

Encouraging Social Change: How to Overcome the Need to Justify the System

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1. Project Description:

System justification theory posits that people perceive the social systems they belong to and have little personal control over as just (Jost & Banaji, 1994). When their social system is under threat (when it is seen as unjust or illegitimate), people tend to endorse their social system even more strongly than they would when no such threat is present (Kay et al., 2009). This can act as a barrier to system change under precisely the circumstances in which such change would be necessary. How, then, can changes to the current system be ushered in?

One proposed mechanism behind the motivation to justify the system lies in the need for individuals to reduce anxiety caused by perceived instability (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008). When a social system that one has little control over is dysfunctional, the social world may be perceived as unstable and chaotic. Such perceptions may produce anxiety in the individual and influence them to support the current system as a defense against their negative feelings.

In the current study, we propose that this anxiety will be reduced if the individual is presented with a specific plan for change to the system. This hypothesis is supported by research in the area of attitude and behavior change. When a behavior leads to a prospective consequence that produces a high amount of fear, the anxiety aroused may cause the individual to become defensive and deny the threat (Maloney, Lapinski, & Witte, 2011). However, individuals who are presented with specific instructions for cessation of the behavior tend to engage in behavioral change at higher rates than those who are not presented with specific instructions (Leventhal, Watts, & Pagano, 1967). Similarly, we propose that when the social system is under threat, individuals who are presented with a specific plan for change will tend to engage in less system justification than those who are presented with a non-specific suggestion for change. The presentation of a specific plan should encourage the embracement of change to the system.

Previous manipulations of system threat have involved exposing participants to fictitious news articles describing a critical opinion regarding the sociopolitical climate of a system that affects the participants. In this study, we will be testing the proposition that inequality is inherently threatening and induces system justification. That is, given the information that the system produces inequalities, participants should necessarily see the system as unjust, leading to the defense of that system. It would be expected that the higher the inequality is perceived to be, the more threatening it is and the more participants will be induced to justify that system.

All 100 participants will sign up for the study through SONA, and will attend an individual in-person experimental session. Participants will read an information form (Appendix A) and provide consent before beginning the study. An experimenter will be present to answer any questions participants may have about the forms. If they consent, participants will begin the study, which we expect to take 30 minutes or less. In exchange, participants will receive one research participation credit toward their Introduction to Psychology research requirement. The study materials and measures will be presented to participants in paper form.

All participants will be presented with information indicating that there is an inequality in the distribution of resources for the academic advising program at the University of Winnipeg (Appendix B). Participants will randomly be assigned a message indicating either that the inequality is small (low inequality condition) or that the inequality is large (high inequality condition). Participants will then randomly be assigned to read one of two descriptions of possible changes to the academic advising program proposed by a fictional student advocacy group (Appendix C). The proposed alterations will either be non-specific, or specifically elaborate on what changes to the Academic Advising program will be made. The experiment is thereby a 2(high inequality, low inequality) x 2(specific, non-specific) factorial design.

Participants will complete the written dependent measures assessing their support for system change, attitudes toward the current Academic Advising program, and attitudes toward the student advocacy group (Appendix D). Upon completion, participants will be given the opportunity to indicate whether they would like to volunteer with the fictional advocacy group as a measure of their support for change. Participants will also be given the opportunity, if they so choose, to fill out blank cards to contribute to a protest collage against the unequal distribution of resources amongst the Faculties in the Academic Advising program. Participants will be allowed to fill out as many cards as they would like within a 5 minute period. They will be told that the more cards we have for the collage, the more of an impact it will make on those in charge of the funding for Academic Advising. Participants will be told that this protest collage is to be put on display in a public location within the University of Winnipeg, and that Sherman Kreiner, the Vice President of Student Life at the University, will be sent a picture of the collage. In reality, the collage will not be sent to the Vice President of student life, but may be shown in publications or presentations of the study. Participants will be informed of this at the end of the study, and fully debriefed.

2. Study Participants:

Participants in this study will be 100 undergraduate students, who will be recruited from the undergraduate participant pool. Students who are interested in participating will sign up online through SONA. There are no specific characteristics required for participation. In exchange for their participation, students will receive one research participation credit toward their Introduction to Psychology research requirement. Participants may choose not to answer any

questions and withdraw from the study at any time before they leave the experiment room and still receive credit.

3. Informed Consent:

At the beginning of the study, all participants will be presented with a hard copy of the consent form. They will be informed that their participation in the study is completely voluntary, and they may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study any time before leaving the session and still receive full credit. They will be informed that their participation in this study will be kept confidential, and that they will be given an opportunity to ask the experimenter any questions before they begin the questionnaire.

4. Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Data Storage:

Participants' responses will be kept confidential, although they will not be anonymous due to the fact that the study will be completed in person. However, they will not be asked to provide any identifying information on the questionnaires. Thus, their responses will not be traced back to them. The only identifying data they will be asked to provide is their e-mail address, which will be kept separately from the questionnaire and will be destroyed upon collection of data. Their e-mail address will not be used in any way. Participants will be informed that any contributions they make to the collage may be displayed publicly. However, these contributions will not be identified upon display. The only manner in which their response may be identified is through the participant's handwriting on the collage. Only Dr. Gaucher and other authorized members (e.g. research assistants) of the Intergroup Relations and Social Justice Laboratory will have access to the data. Hard copies of the questionnaires will be kept in a locked room. The data will be stored for at least five years after publications based on this study have been made, and potentially indefinitely in electronic form on a computer in a secure laboratory in the Department of Psychology with all potentially identifying information removed. The signed consent form will be kept separately from the questionnaires. At the time of disposal, questionnaires will be shredded. The data will only be presented or published in summary form. No individual responses will be reported.

5. Intended use of findings:

When the data for this study are collected and analyzed, we plan to share our findings with the research community through presentations, conferences, and journal articles. When presenting the results of this research, data will be presented in summary form only with no reference to individual responses.

6. Risks:

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

7. Temporary Concealment and/or Incomplete Disclosure:

Participants will not be informed of the exact purpose of the study as it pertains to System Justification Theory and the promotion of social change, as this information may create a response bias. However, if the participants were made fully aware of the study's purpose, it would be unlikely to affect their informed consent to participation. At the end of the study, participants will be informed of the study's true purpose.

Participants will receive false information regarding an inequality in the resources and funding allocated to each academic faculty. There is a slight possibility that this information may arouse some anxiety in participants. However, this anxiety would be expected to be minimal and participants will be informed of the falsity of this information at the end of the study. This should completely reduce any anxiety caused by the manipulation. If there are lasting negative feelings in the participants, they will be referred to counseling services at the University. Participants will also receive false information that a student advocacy group (the University of Winnipeg Student Advocates for Change) is involved in the study, and that they are creating a collage in protest of the (fictional) inequalities embedded in the Academic Advising program. It is unlikely that this information would have an effect on participants' informed consent. The benefit to using a contrived inequality in the study is that it is unlikely to have a lasting impact on participants' lives or cause the arousal of lasting negative affect or attitudes toward the University, because the injustice is not real. At the end of the study, participants will be informed that this information was contrived by the experimenter and is indeed false.

Overcoming System Justification could be an important factor in promoting social change related to equality for minority groups, promoting human rights, and even for making amendments to political/public policies that may increase the quality of life of the people affected by them (which may include the participants themselves). Therefore, the possible gains obtained in the conduction of this study outweigh the potential costs that could be caused by the deception of participants.

8. Feedback/Debriefing:

At the end of the study, participants will be presented with written feedback outlining the details and purpose of the study (Appendix F). Participants will be given a hard copy for their personal records. If participants have any questions, they will be encouraged to contact myself or Dr. Gaucher by phone or e-mail. If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study, they will be referred to the primary supervisor whose contact information is provided on the feedback form. Students will still receive a full research credit regardless of whether they complete the study.

References

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Appendix A

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Attitudes toward Academic Advising 2012-1



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Email:

Research Supervisor:

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Dr. Jeremy Frimer, Assistant Professor
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We invite you to participate in a voluntary research study conducted by Jessica Dupasquier, under the supervision of Dr. Danielle Gaucher of the Psychology Department of The University of Winnipeg. The study will focus on student attitudes toward the Academic Advising program at the University of Winnipeg.

If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to read a description of how resources are currently distributed in the Academic Advising program at the University of Winnipeg. You will then be presented with proposed amendments to the current Academic advising program, and will be asked to provide your opinions on the current program and the proposed amendments to it (e.g., “To what extent do you support the proposed changes). You will also be asked to provide some demographic information (e.g. age, program of study). Lastly, you will be provided with the opportunity to contribute to a collage to support amendments to the Academic Advising program. We estimate it will take up to 45 minutes to complete the study. In appreciation of your time, you will receive one research participation credit. Other potential benefits include learning how research in Social Psychology is conducted at the University of Winnipeg.

Any information you provide will be kept confidential, except for any contributions you decide to make to the collage as it will be displayed publicly. However, your responses will not be identified upon display. In an attempt to ensure your response anonymity, your name will not be placed on the written questionnaire. This consent form will be kept separate from the questionnaire. You will not be asked to provide any identifying information. The questionnaire will be kept in a locked room accessible only to the research team. The data collected will be maintained on a password-protected computer. Afterward, it will be electronically archived indefinitely on a password-protected server. We hope to discuss the findings of the study at a conference of psychologists, and also to publish them in a professional journal. None of your individual responses will be revealed. The data will be presented in summary form only.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study prior to departing from the session and still receive your research participation credit. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study.

Thank you for your assistance in our research.

Signature of Chief Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Please check one:

_____ I **do** agree to participate in the study described above.

_____ I **do not** agree to participate in the study.

Name (please print): _____

Student Number: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Danielle Gaucher at d.gaucher@uwinnipeg.ca. For general comments or concerns, you may contact Heather Mowat, Research Administration Officer, at 204-786-9058 or ethics@uwinnipeg.ca, or Dr. Gary Rockman (Chair of the Departmental Ethics Committee), at 204-786-9405 or g.rockman@uwinnipeg.ca

Appendix F

FEEDBACK AND DEBRIEFING

Attitudes toward Academic Advising 2012-1



Principal Investigator: Jessica Dupasquier

Research Supervisor: Dr. Danielle Gaucher, Assistant Professor (d.gaucher@uwinnipeg.ca)

Secondary Supervisor: Dr. Jeremy Frimer, Assistant Professor (j.frimer@uwinnipeg.ca)

Thank you for participating in our study. Although we were interested in students' attitudes toward the Academic Advising program at the University of Winnipeg, our hypotheses were slightly more complicated than we first told you about. Specifically, we were interested in how to encourage people to support social change. In general, people prefer to keep things the way they are and tend not to support social change. We proposed that factors such as the level of specificity of a plan for change, and the size of the inequality in the system would affect the degree to which individuals would support changing the system. We thought that a more specific plan would lead to more support for change, and that a larger inequality in the system would increase support for change when coupled with a specific message.

In order to test these hypotheses, we systematically varied the amount of funding and the advisor-to-student ratio for each Faculty in the Academic Advising Program so that half of the participants were told that the inequality in the Academic Advising program was large, and half were told that the inequality was small. We had to do this to test whether the size of the inequality would affect system justification processes. We couldn't tell you this at the beginning of the study or it would invalidate the results of the study. To our knowledge, there is no actual inequity between faculties in terms of the funding allocated for academic advising. Afterwards, all participants were told that a student advocacy group had proposed a plan to rectify this inequality. Half of the participants read a specific description of this plan, and half read a non-specific description of the plan. We suspect that the more specific the plan for change is, the more likely participants will feel that change is possible. All participants then completed measures designed to assess their attitudes toward the current program, and their support for the plan for change. Participants were given the chance to further demonstrate their support by volunteering with the University of Winnipeg Student Advocates for Change (UWSAC) and by contributing their comments to the protest collage. UWSAC is a fictional group invented by the experimenters. If you chose to provide it, your e-mail address will not be used in any way and the paper you wrote it on will be destroyed. Your contribution to the protest collage will not be sent to the Vice President of Student Life. However, the collage may be presented to the academic community in presentations, seminars, conferences, or journal articles for the purpose of visually demonstrating support for change in the study. No individual cards will be focused on in such presentations, only the collage as a whole.

Your participation in this study has helped us to better understand System Justifying processes, which may be an important factor in promoting social change related to equality for minority groups, promoting human rights, and even for making amendments to political/public policies that may increase the quality of life of the people affected by them.

Because you have been told the purpose and predictions of this study, please do not discuss your experiences with anyone else who might be in this study until next September. If others completing the study were aware of our specific goals, as you can imagine, it would influence their results, and the data we collected would be invalid.

Please remember that we will protect the confidentiality of your responses. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, we plan to share this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, or wish to obtain the results of this research, please contact Dr. Danielle Gaucher at d.gaucher@uwinnipeg.ca. For general concerns, you may also contact Heather Mowat, Research Administration Officer, at 204-786-9058.

Thank you for participating in this study!