



# HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

*Soc Psychol Personal Sci.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2019 February 12.

Published in final edited form as:

*Soc Psychol Personal Sci.* 2017 April ; 8(3): 267–274. doi:10.1177/1948550616678454.

## Movin' on Up? How Perceptions of Social Mobility Affect Our Willingness to Defend the System

**Martin V. Day** and

Memorial University of Newfoundland St. John's, NL, Canada

**Susan T. Fiske**

Princeton University, Princeton NJ, USA

### Abstract

People's motivation to rationalize and defend the status quo is a major barrier to societal change. Three studies tested whether perceived social mobility – beliefs about the likelihood to move up and down the socioeconomic ladder – can condition people's tendency to engage in system justification. Compared to information suggesting moderate social mobility, exposure to low social-mobility frames consistently reduced defense of the overarching societal system. Two studies examined how this effect occurs. Compared to moderate or baseline conditions, a low social-mobility frame reduced people's endorsement of (typically strong) meritocratic and just-world beliefs, which in turn explained lower system defense. These effects occurred for political liberals, moderates, and conservatives, and could not be explained by other system-legitimizing ideologies or people's beliefs about their own social mobility. Implications for societal change programs are discussed.

### Keywords

Motivation; Social Mobility; Ideology; System Defense

---

The gap between the rich and poor has been rising since the late 1970's and has become one of the most important problems in modern society (Michel, Bivens, Gould, & Shierholz, 2012; Piketty & Saez, 2006). Higher income inequality appears to be linked with societal problems such as decreased physical and mental health (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and hindered economic growth (Stiglitz, 2012).

Why then, do we not see widespread protests? In general, why do citizens tend to accept the status quo rather than support societal change? One possibility is that individuals are not well informed (Kelly & Evans, 1993; Norton & Ariely, 2011). However, supplying accurate information on income inequality does not affect preferences for income redistribution (Kuziemko, Norton, Saez, & Stantcheva, 2014) or desires to change the current system (Trump & White, 2014).

Besides information, perhaps motivation matters. Among other potential explanations, this research tests whether social mobility is a pivotal factor that can affect people's motivation

---

to defend the overarching system as fair, just, and legitimate. Given the value of people's subjective experience, we focus on perceived social mobility, that is, beliefs about the likelihood of people moving up and down the socio-economic ladder. First, we outline relevant theory and the role of perceived social mobility. Afterwards we test our hypotheses experimentally: explicating how perceived social mobility can undermine or uphold people's willingness to defend the overarching system.

## System Justification and Perceived Social Mobility

People's broad motivation to engage in system justification is a critical barrier to societal change efforts. System justification theory, which builds upon theories of cognitive dissonance, just world, marxist-feminism, social dominance, and social identity, helps explain the tendency for people to perceive societal conditions as orderly, fair, and legitimate (Jost & Banaji, 1994). More than 20 years of research indicates that people are motivated to rationalize the status quo – even when faced with ongoing societal problems (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). People engage in a variety of psychological processes to avoid the threat associated with acknowledging the system as chaotic, unfair, or illegitimate (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). For example, the system justification motive can lead to devaluations of those who attempt to change the status quo (Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010; O'Brien & Crandall, 2005) and can increase views that unequal societal arrangements (e.g., large number of rich politicians) are the way things ought to be (Kay et al., 2009).

In order to better understand the factors that lead to societal change, research examining the limits of system justification is critically needed (Kay & Friesen, 2011). We believe that the availability of opportunity in society is a potentially important limiting factor. Opportunity on the societal level primarily takes the form of social mobility. People's perception of social mobility is not trivial. Although untested experimentally, theorists have proposed that the assumption of adequate social mobility underlies support for imperfect systems (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Tyler, 2011). For example, the belief that almost anyone can move up or down in society may make the vast income differences between the rich and poor more palatable, and affect the general willingness to defend such a system. In this paper we seek to broadly test this theoretical assertion. But, how might different levels of perceived social mobility affect system defense?

One position, based on the study of group permeability, is that only low social-mobility is needed to maintain the status quo. People will not collectively protest a system as long as it provides evidence of "tokenism" – such as a small percentage of individuals moving from low to high status (e.g., Wright, 2001). From this view, relatively more social mobility should not increase system defense.

We hold an alternative position. We suggest that the degree of perceived social mobility, such as whether it is relatively low or high, will critically bound people's willingness to justify the overall system. In general, social mobility appears to fall short of people's ideals (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Sawhill & Morton, 2007). In America people perceive approximately moderate social-mobility, that is, they overestimate the chances of changing societal positions when compared to census data (Kraus & Tan, 2015). Rather than being

satisfied, this suggests that low social-mobility will not meet people's basic assumptions of opportunity that may be needed to strongly maintain the status quo.

Consistent with this reasoning, one study found that the amount of perceived social mobility was moderately associated ( $r = .49$ ) with support for the economic system (Mandisodza, Jost, & Unzueta, 2006). Such correlational evidence is promising. However, it remains unclear whether perceived social mobility is related to broader system defense (i.e., beyond the economic system), and importantly, whether there is any causal connection between these factors. In other words, will changes to perceived social mobility also change desires to defend the system? We primarily hypothesize that perceived low social-mobility will reduce people's willingness to defend the overarching system as compared to higher social-mobility.

If we are correct, how might this change occur? According to theory, a variety of ideologies can serve to explain societal arrangements and thus help justify the system (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). These system-legitimizing ideologies have been found to be powerful tools in the rationalization of various outcomes and inequalities (e.g., Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Rubin & Peplau, 1973). Although sometimes confounded in past research, social mobility beliefs about the *likelihood* of moving up and down in society are importantly distinct from ideologies that provide explanations of *how* or *why* people attain certain socioeconomic positions or outcomes (e.g., because of hard work, deservingness). For instance, individuals may perceive social mobility to be high or low, but endorse different beliefs about what they think is the best method to get ahead, such as through business connections, luck, or hard work. Some of these ideologies, such as meritocratic beliefs, rely on the assumption of opportunities for people to change their lot in life. That is, perceived social mobility may affect support for some legitimizing ideologies. Thus, we hypothesize that social-mobility-related changes in people's willingness to defend the system may be partly explained by changes in endorsement of specific system-legitimizing beliefs. Compared to higher perceived social-mobility, lower social-mobility should decrease rationalization and defense of current societal conditions.

We fully examine the above hypotheses in two studies. As a replication, we test our central hypothesis again in a third study reported in the Supplementary-Material. If our hypotheses are correct, this research will shed light on societal conditions that affect people's desire to defend problematic systems, and thus provide additional insight into factors that may be critical for societal change.

## Study 1

Study 1 aims to test whether varying people's perceived social mobility in society changes their willingness to defend the overall system. We also examine possible psychological processes by measuring endorsement of four system-legitimizing ideologies that theoretically predict system defense (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Two of these ideologies reflect beliefs about merit and just rewards, and two legitimize group positions and group conditions. As social mobility involves social class permeability (e.g., poor becoming rich), it may conceivably affect support for beliefs that legitimize existing group hierarchies.

Meritocratic beliefs, however, more fundamentally rest on the assumption of opportunities to move up and down. Degree of societal opportunity may also significantly influence just-world beliefs that people's efforts are rewarded. Thus, we more strongly expect that ideologies related to merit and just reward of effort will be affected by our manipulation of social mobility and explain possible changes in system defense.

## Method

**Participants**—We chose to collect an initial sample of near 200 (G\*Power 3 software,  $1 - \beta > .80$ , small-to-medium effect size,  $d = .35$ ) because precise effect sizes with our materials was unknown. A sample of 199 American participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk service (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Four participants were excluded for spending less than 5 seconds reading the study manipulation. The final sample included 195 participants (53.3% women, 80.5% White,  $M_{age} = 34.2$ ).

**Procedure and materials**—Participants volunteered for a study on “Societal and Lifestyle Issues.” First, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two possible summary reports describing social mobility in America. Next, participants completed five dependent measures. We counterbalanced the order of a system-defense measure (listed first below) with four system-legitimizing ideologies. The four ideologies were presented to participants in the same sequence as listed below. As a manipulation check, participants also indicated their perceived social mobility and then completed demographic information. All of the main measures used 7-point agreement scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

**Manipulation of social mobility:** Participants read a brief report designed to induce perceptions of either moderate or low social mobility. We used a moderate social-mobility frame as a baseline because a high likelihood of changing social class (i.e., high social-mobility) may not be believable given the constraints of actual social mobility. In the moderate social-mobility condition, participants read an article titled “Moving on Up!” that described a study on the relative ease with which Americans can move up and down the societal ladder. This included statistics on the chances that people from the bottom 20% of incomes will move up, and the chances that people from the top 20% will move down. All statistics were based on a real study (Bengali & Daly, 2013). In the low social-mobility condition, participants read a similarly-worded article with mostly comparable arguments, but titled “Moving on Up?” The article included statistics from the same study, but the statistics were used in such a way as to convey a message of low social-mobility. See the Supplementary-Material for manipulations and measures used across studies, including full details of Study 3.

**System defense:** We assessed defense of the broader American sociopolitical system using a measure of system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003; 8-items,  $\alpha = .89$ ). Participants indicated how fair, just, and legitimate they believed society to be, e.g., “In America, most policies serve the greater good.”

**Meritocratic beliefs:** This system-legitimizing ideology (10-items,  $\alpha = .93$ ) assesses beliefs about how much hard work and ability are rewarded, and how much people are perceived to deserve their success, e.g., “Getting ahead is a matter of working hard and relying on yourself.” Items were based on prior research and definitions of meritocratic ideology (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

**Group-based dominance:** This subscale of social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; 8-items,  $\alpha = .94$ ), measures support for group-based hierarchy and the supremacy of some groups over others, e.g., “Superior groups should dominate inferior groups.”

**Group-based opposition to equality:** The group-relevant opposition-to-equality subscale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; 8-items,  $\alpha = .93$ ), taps into beliefs about equalizing conditions among groups and treating groups equally, e.g., “Group equality should be our ideal,” all reverse-scored.

**Belief in a just world:** This scale assesses general perceptions of fair outcomes and whether people’s good and bad actions are justly awarded (Lerner, 1980; Lipkus, 1991; 7-items,  $\alpha = .93$ ), e.g., “I feel that a person’s efforts are noticed and rewarded.”

**Perceived societal social mobility:** Participants also indicated the general likelihood of social class change in America (8-items,  $\alpha = .88$ ), e.g., “There are a lot of opportunities for people to move up the social ladder.”

**Demographics:** Finally, participants provided their gender, age, and ethnicity, as well as political orientation, education, household income, and perceived socioeconomic status.

## Results

We conducted a manipulation check using analysis of variance (ANOVA), which revealed that the low social-mobility frame lowered perceptions of societal-level social mobility ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) relative to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 41.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .93$ . Next we tested the effect of social-mobility on system defense. As hypothesized, exposure to the low social-mobility frame significantly attenuated defense of the overall system ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ), relative to system defense following the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 17.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .60$ .

We also conducted a series of ANOVAs to examine the effects of social-mobility on the four system-legitimizing ideologies. As predicted, meritocratic beliefs were lower following the low social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ), as compared to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 11.76$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .49$ . Similarly, the low social-mobility frame led to less belief in a just world ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) than the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 6.08$ ,  $p = .015$ ,  $d = .35$ . In contrast, participants’ support for group-based dominance did not differ between the low ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) and moderate ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) social-mobility conditions,  $F(1, 193) = 0.001$ ,  $p > .250$ ,  $d = .01$ . We also did not observe significant differences for group-

based opposition to equality between the low ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and moderate ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) social-mobility frames,  $F(1, 193) = 0.46$ ,  $p > .250$ ,  $d = .10$ .

Additional analyses revealed no main effects or interactions involving presentation order of the system defense and other measures.

### Mediation

All system-legitimizing ideologies were significantly related to system defense (see Table 1), but as predicted, only meritocratic and just-world beliefs showed effects of the social mobility manipulation.<sup>1</sup> We followed a multiple-mediation bootstrapping procedure to simultaneously compare whether two of the system-legitimizing ideologies (meritocratic beliefs, belief in a just world) can explain how perceived social mobility affects system defense (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We used 5000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% bias-corrected Confidence Interval (CI). The mediation analysis revealed that both the specific indirect effect of meritocratic beliefs [CI: .04, .34],  $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .08$ , and belief in a just world [CI: .05, .45],  $b = .22$ ,  $SE = .10$ , mediated the effect of the social-mobility frames on system defense. The direct effect of social mobility on system defense was reduced when both mediators were entered in the model, but still significant [CI: .11, .56],  $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p = .004$ .

**Political orientation and other covariates**—The social-mobility effects on system defense and mediators remained significant even when separately controlling for age, gender, education, income, perceived socioeconomic status, and political orientation (see Supplementary-Material for control and related analyses). In other words, our manipulation of social mobility held across the political spectrum, and significantly explained variance beyond other factors relevant to system defense (Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay, & Payne, 2015; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007) and perceived social mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2014; Kraus & Tan, 2015).

### Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated that compared to a moderate social-mobility frame, exposure to low social-mobility reduced people's willingness to defend the current system. We also tested mechanisms of this effect. We did not find evidence that our social mobility manipulation acted as a broad threat across system-legitimizing beliefs. The low social-mobility frame specifically modified endorsement of meritocratic values and belief in a just world, which in turn explained some of the reduction in system defense.

To examine the robustness of these results, Study 2 sought to replicate and expand these findings. In addition to increasing our sample size, we included a baseline (no information) control condition. From a theoretical perspective, it may be useful to know whether a linear relationship exists or people's baseline perceptions are closer to the moderate or low social-mobility frames. As individuals may support the system because they believe it provides adequate socioeconomic opportunity, we expect that the low social-mobility frame should

---

<sup>1</sup>See Supplementary-Material for correlations among all variables in Studies 1 and 2.

attenuate desires to directly defend the system compared to a baseline. It is also possible that moderate social-mobility information may affirm existing views and thus increase system defense.

Study 2 was also designed to address the possible concern that the manipulation mostly affected perceived chances of personal social mobility, which may better explain changes in willingness to defend the system (i.e., depending on whether individuals would personally benefit). System rationalization and defense should involve a system-motive theoretically distinct from self-motives (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Whereas non-system based motives can explain some variation in system defense, our findings in Study 1 remained significant even when controlling for such factors (e.g., perceived socioeconomic status). To more thoroughly rule out that effect of social-mobility on system defense is not explained by beliefs about personal socioeconomic benefit, Study 2 included a measure of perceived individual social mobility.

## Study 2

### Method

**Participants**—We decided to collect a sample 2.5 times larger than Study 1 (i.e., near 500 participants). This was a compromise between replicating our finding of social mobility on system defense (if  $d = .40-.60$ , power = .98-.99, with 166 in each condition), and exploring this effect across three conditions (if  $d = .20-.30$ , power = .57-.86). Participants were 501 American residents recruited from Mechanical Turk. We excluded 9 participants who spent less than 5 seconds on the study manipulation, consistent with Study 1. The final sample consisted of 492 participants (49.2% women, 76.2% White,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.2$ ).

**Procedure and materials**—Study 2 was similar to Study 1 except for three alterations. First, we added a baseline control condition to determine how this condition may differ from the moderate and low social-mobility frames. Participants in the control condition completed the study measures, but did not read social-mobility information.

The second change was to shorten the social mobility information and make it easier to comprehend. We reduced the length of the low and moderate social-mobility articles by approximately 50 words and included a small metaphoric image of a figure climbing either a broken or normal ladder, respectively.

The third change was to the measures. We kept the measures of system defense ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and significant mediators in Study 1 (meritocratic beliefs,  $\alpha = .89$ ; belief in a just world,  $\alpha = .77$ ), and added an 8-item measure of *perceived individual social mobility* that assessed the perception of changing one's own societal position ( $\alpha = .88$ ), e.g., "In today's society, I could change my social class."

There were no significant effects of counterbalancing the order of measures, so this variable is not discussed further. As in Study 1, we measured perceived societal social mobility ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and demographic information.

## Results

As a manipulation check, a one-way ANOVA on perceived societal social mobility indicated differences among conditions,  $F(2, 489) = 8.67, p < .001$ . Relative to the control condition ( $M = 3.33, SD = 1.15$ ), social mobility perceptions were higher following the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.05$ ),  $t(489) = 2.65, p = .008, d = .29$ , and lower following the low social-mobility frame ( $M = 2.88, SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(489) = 3.71, p < .001, d = .40$ .

Next we tested whether Study 1 replicated. An ANOVA indicated that system defense varied by condition  $F(2, 489) = 6.36, p = .002$ . Consistent with Study 1, the low social-mobility frame significantly reduced defense of the overall system ( $M = 3.36, SD = 1.23$ ), compared to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.87, SD = 1.28$ ),  $t(489) = 3.57, p < .001, d = .41$ . We also expected participants in the no-information baseline control condition to indicate responses approximately between the moderate and low social-mobility frames. Contrasts revealed that the moderate social-mobility frame increased system defense relative to the control condition ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.33$ ), although the effect was marginal,  $t(489) = 1.85, p = .065, d = .20$ . The low social-mobility frame decreased system defense compared to the control condition, but this effect was similarly marginal,  $t(489) = 1.75, p = .080, d = .20$ . When we dummy-coded the conditions (0 = low, 1 = control, 2 = moderate) and entered them into a regression, they significantly predicted system defense as expected, indicating a positive linear relationship,  $b = .24, SE = .07, p = .001$ .

A separate ANOVA revealed between-condition differences for endorsement of meritocratic beliefs,  $F(2, 489) = 16.44, p < .001$ . As in Study 1, the low social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.55, SD = 1.29$ ) lowered meritocratic beliefs relative to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 4.29, SD = 1.14$ ),  $t(489) = 5.49, p < .001, d = .61$ . The moderate social-mobility frame did not differ from the control condition ( $M = 4.10, SD = 1.21$ ),  $t(489) = 1.37, p = .173, d = .16$ . However, participants in the low social-mobility condition indicated significantly less support of meritocratic beliefs than those in the control condition,  $t(489) = 4.18, p < .001, d = .44$ .

Our manipulation also affected belief in a just world,  $F(2, 489) = 6.88, p = .001$ . Replicating our previous finding, the low social-mobility frame lowered just-world beliefs ( $M = 3.44, SD = 1.39$ ), relative to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 3.96, SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(489) = 3.59, p < .001, d = .40$ . The difference between the moderate and control conditions ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.27$ ) was not significant,  $t(489) = 1.03, p > .250, d = .12$ , but compared to the control condition, exposure to the low social-mobility frame significantly lowered belief in a just world,  $t(489) = 2.60, p = .010, d = .28$ .

The social-mobility frames also led participants to adjust perceptions of their own social mobility,  $F(2, 489) = 8.64, p < .001$ . The low social-mobility frame decreased participants' estimates of their own potential mobility ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.37$ ), compared to the moderate social-mobility frame ( $M = 4.36, SD = 1.29$ ),  $t(489) = 4.07, p < .001, d = .46$ . Although the moderate frame did not significantly differ from the control condition ( $M = 4.16, SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(489) = 1.36, p = .175, d = .15$ , the low social-mobility frame lowered perceptions of personal mobility relative to the control condition,  $t(489) = 2.76, p = .006, d = .30$ .

**Mediation**—We examined whether the effects of the low and moderate social-mobility frames on system defense could be explained by changes in meritocratic and just-world beliefs, as well as perceived individual social mobility. The between-condition comparisons revealed that the low social-mobility frame affected our measures more than did the moderate social-mobility frame. A multiple mediation analysis confirmed that meritocratic beliefs [CI: -.01, .16],  $b = .05$ ,  $SE = .04$ , belief in a just world [CI: -.06, .24],  $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .08$ , and individual social mobility [CI: -.01, .05],  $b = .00$ ,  $SE = .01$ , did not mediate the effect of the moderate social-mobility frame on system defense (for correlations, see Table 2). Although the moderate social-mobility frame marginally increased system defense compared to the control condition, it does not appear that this occurred via system-legitimizing or individual mobility beliefs. Rather the moderate social-mobility frame may have simply primed notions of socioeconomic opportunity, and participants affirmed the seemingly responsible system without needing to change their other existing beliefs.

Next we compared the low social-mobility and control conditions. We conducted similar mediation analyses simultaneously comparing the three possible mediators. Examination of the indirect effects importantly revealed that both lower meritocratic [CI: .04, .28],  $b = .14$ ,  $SE = .06$ , and just-world beliefs [CI: .04, .34],  $b = .17$ ,  $SE = .08$ , significantly explained how the low social-mobility frame decreased system defense. Individual social mobility was not a significant mediator [CI: .00, .13],  $b = .04$ ,  $SE = .03$ . When controlling for the mediating variables, the direct effect of social mobility on system defense in this mediation was not significant [CI: -.29, .08],  $b = -.11$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .26$ .

**Political orientation and other covariates**—The effects of the social-mobility frames on system justification, meritocratic beliefs, belief in a just world, and individual social mobility remained significant, when controlling for political orientation, as did the mediation analyses. Given the sample size, we also tested whether separate effects would emerge for liberal, moderate, and conservative participants. Compared to moderate social-mobility, the low social-mobility frame effectively lowered perceived societal social-mobility (all  $p$ 's  $\leq .003$ ), and reduced system defense for all three political groups ( $p = .031$ ,  $p = .053$ ,  $p = .010$ , respectively). The results of Study 2 also remained significant when controlling for age, gender, income, education, and perceived socioeconomic status.<sup>2</sup>

**Discussion**—Study 2 again demonstrated that a low social-mobility frame, as compared to a moderate social-mobility frame, lowered defense of the overall sociopolitical system. A baseline control condition also revealed a level of system defense approximately between the low and moderate social-mobility conditions. Comparisons to the control condition indicated that lower system defense induced by the low social-mobility frame was driven by reduced meritocratic values and belief in a just world. This pattern was not observed for the moderate social-mobility frame.

Although broad information on social mobility influenced people's beliefs about their own social mobility, these beliefs could not uniquely explain changes in desires to defend the system.

<sup>2</sup>See Supplementary-Material for control analyses, as well as multicollinearity and item-specific tests across studies.

## General Discussion

Reading the daily news reveals 1) many instances of unfair, unjust, and poorly structured societal arrangements, and 2) that most people seem to do little in response. The present research examined when going along with the current system is more or less likely. Consistently, people's willingness to maintain the societal status quo hinges, at least in part, on perceived opportunities to move up and down the socioeconomic ladder. Individuals are willing to prop up an imperfect system if they perceive a moderate level of social mobility, but they are less willing to rationalize and defend current societal conditions if they believe social mobility to be low. Although the effects of social permeability have been studied on other outcomes, such as stereotype endorsement and ethnic group boundaries (Ho, Sanbonmatsu, Akimoto, 2002; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), this is the first experimental evidence that perceived social mobility can bound tendencies to rationalize and defend broad system arrangements (Jost et al., 2004).

This research also explains how perceived social mobility can affect system defense. Reduced belief in system-legitimizing ideologies was associated with less defense of the societal system. Specifically, people were less likely to endorse beliefs about rewards to effort and fairness of outcomes (i.e., meritocratic values, belief in a just world), after learning about low social mobility, as compared to moderate social mobility or baseline conditions. Other system-legitimizing beliefs (e.g., group-based dominance), perceptions of personal social mobility, or demographic factors, could not explain these findings. The ability of low social-mobility framing to decrease endorsement of meritocratic and just-world ideologies is particularly notable, as such beliefs are core to the American Dream and dominant ideology (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) and the rationalization of inequalities (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

There are likely limits of these effects. For example, evidence suggests that very high and equal levels of social mobility are not necessarily desirable (Davidai & Gilovich, 2014; Lane, 1959). Thus, at the extremes, the effect of higher social mobility on system defense may taper off. In addition, the strength of the association may vary by culture. Motivations to defend the societal system may be more grounded in beliefs of opportunity in more individualistic cultures, such as America (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), especially when compared to places with more egalitarian values. Stronger correlations between social mobility and economic system defense documented in America as compared to Australia bolsters the possibility of such cultural variation (Mandisodza et al., 2006).

The present research may have important implications for addressing societal problems through system change. For example, system change proposals are more likely to be endorsed when framed as sanctioned by the system (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010). System change behaviors can also increase (e.g., negative information seeking) when the system is perceived to be changeable (Johnson & Fujita, 2012). Given the attenuating effect of low social mobility on support for system-legitimizing ideologies, this framework may be relevant for programs of change that are stifled by status-quo rationalizations – as may have been the case in prior efforts to combat high income inequality. Indeed, our findings support the notion that individuals may defend current societal arrangements, in part, because they

believe there to be an acceptable level of social mobility (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). However, current social mobility in America is lower than many other developed nations and generally is also lower than expectations (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Sawhill & Morton, 2007). Therefore, emphasizing low social-mobility may be particularly effective. The effects may also be widespread. For example, as the present research impacted liberals, moderates, and conservatives, future research that involves exposure to low social-mobility information may reveal more united support for system change programs and policies across the political spectrum.

System justification can be a strong driver of maintaining the status quo. The present studies indicate that perceived social mobility may be a promising tool for disrupting system defense, altering endorsement of impactful ideologies, and encouraging various system-change efforts.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

## References

- Bengali, L; Daly, M. U.S. economic mobility: The dream and the data. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Economic Letter (Report No 2013-06). 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/publications/economic-letter/2013/march/us-economic-mobility-dream-data/>
- Brown-Iannuzzi JL, Lundberg KB, Kay AC, Payne BK. 2015; Subjective status shapes political preferences. *Psychological Science*. 26:15–26. [PubMed: 25416138]
- Davidai S, Gilovich T. 2015; Building a more mobile America—one income quintile at a time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 10:60–71. [PubMed: 25910381]
- Feygina I, Jost JT, Goldsmith RE. 2010; System justification, the denial of global warming, and the possibility of “system-sanctioned change”. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 36:326–338. [PubMed: 20008965]
- Ho EA, Sanbonmatsu DM, Akimoto SA. 2002; The effects of comparative status on social stereotypes: How the perceived effect of some persons affects the stereotypes of others. *Social Cognition*. 20:36–57.
- Johnson IR, Fujita K. 2012; Change we can believe in: Using perceptions of changeability to promote system-change motives over system-justification motives in information search. *Psychological Science*. 23:133–140. [PubMed: 22228643]
- Jost JT, Banaji MR. 1994; The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 33:1–27.
- Jost JT, Banaji MR, Nosek BA. 2004; A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*. 25:881–919.
- Jost JT, Hunyady O. 2005; Antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 14:260–265.
- Katz I, Hass RG. 1988; Racial ambivalence and American value conflict: Correlational and priming studies of dual cognitive structures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 55:893–905.
- Kay AC, Friesen J. 2011; On social stability and social change: Understanding when system justification does and does not occur. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 20:360–364.
- Kay AC, Gaucher D, Peach JM, Laurin K, Friesen J, Zanna MP, Spencer SJ. 2009; Inequality, discrimination, and the power of the status quo: Direct evidence for a motivation to see the way things are as the way they should be. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 97:421–434. [PubMed: 19685999]

- Kay AC, Jost JT. 2003; Complementary justice: Effects of “poor but happy” and “poor but honest” stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 85:823–837. [PubMed: 14599247]
- Kelley J, Evans MDR. 1993; The legitimization of inequality: Occupational earnings in nine countries. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 99:75–125.
- Kluegel, JR, Smith, ER. Beliefs about inequality. New York: Aldine de Gruyter; 1986.
- Kraus MW, Tan JJX. 2015; Americans overestimate social class mobility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 58:101–111.
- Kuziemko I, Norton MI, Saez E, Stantcheva S. 2014; How elastic are preferences for redistribution? Evidence from randomized survey experiments. *American Economic Review*. 105:1478–1508.
- Lane RE. 1959; The fear of equality. *American Political Science Review*. 53:35–51.
- Laurin K, Shepherd S, Kay AC. 2010; Restricted emigration, system inescapability, and defense of the status quo: System-justifying consequences of restricted exit opportunities. *Psychological Science*. 21:1075–1082. [PubMed: 20585053]
- Ledgerwood A, Mandisodza AN, Jost JT, Pohl M. 2011; Working for the system: Motivated defense of meritocratic beliefs. *Social Cognition*. 29:322–340.
- Lerner, MJ. The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion. New York: Plenum Press; 1980.
- Lipkus I. 1991; The construction and preliminary validation of a global belief in a just world scale and the exploratory analysis of the multidimensional belief in a just world scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 12:1171–1178.
- Mandisodza AN, Jost JT, Unzueta MM. 2006; “Tall poppies” and “American dreams” reactions to rich and poor in Australia and the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 37:659–668.
- Michel, L, Bivens, J, Gould, E, Shierholz, H. State of Working America. 12th. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 2012. Income: Already a ‘lost decade’; 53–138.
- Norton MI, Ariely D. 2011; Building a better America – one wealth quintile at a time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 6:9–12. [PubMed: 26162108]
- O’Brien LT, Crandall CS. 2005; Perceiving self-interest: Power, ideology, and maintenance of the status quo. *Social Justice Research*. 18:1–24.
- Oishi S, Kesebir S, Diener E. 2011; Income inequality and happiness. *Psychological Science*. 22:1095–1100. [PubMed: 21841151]
- Paolacci G, Chandler J. 2014; Inside the turk: Understanding mechanical turk as a participant pool. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 23:184–188.
- Piketty T, Saez E. 2006; The evolution of top incomes: A historical and international perspective. *American Economic Review*. 96:200–205.
- Preacher KJ, Hayes AF. 2008; Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavioral Research Methods*. 40:879–891.
- Quinn DM, Crocker J. 1999; When ideology hurts: Effects of belief in the protestant ethic and feeling overweight on the psychological well-being of women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 77:402–414. [PubMed: 10474214]
- Rubin Z, Peplau A. 1973; Belief in a just world and reactions to another’s lot: A study of participants in the national lottery. *Journal of Social Issues*. 29:73–93.
- Sawhill I, Morton JE. 2007 Economic mobility: Is the American Dream alive and well? Pew Economic Mobility Project.
- Sidanius, J, Pratto, F. Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression. New York: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- Stiglitz, J. The price of inequality: How today’s divided society endangers our future. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; 2012.
- Trump, K; White, A. Does economic inequality activate the system justification motive?. Paper presented at the 15th biennial meeting of the International Society of Justice Research; New York, USA. 2014 Jun.
- Tyler T. 2011; Procedural justice shapes evaluations of income inequality: Commentary on Norton and Ariely (2011). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 6:15–16. [PubMed: 26162110]

- Wakslak CJ, Jost JT, Tyler TR, Chen ES. 2007; Moral outrage mediates the dampening effect of system justification on support for redistributive social policies. *Psychological Science*. 18:267–274. [PubMed: 17444925]
- Wilkinson RG, Pickett KE. 2009; Income inequality and social dysfunction. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 35:493–511.
- Williams MJ, Eberhardt JL. 2008; Biological conceptions of race and the motivation to cross racial boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 94:1033–1047. [PubMed: 18505316]
- Wright, SC. Restricted intergroup boundaries: Tokenism, ambiguity, and the tolerance of injustice. In: Jost, JT, Major, B, editors *The psychology of legitimacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 2001. 223–254.

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Correlations among variables in Study 1. Low vs. moderate social-mobility frames were dummy coded as 0, 1, respectively.

**Table 1**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social mobility	(-)	.29**	.24**	.18*	.00	.05	.42**
2. System defense		(-)	.72**	.76**	.19**	.29**	.70**
3. Meritocratic beliefs			(-)	.84**	.39**	.38**	.73**
4. Belief in a just world				(-)	.28**	.27**	.66**
5. Group-based dominance					(-)	.59**	.21**
6. Group-based opposition to equality						(-)	.25**
7. Perceived societal social mobility (manipulation check)							(-)

Note.

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2**

Correlations among variables in Study 2. Top right-half compares low social-mobility vs. control conditions (coded as 0, 1, respectively); bottom left-half compares control vs. moderate social-mobility conditions (coded as 0, 1, respectively).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social mobility	(-)	.10	.22*	.14*	.15**	.20**
2. System defense	.10	(-)	.72**	.75**	.55**	.71**
3. Meritocratic beliefs	.08	.72**	(-)	.85**	.65**	.78**
4. Belief in a just world	.06	.76**	.84**	(-)	.58**	.72**
5. Perceived individual social mobility	.08	.51**	.67**	.59**	(-)	.71**
6. Perceived societal social mobility (manipulation check)	.15**	.67**	.75**	.69**	.68**	(-)

Note.

\*\*  $p < .01$ ,

\*  $p < .05$ .