender, race) and social dominance orientation was stronger in more equal (rather than unequal) societies. In other words, low-status individuals did not show stronger system justification motivation in more equal environments. Clearly, current research has not reached consensus on the two theoretical perspectives, suggesting that future studies must explore other potential boundary mechanisms. The question remains whether adopting an oppositional perspective to determine which view is “correct” can capture the full picture and essence of the relationship between inequality and system-justifying beliefs. Given the lack of consistent findings, this research direction appears inadequate for resolving theoretical controversies.

4.2 Second Approach: From an Integrative Perspective

The second approach simultaneously considers the roles of both self-interest and system justification motivations in the relationship between inequality and low-status individuals’ system-justifying beliefs, emphasizing that system justification motivation influences self-interest motivation and its psychological and behavioral consequences. For example, Osborne, García-Sánchez, and Sibley (2019) proposed a “macro-micro model of inequality and relative deprivation” (MIREDD). This model suggests that macro-level social inequality enhances social comparison processes, with the resulting relative deprivation affecting individuals’ micro-level psychological experiences (e.g., self-esteem, identity, collective action). The model further proposes that system justification motivation moderates this macro-micro interaction, with higher system justification motivation attenuating the negative psychological consequences of relative deprivation. Osborne and Sibley (2013) provided supporting evidence, finding in a New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study sample of 6,886 participants that group relative deprivation positively predicted political mobilization to correct inequality, but system justification motivation weakened this relationship.

Similarly, Jost et al. (2017) built upon the social identity model of collective action to propose an alternative integrative model. This model incorporates both self-interest motivation (i.e., in-group identification) and system justification motivation to reveal when people participate (or not) in collective action opposing (or defending) social systems. Subsequently, Osborne, Jost, et al. (2019) refined and tested this model, finding that system justification motivation reduced support for system-challenging collective action and increased support for system-defending action. For low-status individuals, system justification motivation could inhibit self-interest motivation (i.e., in-group identification), intergroup injustice perceptions, and group anger, thereby reducing support for system-challenging action and increasing support for system-defending action. Using the 2019 New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (with European New Zealanders and Māori as high- and low-status groups) and a U.S. online survey (with White and Black Americans as high- and low-status groups), they validated these predictions. These integrative models move beyond single-motivation per-

spectives, incorporating both self-interest and system justification motivations to address the limited view that relied solely on self-interest to explain collective action. However, whether treating system justification motivation as a moderator (Osborne, García-Sánchez, & Sibley, 2019) or as an antecedent that influences self-interest motivation (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne, Jost, et al., 2019), these approaches emphasize system justification's inhibitory effect on self-interest and its consequences, without fully revealing the mutual influence and mechanisms of the two motivations.

4.3 Third Approach: A Dual-Path Model of Social Inequality's Effect on Low-Status Individuals' System-Justifying Beliefs

Given that the first approach has yielded inconsistent conclusions and the second approach emphasizes system justification's effect on self-interest, neither effectively or comprehensively addresses theoretical controversies. We argue that self-interest-oriented theories and system justification theory are not contradictory but rather focus on individual/group levels versus systemic levels, collectively explaining the "full picture" of how inequality affects low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs. Future research should advance in several ways: (1) Previous studies have focused only on the "quantity" of inequality (high vs. low) and its linear relationship with system-justifying beliefs. We propose also examining the "quality" of inequality and its different effects. (2) Prior research has adopted opposing perspectives on the two motivations or overemphasized one over the other. We argue that self-interest and system justification motivations are not all-or-none but rather coexist at different analytical levels, each explaining and driving different relationships between inequality and system-justifying beliefs. (3) Examining qualitative differences in inequality will help clarify how the two motivations operate. Therefore, the theoretical controversy may not center on whether inequality strengthens or weakens low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs, but rather on analyzing the different conditions (cognitive bases) and underlying mechanisms (motivational bases) for each effect.

4.3.1 Cognitive Basis: Realistic Threat and Symbolic Threat of Inequality

Under what conditions does inequality strengthen or weaken low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs? Previous research has primarily examined linear relationships between "inequality" and "system-justifying beliefs." This approach overlooks the psychological meaning of inequality itself, yet people's judgments of systemic reality largely depend on how they cognitively process this objective information (Schwarz, 2007; see also Walker et al., 2021). Therefore, before addressing the relationship between inequality and system-justifying beliefs, we must ask: what does inequality mean for low-status individuals? Extensive psychological research on "threat" offers an illuminating perspective (Stephan

et al., 2009). On one hand, severe inequality intensifies resource competition (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017), worsens low-status individuals' disadvantaged positions in this competition (Jiang & Probst, 2017), and harms their physical and mental health (Hu et al., 2019), constituting a **realistic threat** to tangible interests. On the other hand, severe inequality conflicts with people's beliefs about social system fairness and challenges systemic legitimacy, constituting a **symbolic threat**. Previous researchers have proposed similar ideas: Fritzsche and Jugert (2017) analyzed "economic inequality" as an economic threat from a realistic threat perspective, while Kaiser et al. (2008) examined "racial inequality" from a symbolic threat perspective (see also Friedman & Sutton, 2013). Realistic and symbolic threats align with classic intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2009), though here the threat source is an unequal system or social reality rather than an outgroup, and the threatened target is the low-status group within the system.

Although the two threats may be correlated, they often have different effects (Stephan et al., 2009). From the self-interest perspective, highlighting inequality's realistic threat at the individual or group level should weaken low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs. From system justification theory, highlighting inequality's symbolic threat at the systemic level should enhance people's motivation to defend and justify the system, strengthening their system-justifying beliefs. Preliminary evidence supports this distinction. Regarding realistic threat, Du et al. (2019) used China Family Panel Studies data (2010-2014) to find that in provinces with greater income inequality, life satisfaction was lower and psychological stress higher, with inequality harming low-status individuals' life satisfaction more than high-status individuals' (see also Wienk et al., 2021). As a manifestation of realistic threat, lower life satisfaction subsequently reduces perceptions of social system fairness (Jia et al., 2020). Regarding symbolic threat, Napier et al. (2006) studied Hurricane Katrina victims, who were predominantly poor and minority (Black) individuals. They found these disadvantaged groups had "internalized" inequality: when informed that the wealthy received more disaster aid, they did not perceive this as unfair, demonstrating a depressed entitlement effect. Napier et al. explained that Hurricane Katrina exposed American social inequality, creating an indirect systemic threat (i.e., symbolic threat) that conflicted with beliefs about system fairness. Kaiser et al. (2008) further found that interpreting Black victims' suffering as a consequence of racism (rather than government failure) was understood as a systemic threat to the legitimacy of racial differences (i.e., symbolic threat), leading White individuals to exhibit stronger in-group identification.

Thus, from a threat perspective, one source of divergence between self-interest and system justification theories lies in their emphasis on different cognitive processes: the former focuses on individual or intergroup-level impacts (realistic threat), while the latter adopts a macro-level perspective emphasizing systemic-level impacts (symbolic threat). Based on this analysis, inequality's effect on low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs depends on which threat is salient in the cognitive process or social context.

4.3.2 Motivational Basis: Self-Interest Motivation and System Justification Motivation

Realistic and symbolic threats provide conditions for low-status individuals to oppose or support the status quo, but the driving forces are two defensive motivations: self-interest motivation and system justification motivation. Their relationship and distinct effects are crucial for forming system-justifying beliefs. First, as previously discussed, they have opposite effects on these beliefs. Second, despite their different effects, they are coexisting motivations at different analytical levels. Self-interest motivation focuses on the individual or group level, leading people to protect self and in-group interests. System justification motivation focuses on the more abstract systemic level, leading people to maintain, rationalize, and support the status quo. System justification theory does not deny self-interest motivation's role, referring to individual-level self-protection as ego justification and group-level in-group protection as group justification (Jost et al., 2001; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000). Third, for low-status individuals, the two motivations conflict (Jost et al., 2001). Rationalizing an unequal system means accepting one's disadvantaged position. For high-status individuals, however, no strong conflict exists, as rationalizing inequality does not threaten their advantaged position. Therefore, low-status individuals do not always exhibit strong system-justifying beliefs; when self-interest motivation is stronger, they are more likely to oppose the unjust status quo (Jost, 2019).

What determines which motivation dominates? Distinguishing between the two types of threat is key to clarifying how the motivations operate. Specifically, when inequality's realistic threat at the individual or group level is salient, it is more likely to activate self-interest motivation to protect self and in-group interests, thereby weakening system-justifying beliefs. In this **weakening path**, based on the conflict between motivations, realistic threat-activated self-interest motivation can also inhibit system justification motivation, further weakening system-justifying beliefs. As discussed, income inequality severely harms low-income individuals' interests and reduces their life satisfaction (Du et al., 2019; Wienk et al., 2021), subsequently undermining their perceptions of systemic fairness (Jia et al., 2020). Conversely, when inequality's symbolic threat at the systemic level is salient, it is more likely to activate system justification motivation to defend the status quo, thereby strengthening system-justifying beliefs. In this **strengthening path**, symbolic threat-activated system justification motivation can also inhibit self-interest motivation, enhancing system-justifying beliefs. The depressed entitlement effect among Hurricane Katrina victims (Napier et al., 2006) and White individuals' in-group identification when facing racism accusations (Kaiser et al., 2008) provide preliminary evidence. Additionally, Friedman and Sutton (2013) further demonstrated symbolic threat's activating effect on system justification motivation. In their experiment, participants read newspaper reports about civilian casualties in the Afghanistan War. When luxury advertisements (highlighting wealth gaps) surrounded the report, politically conservative (versus liberal) participants showed greater tolerance

for civilian casualties compared to when no advertisements were present. The researchers explained that highlighting wealth gaps created a symbolic threat to the socioeconomic system, activating system justification motivation and increasing support for U.S. military policy—an effect independent of subjective socioeconomic status.

Based on this analysis, we propose a **dual-path model of social inequality's effect on low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs** (see Figure 1). According to this model, two opposing yet coexisting psychological paths link systemic inequality to system-justifying beliefs: a weakening path focusing on individual and group levels, and a strengthening path focusing on the systemic level. Which path operates depends on how low-status individuals cognitively process inequality, with this cognitive process activating corresponding defensive motivations that lead to weaker or stronger system-justifying beliefs. In other words, different motivations provide the impetus for supporting or opposing the status quo, with the dominant motivation determined by how inequality is cognitively processed. The dual-path model integrates previously contradictory findings by analyzing different cognitive bases through which inequality affects low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs and clarifying the role of different motivations. This offers a third approach to understanding inequality's effects and explaining theoretical “disagreements.” Although this model currently lacks solid empirical support, future research can explore and refine it from this perspective.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

Social justice is crucial for activating internal drivers of modernization and has become a key factor affecting overall social stability (Wu, 2019). In the post-poverty-alleviation era, China will continue facing relative poverty challenges (Yang, 2020), while global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic pose severe threats to poverty reduction achievements (Thompson, 2020). In this context, how we address social inequality will affect people's—especially low-status individuals'—system-justifying beliefs. Our review reveals two seemingly “opposing” theoretical perspectives on this relationship. Based on our analysis of both theories and their empirical research, we propose an integrative framework: the **dual-path model of social inequality's effect on low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs**. Moving from opposition to integration requires not only responding to theoretical debates but also exploring several directions for future research.

First, future research should further refine and test the dual-path model. Our integrative framework, grounded in self-interest and system justification theories, requires empirical testing of its explanatory power and ecological validity. Several key issues need clarification: (1) Control for perceptual factors. The dual-path model focuses on the “quality” of inequality but does not deny the role of “quantity.” Its analytical framework actually depends on high levels of inequality. However, previous research shows people are often insensitive

to macro-level inequality and may even underestimate it (Ding & Ji, 2021). Future research examining the dual-path model should control for such perceptual biases. (2) Some macro-social factors may limit the model's explanatory power. Attitudes toward social systems depend not only on inequality but also on factors like inequality growth rates and socioeconomic development levels. For example, in areas with high but growing inequality, low-status individuals may have higher hopes for improving their situation, leading to stronger system-justifying beliefs (e.g., Cheung, 2016). Future research should control for such macro-level factors. (3) Boundary mechanisms may exist in the relationships between threats and motivations in the dual-path model. For instance, based on compensatory control theory (Kay et al., 2008), for individuals with low control, realistic and symbolic threats may simultaneously activate compensatory control needs, strengthening system justification motivation (Fritzsche & Jugert, 2017). When social systems fail to satisfy control needs, inequality's symbolic threat may also strengthen self-interest motivation, weakening system-justifying beliefs (Kay et al., 2008). (4) While the dual-path model focuses on two threats, other inequality threats merit examination. For example, symbolic threats at individual and group levels (e.g., inequality threatening low-status individuals' self-esteem and positive in-group identity; Zhang, 2013) and realistic threats at the systemic level (e.g., severe inequality potentially causing social unrest; Engler & Weisstanner, 2020) may also affect motivations and system-justifying beliefs. These were not addressed due to overlapping mechanisms with our focal threats but could be integrated to expand the model's cognitive foundations. (5) The dual-path model focuses on low-status individuals because its theoretical foundation rests on the conflict between their self-interest and system justification motivations (Jost et al., 2001). For high-status individuals, this conflict is weak, and inequality does not pose serious realistic threats, making the model less applicable. This reveals fundamental differences in how system-justifying beliefs are formed across status levels, offering an explanatory perspective for debates about the "status-legitimacy hypothesis" (Yang et al., 2013). Future research could compare the cognitive and motivational bases of system-justifying beliefs between high- and low-status individuals.

Second, future research should examine "new inequalities" in public crisis contexts and their effects on system-justifying beliefs. Both theoretical orientations discussed here presuppose social inequality as an objective reality. Previous research has primarily examined inequality across class, gender, race, and region in domains like economy, health, and education. Recently, climate change, globalization, and technological revolutions have intensified various forms of inequality, creating multiple "new inequalities" (Thompson, 2020). For instance, public health crises like COVID-19 may exacerbate existing inequalities, creating differential vulnerabilities across class, gender, and region in economic well-being, physical and mental health, and academic achievement—manifesting as risk inequality (e.g., Rodríguez-Bailón, 2020; Wiwad et al., 2021; Gan et al., 2020). According to our dual-path model, risk inequality in public crisis contexts makes realistic threats salient. Notably, due to loss aversion, unequal-

ity in loss contexts may activate stronger self-interest motivation (Zhou & Wu, 2011), with detrimental effects on system-justifying beliefs that cannot be ignored (Rodríguez-Bailón, 2020). Future research examining inequality's impact on system-justifying beliefs should therefore consider these "new inequalities" in public crisis contexts and their mechanisms.

Third, researchers should further distinguish between system justification motivation and system-justifying beliefs at both conceptual and empirical levels. System justification is a motivational psychological process (Jost, 2019). Why emphasize its motivational nature? Jost et al. (2010) explain that people actively and purposefully (though possibly unconsciously) rationalize social reality to satisfy three fundamental needs: existential, epistemic, and relational. However, previous research has examined this motivational process ambiguously. On one hand, the process has strong implicit properties (Jost & Banaji, 1994), making it difficult to capture with traditional explicit measures. On the other hand, empirical studies often measure system justification motivation using system-justifying belief scales, conceptually conflating the two. As Hafer and Bègue (2005) criticized regarding just-world belief theory, system-justifying belief scales cannot effectively distinguish between the "motivational process of rationalization" (system justification motivation) and the "resultant reactions" (system-justifying beliefs). These scales were originally designed to measure people's judgments and perceptions of system fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability (Kay & Jost, 2003; see also Vesper et al., 2022). Therefore, beyond conceptual distinction, researchers should explore more appropriate methods to assess system justification motivation. Additionally, another ambiguity concerns whether system-justifying beliefs reflect prescriptive beliefs (how things ought to be), descriptive beliefs (how things are), or both. Zimmerman and Reyna (2013) argue this distinction is necessary, and future research should examine differential effects of inequality on the two types of beliefs (e.g., Li & Hu, 2021).

Finally, researchers should explore targeted intervention mechanisms to reduce the detrimental effects of social inequality on system-justifying beliefs, leveraging psychological research for social governance (Yang & Guo, 2017). Based on our dual-path model, intervention strategies could target two pathways. First, following the **weakening path**, we should strengthen "source governance" of inequality and injustice (Wu, 2019). For advantaged groups, research shows that activating humility can reduce internal attribution of wealth gaps and increase support for redistribution (Bai et al., 2021). For disadvantaged groups, promoting fairer class mobility opportunities and enhancing confidence and hope for upward mobility is crucial (Guo et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Second, following the **strengthening path**, we should rationally address the double-edged effects of system justification motivation (Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Yang et al., 2018). Short-term, system justification motivation can enhance life satisfaction (Li et al., 2020) and maintain social stability (Jost et al., 2012). Long-term, however, rationalizing inequality may create vicious cycles (García-Sánchez et al., 2019) and hinder social justice correction (Tan et al., 2017). Scholars have called for vigilance against these negative effects and exploration of culturally

appropriate intervention strategies (Jost et al., 2019; Fernando et al., 2018). In summary, the dual-path model attempts to reveal the complex psychological mechanisms through which inequality affects low-status individuals' system-justifying beliefs, while also providing psychological insights for psychological research to serve social governance.

References

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