

Introduction

What predicts people's judgments about inequality in their society?

- Perhaps given self-interest, a key predictor for perceptions of, and desires for, inequality is people's socio-economic position (i.e., SES). Indeed, studies have shown that the higher one's SES, the more income inequality they perceive and desire.^[1-2]
- Alternatively, perhaps people's tendency to defend and justify the status quo (i.e., system justification ideologies) predict their judgements of income inequality. Consider the prospect of social mobility – one of many system justification ideologies.^[3-4] Past research has found that the more one believes that social mobility is possible, the more income inequality they find tolerable.^[5]
- However, it is still unclear as to whether SES and system justification ideologies interact to predict people's perceived and desired levels of inequality.^[6-7] To investigate this, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How are people's SES related to their perceived and desired levels of inequality?

RQ2: How are people's system justification ideologies related to their perceived and desired levels of inequality?

RQ3: Does SES moderate the relation between system justification ideologies and perceived levels of inequality?

RQ4: Does SES moderate the relation between system justification ideologies and desired levels of inequality?

Method

- Participants ($N = 357$) completed an online survey that asked them to report their system justification ideologies, socioeconomic status, and attitudes towards inequality.

Table 1 – Measures, Sample Items, and Reliability Coefficients

| Measures | Sample Items | α |
|---------------------------------|--|----------|
| SES | Income Please provide your best estimate of your household income last year. | 0.63 |
| | Education What is the highest level of education you have completed? | |
| | Occupational Status What is your current employment status? | |
| System Justification Ideologies | Social Dominance Orientation Scale Some groups of people are simply not the equals of others. | 0.95 |
| | Belief in a Just World Scale I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve. | 0.87 |
| | System Justification Scale In general, I find society to be fair. | 0.86 |
| | Social Mobility Estimates What is the likelihood of a person born to a family in the poorest 20% rising (as an adult) to the richest 20%? | 0.85 |
| Covariates | Political Conservatism Please indicate your political orientation by choosing where your orientation falls. | |
| Covariates | Social Desirability Scale No matter who I am talking to, I am always a good listener | |
| | Gender What is your gender? | |
| Outcome Variables | Each pie shows a possible distribution of "the good things in life" (e.g., higher income, quality education, better jobs) among the best off, the worst off, and those in between. | |
| | Perceived Levels of Income Inequality The distribution of the good things in America most closely resembles option ____. | |
| | Desired Levels of Income Inequality Among the options, which mostly closely resembles how the good things should be distributed in America? | |

Results

Table 2 – Hierarchical Regression Examining the Effects of SES and System Justification Ideologies on Perceived and Desired Inequality

| Variables | Perceived Inequality | | | | Desired Inequality | | | |
|---|--|------|--------|----------------|--|------|--------|---------------|
| | B | SE | sr^2 | CI s | B | SE | sr^2 | CI s |
| Step 1: | | | | | | | | |
| Demographic Variables and Social Desirability | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | 0.24 | 0.24 | .00 | [-0.24, 0.71] | 0.14 | 0.19 | .00 | [-0.23, 0.51] |
| Political Conservatism | -0.25*** | 0.07 | .05 | [-0.38, -0.11] | 0.11* | 0.05 | .02 | [0.00, 0.21] |
| SES | 0.14 | 0.15 | .00 | [-0.17, 0.44] | 0.33** | 0.12 | .03 | [0.09, 0.56] |
| Social Desirability | -0.04 | 0.04 | .00 | [-0.12, 0.04] | 0.00 | 0.03 | .00 | [-0.07, 0.06] |
| | $R^2 = .060^{***}$ | | | | $R^2 = .051^{***}$ | | | |
| Step 2: System Justification Ideologies | | | | | | | | |
| Social Dominance Orientation | -0.21 | 0.12 | .01 | [-0.45, -0.03] | 0.40*** | 0.09 | .07 | [0.22, 0.58] |
| Social Mobility Estimates | 0.05 | 0.10 | .00 | [-0.15, 0.25] | 0.15 | 0.08 | .01 | [-0.01, 0.30] |
| Belief in a Just World | -0.06 | 0.12 | .00 | [-0.29, 0.18] | -0.03 | 0.09 | .00 | [-0.21, 0.15] |
| System Justification Scale | -0.42** | 0.14 | .03 | [-0.69, -0.16] | 0.05 | 0.11 | .00 | [-0.16, 0.25] |
| | $R^2 = .141 (\Delta R^2 = .080^{***})$ | | | | $R^2 = .135 (\Delta R^2 = .084^{***})$ | | | |
| Step 3: Interactions | | | | | | | | |
| SES x Social Dominance Orientation | 0.01 | 0.18 | .00 | [-0.35, 0.36] | 0.07 | 0.14 | .00 | [-0.21, 0.34] |
| SES x Social Mobility Estimates | 0.15 | 0.14 | .00 | [-0.43, 0.12] | -0.04 | 0.11 | .00 | [-0.25, 0.18] |
| SES x Belief in a Just World | 0.03 | 0.15 | .00 | [-0.27, 0.33] | -0.15 | 0.12 | .00 | [-0.38, 0.09] |
| SES x Political Conservatism | 0.15 | 0.11 | .01 | [-0.07, 0.37] | 0.13 | 0.09 | .00 | [-0.04, 0.30] |
| SES x System Justification Scale | 0.37* | 0.18 | .01 | [0.01, 0.72] | 0.10 | 0.14 | .00 | [-0.18, 0.37] |
| | $R^2 = .179 (\Delta R^2 = .038)$ | | | | $R^2 = .155 (\Delta R^2 = .020)$ | | | |

Note. $N = 251$. * Indicates $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

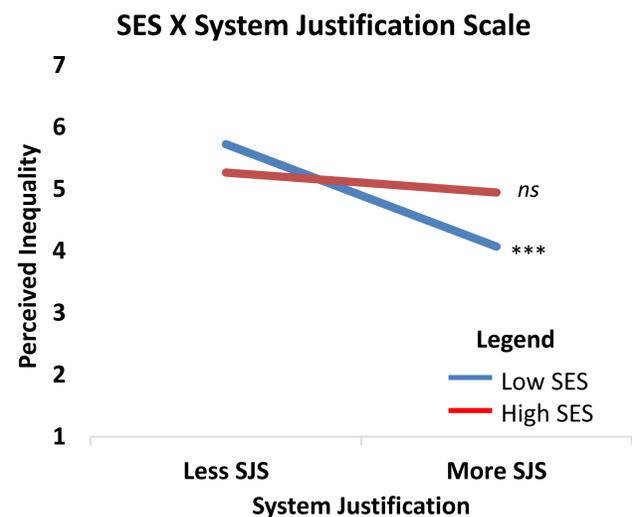


Figure 1. Interaction of SES and the System Justification Scale on Perceived Levels of Inequality

Conclusion

- We found that the higher one's SES, the more likely they were to desire income inequality. However, SES was not significantly related to perceived levels of inequality.
- We found that among those lower in SES, the more one believed society to be fair, the less they perceived inequality. Conversely, among those higher in SES, there was no relation between system justification and perceived inequality.
- This finding supports system justification theory and the notion that those who are more disadvantaged may be more likely to rationalize the system as fair by perceiving less inequality to exist.^[7]
- This research is important because inequality has negative effects on people's health, well-being, and social cohesion within society.^[8-9] Understanding why people perceive and desire inequality can be used in future research to develop effective policies and interventions to reduce inequality.

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