

# CHAPTER 1

## SOUNDING THE ALARM: MOVING FROM SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION TO SYSTEM CONDEMNATION IN THE JUSTICE JUDGMENT PROCESS

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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose – In this chapter, we seek to resolve the conflicting implications that emerge from status quo theories of justice, on the one hand, and theories of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice on the other. Specifically, status quo theories depict individuals as resistant to perceptions of injustice in their social environments, whereas theories of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice depict individuals as quite sensitive to the justice that characterizes outcomes and treatment.*

*Methodology/approach – We build on previous research on the justice judgment process to consider ways in which the findings from these two research streams can be integrated.*

*Findings – We suggest that the two overarching streams of research have identified and empirically explored two distinct modes of justice evaluation: a system justification mode and a system critique mode.*

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*Originality/value of chapter – We develop a model of the justice judgment process that specifies the circumstances under which each of the two modes is likely to operate.*

What is the process by which individuals evaluate the fairness of the social systems, organizations, authorities, and procedures that characterize their social environments? In this chapter, we seek to address this issue by specifying two distinct modes of justice judgment and incorporating those modes into a model of the justice judgment process. To do so, we draw on two distinct streams of justice research. Status quo theories of justice, such as system justification theory (for reviews, see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005), just world theory (e.g., Lerner, 1980), and victim derogation theory (e.g., Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), share the notion that individuals tend to resist perceiving injustice. However, empirical findings from social and organizational psychological research examining perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice generally indicate that individuals readily distinguish between fair and unfair outcomes, procedures, and treatment (see Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005, for an excellent review). Therefore, we seek to account for the very different implications that emerge from these two streams of research by developing a model of the justice judgment process that specifies the circumstances under which the findings of each of the two paradigms are likely to hold.

We suggest that the implications deriving from status quo theories and theories of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice are in conflict because the two overarching streams of research have identified and empirically explored two distinct modes of justice evaluation: a system justification mode and a system critique mode. By drawing on and extending previous research on fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001), we develop a model of the justice judgment process that specifies four distinct phases of the justice judgment process (Fig. 1), and we argue that while the system justification motive predominates in the initiation and use phases, the system critique mode predominates in the revision phase.

To develop this argument, we begin by reviewing previous research on system justification theory, which is currently the predominant status quo theory. We highlight recent findings from this area of research, and we

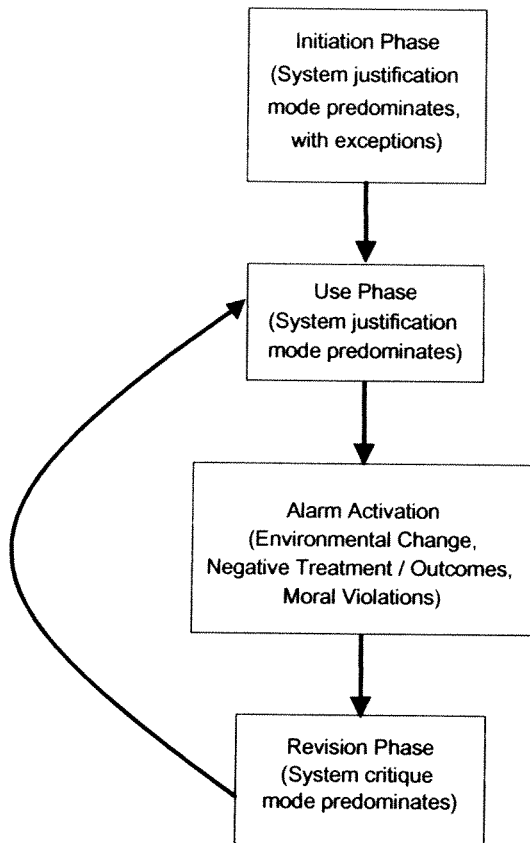


Fig. 1. Model of the Justice Judgment Process.

identify the primary psychological features of the system justification mode of justice judgment. We then contrast the psychological features of the system justification mode with the psychological features of a system critique mode, and we explore the factors that lead individuals to switch from the former to the latter. In the process, we integrate insights from fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos et al., 2001), uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002), and relational theories (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989, 1994, 1997; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992) as we develop our model of the justice judgment process.

## SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY

Jost and Banaji (1994) define system justification as the “process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal or group interest” (p. 2). System justification theory builds off of social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), just world theory (e.g., Lerner, 1980), cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., Festinger, 1957), Marxist and feminist ideological theory (e.g., Elster, 1982; Gramsci, 1971; Lukács, 1971), and social dominance theory (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) in its attempts to explain individuals’ use of ideological explanations to justify the status quo. The key hypothesis of system justification theory is that individuals possess a system justification motive, which drives them to defend the legitimacy and stability of existing social institutions. The most provocative aspect of the theory is the contention that even those who are disadvantaged by the social system will seek to defend it and that under certain circumstances, disadvantaged individuals may even experience a stronger system justification motive than those who are advantaged by the system.

Over the past decade, system justification researchers have demonstrated the utility of the theory in explaining a wide variety of ideological reactions to social systems and institutions. For example, researchers have demonstrated that disadvantaged individuals appear to internalize their low status, exhibiting a tendency to accept and justify their diminished status and outcomes (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost, 2001), to report attitudinal ambivalence regarding their low status (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Burgess, 2000), to report depressed entitlement relative to more high status individuals (Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Jost, 1997; Major, 1994; Pelham & Hetts, 2001), and to grant ideological support for the social system and its authorities despite their personal and group-based disadvantage (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2002). Researchers have also shown that individuals rationalize the status quo by subjectively enhancing their perceptions of the desirability of anticipated events (whether those events are perceived to represent either positive or negative outcomes) as they become more likely (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002) and by exhibiting a tendency to view the status quo as more desirable than alternative arrangements (Kay et al., 2009). Research also indicates that the system justification motive leads both high and low status individuals to use stereotypes to justify status differences (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay et al., 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008). These tendencies produce out-group favoritism for low status individuals and in-group favoritism for high status individuals (Jost &

Hunyady, 2005), and greater levels of inequality have been shown to exacerbate these effects (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 2001).

A key implication of this drive to justify the status quo (i.e., to view the status quo as legitimate) is that individuals are motivated to view the status quo as fair. Interestingly, these findings, which indicate a resistance to the perception of injustice, are in stark contrast to findings produced from social psychological inquiry into perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Distributive justice research, which concerns perceptions of the fairness of the allocation of outcomes, has demonstrated that people view equal allocations among comparable individuals to be more fair than unequal allocations (e.g., Adams, 1965; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; see Colquitt et al., 2005, for a review). Similarly, research regarding procedural justice, which examines people's perceptions of the fairness of the procedures used in resource allocation, has demonstrated, for example, that people evaluate procedures that allow them to voice their opinions as more fair than procedures that deny them voice and that procedures that are accurate and complete are viewed as more fair than others that are inaccurate or incompletely executed (e.g., Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990; Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Finally, research regarding interactional justice, which examines people's perceptions of the fairness of interpersonal treatment during processes of resource allocation, has demonstrated that treatment characterized by truthfulness, respect, propriety, and explanations is viewed as more fair than treatment lacking these characteristics (e.g., Bies & Moag, 1986).

Thus, findings from research on distributive, procedural, and interactional justice perceptions indicate that people readily differentiate between fair and unfair treatment, whereas system justification research indicates that people resist the perception of injustice, suggesting that such differentiation is unlikely. What factors can account for these conflicting findings? What are the circumstances under which individuals will resist or acknowledge perceptions of injustice?

While the status quo-oriented research has focused to a greater extent on reactions to the injustice of others, and distributive, procedural, and interactional justice research has generally focused more narrowly on reactions to one's own justice experiences, this difference in perspective cannot account for the different findings. In fact, recent studies of distributive and procedural justice research have demonstrated that under some circumstances, reactions to others' justice experiences can be as strong as reactions to one's own justice experiences (e.g., Van den Bos & Lind, 2001). In addition, system justification theory research has demonstrated that the

tendency to resist the perception of injustice and defend the status quo is, surprisingly, at its strongest among the victims of injustice (Jost et al., 2002). Instead, to address these questions, it is necessary to consider why a system justification motive might exist.

*What Explains the Existence of the System Justification Motive?*

Although system justification theorists have not yet, to our knowledge, provided a full psychological account of the underlying mechanisms that produce the system justification motive, they have put forth two explanations for related phenomena. First, Jost et al. (2007) have developed an uncertainty-threat model of political conservatism. In this model, Jost and his colleagues argue that uncertainty aversion and fear underlie inclinations to adopt politically conservative ideologies and that a tendency to engage in system justification is one manifestation of politically conservative ideologies. The implication from this work, then, is that fear of uncertainty is a key driver of the system justification tendency. Second, Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, and Laurin (2008) have developed a compensatory control explanation for the general tendency to support existing external systems, including belief in God and support for one's government. Kay and his colleagues argue that individuals are motivated to perceive that their social environments are not characterized by randomness or chaos. They further argue that because of this motivation to perceive some degree of orderliness in their social environments, if individuals do not feel personally in control of their outcomes, they prefer to believe that a benevolent God or government is in control. Thus, this view similarly posits that discomfort with uncertainty is a key motivator of system justification.

Both of these explanations share the idea that the motive to defend the system and resist perceptions of injustice is rooted in a desire to avoid the experience of uncertainty that would come from acknowledging that one is at the mercy of an unjust system. Indeed, research has indicated that the system justification motive is exacerbated when the system is viewed as inescapable and when individuals feel dependent on the system (Kay et al., 2009). In the following sections, we build on this uncertainty-based view of the system justification motive, incorporating insights from a number of justice theories to build a model of the justice judgment process as it applies to inclinations to acknowledge or resist the perception of injustice and to support or resist social change.

## **FAIRNESS HEURISTIC THEORY AND THE PHASES OF THE JUSTICE JUDGMENT PROCESS**

In one of the earliest full articulations of fairness heuristic theory, Lind (2001) explains that the basis of the theory is the recognition that virtually all social relationships and social environments are characterized by what he terms "the fundamental social dilemma." On the one hand, involvement in and contribution to social groups and collective endeavors allows the individual to achieve greater ends than he or she could accomplish alone. On the other hand, this type of involvement also exposes the individual to the possibilities of exploitation, rejection, and loss of individual identity. To manage these potential threats, Lind (2001) argues that individuals make fairness judgments that they can use as heuristics to determine the extent to which they can trust that their social environment is safe for collective engagement.

An important implication of fairness heuristic theory is the idea that the fairness judgment process is likely to be episodic and to proceed in stages. Lind (2001) distinguishes between a judgment phase and a use phase and argues that justice judgments will be used more often than they are revised. At the beginning of a relationship or at entry into a new social system, an individual is said to enter the judgment phase in which they use the first available justice information to form a judgment concerning the fairness of other individuals and of their social environment. Lind (2001) suggests that the judgment phase tends to be relatively brief because individuals need to arrive at a judgment quickly to have that judgment available to guide their decisions regarding cooperation with the individual or group. Thus, there is a primacy effect in which the first available justice information is weighted the most heavily in influencing the justice judgment (Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 2001; Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997).

Following the judgment phase is a use phase, in which the fairness judgment functions as a fairness heuristic, which is utilized to guide social decisions and to make sense of incoming stimuli. In the use phase, the initial justice judgment established in the judgment phase guides subsequent judgments about the social environment, impacting individuals' inclinations to obey authorities, follow rules, trust in others, identify with the group, act prosocially, and perceive new events and actions as fair (Van den Bos et al., 1997; Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). Thus, fairness heuristic theory holds that once a justice judgment is generated, it will be assumed to be accurate, and all incoming information will be assimilated to be congruent with the initial judgment.

This distinction between phases of the justice judgment process can help to delineate the circumstances under which individuals are likely to resist or acknowledge perceptions of injustice. We expand the distinction by separating the judgment phase into two separate types of judgment phases (initiation and revision) and adding an alarm phase. Thus, in the sections below, we distinguish among an initiation phase, a use phase, an alarm phase, and a revision phase (see Fig. 1). We suggest that the system justification mode of justice judgments predominates during the initiation and the use phases, but that the alarm phase brings about a revision phase in which the system justification motive is inoperative and the system critique mode predominates. Below, we describe the psychological features of each phase in detail to describe our model of the justice judgment process and to identify the circumstances that promote or hinder the perception of injustice.

### *Initiation Phase*

The justice judgment process begins with the initiation phase, which involves the individual's entry into a new social relationship or group. For individuals entering into a new social relationship or group, there are both uncertainty and relational motivations to exhibit a system justification bias. The uncertainty motivation is consistent with the explanations for system justification suggested by Kay et al. (2008) and Jost et al. (2007): Perceiving the new group or individual as fair minimizes feelings of uncertainty and provides reassurance that the social context is not characterized by randomness or chaos. The relational motivation involves the need to feel that the group one is joining is desirable and appealing. Combining these motivations for positive evaluation with Lind's (2001) indication that the first phase of justice judgments is likely to be made rather swiftly, we expect that most initial fairness perceptions tend to be characterized by a positive bias.

Two exceptions to this expectation should be highlighted, however, and to explain them, it is necessary to first provide a general overview of Lind and Van den Bos' uncertainty management theory of justice (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Building on the insights of fairness heuristic theory, and especially on the concept of the fundamental social dilemma, Lind and Van den Bos (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) proposed uncertainty management theory, in which they argue that the experience of personal uncertainty is a primary motivator of fairness judgments. One central implication of uncertainty management theory that has received considerable empirical support is that uncertainty



enhances reactions to treatment. Specifically, a growing collection of empirical studies demonstrates that when people experience personal uncertainty, they react more strongly to the fairness of the procedures they experience (see Van den Bos & Lind, 2009, for a review). For example, Van den Bos (2001) asked half of the participants in his study to write about the emotions and physical reactions they experience when they feel uncertain; the other half were asked to write about the experience of watching television. The fairness of the treatment the participants received was then manipulated, either by granting or denying them voice (experiments 1 and 3) or by using an accurate or inaccurate evaluation procedure (experiment 2). He found that the individuals who had written about the experience of uncertainty had a stronger reaction to the fairness manipulation than did those who had written about the experience of watching television, reacting more positively to fair treatment and more negatively to unfair treatment. Thus, while system justification involves resisting the experience of uncertainty, uncertainty management research demonstrates that when uncertainty cannot be avoided and is experienced personally and directly, reactions to treatment are amplified.

Therefore, one implication of uncertainty management theory is that if an individual is already feeling a high level of personal uncertainty at the time of entering a group, that uncertainty may lead the individual to take a more critical approach to the formation of a justice judgment and behave in ways that are more characteristic of the revision phase. In this way, the experience of uncertainty can be expected to moderate the relationship between group initiation and the inclination to view group outcomes, procedures, and treatment positively: If the individual is experiencing a high level of uncertainty, this positive inclination may be muted or even eliminated. This inclination would also be muted or eliminated if social circumstances led to an activation of the alarm phase before entering the use phase. The details of the alarm phase and revision phase will be explained below. First, however, we turn to the use phase, in which the system justification mode of justice judgments is likely to predominate if indeed the initial fairness judgment was positive.

#### *Use Phase*

The primary output of the initiation phase of the justice judgment process is a fairness heuristic, which consists of a generalized fairness assessment that is uncritically perpetuated in the use phase. As Lind (2001) explains, the

initial fairness judgment becomes an anchor that guides interpretations of justice-relevant cognitions and experiences throughout the use phase. Thus, in the use phase, the fairness heuristic developed in the initiation phase shapes interpretations of new justice experiences such that new justice-relevant information is viewed as consistent with the fairness heuristic. Incoming bits of information and stimuli are assimilated to conform to the initial fairness judgment in a process characterized by motivated reasoning, and in this way, the initial fairness heuristic acts as a substitute for any fairness-related judgment that individuals construct (Lind, 2001).

This assimilation process occurs for two reasons. First, assimilation minimizes the cognitive energy that must be allocated to fairness assessments. If the avoidance of exploitation required individuals to constantly and consistently monitor their social environments for evidence of unfairness, very little could be accomplished. Such a high level of monitoring would simply require too much cognitive energy and attention, leaving individuals unable to engage in other tasks. Thus, the assimilation process that characterizes the use phase significantly reduces the cognitive resources that are required for individuals to assess their security within their social environments. Second, the assimilation process helps individuals to avoid uncertainty. If each new fairness-related experience led one to reevaluate once again their existing fairness judgments, then the fairness of the social environment would constantly be called into question. Using the fairness heuristic to guide the interpretation of new information, on the contrary, ensures that ambivalence and uncertainty are minimized. Thus, the use phase of the justice judgment process is driven by needs for the conservation of cognitive resources as well as by the motivation to avoid uncertainty.

Like all heuristics, of course, the use of fairness heuristics is subject to bias. Specifically, a key implication of the assimilation process is that the initial fairness judgment will be perpetuated throughout the use phase, and if the initial fairness judgment is biased, that bias will persist. With respect to system justification tendencies, therefore, any individual that initially forms a positive judgment of fairness in the initiation phase will exhibit system justification tendencies in the use phase. Because there is, we argue, often a bias toward positive fairness judgments in the initiation phase, we expect the system justification mode of justice judgments to predominate in the use phase.

Thus, the system justification mode of justice judgments, in which judgments are biased by both relational and uncertainty motives in the initiation phase and these judgments are perpetuated through assimilation

processes in the use phase, tends to predominate in the early stages of engagement with a social system or individual. Indeed, this mode of judgment may persist in perpetuity in many cases. However, in other cases, events may arise that lead individuals to reconsider their initial fairness judgments. Specifically, we suggest that certain types of events can activate an “alarm phase” that switches individuals from the system justification mode (for those who initially viewed the system as fair) to a system critique mode, in which individuals reevaluate and critically examine the fairness of their social systems. This system critique mode is characterized by renewed vigilance to fairness information and by justice judgments that are guided by the principles and relationships identified in the extensive social psychological research on distributive, procedural, and interactional justice.

#### *Alarm Phase<sup>1</sup>*

Social neuroscience research has posited the existence of a “neural alarm system” in which a pattern of neural activity is activated by threats to social or physical security (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). This research indicates that a particular region of the neural system becomes activated when individuals feel they are under social threats, such as potential exploitation and exclusion, and when they experience physical pain and fear for their physical security. Building on this research, Van den Bos et al. (2008) have argued that personal uncertainty and other self-threatening conditions activate the neural alarm system, which in turn leads individuals to engage in a high level of vigilance regarding their social environments and, consequently, to form more extreme justice judgments. In a series of four studies, half of the participants were exposed to alarming stimuli before evaluating the justice of a procedure and the other half were not exposed to the alarming stimuli. The alarming stimuli included either exclamation points or yellow flashing lights. In each of the studies, participants who were exposed to the alarming stimuli reported more extreme reactions to their experiences (Van den Bos et al., 2008).

We suggest that the activation of this neural alarm system by social events or personal uncertainty switches the justice judgment process from the uncritical assimilation of justice information that characterizes the system justification mode to the system critique mode, in which individuals abandon their initial fairness heuristic and instead vigilantly evaluate the justice of the outcomes, procedures, and treatment, which occur in their social environments. Before describing the system critique mode in more

detail, we describe the types of events that are likely to activate the neural alarm system. We suggest that events that are likely to activate the alarm phase fall into three categories: (1) those that signal a radical change in the environment such that the uncertainty managing roles and abilities of current relationships and systems are rendered ambiguous, (2) those that involve such negative interpersonal treatment or outcomes that the social relationship, group, or system fails to reassure the person and comes to be experienced as a source of uncertainty rather than as a buffer against uncertainty, and (3) those that cannot be assimilated to a positive fairness heuristic because they expose a clear system- or relationship-based violation of the individual's moral code.

#### *Radical Change in the Social Environment*

First, any sudden and radical change in the social environment is likely to activate the alarm phase because it calls into question the uncertainty management function of the existing social system. As explained above, a primary driver of the system justification motive is the desire to avoid uncertainty; believing that one's social system is just allows the system itself to serve as a buffer against anxiety, and as long as belief in the system can be maintained, that uncertainty and accompanying anxiety can be avoided. However, if events indicate that the social environment has changed such that the system may no longer be able to serve this uncertainty- and anxiety-buffering function, then the neural alarm system is likely to be activated.

Of course, the nature of the change must be dramatic for it to activate the alarm phase. We expect that the effect of radical environmental change on alarm phase activation is not linear; it is a threshold effect. As people go about their daily lives and experience minor environmental changes or threats, they are still able to view the overall social system and their relationships with authorities as fairly stable. When changes are particularly radical and dramatic in nature, however, the system and accompanying relationships no longer appear stable, and the alarm phase will be activated.

One aspect of system justification theory research that might initially seem to be in contradiction with this aspect of our argument is the finding that "system threat" heightens the system justification motive (e.g., Kay et al., 2005, 2009; Lau et al., 2008). However, manipulations of system threat generally involve exposing participants to a fictitious news article describing an individual's (often a non-group member) opinion regarding the socio-political climate of a particular system. For example, in one study that

explored the role of system threat in impacting victim derogation and victim enhancement, the manipulation of system threat read as follows:

These days, many people in the United States feel disappointed with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors ... It seems that many countries in the world are enjoying better social, economic, and political conditions than the U.S. More and more Americans express a willingness to leave the United States and emigrate to other nations. (Kay et al., 2005, p. 241)

Although this paragraph can be viewed as critical of the sociopolitical system of the United States, we suggest that it does not reach a level of threat or unexpected change that would be sufficient to set off the alarm phase. "Many people" being disappointed certainly does not suggest that a sudden and radical change in the environment has taken place. It challenges the uncertainty managing function of the system, but it does not reach the threshold of sudden and radical change that is necessary to activate the alarm phase. Thus, we view the system justification finding that system threat enhances the system justification motive to be not incompatible with our argument: When there is a low-level system threat, individuals in the initiation or use phases of the justice judgment process are likely to enhance their pursuit of the system justification goal, just as other types of goal interference have been shown to enhance nonconscious goal pursuit (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001). However, when environmental changes reach a threshold of sudden and radical change, the alarm phase is activated.

There are numerous types of organizational events that would constitute this type of radical change. For example, the replacement of a key organizational leader, such as the organization's CEO, could serve to alert organizational members that the function of the organization as a social system may be shifting, leading them to feel uncertainty about their personal role, and security within the organization. Mergers and acquisitions may similarly alert organizational actors to uncertainty involving their place in the organization, thereby activating the alarm phase. So too would unexpectedly severe changes in the external environment.

#### *Negative Interpersonal Treatment or Outcomes*

Second, negative treatment from individuals or groups, such as social exclusion or disrespect, has been shown to activate the alarm phase (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; see also Rutte & Messick, 1995). This finding suggests that if the

individual directly experiences a sufficient level or degree (in terms of magnitude) of negative interpersonal treatment or a sufficiently bad outcome within the social system, the alarm phase will be activated and the inclination to defend the system will be eliminated. This alarm activation occurs because serious negative interpersonal treatment and extreme negative outcomes introduce heightened levels of personal and relational uncertainty, calling into question one's role within and value to the social group (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Van den Bos and Lind (2002) suggest that something very similar to this response might account for the frequently observed interaction between outcomes and fair process.

However, as with environmental change, it is only when negative treatment and outcomes reach sufficient heights in negative magnitude that they activate the alarm phase. In other words, like the effect of environmental change, the effect of negative treatment and outcomes on alarm phase activation is not linear; it is a threshold effect. As people move through their daily lives and experience minor disadvantages or transgressions from other individuals, authorities, and institutions in their social environments, these minor events are often relatively easy to assimilate to a positive fairness heuristic: Biased attributions involving unique circumstances and misunderstandings can generally perform the assimilative function. However, if negative treatment or outcomes become particularly dramatic in nature, the ability to assimilate these events is hampered, and the alarm phase is likely to be activated.

In addition, we expect that negative treatment is more likely to activate the alarm phase than are negative outcomes, because outcomes lend themselves much more easily to rationalization than do procedures or treatment. When one observes an outcome, it is often unclear what caused it; individuals must make subjective inferences about causes. In other words, outcomes are relatively nondeterministic because any number of fair or unfair processes can conceivably lead to a given outcome. Therefore, when only outcomes are observed, assimilation happens relatively easily as individuals presume that the process used to arrive at the outcome is consistent with their fairness heuristic. This easy assimilability makes it likely that the use phase can persist without activation of the alarm phase, thus enhancing the likelihood of system justification responses. However, when a procedure is directly observed, it is clear that the procedure is producing a particular outcome, and the procedure can be evaluated on the basis of the values that it embodies. Thus, procedures are more diagnostic of the motives that spur them. Consequently, when procedures are observed,

assimilation may be less feasible, particularly if the negativity of the procedure or treatment is of a significant order of magnitude.

Our contention that negative outcomes and treatment can activate the alarm phase may initially appear to be somewhat in tension with system justification theory findings that demonstrate the internalization of low status by disadvantaged individuals (e.g., Blanton et al., 2001; Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost, 1997, 2001; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost et al., 2002). By asking participants to evaluate the justice or legitimacy of status differences and stereotypes among individuals and groups, these studies generally show that individuals who receive negative outcomes tend to justify, rather than critique, their social systems. However, the majority of system justification research that indicates that individuals internalize their negative status examines individuals in the initiation and use phases of the justice judgment process and in the absence of any alarm phase activation. At the same time, these studies primarily ask participants to render judgments regarding status outcomes, and as we explain above, outcomes are more amenable to assimilation than are procedures or treatment.

For example, Haines and Jost (2000) asked participants to evaluate students from another university who were granted power over them in the context of their particular experiment. Given that this type of power difference was artificially manipulated for the purpose of the experiment, it is likely that participants were operating in the initiation phase of the justice judgment process, with its associated relational- and uncertainty-based motivations to engage in system justification. Aside from any experience of acute personal uncertainty that might exist unrelated to the experiment, we would therefore expect participants in this study to exhibit system justification tendencies, which is just what the experimenters found. Similarly, Jost et al. (2003) examined data from a series of national surveys in which they discovered that disadvantaged minorities were more likely than others to report support for system justifying ideologies and to view the government as benevolent. Again, we would expect that individuals participating in these types of surveys were primarily functioning within the use phase of the justice judgment process, in which the system justification tendency predominates (at least until the alarm phase is activated). Thus, these and similar studies on the internalization of low status examine individuals in the first two phases of the justice judgment process, in the absence of alarm phase activation, which represent precisely the circumstances under which we would expect the system justification motive to predominate. Therefore, the findings from these studies, indicating that those with low status (i.e., negative outcomes) are

particularly inclined to engage in system justification, are not in conflict with our argument. What we would predict, however, is that following any event that activates an alarm phase, this finding would reverse, and those with negative outcomes would be the least likely to engage in system justification.

Finally, it is important to point out that alarm activation through negative interpersonal treatment or outcomes can occur as a result of one's own or others' negative treatment and outcomes. In our discussion above, we have focused on examples concerning the treatment or outcomes that an individual personally experiences because these types of experience are most likely to lead directly to the feelings of personal and relational uncertainty that activate the alarm phase. However, when an individual observes negative treatment or outcomes experienced by another individual, that observation may also lead the individual to question the treatment that they themselves can expect, thereby activating feelings of personal and relational uncertainty. Therefore, in such a case, observing the experience of others would be expected to activate the alarm phase. There is also another route by which observing the experience of others may activate the alarm phase. Specifically, if another individual is observed to experience treatment or outcomes that the observer views as immoral, then the alarm phase may be activated by a third mechanism – moral violations.

#### *Moral Violations*

In addition, we suggest that the alarm phase is activated when the individual is confronted with the violation of closely held moral values (i.e., sacred values; see Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000) committed by an institution or authority within the social system or by an individual with whom one is in a social relationship. However, not all moral violations activate the alarm phase. We argue that, to trigger the neural alarm phase, this type of event must (1) violate a moral mandate and (2) be clearly attributable to systemic causes.

Skitka (2002) explains that moral mandates constitute self-expressive stands on particular issues and represent a special class of attitudes that are particularly strong in both their extremity and importance to the individual. She further emphasizes that while moral mandates are closely tied to moral values, they are not moral values per se. Instead, moral mandates represent the selective expression of particular moral values. For example, two individuals who report placing a high value on the sanctity of human life may build on that value to develop different types of moral mandates: One may support the abolishment of the death penalty, whereas the other may take a pro-life position on abortion.



Thus, moral mandates are positions on moral issues that are based on attitudes about moral values that have passed a certain threshold of strength. Therefore, once again, the relationship between a moral violation and the activation of the alarm phase is nonlinear: The strength of commitment to the moral issue in question must have surpassed a certain level of strength within the observer (i.e., must have reached the level of a moral mandate) for the violation to set off the alarm.

In addition, to activate the alarm phase, the event must be clearly attributable to individuals with whom one has a social relationship or to authorities or institutions of power within the social system. For example, many individuals have a moral mandate against the use of sweatshops in manufacturing. The fact that sweatshops exist, however, does not activate the alarm phase. However, when a university student with a moral mandate against sweatshop labor discovers that the university of which he or she is a member has used sweatshop labor for university activities, that discovery is likely to activate the individual's neural alarm system because the discovery will call into question the extent to which the university administration can be trusted to secure a social environment free from exploitation and moral violations.

The requirement that the violation be clearly attributable to a valued individual or an authority or institution once again highlights the point that procedures and treatment are more diagnostic than outcomes. When an outcome is observed, such as an unequal allocation of resources, it is not always clear how the allocation arose. An unequal allocation might arise due to merit, or instead it might arise due to favoritism. An individual with a moral mandate against cronyism or nepotism may not know if a violation of this moral mandate has occurred by seeing an unequal outcome. However, if the process of producing the outcome is observed, or if evidence regarding the process is presented, then the determination of violation is much clearer.

In summary, we believe that events that (1) communicate that a radical change in the social environment has taken place, (2) involve highly negative interpersonal treatment or outcomes, or (3) represent the violation of a moral mandate by an authority or institution representing the social system will lead to an activation of the neural alarm system, which will in turn initiate a new phase of the justice judgment process – a revision phase.

#### *Revision Phase*

Due to the uncertainty that is aroused in the alarm phase, individuals are inclined to be particularly critical and vigilant about justice in the revision

phase, which is why we term this mode of justice judgment the “system critique” mode. This critical and vigilant approach to the evaluation of social targets has the effect of muting the system justification motive and replacing it with a motive to come to an accurate, full, and objective assessment of the justice of the outcomes, procedures, and interactions associated with the social relationship or system. Thus, in the system critique mode, the findings from research on distributive, procedural, and interactional justice indicating that individuals readily distinguish between justice and injustice across a range of dimensions are likely to hold. As a consequence, in the system critique mode, we would expect individuals to view as unjust any outcome, procedure, or interaction that violates the principles and norms of justice identified in this extensive literature (see Colquitt et al., 2005, for a review). Finally, once a new assessment of the social relationship or system has occurred in the revision phase, the individual returns to the use phase, and the individual will use the newly formed justice judgment as a new fairness heuristic until a new alarm phase is activated, motivating another round of revision.

Thus, we expect that the revision phase of the justice judgment process, in which the system critique mode of judgment predominates, is the phase from which perceptions of injustice are most likely to emerge. If the alarm phase activates feelings of uncertainty that magnify reactions to outcomes, procedures, and treatments, then individuals in the revision phase are likely to view events or entities that violate principles of justice as highly unjust. Again, this is consistent with research on uncertainty management theory, which indicates that individuals experiencing uncertainty are likely to have particularly strong reactions to their justice-related experiences (see Van den Bos & Lind, 2009, for a review).

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This model of the justice judgment process has important implications regarding the nature of changes in justice judgments, as well as for understandings of reactions to injustice, the processes and leadership of organizational change, and reactions to crises in organizational contexts. In the sections below, we briefly describe some of these implications.

### *Changes in Justice Judgments*

With respect to changes in justice judgments, our discussion indicates that negative initial fairness assessments (i.e., judgments of unfairness) are

unlikely to be revised. We discussed in detail how the justice judgment process unfolds for individuals who form an initial judgment of a high or reasonable degree of fairness. For these individuals, radical environmental change or dramatic negative events, in the form of negative interpersonal treatment or the violation of moral mandates, activate the alarm phase and move them into the revision phase of the justice judgment process, where they are likely to change their initial fairness judgment. For individuals who initially form a judgment of unfairness, however, positive experiences, such as unexpectedly considerate and respectful interpersonal treatment or the support and protection of moral mandates, are unlikely to activate the alarm phase because they do not initiate feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, or potential exploitation in the way that negative events do. Thus, when initial fairness judgments are negative, they are less likely to be revised by the process we describe here except in reaction to radical environmental change.

### *Reactions to Injustice*

When will an individual react to the perception of injustice by supporting change initiatives? Social movement activists argue that broad-scale social movements are likely to emerge when activists frame grievances and identify solutions, when political opportunities emerge as social structures weaken and become amenable to change, and when organizations emerge to channel grievances into collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1997; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). While social movement theorists usefully identify the macro-level structural features that make collective action for change possible, the model of the justice judgment process that we have presented points instead to the impact that individual-level perceptions of injustice may have on individuals' inclinations to pursue change. Our view that injustice inspires action for change is consistent with previous work by Foster and Rusbult (1999), who demonstrated that perceptions of injustice lead individuals to seek power for prosocial ends.

Furthermore, it may be the case that the type of event that activates the alarm system could play a significant role in impacting the likelihood that the individual will pursue change. For example, previous research has indicated that certain emotions are associated with action-oriented behavior, whereas others are associated with avoidance and withdrawal from social engagement. Specifically, anger and outrage are associated with action, whereas fear and sadness are associated with withdrawal (Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989). Combining these two insights suggests that an

individual who experiences anger in response to perceptions of injustice that are formed in the revision phase is more likely to actively support change than is an individual who experiences sadness or fear instead. Thus, individuals may be differentially willing to take action against injustice depending on the type of event that set off the alarm phase and led them to detect the injustice in the first place. Research has demonstrated that the experience of disrespect and procedural injustice is associated with anger (Mark, 1985; see Miller, 2001, for a review). Research has also demonstrated that the violation of moral mandates produces moral outrage and anger (Mullen & Skitka, 2006). Radical environmental change, on the contrary, is more likely to be associated with fear and anxiety (Cartwright & Cooper, 1992). These findings indicate that individuals whose alarm phase is activated by negative interpersonal treatment or violation of moral mandates are more likely to experience action-oriented emotions, and therefore are more likely to take action for change, than are individuals whose alarm phase is activated by a radical change in the social environment.

#### *Organizational Change*

Regarding the process of organizational change, the research reviewed here raises the interesting question of whether the system justification motive might in fact be a source of continuous or incremental change in organizations. Specifically, as organizational leaders make small changes to organizational structures and processes (changes that are meaningful but are not sufficiently dramatic to activate the neural alarm system), the tendency of organizational members to continue to function in the system justification mode in the use phase of the justice judgment process may lead to a bias in support of these small changes. In this way, the tendency to support the status quo could, counterintuitively, be a key driver of incremental organizational change.

With respect to the leadership of the change process, the model makes clear that the activation of the alarm phase is a critical step in inspiring support for substantial, system-altering change. Thus, a key task for organizational leaders wishing to promote change is to undermine the process of assimilation that occurs in the use phase of the justice judgment process. To the extent that leaders can disrupt this assimilation process and activate the alarm phase, they are more likely to be successful in their attempts at eliciting support for organizational change. In addition, we have

argued that procedures are less amenable to the assimilation process than are outcomes. Therefore, to inspire support for change, leaders can direct individuals' attention to unassimilable events, and in particular, to procedures that violate moral mandates, and then guide followers in their interpretations and attributions of these events so that the resultant motive for change is channeled in the most effective direction.

### *Crises and Threat*

Finally, there are important implications of our model for the management of crisis and threat in organizational contexts. Specifically, organizational leaders should be aware that the experience of crises or high degrees of threat are likely to be associated with the activation of the alarm phase, which leads individuals to be particularly vigilant about fairness in their social environments. Although leaders may be inclined to presume that procedural protections of the interests of organizational members, as well as concentrated effort to treat organizational members with dignity and respect, can be set aside during times of crisis, the model we present here indicates that any negative evaluations that are formed in the revision stage following alarm activation are quite difficult to change once the crisis has ended.

### NOTE

1. In the sections below, we discuss the activation of the alarm system and the revision of justice judgments for individuals who initially formed a judgment of fairness (rather than unfairness) in the initiation phase. This framing allows us to more directly address the switch from system justification mode to system critique mode. In addition, we believe that while positive events may be unexpected when an individual has formed an initial judgment of unfairness, unexpected positive events are less likely to activate the alarm system because they do not inspire anxiety or a concern for exploitation. This assertion implies that initial judgments of unfairness are unlikely to be revised, a point we return to in the discussion.

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