Dissertation project: How to use the system justification theory in order to induce the desire for change towards gender equality

In the early 90’s the third wave of feminism started to impact people’s lives on private and public levels. Women’s movements addressed once more gender inequality and injustice in fields like health, education, economics and politics. Almost 25 years after the third uprising of feminism, the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2013) reveals that women still are underrepresented in politics and earn just a fractional amount of what men earn. Though the gender gaps in most Western countries became smaller in the past years, the slow-paced change indicates that closing the gaps will need a few hundred more years. Why is it that women, men and persons outside the gender binary endure such a vast inequality instead of actively advocate egality?

From a social psychological standpoint, system justification theory (SJT) provides one jigsaw piece for answering this question. System justification theory states that individuals hold the motive to justify, rationalize, support and even maintain the status quo (Feygina, Jost & Goldsmith, 2010; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Moreover, research showed that individuals tend to see the status quo “as good, fair, natural, desirable and even inevitable” (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004, p. 887). It has been demonstrated that individuals support and justify the status quo even (and sometimes particularly) if they are disadvantaged by it (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). O’Brien and Major (2009), for example, reported that with an increasing degree of system justifying-beliefs women feel less entitled to earn at least as much as men do. Unfortunately, the tendency to system justification increases even more if the system is criticised (Waksilak, Jost & Bauer, 2011), for example for maintaining disadvantages among groups. Against that background of heightened system-justification after system-criticism, it seems very difficult to awake a sense of injustice and motivate people to support change towards equality (see also Gaucher & Jost, 2011).

However, Feygina (2012) was able to use the motive for system justification and managed to encourage individuals to endorse a change of the status quo towards environmental protection. For this purpose, she harnessed the power of the system justification motivation by reframing change as being patriotic and preserving “the American way of life”. With this approach, the participants were not afraid of engaging in the change of the status quo because they felt that they supported the essential ideals of the system, hence maintaining it. This approach of “system-sanctioned change” stands in line with several other ideas to encourage social change with regarding the SJT (Gaucher & Jost, 2011). However, this branch of research of reversing the system justification effect and encouraging change remains largely unstudied. Namely, actual behavioural outcomes and the relationship to political ideologies should be topics of further investigation (Feygina, 2012). I would like to address both properties in my dissertation project, amongst others. In order to investigate possible changes towards gender equality, I plan to investigate further characteristics of system-sanctioned change and furthermore ways of encouraging people to compete a system they usually tend to maintain. One way to gain further knowledge about the underlying processes of "system-sanctioned change" is to look at implicit processes.

As recently demonstrated by Liviatan and Jost (2014) plain system justification not only appears as an explicit (reflective) expression of support for the system, it can rather be understood as goal-striving behaviour due to an implicit (automatic) motivation of affirming the system. The authors were able to show that after exposure to system criticism the participants’ cognitive accessibility of legitimacy-related contents is increased. After the participants were enabled to show affirmation of
the system, the unconscious accessibility of legitimacy-related contents, which was measured with a lexical decision task, decreased again. Liviatan and Jost (2014) concluded that there is an implicit tendency of defending and justifying social arrangements which is driven “by a general motivation to perceive the status quo as stable and fair” (p. 118). However, the interplay between implicit cognitive processing and explicit system-justification behaviour remains unclear. Beyond that, the relationship between system-justification as implicit goal-directed mechanism and the possibility of system-sanctioned change (see above) remains unresolved until now. As many social psychological phenomena like sexism and intergroup biases went “underground” because of societal changes, hence sustaining the status quo on an implicit level (see Jost, Pelham & Carvallo, 2002), it is possible that, but unknown if, the effect of system-sanctioned change primarily works explicitly and is harder to be achieved on the implicit level. The planned dissertation wants to close this gap of knowledge and aims to shed light on the implicit foundations of system-sanctioned change.

Summing up, the dissertation project aims to investigate the characteristics of system-sanctioned change, which uses the tendency of individuals to support the status quo to endorse the desire for change. To achieve this aim, participants will be presented feminist demands for gender equality with varying degree of system-threat, resp. system-sanctioned change. Afterwards the implicit and explicit motivation to support (resp. change) the status quo will be measured. Additionally, it is planned to retrieve data about real behavioural outcomes, by giving the possibility to engage in either support for, or change of, the status quo. Finally, the impact of demographic variables as well as constructs, which are related to SJT and gender equality, shall be studied (i.e. Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation, political ideology, sexism, Need For Cognitive Closure, meritocratic worldview; Kaiser & Major, 2006; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003). To sum it up, the planned dissertation will reveal insight about how and when individuals engage in social change, especially with regard to change towards gender equality.
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References


