

Shared Reality, System Justification, and the Relational Basis of Ideological Beliefs

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Abstract

Although it is tempting to think that one's political convictions reflect independent and unbiased thinking, research increasingly suggests that ideologies reflect motivational processes. The present paper integrates system justification and shared reality theories to propose that ideologies may function as prepackaged units of interpretation that spread because of basic human motives to understand the world, avoid existential threat, and maintain valued interpersonal relationships. The authors review evidence suggesting that affiliative motives may influence ideological beliefs to align with the progressive or conservative views shared within a given relationship or group. At the same time, such motives may lead disproportionately to the adoption of system-justifying worldviews. Implications for the context dependence of ideological convictions, the role that shared reality may play in group conflicts, and the relational bases of revolutionary change are discussed.

Often our need for others is not love at all but only the need to be sustained in our illusions, even as we sustain others in theirs.

– Thomas Merton (1979, 23)

Contrary to the common view that human beliefs result from a more or less rational use of evidence, it is well documented that beliefs and opinions frequently result from biased, selective, and motivated processing of information (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Kunda, 1990; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Humans excel at believing what they *wish* to believe, sometimes even in the face of disconfirming evidence (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995), and the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by others much more than is typically recognized (e.g., Asch, 1952; Festinger, 1954; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Kawakami, Dovidio, & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Sherif, 1936; Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005b; Turner, 1991). Although it is tempting to assume that at least the most self-defining, weighty, and principled convictions – such as ideological opinions – escape the clutch of motivation and social influence, it seems increasingly unlikely that they do (see Jost, 2006; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a,b).

A Tale of Two Theories (and Three Motives)

In this article, we start by summarizing theory and research on the role of system justification in giving shape to the ideological opinions and values of individuals. This work suggests that two classes of motivation, namely epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty and existential motives to minimize threat, are capable of influencing ideological outcomes (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004). Next, we propose that there is also a third, relational motivation that underpins ideological opinions. From this perspective, ideology is linked to processes of social influence and the motivation to achieve and maintain ‘shared reality’ with others (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). An integration of these two theories (and three motives) suggests that it is possible to provide a more complete account of the psychological origins of political beliefs than currently exists in the research literature.

System justification theory

In laying out the basic tenets of system justification theory, Jost and Banaji (1994) proposed that ‘there is a general psychological tendency to justify and rationalize the status quo, that is, a motive to see the system as good, fair, legitimate, and desirable’. Although system justification results in negative consequences for some individuals – most especially for members of disadvantaged groups who are harmed by the current state of affairs – there are a number of psychological reasons why it would be functional for people to actively seek to justify the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). These include epistemic motives to establish order, structure, closure, and certainty as well as existential motives to perceive a safe, reassuring environment (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Experimental studies reveal that people defend and bolster the legitimacy of the societal status quo following exposure to various manipulations of system threat, including exposure to passages highlighting crises of legitimacy or stability in society (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). These results, which demonstrate defensive ideological responses on behalf of the system, are consistent with the notion that a general system justification motive exists.

Ideologies differ in the extent to which they serve to justify reigning social systems (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005). For example, conservative ideology typically favors preserving the societal status quo, whereas liberal, radical, and progressive ideologies often seek to reform or revise it (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a, b; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Consistent with this formulation, Jost, Nosek, and Gosling (forthcoming) found in several samples of student respondents that system-justifying attitudes are endorsed more enthusiastically by conservatives than liberals. In this research, self-reported conservatism scores strongly predicted scores on Kay and Jost’s

(2003) general system justification scale, with r s ranging from 0.42 to 0.46 (total $N = 1316$), as well as scores on Jost and Thompson's (2000) economic system justification scale, with r s ranging from 0.32 to 0.47 (total $N = 2539$).

Although most people endorse system-justifying beliefs to at least some extent, dispositional and situational factors that stimulate the motivation to reduce uncertainty and threat also tend to increase the appeal of conservative, system-justifying beliefs and decrease the appeal of progressive, system-challenging beliefs (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Research reveals, for instance, that heightened epistemic motives to achieve certainty and closure and/or heightened existential motives to minimize fear and threat are associated with increased conservatism with respect to political opinions, candidate preferences, and even ideological self-placement (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003a, b, 2007). The evidence, therefore, is quite strong that *epistemic and existential motives contribute to specific ideological outcomes*.

Shared reality theory

Shared reality theory was first proposed by Hardin and Higgins (1996) to explain how and why relational and epistemic motives are intertwined. The theory holds that *people are motivated to achieve mutual understanding or 'shared reality' with specific others* in order to (i) establish, maintain, and regulate interpersonal relationships, thereby satisfying relational needs for affiliation (see also Asch, 1952; Freud, 1933; Sherif, 1936), and (ii) perceive themselves and their environments as stable, predictable, and potentially controllable, thereby satisfying epistemic motives to achieve certainty (see also Festinger, 1954; Mead, 1934; Turner, 1991). Hence, according to the theory, two fundamental adaptive requirements of human survival (social inclusion and knowledge of the external world) are served by the same social psychological mechanism, namely the maintenance and regulation of shared reality in interpersonal relationships (see also Hardin & Conley, 2001).

If specific interpersonal relationships and the subjective experience of reality are indeed connected through the regulation of shared reality, then people should (i) 'tune' relationship-relevant attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors *toward* others in desired or obligatory relationships so as to create and protect those common understandings on which the relationships depend, and (ii) 'antitune' relationship-relevant attitudes beliefs, and behaviors *away from* others in undesired or disengaged relationships so as to protect common understandings shared with other extant relationships. Consistent with this prediction, research shows that individuals mimic the characteristics and behaviors of salient individuals and groups (Cesario, Plaks, & Higgins, 2006; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), shift their attitudes toward those of close relationship partners (Davis & Rusbult, 2001), and bring their self-concepts and self-evaluations into alignment with the perspectives of significant others and even the perspectives of strangers (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987;

Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Sinclair, Dunn, & Lowery, 2005a; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005c). In fact, it may be that some behavioral assimilation effects that have received purely 'cognitive' explanations (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996) result, at least partially, from motivated social tuning processes (Cesario et al., 2006). By the same token, consistent with shared reality theory, research also shows that individuals shift their attitudes away from disliked or socially peripheral others (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2005a, c).

Although shared reality theory has not yet been applied expressly to the political domain, there is every reason to expect that it will be useful for understanding the interplay of relational and epistemic motives that underlies ideological belief formation and change, just as it has been useful for understanding the role of these motives in other attitudinal domains (e.g., Hardin & Conley, 2001; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Sinclair et al., 2005a, b, c).

An integration of system justification and shared reality perspectives

Although system justification and shared reality theories were developed independently, there are several ways in which they complement each other, particularly in the context of understanding social and political opinions. Both theories seek to explain the social psychological appeal of specific beliefs and belief systems (including ideologies) in terms of basic motives held by individuals and groups. Although system justification theory emphasizes epistemic and existential motives (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004) and shared reality theory emphasizes epistemic and relational motives (Hardin & Conley, 2001), it seems clear that all three motives could contribute to ideological outcomes. For instance, there may be interpersonal reasons, in addition to epistemic and existential reasons, to profess one's support for the status quo and to refrain from 'upsetting the apple cart'. Studies show that many people – especially those who engage in system justification – derogate others who are perceived as complaining about discrimination and injustice in the system (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). This is consistent with the possibility that shared social norms may reward system-justifying responses and punish system-challenging responses in part to regulate interpersonal relationships. To the degree that friends and family members have system justification motives of their own, the desire to achieve shared reality may disproportionately lead to system-justifying outcomes.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that social tuning is affected by the system-justifying tendency to maintain and bolster existing forms of social inequality (see also Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). In two studies, Henry and Hardin (2006) found that members of disadvantaged groups (blacks in Chicago and Muslims in Lebanon) were more likely to align their attitudes with advantaged out-group friends (whites and Christians,

respectively) than members of the advantaged groups were to align their attitudes with disadvantaged out-group friends. In this way, the overarching status quo may be slow to change because people are not equally motivated to achieve shared reality with everyone. According to shared reality theory, social tuning of attitudes occurs to the extent that the relationship is desired or obligatory. Social privilege, it seems, extends to epistemic privilege. In the remainder of this article, we will focus first on the notion that relational motives can contribute to ideological beliefs that are *either* conservative or progressive, depending on the beliefs held by significant others. Afterward, we will return to the more speculative possibility that the motivation to achieve shared reality will lead disproportionately to conservative, system-justifying outcomes.

Theory and Evidence Suggesting that Relational Motives Contribute to Ideological Opinions in General

We propose that *ideological convictions are influenced by a motive to establish and maintain a shared view of the world with other people* – what Hardin and Higgins (1996) referred to as a need for ‘shared reality’. To the extent that political and religious ideologies are sets of interrelated beliefs and attitudes that can provide many different individuals with the same ‘lenses’ through which to view the world and thereby communicate with each other, they should be especially useful for building and maintaining a sense of shared reality. Ideologies, in other words, may function as ‘pre-packaged’ units of interpretation that are useful for regulating interpersonal relationships and navigating social and political life. If a person knows, for instance, that her friend, family member, or conversation partner voted for President George W. Bush, then she also knows that he probably favors lower taxes, the death penalty, and the Iraq War and opposes welfare spending, gay marriage, and abortion rights. These inferences are more likely to be made by those who are relatively educated and knowledgeable about politics (e.g., Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Zaller, 1992). We consider four sources of evidence for the claim that for these people at least ideological endorsement is affected by, among other things, the desire to maintain shared reality with others.

The political socialization literature

The first reason to think that people’s ideological opinions are influenced by significant others comes from a vast research literature in political science on the parental socialization of party identification, social and political attitudes, and political behavior (e.g., Hyman, 1959; Sapiro, 2004; Sears, 1975; Sears & Levy, 2003). Although the effect of parental attitudes on their offspring may decline somewhat as the offspring age and accumulate other experiences and relationships (Niemi & Jennings,

1991), there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that young adults and late adolescents are strongly influenced by their parents' (and friends') political preferences and behavior (e.g., Kitt & Gleicher, 1950; Stillman, Guthrie, & Becher, 1960). Correlations between parent and adolescent attitudes, for example, frequently range from 0.3 to 0.6, with especially high parent–offspring correlations (around 0.6) for party identification and other parental commitments that are particularly well known to their children (Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Tedin, 1974). The transmission of political partisanship from parents to children is more effective when both parents belong to the same party and when politics is salient in the family and attitudes are well known (Jennings & Niemi, 1981). Both of these findings are consistent with a shared reality perspective – the first because it is a situation in which there are no competing shared realities within the same family, leading to a clearer ‘relational signal’, and the second because salience makes politics more central to the discursive environment in which shared reality is established. Although there have been skeptics of the notion that parents transmit their political attitudes to their children (see Tedin, 1974, for a discussion), the evidence inspired at least one team of researchers to conclude that, ‘the single most important determinant of long-run voting behavior is the behavior of one’s friends and family’ (Stillman et al., 1960, 171).

However, there are some limitations to what can be learned from correlational studies of parent–offspring attitudes. First, it is unclear what specific processes or mechanisms are responsible for the apparent connection between parental political preferences and those of their children. Cook (1985) has even suggested that the decline in research interest in political socialization research after 1978 is attributable to the ‘absence of an explicit psychological model of learning’ (p. 1079). Second, there is the possibility that at least some of the ideological correspondence between parents and their offspring is due to genetic factors such as inherited personality traits that are linked to political predispositions (Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005). This limitation does not apply to studies that document intercorrelations in political attitudes among friends. In any case, relational motives have received relatively little attention in political science in recent decades, perhaps because some researchers find relational or identity-based theories difficult to apply to real-world political preferences (e.g., Huddy, 2001). Nonetheless, the studies that do exist are consistent with the notion derived from shared reality theory that stable ideological opinions are tied to stable interpersonal relationships such as those involving friends and family members.

Effects of social identification on political opinions

Several studies link social and political attitudes to group memberships that are especially valued by individuals (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee,

1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Greene, 1999; Newcomb, 1943). For instance, Conover and Feldman (1981) found, using data from the American National Election Studies, that ideological self-placement was related to evaluations of liberals and conservatives as social groups, and that these evaluations stem, in turn, from cognitive sources (beliefs about political issues) and symbolic sources (affective evaluations of social groups). Their model, which is also highly compatible with both reference group theory (Merton, 1957) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), implies that political opinions are influenced by the desire to align oneself with positively evaluated social groups.

Other researchers have examined additional implications of social identity and self-categorization perspectives for social and political attitudes (e.g., Abrams, 1994). For example, Haslam et al. (1996) demonstrated that Australians' beliefs about Americans and Australians were strongly influenced by opinions expressed by fellow Australian (but not other) sources. Similarly, Stangor, Sechrist, and Jost (2001) demonstrated that racial beliefs are influenced by consensus information, such that college students' stereotypes are bolstered when they learn that fellow students hold similar versus dissimilar beliefs. These findings and others suggest that motives to bring one's attitudes into alignment with those held by others (especially in-group members) can play a key role in the formation and maintenance of stereotypes and other social and political attitudes.

Recent research has shed some light on the cognitive-motivational mechanisms by which identification-based motives come to influence political opinions. Specifically, Cohen (2003) found that liberal and conservative participants who were presented with either a generous or stringent welfare policy supported the new policy when their own political party allegedly endorsed it, regardless of the policy's content. Furthermore, knowledge of their own party's position led people to engage in selective and biased processing of policy information in order to arrive at agreement with in-group members. Participants also selectively invoked moral consequences of the policy in order to justify the in-group position. Thus, evidence suggests that people's opinions about political parties and specific policy issues are influenced (and perhaps even distorted) by their attachment to valued social groups as well as interpersonal relationships.

Experimental demonstrations of automatic social tuning

In addition to suggesting that lasting interpersonal relationships and group identities should exert strong and stable influences on ideological beliefs, shared reality theory implies that ideological beliefs may fluctuate insofar as unconscious (as well as conscious) needs to regulate temporary relationships motivate ideological alignment with different individuals (Hardin &

Conley, 2001). Thus, rather than representing stable and unchanging views of the world, ideological outcomes may be more malleable and context dependent than is often assumed (see also Jost, 2006, forthcoming). Several studies demonstrate that people automatically (or implicitly) 'tune' their attitudes to others, subtly bringing their own opinions into alignment with the actual or presumed opinions of other people, including strangers with whom they wish (or are obligated) to maintain smooth interactions.

In one particularly dramatic demonstration, Lowery et al. (2001) found that participant scores on various implicit measures of antiblack bias were affected by the presence of a black (versus white) experimenter. To the extent that white participants were motivated to interact with the black experimenter, they exhibited less antiblack bias on these measures, although they were unaware of the effects of the experimenter's race on their behavior. Subsequent research demonstrated that automatic social tuning effects are both moderated and mediated by the degree to which participants like the experimenter (Sinclair et al., 2005c), thereby demonstrating that social tuning is a consequence of temporary relationship regulation and complementing evidence that stable relationships are associated with stable political attitudes. For example, children's racial attitudes are positively correlated with the racial attitudes of their parents to the extent that they are highly identified with their parents (Sinclair et al., 2005a). Ledgerwood and Chaiken (forthcoming) found that subliminally priming participants with their own political party led them to express stronger agreement with the positions of their party, raising the possibility that ideological attitudes may automatically tune toward groups as well. Together, these findings are consistent with the notion that social and political attitudes are affected by both conscious and unconscious relational motives to establish and maintain shared reality with friends, family members, and even strangers. The theoretical and practical implications of this insight for the study of ideology, as we shall see, are numerous.

Effects of parents on system-justifying versus system-challenging attitudes

If attitudes are held and expressed in part to maintain and regulate interpersonal relationships, as shared reality theory implies, then ideological endorsement should covary with the cognitive accessibility of particular individuals with whom that ideology is (or is not) shared. Your politics are your people, or, more precisely, an expression of the values and opinions perceived to be shared with them when you are with them or thinking of them. In order to explore this plausible, but until now untested hypothesis, we conducted two studies that directly implicate relational motives in ideological endorsement. Specifically, we sought to alter the extent to which people would express conservative, system-justifying attitudes versus liberal, system-challenging attitudes by subtly reminding participants of significant others who hold different ideological positions.

Although political conservatives do in fact score more highly than liberals on system justification measures (Jost et al., forthcoming), we wanted to be sure that participants were (at least to some extent) aware of this empirical association. In an initial study we asked a small group of 16 New York University undergraduates to answer the 8 questions taken from Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale either as a 'moderate conservative' or as a 'moderate liberal' would. Sample items include: 'Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness'; 'Most policies serve the greater good'; and 'American society needs to be radically restructured' (reverse scored). Results indicated that when participants emulated a conservative, they scored significantly higher on every item and more than three points higher on the 9-point system justification scale ($M = 6.69$, $SD = 0.69$) than when they emulated a liberal ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(14) = 8.32$, $P < 0.001$. Thus, the students accurately discerned a connection between liberalism-conservatism and the endorsement of system-justifying attitudes.

If it is true that people either legitimize or subvert the status quo in part to fulfill relational motives, then individuals should endorse system-justifying beliefs more enthusiastically when a relationship with a conservative (rather than liberal) family member is made salient. To investigate this possibility, we asked a large number of undergraduates about their parents' political partisanship and recruited only those with one liberal (i.e., Democratic) and one conservative (i.e., Republican) parent to participate in a second study. Several weeks after the initial pretesting session, participants were asked to imagine either a positive or negative interaction with either their mother or their father (with no mention of political partisanship or opinions whatsoever) and to write a few sentences describing the hypothetical interaction. Next, as part of an ostensibly unrelated task, participants completed two measures of system justification, including the same Kay and Jost (2003) general system justification scale used in the pilot study and Jost and Thompson's (2000) economic system justification scale. (Scores on these two scales were significantly intercorrelated, $r = 0.59$, $P < 0.001$). Participants who thought about interacting with their conservative parent scored significantly higher on both the general and economic system justification scales than did participants who thought about their liberal parent (see Figure 1). Remarkably, these effects were equally strong regardless of whether participants had been asked to write about positive or negative interactions with their parents. This suggests that long-term, obligatory social relationships may exert a much stronger hold on attitudes than more transitory or optional relationships in which similar valence manipulations have been found to moderate shared reality effects (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2005c).

Thus, above and beyond participants' own ideological preferences for supporting versus criticizing the societal status quo, their opinions shifted as a function of whether they imagined interacting with a parent who was

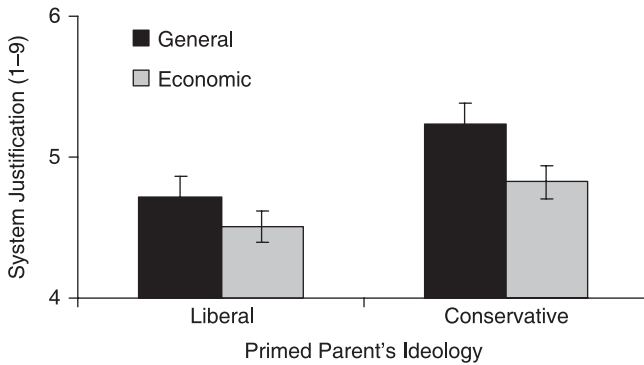


Figure 1 Effects of parental priming on participants' general and economic system justification scores.

Note: We conducted two analyses of covariance to examine the effect of the salient parent's political orientation on general and economic system justification scores, adjusting for the parent's gender (mother versus father) and participants' baseline general and economic system justification scores, respectively (obtained during the pretesting session). As shown here, participants who thought about interacting with their conservative parent scored higher on both the general and economic system justification scales than did participants who thought about their liberal parent, $F(1, 54) = 6.36$, $P = 0.01$, and $F(1, 52) = 3.85$, $P = 0.06$, respectively. Similar results were obtained when the two dependent variables were analyzed simultaneously in a repeated measures design.

presumably more (versus less) favorable toward the social system. These results provide preliminary but striking support for the notions that (i) shared reality needs motivate short-term fluctuations in ideological convictions, and (ii) political conservatism is indeed associated in many people's minds with the endorsement of more system-justifying attitudes, consistent with system justification theory (e.g., Jost et al., 2004a, forthcoming; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). In addition, results are broadly consistent with our suggestion that ideologies may provide 'prepackaged' units of shared reality. Knowing someone's political party says a great deal about a whole complex of beliefs they are likely to hold, including system justification beliefs – beliefs that are then ready to be used to create and regulate shared realities necessary to maintain the relationship.

Theory and Evidence Suggesting that Relational Motives Contribute to System-justifying Opinions in Particular

Thus far, we have suggested that motives to attain shared reality may underlie commitment to any ideology, whether system-justifying or system-subverting. When a friend, family member, or member of a valued group endorses a given set of social or political beliefs, shared reality is facilitated by partial (if not complete) adoption of that belief system, regardless of its specific content. The results of our experimental study involving college students with one liberal and one conservative parent

are consistent with the notion that relational motives can contribute to ideological shifts to the left or to the right. However, we do not know from this experiment alone whether it is easier to shift attitudes in one direction or the other. There are reasons to expect that the motivation to establish and maintain shared reality may disproportionately lead to conservative, system-justifying outcomes, much as epistemic and existential motives do (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a, b, 2007; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; see also Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007).

Specifically, we think that shared reality motives might lead disproportionately to conservative, system-justifying outcomes because of communicative advantages associated with conservative cognitive and rhetorical styles. When a shared worldview does not already exist, certain types of ideologies may be more easily shared than others. For example, shared reality may be more easily established when a perspective is simple (versus complex), unambiguous (versus nuanced), and consistent (versus dynamic). Because conservative rhetoric and ideology tends to be simpler, more consistent, and less ambiguous on average than liberal rhetoric and ideology (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a, b, 2007; Tetlock, 2007), relational motives for shared reality may generally elicit relatively conservative attitudes, much as epistemic and existential motives to reduce uncertainty and threat do. Although this possibility is highly speculative, future research would do well to address ideological asymmetries arising from relational (as well as epistemic and existential) motives.

Concluding Remarks

In contrast to the view of ideologies as belief structures that are stable, consistent, logically (as opposed to psychologically) coherent, and predicated on individualized perceptions of the world, ideologies may change considerably in response to the demands of both ongoing and temporary social relationships (see also Glassman & Karno, forthcoming; Jost, 2006, forthcoming). Ideological values and opinions are influenced by the individuals and groups that surround us, at least to some extent. We hasten to add, however, that just because ideological beliefs are motivated and subject to social influence processes, it does *not* mean that they are necessarily incorrect or invalid (see also Jost, 2006, for a discussion of this point). One may indeed be motivated to agree with others that the sky is blue at least in part to preserve social harmony, but who would argue that the presence of relational motivation entails that the sky is not blue? Nevertheless, shared reality theory implies that (i) multiple interpretations of reality may exist in different social settings or among different groups, and (ii) shared versions of reality will solidify interpersonal relationships.

Encountering a truly alternative (or countercultural) worldview may be threatening to relational motives, especially at first, because it calls into question the shared, meaningful set of assumptions upon which a web of

interpersonal relationships depend. The presence of an opposing worldview may, therefore, lead people to become extremely defensive about their ideologies; at that moment, they are protecting not only their own beliefs but also the integrity of the shared reality on which their valued relationships are based. This fact may help to explain the fierceness with which individuals and groups strive to avoid, repel, and even eradicate those who endorse competing ideological convictions (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998; Green, Abelson, & Garnett, 1999; Tindale, Munier, Wasserman, & Smith, 2002). Social conflicts such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the current tensions between the USA and much of the Muslim world may arise in part because of the threat that is inherent in the existence of competing worldviews and the motivation to defend and protect existing social networks, relationships, and the ideologies on which those relationships are predicated. In other words, the mere existence of an alternative worldview may challenge the shared set of beliefs that constitute the very foundation of people's connections to their family, friends, and social groups.

Shared reality theory, however, may be able to explain important deviations from system justification – that is, how and why people are at least occasionally motivated to band together to fight to change the societal status quo (cf. Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005). Although questions of how and when social change occurs are enormously complicated, we would predict that people are capable of devoting themselves to rebellious causes only when they have arrived at a shared definition of reality with important others as fundamentally unjust and oppressive. Thus, the relational benefits arising from the opportunity to experience and communicate intimacy, support, and loyalty to one's fellow agitators may – at least in exceptional circumstances – outweigh the tremendous epistemic and existential costs associated with any sustained revolutionary impulse or effort.

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