

System Justifying Motives Can Lead to Both the Acceptance and Rejection of Innate
Explanations for Group Differences

Commentary on Cimpian and Salomon (in press), “The Inherence Heuristic”

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Abstract

Recent experimental evidence indicates that intuitions about inherece and system justification are distinct psychological processes, and that the inherece heuristic supplies important explanatory frameworks that are accepted or rejected based on their consistency with one's motivation to justify the system.

In the target article, Cimpian and Salomon (in press) make a compelling and persuasive case that a wide range of psychological phenomena, from essentialism to correspondent inferences to system justification, are not only closely related, but reflect a fundamental bias toward explaining observed patterns in terms of inherent features. The present commentary focuses on one aspect of this theory in particular: the relationship between the inherece heuristic and system justification.

System justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) proposes that people have a fundamental motive to view their social system as just, fair, and “good” and will thereby engage in a number of strategies to rationalize prevailing social arrangements. Cimpian and Salomon suggest two possible relationships between the inherece heuristic and system justification. One is that the tendency to regard existing social arrangements as fair and just may result directly from the more general tendency to view various aspects of the social environment as inherent features of that environment. In other words, the inherece heuristic may largely explain or even subsume system justification. Another possibility is that intuitions about inherece may provide important inputs into biased reasoning aimed at rationalizing and justifying the prevailing social order, but that ultimately, system justification and the inherece heuristic are in fact distinct psychological processes.

The present commentary reviews empirical findings favoring this latter model, in which the inherece heuristic and system justification are distinct psychological processes that interact with one another in complex ways. First, past research on system justification suggests that the phenomenon itself is a motivated process that can be activated through various types of

experimental manipulations (e.g., Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Masso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010). For example, in a frequently used manipulation participants read either that their country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political conditions (system threat), or that things are relatively fine (system affirmation) (Jost et al., 2005; Kay et al., 2005). Consistent with prior work on motivated reasoning (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Kunda, 1990), people tend to react against threatening information by supporting and bolstering their social system through greater endorsement of prevailing ideologies, preferences, and stereotypes of social groups (Cutright et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2005; Kay et al., 2005; Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008).

Second, further empirical findings suggest that rather than the inherence heuristic leading directly to system justification, it instead appears to provide important inputs to reasoning aimed at satisfying system justifying motives. In one recent investigation Zhu, Kay, and Eibach (2013) manipulated both system justifying motives (Laurin et al., 2010) and the accessibility of beliefs related to meritocracy and egalitarianism (two important but often opposing American values) through a priming manipulation. Activating motives to justify the system led participants to support whichever value had been made temporarily accessible through priming. This result suggests that people view whatever ideologies are accessible in a given social environment as inherent properties of that environment (Cimpian & Salomon, in press), but only “seize” on and use those ideologies when motivated to support the system. As a result, system justifying motives can lead individuals to endorse not only hierarchy enhancing beliefs (e.g., meritocracy) but even hierarchy attenuating beliefs (e.g., egalitarianism).

Finally, especially strong evidence for the independent nature of system justification and the inherence heuristic comes from recent studies demonstrating that system justifying motives can lead to not only the acceptance, but also the *rejection* of innate explanations for group differences (Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, in press). Specifically, a threat to the system leads people to endorse innate explanations for gender differences when these differences are portrayed as immutable, but reject such explanations when they are portrayed as mutable. This is because one way of justifying the system and existing status hierarchies, such as those between men and women, may be to explain group differences as immutable. For example, if one perceives the existing social structure as an inevitable “fact” that is unlikely to change over time, then it limits the criticisms that can be made of the status quo, and lends support to the current system. In other words, innate explanations imply that existing social structures (such as differences between social groups) are fundamental, not likely to change, and therefore “right,” which can be used as a means of reaffirming the status quo. And indeed, Brescoll et al. (in press) find that motivations to justify the system can lead people to seek out innate explanations for gender differences because such explanations imply the system is stable and incapable of being changed. However, when those same innate explanations are portrayed as *mutable*, individuals experiencing a system threat reject those same innate explanations for gender differences.

Additionally, under system threat, people also *reject* innate explanations for socially stigmatized behavior such as homosexuality and obesity (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2013). Thus, system justifying motives can lead people to radically “flip-flop” on whether or not they endorse the

belief that human behavior is driven by inherent/innate factors, depending on the implications of those explanations for system justification.

In sum, it seems clear that the tendency to explain social arrangements in terms of inherent factors is fundamental to human cognition and also plays an important role in many phenomena, including system justification. Recent research indicates that when considering the relationship between the inherence heuristic and system justification in particular, these appear to be distinct psychological processes with the inherence heuristic supplying important explanatory frameworks that are accepted or rejected based on their consistency with one's motive to justify the system.

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