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On objects and actions:

Situating self-objectification in a system justification context

Rachel M. Calogero

University of Kent, Canterbury

**The final, definitive version of this paper has been published in:**

Calogero, R.M. (2013). On objects and actions: Situating self-objectification in a system justification context. In S. Gervais (Ed.), *Nebraska Motivation Symposium: Vol. 60. Perspectives on motivation* (pp. 97-126). NY: Springer.

**See:** <http://www.springer.com/psychology/personality+%26+social+psychology/book/978-1-4614-6958-2>

Please address all correspondence to:

Rachel M. Calogero  
School of Psychology  
University of Kent  
Keynes College  
Canterbury, CT2 7NP  
e-mail: R.Calogero@kent.ac.uk

### **Abstract**

Integrating objectification and system justification perspectives, this chapter offers a conception of self-objectification as a dominant cultural lens through which women come to view themselves that garners their compliance in the sexist status quo. This chapter begins with an overview of objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) and system justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994). Then, an integration of the two perspectives is presented that situates self-objectification in a system justification context, extending the scope of impact of self-objectification beyond the domains of body image and mental health. Empirical evidence is reviewed to demonstrate the direct and indirect ways that self-objectification works as a system-justifying device for many women. For example, as a self-perspective that increases in response to benevolently sexist ideology or as a potential obstacle to taking collective action on behalf of women, self-objectification functions as a motivational and ideological force that rationalizes and legitimizes a gender role hierarchy. This developing program of research attempts to deepen our understanding of self-objectification and the broader system-level implications of this self-perspective. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential next steps and a call for continued scientific inquiry into the broader functions of self-objectification.

Keywords: Self-objectification - System justification - Social motivation - Gender inequality - Collective action - Sexist ideology - Gender role - Status quo - Sexual objectification - Social justice

**On objects and actions:****Situating self-objectification in a system justification context**

Why can women know that this—life as we have known it—is not all, not enough, not ours, not just? Now, why don't all women?

- Catharine MacKinnon (1989, p. 115)

The beauty practices that women engage in, and which men find so exciting, are those of political subordinates... The fact that some women say that they take pleasure in the practices is not inconsistent with their role in the subordination of women.

- Sheila Jeffreys (2005, p. 26-27)

The pervasive tendency to equate girls and women with their bodies within westernized cultural contexts has been linked to a suite of adverse outcomes for girls and women (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008). According to the United Nations (1995), a cultural practice is considered harmful to women if the practice: (1) is harmful to the health of girls and women, (2) arises from material power differences between the sexes, (3) is for the benefit of men, (4) creates stereotypes which thwart the opportunities of girls and women, and (5) is justified by tradition. Based on these criteria, I propose that self-objectification—and the system of sexual objectification that perpetuates it—limits the full potential of individual girls and women and constitutes a cultural practice that is harmful to them. The central aim of the present chapter is to describe an integrative social psychological framework that further articulates how this harm might be exacted.

This integrative framework draws on two main theoretical perspectives to situate self-objectification in a system justification context. This chapter begins with an overview of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), with a focus on delineating the construct of self-objectification and the consequences associated with it. An overview of system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) follows, with a focus on the motivation to justify the status quo and comply with it. Then, an integration of the two perspectives is presented that situates self-objectification in a system justification context. This developing program of research attempts to deepen our understanding of self-objectification and the broader system-level implications of this self-perspective. Throughout this section, empirical evidence is presented that provides direct and indirect support for this integrative framework. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential next steps and a call for continued scientific inquiry into the broader functions of self-objectification.

### **Objectification Theory: An Overview**

#### **Sexual Objectification**

Onesies for infant girls read: “Pretty like Mommy.” Onesies for infant boys read: “Bikini Inspector.” T-shirts for young girls read: “Future porn star.” T-shirts for young boys read: “Lock up your daughters.” T-shirts for adult women read: “Who needs brains when you have these?” T-shirts for adult men read: “Some call it stalking, I call it love.” These clothing products are real and reflect a deeply entrenched cultural view of girls and women as sex objects in the service of boys and men. Although lay reactions to these t-shirts range from “funny” and “cute” to “harmless” and “just get it over it,” the empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that the content of these messages is cause for concern. Scholars have documented that when sexually objectified, women are stripped of agency and competence (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2011;

Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), dehumanized (Loughnan et al., 2010), and more likely the targets of sexual aggression (Donnerstein & Hallam, 1978; Lanis & Covell, 1995; Rudman & Borgida, 1995; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). At a basic cognitive level, both men and women demonstrate a tendency to recognize and perceive sexualized women more as objects, whereas they perceive sexualized men more as persons (Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012).

Moreover, under objectifying conditions, women behave with less social agency (Bryant, 1993; Calogero, in press; Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2010), report more negative self-evaluations (Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008), and perform worse on concurrent cognitive tasks (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2011). This section provides a concrete definition of sexual objectification and a summary of the most common ways it is enacted in westernized cultural contexts.

To objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object—which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties (Nussbaum, 1995). A person is made into a sexual object when the objectification serves a sexual purpose or function. Sexual objectification is characterized by the following: “A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her. In this definition, then, the prostitute would be a victim of sexual objectification, as would the *Playboy* bunny, the female breeder, and the bathing beauty” (Bartky, 1990, p. 26). This fragmentation of women into collections of sexual parts and functions manifests in varying degrees of force from sexualized gazing and visual inspection to sexual violence and rape. Typical experiences and events that constitute sexual objectification include

gazing or checking out women's bodies, whistling or honking at women, taking unsolicited photographs of women's bodies, sexual commentary directed toward women, sexual jokes, sexualized media imagery or pornography, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. Although some of these experiences are more common than others, their recurrence in the lives of women and men implies that both genders are reminded (even if only momentarily) that women are viewed as objects. These forms of sexual objectification do not occur under women's control and are often viewed as permissible (Brownmiller, 1975; Henley, 1977; MacKinnon, 1989; World Health Organization, 2005). Collectively, these experiences and practices constitute the "objectifying cultural milieu" in which girls and women are socialized.

Objectification theory starts from the well-established premise that cultural practices of sexually objectifying women are pervasive in westernized societies and create multiple opportunities for public attention to be drawn to the female body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In most westernized societies, it is normative for women's bodies to be ogled, sexualized, commented on, harassed, and violated. As MacKinnon (1989) states, "All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water" (p. 149). Objectification theory organizes the different ways in which women's bodies are routinely sexually objectified more broadly into interpersonal encounters and media encounters, which are summarized below.

Interpersonal encounters include interactions with familiar others (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, employers, acquaintances) or with strangers, and begin early in the socialization process. Female children, adolescent girls, and adult women report exposure to sexually degrading jokes, being sexually harassed, being called sexual names, having body parts ogled, and being the target of unwanted sexual advances to a significantly greater degree than boys and men (Gardner, 1980; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Kozee, Tylka, Augustus-

Horvath, & Denchik, 2007; Macmillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000; Moradi, Dirks, & Matteson, 2005; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Puwar, 2004; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Media encounters include the depiction of women as primarily bodies and body parts in magazines, advertisements, TV programming, film, music lyrics and videos, and internet and social networking sites (for reviews, APA, 2007; Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). A quick glance at the stable of magazine covers at the grocery counter confirms the extent of this form of sexual objectification.

In sum, the empirical evidence substantiates our everyday observations that girls and women are routinely targeted for sexually objectifying treatment in their day-to-day lives. A cultural climate where such intense and persistent scrutiny of the female body is accepted and reinforced does not exist without consequence for the girls and women who live in it. Indeed, the purpose of objectification theory was not to elucidate the causes of the sexual objectification of women, but rather to articulate a set of consequences for girls and women that may directly stem from it. In the next section, these consequences are described.

### **Self-Objectification**

In the objectification theory framework, *self-objectification* is identified as the primary psychological consequence for girls and women of living in an objectifying cultural milieu (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997): “We posit that in a culture that objectifies the female body, whatever girls and women do, the potential always exists for their thoughts and actions to be interrupted by images of how their bodies appear” (p. 180). According to this theory, repetitive and systematic encounters of being sexually objectified encourage girls and women to adopt an observer’s gaze, or third person perspective, on their selves. This introjection of an objectifying gaze directs women to view their bodies primarily in terms of their value and attractiveness to

others, rather than on their value and function for the self. Consistent with Kaschak's reasoning (1992), "The body becomes a product to be manipulated and exhibited to its best advantage rather than a living apparatus to be developed and experienced fully" (p.112).

Self-objectification is described as a peculiar form of self-consciousness, whereby a person views the body as belonging "less to them and more to others" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 193). The objectifying lens that women adopt and turn inward is not gender neutral. Gender undeniably acts as a pervasive organizer of culture, especially in cultures saturated with heterosexuality (Horney, 1937; Henley, 1977; Lerner, 1983). Similarly, the sexually objectifying gaze is organized along gender lines.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life...Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it (Berger, 1972, p. 40).

Berger is one of several scholars who recognized that it is the culturally dominant heterosexist male gaze which women come to adopt as their own. "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky, 1990, p.72).

It is useful at this point to address an often posed objection to this proposition that it is the male gaze specifically which is problematic. What about women who sexually objectify other women? Although there is little empirical research on this dynamic (see Goldenberg, this

volume), objectification theory does not deny that women sexually objectify each other. What the theory does argue is that all women in westernized societies are socialized within the same patriarchal framework which measures women's value in relation to their fulfilment of the role of sex object for men. Therefore, all women learn what the standards for comparison and evaluation are when it comes to appearance. If women have adopted the objectifying male gaze as their own, it seems likely women would objectify each other (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005), since both men and women come to view women's bodies through the same lens. In short, women may be objectifying other women, but they do so through the eyes of men.

We are often told that "women dress for other women." There is some truth in this: Who else but someone engaged in a project similar to my own can appreciate the panache with which I bring it off? But women know for whom this game is played: They know that a pretty young woman is likelier to become a flight attendant than a plain one and that a well-preserved older woman has a better chance of holding onto her husband than one who has "let herself go." (Bartky, 1990, p. 72).

Although women do objectify other women, it is difficult to argue that the female gaze is a parallel practice to the male gaze because of the different power dynamics in place. Further, there is empirical evidence to demonstrate that the male gaze is a more insidious and significant contributor to women's self-objectification than the female gaze (Calogero, 2004; Saguy et al., 2010).

Objectification theory proposes that women will vary in the degree to which they self-objectify, but most women will experience self-objectification in one of two forms. Many women will experience some degree of state self-objectification in situations where attention has been called to their bodies, such as receiving catcalls, catching someone staring at their breasts,

or where their gender becomes a salient feature of the immediate social context. For some women, however, this objectified lens becomes engaged virtually all of the time, whether they find themselves in public or private settings. This more pervasive and chronic view of the self as an object is referred to as trait self-objectification. Whether engaged as trait or state, self-objectification is associated with a number of adverse consequences for women.

### **Consequences of Self-Objectification**

In the objectification theory framework, self-objectification is the primary psychological mechanism that accounts for the link between women's experiences of sexual objectification at the cultural level and their bodily and subjective well being at the individual level. Self-objectification kicks off a chain of psychological events that are known to occur at a disproportionately higher rate among girls and women. Although some of the proposed relationships within objectification theory require more research and clarification, considerable empirical support has been garnered for most of the propositions described below (Calogero et al., 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Tiggemann, 2011; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012).

Specifically, self-objectification creates more opportunities for girls and women to experience a particular collection of negative subjective outcomes, including body shame, appearance anxiety, disrupted attention or flow, and diminished awareness of internal bodily states (e.g., satiety, hunger, fatigue, emotions). These subjective experiences serve as the intermediate variables that link self-objectification to three specific mental health outcomes, which include depressed mood (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004), disordered eating (Calogero, Davis, & Thompson, 2005; Tylka & Hill, 2004; Tylka & Sabik, 2010), and sexual dysfunction (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008). Thus, self-objectification indirectly contributes to greater depression, eating disorders, and sexual

dysfunction in women by generating recurrent shame and anxiety, disrupting attention that could be directed toward pleasurable and rewarding activities, and reducing sensitivity to internal bodily cues.

A considerable body of evidence has also linked self-objectification to a range of other negative intrapersonal and behavioural outcomes, well beyond those originally proposed by objectification theory. The following is a list (not exhaustive) of other consequences empirically associated with self-objectification: lower intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003); lower self-esteem (Choma et al., 2010); less life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008); diminished cognitive performance (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gay & Castano, 2010; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006); diminished physical performance (Fredrickson & Harrison, 2005); more negative attitudes toward breastfeeding (Johnston-Robledo, Fricker, & Pasek, 2007) and reproductive functioning (Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt, & Wilcox-Constantine, 2007; Roberts, 2004); greater fear and perceived risk of rape (Fairchild & Rudman, 2007); greater hostility toward other women (Loya, Cowan, & Walters, 2006); more self-injury (Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005); more substance abuse (Carr & Szymanski, 2011; Harell, Fredrickson, Pomerleau, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006); decreased use of sexual protection (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006); more dysfunctional exercise (Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003); and more support for cosmetic surgery (Calogero, Pina, Park, & Rahemtulla, 2010; Calogero, Pina, & Sutton, 2013).

In sum, self-objectification is defined as the adoption of a third person perspective (i.e., male gaze) on the self, whereby girls and women come to place greater value on how they look to others rather than on how they feel or what their bodies can do (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This particular self-perspective manifests as a chronic ‘policing’ of the body (self-surveillance)

to manage and control appearance in anticipation of being evaluated by others. Self-objectification is unlikely to be consciously chosen, but it does reflect a certain degree of agency in navigating encounters of sexual objectification. This self-perspective allows women to anticipate, and thus exert some control over, how they will be viewed and treated by others and is not simply an indicator of narcissism, vanity, or body dissatisfaction. This chapter now turns to a brief overview of system justification theory before considering self-objectification within a system-justifying context.

### **System Justification Theory: An Overview**

#### **System Justification Motivation**

System justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) attempts to explain why people are more likely to comply with the societal status quo instead of pushing for social change and progress. In this theory, systems can be concrete (e.g., families, institutions, organizations, governments) or abstract (e.g., prescriptive gender stereotypes, political ideologies). In any of these types of systems, individuals and groups are hierarchically structured and situated in such a way as to differentiate them from each other on the basis of status, distribution of resources, power in decision-making, and division of social roles (Blasi & Jost, 2006). The theory posits that people are generally motivated (often nonconsciously) to defend, bolster, and rationalize the prevailing social, economic, and political systems that affect them—that is, to perceive the status quo as fair, legitimate, natural, and just (Jost & Burgess, 2002; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermendi, & Mosso, 2005; Jost, Pelham, & Carvalho, 2002). System justification is a motive that functions to satisfy epistemic, existential, and relational needs (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). In these ways, system justification acts as a palliative (at least in the short-term) because it reduces anxiety,

guilt, moral outrage, uncertainty, and makes people feel better about their place in society (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay et al., 2008; Napier & Jost, 2008).

### **System-Justifying Contexts and Devices**

Of course, not everyone defends every aspect of the status quo all the time, but they do tend to defend it more often than is actually warranted (Jost et al., 2004). The degree to which people are motivated to justify aspects of the system varies as a function of individual differences (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005) and situational factors—namely under conditions of system threat, system dependence, system inescapability, and low personal control (Kay & Friesen, 2011). Further, people are able to justify the systems to which they belong in a variety of ways (Bem & Bem, 1970; Jost, Pelham, et al, 2002; Jost, Pietrzak, Liviatan, Mandisodza, & Napier, 2008). Scholars have identified a number of culturally dominant ideologies and stereotypes that readily provide people with the content necessary to rationalize the societal status quo, such as fair market ideology (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003), political conservatism (Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003), social dominance orientation (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), denial of system failure (Feyinga, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010), essentialist beliefs (Rangel & Keller, 2011), meritocratic beliefs (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2009), victim-blaming attributions (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Stahl, Eek, & Kazemi, 2010), complementary stereotyping (Kay & Jost, 2003), self-stereotyping (Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011), benevolently sexist ideology (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Kay, 2005; Sibley, Overall, & Duckitt, 2007), and committed relationship ideology (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011). Insofar as the content of these beliefs and stereotypes legitimize inequities in the

prevailing systems, the activation and endorsement of such content leads people to provide greater support for the way things are.

### **System Justification Sustains Disadvantage**

One striking pattern observed in the system justification literature, and indeed what strikes at the very heart of system justification theory, is that the people who are most disadvantaged and disenfranchised by the societal status quo still provide support for it (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). Although most people will reject overtly prejudicial treatment, more subtle ideologies that justify group inequality (like those listed above) can affect the attitudes and behaviors of disadvantaged group members in ways that lead them to accept and maintain their disadvantaged status (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). It is important to point out that lower status groups may not always support the status quo to a greater degree than higher status groups. In fact, it is plausible that in some contexts, it would be the higher status groups who are more motivated to justify the system in order to maintain the advantages it affords them. However, it is when lower status groups provide any defense of a system that is clearly at odds with their interests and disadvantages them that presents the most intriguing psychological puzzle.

For the purposes of this chapter, let us take the justification of gender inequality as one example. Compared to men, women continue to earn less money, are underrepresented in government and decision-making positions, are significantly more often the victims of intimate partner violence and rape, have less access to education, complete the bulk of all domestic labor, and have fewer legal rights and protections overall—to date, no country has achieved full gender equality (United Nations, 1995, 2000). Yet, on the whole, women are not expressing outrage over these inequities and injustices. Since these inequalities generally favor men's interests, it is not too surprising that men are less engaged in protest. But why not women?

From a system justification perspective, women may be more likely to support the gender status quo because they are motivated to view existing gender relations as fair, just, and inevitable (Jost & van der Toorn, 2011). In particular, research has demonstrated that exposure to complementary stereotypes is an especially potent way to rationalize social inequalities, including the imbalance between women and men (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Jost & Kay, 2005). Complementary stereotypes highlight the positive qualities and strengths of lower status groups relative to higher status groups and thereby create a more balanced view of the status quo. For example, people are more likely to rationalize inequalities when exposed to complementary stereotypes such as “poor but happy” and “rich but miserable” (Kay & Jost, 2003). Pointing out the positive traits and characteristics enjoyed by the lower status group (and/or the negative traits attached to the higher status group) helps to rationalize the greater inequities produced by this imbalance in social standing and power. Complementary stereotypes for gender work similarly. For example, by reframing traditional gender roles and the division of labor within the family as a reflection of women’s inherent strengths and men’s inherent weaknesses, gender differences in society are legitimized (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Kay, 2005; Rudman & Glick, 2008). Indeed, in a series of studies, Jost and Kay found that simply reminding people about prevalent sexist beliefs via these complementary (or benevolent) stereotypes increased women’s (but not men’s) support for the gender status quo and the social system as a whole.

### **Implications of System Justification**

In light of both the observational and empirical evidence, system justification theorists are not especially optimistic about social change—at least not yet (cf., Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002; Wakslak et al., 2007). Even when personal experience or scientific research provides clear evidence for the negative impact of an unequal social system, people continue to defend the way

things are instead of demanding change (Jost & van der Toorn, 2011). Insofar as system justification helps to render disconcerting and uncomfortable social problems acceptable, system justification thwarts progress and true equality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). It is useful to highlight a few key examples of the ways in which system justification is enacted among lower status group members and the implications for social change.

In a sample of school-aged children who varied in social status in Bolivia (a country with one of the highest poverty rates in the world), it was the lower status Indigenous children who provided the greatest support for the existing government (run by a high status group member), and not the higher status Spanish children (Henry & Saul, 2006). Specifically, in comparison with the higher status children, the lower status children believed that political dissent should be suppressed, the government adequately responds to the needs of the people, and they felt less alienated by the government. These findings highlight the deeply troubling entrenchment of system-justifying beliefs among the youngest members of a society: “Even in one of the poorest countries in the world, we see signs of greater support among the lower status indigenous children for the very governmental system that serves to maintain their lower status” (Henry & Saul, 2006, p. 373).

System-justifying biases have also been identified among the evacuees of Katrina. In their analysis of Hurricane Katrina, Napier et al. (2006) explained that evacuees spread false claims of rampant violence in New Orleans in the aftermath of the hurricane in order to rationalize and justify their own government’s failure to rescue them. By making internal attributions (as opposed to external attributions) for their unfortunate circumstances, the disadvantaged group was able to make right psychologically the social wrongs of the system by coming to believe they deserved to be left in these conditions—a system-justifying tendency

known as the depressed entitlement effect (Major, 1994). By blaming themselves, the evacuees restored legitimacy to the system, despite the costs of this misattributed accountability to the rebuilding and recovery efforts that would directly improve the lives of the individuals and groups involved.

The depressed entitlement effect has been conceptualized as an internalized sense of inferiority. The power of this effect has been observed most often among U.S. women. Specifically, women demonstrate a tendency to pay themselves less than men do for similar work (Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Hogue & Yoder, 2003; Jost, 1997; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984; Major, 1994). For example, in a simple thought-listing task, women paid themselves significantly less than men for their contributions, indicating that they judged their own work to be less valuable than the men did (Jost, 1997). The depressed entitlement effect offers one explanation for the general lack of protest among women against the marked gender pay gap (American Association of University Women, 2012) or their minority representation in government (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012). In this case, it is not the system that favourably distributes wealth to men that women call into question. Instead, many women tend to endorse subtle system-justifying beliefs, such as “I deserve less” or “I don’t value material rewards,” which serve to justify and preserve the gross gender inequalities in pay and representation.

In sum, empirical evidence supports the main tenet of system justification theory: People tend to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo, even when it goes against their own interests and maintains their disadvantaged status. Drawing from this theoretical perspective and objectification theory, this chapter formulates an integrative framework whereby self-objectification is considered to be another route to system justification. This integrative

perspective moves beyond prior research under the umbrella of objectification theory, broadening the scope of impact of self-objectification on women's lives and social justice.

### **Self-Objectification and System Justification: An Integrative Framework**

As illustrated above, self-objectification is severely detrimental to women both individually and collectively—so why do they continue to invest in it? According to system justification theory, “members of disadvantaged groups not only pretend to accept their station in life, but actually do see themselves through the dominant cultural lens” (Jost et al., 2002, p. 589; see also Allport, 1954). Integrating objectification and system justification perspectives, this chapter offers a conception of self-objectification as a dominant cultural lens through which women come to view themselves that garners their compliance in the sexist status quo. As women are the most obviously disadvantaged within the gender status quo and objectifying cultural milieu, system justification theorists would argue that women have the most to justify and rationalize, and therefore they will often provide strong ideological support for it (Jost & Kay, 2005; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003).

This integrative perspective conceives of sexual objectification as not merely the perpetration of individual acts or as simply “bad” for women (see Fischer, Bettendorf, & Wang, 2011), but as a system—a structured set of social arrangements that prescribe particular and interdependent roles and behaviors to men and women that reinforce the gender hierarchy. Women are positioned in specific ways in this system relative to men that reflect their subordinate and disadvantaged status. It is the prerogative of the male sex to observe, evaluate, and use the female body for their own purposes, and “...no woman can choose to opt out of this system” (Kaschak, 1992, p. 68). Men are positioned to judge and evaluate women as decorative and sexual objects. Beyond a potentially more benign communication of sexual interest, when

men sexually objectify women, they signal women's inferior and subordinate status. To position women as objects, as the targets of the evaluation, is less threatening to men and effectively disarms women (Bartky, 1990; Henley, 1977). This system of sexual objectification is seamlessly woven into the wider social landscape that women traverse every day.

Under these social conditions, women come to learn that their social value is highly dependent on the degree to which they complement and compliment men through their availability for sexual objectification. Whereas sexual objectification serves as an external indicator of women's subordinate status, the resultant self-objectification signals a deeply entrenched personal sense of inferiority in the absence of sexual objectification. Many girls and women come to experience male attention and approval as most rewarding to their self-esteem and conducive to social success compared to other pursuits (e.g., academic, vocational, political). In these ways, self-objectification is considered to be a form of internalized social control:

That is, socialization of subordinates in a dominant culture achieves a kind of colonization of the mind that ensures self-imposed powerlessness. So too socialization of girls and women in a sexually objectifying culture achieves self-objectification – a perspective on oneself as an object to be looked at and evaluated. (Roberts, 2002, p. 326).

Consistent with these accounts, the integrative framework put forward here suggests that self-objectification in women is a self-perspective that is consonant with their own oppression. Self-objectification exacts serious costs to women's individual and collective well-being, yet reinforces the system of sexual objectification and the gender status quo by garnering women's support for it. When women self-objectify, they are motivated to uphold a system of gender relations that disproportionately privileges the interests of men and fosters gender inequality. Clearly, though, the motivation, to accept the system is in conflict with the motivation to

maximize the interests of the self and group for women. System justification theory predicts that this internal conflict between the self, group, and system motives is associated with negative well-being (Jost et al., 2000; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Indeed, the wide array of adverse outcomes associated with self-objectification described above supports this idea. In line with system justification theory, self-objectification is negatively associated with self-esteem (Mercurio & Landry, 2008), positively associated with hostility toward other women (or low ingroup favoritism; Loya et al., 2006), and negatively associated with long-term psychological well-being as demonstrated by lower life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008) and increased mental health risks (Tiggemann, 2011).

### **Self-Objectification: Power or Palliative?**

Despite the negative consequences, some women report pleasure and feel a sense of power from being positively evaluated in sexually objectifying environments (Moffitt & Szymanski, 2011). Research demonstrates that women who self-objectify report less negative mood (Fea & Brannon, 2006; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008) as well as boosts to self-esteem and well-being (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Goldenberg, Cooper, Heflick, Routledge, & Arndt, 2011) when sexually objectified. Indeed, although women are more dependent on men for financial support and protection, men are more dependent on women in the realm of intimate and sexual relations, allowing women to wield some power in heterosexual relationships (Rudman & Glick, 2008). Women who self-objectify are also more likely to report that they enjoy being sexually objectified (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011) and engage in self-sexualizing behaviors (Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). The following quote by a female executive at Sony Pictures to Ariel Levy during the preparation of Levy's book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, speaks directly to the well-established notion that physical attractiveness serves

as social currency for women (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Unger, 1979).

My best mentors and teachers have always been men. Why? Because I have great legs, great tits, and a huge smile that God gave to me. Because I want to make my first million before the age of thirty-five. So of course I am a female chauvinist pig. Do you think those male mentors wanted me telling them how to better their careers, marketing departments, increase demographics? Hell no. They wanted to play in my secret garden. But I applied the Chanel war paint, pried the door open with my Gucci heels, worked, struggled and climbed the ladder. And made a difference!! And I did it all in a short Prada suit. (2005, p.102).

Clearly, some women feel quite powerful by “controlling” or “choosing” their sexualized appearance to capture the attention of men (Kipnis & Reader, 1997; Levy, 2005; Nowatzki & Morry, 2009). Yet, there is reason to be skeptical of the empowerment veneer. First, the fact that some women report pleasure through their own bodily objectification is not surprising when we consider that the objectified lens through which they come to view themselves emphasizes their value to men as sex object. When their appearance elicits attention and approval from men, many women view it as flattering or validating, and therefore advantageous to themselves and their ingroup (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009) and prefer to interact more with men who sexually objectified them (Gervais et al., 2011). However, it is important to point out that even when women feel good about compliments on their appearance these effects seem to be short-lived. Tiggemann and Boundy (2008) found that although negative mood decreased after an appearance compliment among high self-objectifying women, body shame increased. Counter to what we might intuit, Calogero, Herbozo, and Thompson (2009) demonstrated that appearance

compliments (which felt good to women, especially those related to weight and shape) still predicted higher body dissatisfaction and self-surveillance in women. Far from bolstering women's power, the relationship between self-objectification and disordered eating appears to be exacerbated for women who report that they enjoy sexualizing attention and treatment (Liss et al., 2011). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that self-objectification might also constrain the physical strength and power of girls and women (Fredrickson & Harrison, 2005; Young, 1990).

Second, the fact that there are rewards built into the system of sexual objectification for women is well-known, insofar as women's social, economic, and legal outcomes hinge upon their physical appearance to a much greater degree than men's do (Bartky, 1990; Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Jeffreys, 2005; Wolf, 1994). The desirability of these rewards make sexual and self-objectification more insidious and it is not surprising that women's beliefs and behaviors often support and reinforce the objectification of women. However, does compliance with the system and the garnering of rewards for doing so constitute empowerment? Does the fact that women have to climb the ladder in Gucci heels reflect tangible power or mark them as different and serve as a decorative handicap? If women's outcomes are dependent on men's responses to their appearance and sexual appeal, then do women actually hold the power? One might argue that such outcome-dependency on men does not empower women collectively, but rather creates insecure positions of power for some women and prevents other women from ever gaining access at all.

What self-objectification appears to do is help make the system more palatable for women (Jost, 1995), especially under conditions of greater epistemic (Calogero & Jost, 2011), existential (Goldenberg et al., 2011), and relational (Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworski, 2011)

stress. Investment in appearance as the means to self-worth and social status brings the self in line with the system, which motivates women to work harder in the service of that system. It stands to reason that if women come to rely on their appearance for power and status, they would be less likely to challenge the status quo that produces those power arrangements, perhaps because they view the arrangements as fair and just. Ultimately, this investment does not elevate women's status relative to men in part because the self-objectification remains in the service of a patriarchal system. Thus, although not good for women in the long run, self-objectification serves as a palliative in the short-term by legitimizing and naturalizing women's lower social standing in the gender hierarchy.

### **Empirical Evidence for an Integrative Framework**

Most of the prior research on self-objectification situates this self-perspective within the context of specific interpersonal or media encounters (Moradi, this volume), but does not address the ideological concomitants of self-objectification or the possibility that self-objectification is part of a broader pattern of system-justifying beliefs and behavior. If self-objectification is another route to system justification, then self-objectification should be activated by broader situational antecedents that convey information about culturally prescribed gender roles and behaviors. Insofar as these cultural prescriptions and ideologies justify the status of gender relations in society and flatter women into conforming to traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jackman, 1994; Jost & Kay, 2005), self-objectification should increase in response to those ideologies. Further, once in place, self-objectification may help to preserve the status quo by undermining social change. Investigating the direct link between self-objectification and collective action is a stronger test of objectification theory, insofar as it suggests that self-objectification does not stem merely from appearance evaluations, but that self-objectification is

actually situated within a more extensive ideological network that perpetuates gender inequality (Bem & Bem, 1970; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Kay, 2005). In this section, I describe a series of studies that begin to provide evidence for this theorizing.

### **Self-Objectification and Sexist Ideologies**

Sexist ideologies have been causally related to the perpetuation and entrenchment of systemic gender inequality (Brandt, 2011). Sexist ideology seems to exist in two main flavors. Hostile sexism refers to an openly antagonistic attitude toward women, whereas benevolent sexism refers to a subjectively positive orientation toward women that casts “women as wonderful but fragile creatures who ought to be protected and provided for by men” (Glick et al., 2004, p. 715; see also Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991). Both types of sexism convey information about the division of structural power between the sexes by portraying women as weaker than men and more suitable for traditional domestic roles. Although most people reject hostile forms of sexism (and prejudice more generally), women are less likely to recognize and challenge benevolent sexism as a form of sexism (Barreto & Ellmers, 2005; Jackman, 1994; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Benevolent sexism emphasizes those domains and qualities where women have unique strengths and men depend on them (Glick & Fiske, 1996), thereby functioning as an ideology that legitimizes women’s subordinate status (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Jost & Kay, 2005). Thus, unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism is a subtle and insidious “sweet persuasion” (Jackman, 1994) that disarms women and gains their compliance with the gender status quo (Glick et al., 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Across three experiments, my colleague and I (Calogero & Jost, 2011) subtly primed sexist ideology in participants by having them read a short set of statements that varied in the type of sexist content they contained (*benevolently* sexist statements only, *hostile* sexist

statements only, *complementary* sexist statements—a combination of hostile and benevolent items, or *no* sexist statements). This methodology followed the priming procedure employed by Jost and Kay (2005). In the first experiment, we examined whether exposure to these varying types of sexist ideology would impact self-objectification. We examined three specific objectification theory variables: trait self-objectification, self-surveillance, and body shame. Trait self-objectification was operationalized as the extent to which people value observable physical attributes (e.g., weight) over non-observable physical attributes (e.g., strength) and measured with the *Self-Objectification Questionnaire* (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Self-surveillance was operationalized as the extent to which people engage in chronic body monitoring and self-policing of their appearance and measured with the Surveillance subscale of the *Objectified Body Consciousness Scale* (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Body shame was operationalized as the extent to which people feel bad and ashamed of their appearance when they perceive themselves to fall short of cultural appearance ideals and measured with the Body Shame subscale of the *Objectified Body Consciousness Scale* (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The findings demonstrated that when women and men were exposed to benevolent and complementary sexist stereotypes (compared to hostile or no stereotypes), only the women responded with increased shifts in self-surveillance and body shame. That is, only women self-objectified more in response to reminders about traditional feminine roles in the gender status quo. No significant differences were demonstrated for the trait self-objectification measure, which may have been due to the fact that this scale assesses a more entrenched self view that would be less susceptible to modification by a single exposure to subtle sexist cues.

In the second experiment, we replicated these effects for self-surveillance and body shame, and also demonstrated that exposure to legitimizing sexist ideology (i.e., benevolent and

complementary sexism) led to increased appearance management among women only. For example, when asked what they planned to do over the next week, women were more likely to report behaviors related to dieting, tanning, and hair and nail grooming as part of their weekly intentions compared to men, but only under conditions of benevolent and complementary sexism. The relationship between exposure to sexist ideology and appearance management was mediated by self-surveillance and body shame. The results of this study further suggest that self-objectification processes and appearance management are situated within a wider ideological network that reinforces sexist prescriptions for behavior.

In the third experiment, we again replicated the effects for self-surveillance and body shame. In addition, we examined whether these effects were magnified for those women and men with greater epistemic needs. Specifically, we measured individual differences in the need for cognitive closure using the *Need for Cognitive Closure Scale* (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) as a potential moderator of the observed patterns between sexist ideology and self-objectification. According to Kruglanski's (1989, 2006) lay epistemic theory, the need to avoid or attain cognitive closure is a fundamental motive that influences the way in which people interpret and respond to information in their social environments, and whether or not they tend to uphold the status quo (e.g., Jost, Glaser et al., 2003; Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon, 1999). We demonstrated that the effects of sexist ideology on self-objectification were magnified for those women and men with a higher need for cognitive closure. Specifically, under conditions of benevolent and complementary sexism, women with a higher need for closure reported significantly more self-objectification compared to women with a lower need for closure, and all men. Interestingly, men with a higher need for closure reported significantly less self-objectification than men with a lower need for closure under conditions of complementary sexism. In line with system

justification theory, we found that those participants with greater epistemic needs for certainty and structure responded the strongest to the legitimizing sexist content, either bringing themselves more in line with feminine norms (i.e., the women by self-objectifying) or distancing themselves from them (i.e., the men by not self-objectifying).

Independent research labs have corroborated these general patterns. For example, Shepherd et al. (2011) manipulated whether female participants witnessed a specific type of benevolently sexist act or not (i.e., male confederate offering and taking it upon himself to carry a heavy box for a female confederate). The particular phrase employed in this research, “I’ll get that for you,” communicates the chivalrous and paternalistic attitude entrenched in benevolently sexist ideology that women may find especially seductive (Cikara, Lee, Fiske, & Glick, 2009), although it simultaneously communicates and activates the threat of incompetence (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2010). Indeed, Shepherd et al. found that women who witnessed an act of benevolent sexism reported higher levels of self-surveillance and body shame compared to women who did not.

Taken together, we have evidence for the idea that the lens of self-objectification can be activated with exposure to sexist ideology. Legitimizing sexist stereotypes effectively remind women of their complementary (and subordinate) status to men, painting a positive representation of women as the beloved object of men’s protection and affections. It is under these conditions that self-objectification manifests, directing women’s attention toward appearance and gendered self-perceptions and reinforcing the gender status quo.

### **Self-Objectification and Collective Action**

Of particular interest in light of the integrative perspective put forward here is the possibility that self-objectification preserves the status quo by undermining women’s motivation

to engage in social action that would challenge gender inequalities. Research demonstrates that system-justifying beliefs, such as endorsement of social hierarchies as natural and desired, are linked to less support for women's rights (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Further, benevolently sexist ideologies have been linked to women's acceptance of group-based gender inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jackman, 1994) and they undermine women's collective action (Becker & Wright, 2011). Building on this prior work and the findings of Calogero and Jost (2011), it was proposed that adopting an objectified view of the self may represent another way in which system-justifying beliefs interfere with taking the collective action necessary to improve social conditions and the social standing of women as a whole. Across two studies, I tested directly whether self-objectification would lead women to provide more ideological and behavioral support for the gender status quo (Calogero, 2013).

In the first study, a survey methodology was employed to test the proposed relationships. Similar to the studies described above, trait self-objectification was measured with the *Self-Objectification Questionnaire* (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Gender-specific system justification was operationalized as support for the gender status quo and measured with the gender-specific *System Justification Scale* (Jost & Kay, 2005). Collective action was operationalized as engagement in eight different acts of gender-based social activism over the last six months (Stake, Roades, Rose, Ellis, & West, 1994). Types of activism included: *discussed* issues related to gender equality with friends or colleagues in person or online (e.g., email, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc.); *attended* meetings, conferences, or workshops on gender equality issues; *signed* a petition (in person or online) in support of women's rights and gender equality; *circulated* a petition (in person or online) related to a women's rights cause and/or gender equality; *handed out* flyers related to women's rights issues and gender equality; *attended* demonstrations, protests,

or rallies related to women's rights and gender equality; *spent time working for* women's rights campaigns (e.g., fundraising); *acted as* a spokesperson for a particular gender equality issue.

In the second study, self-objectification was again tested in relation to the same set of variables. This time, however, self-objectification was manipulated instead of measured as an individual difference variable. State self-objectification was activated (or not) by randomly assigning women to write about a time when they had been sexually objectified or what they would do if they won the shopping voucher in the research study raffle (control group). The other modification in this study was that the women were asked about their intentions to engage in gender-based social activism over the next six months.

In both studies, self-objectification predicted stronger endorsement of the gender status quo and less gender-based social activism. Importantly, experimentally increasing self-objectification also led women to become more entrenched in the gender status quo and decreased intentions to get involved in actions that challenge gender inequities. In both studies, women's motivation to view the existing gender arrangements as fair and just fully explained the relationship between self-objectification and collective action. It appears that activism is disrupted because women are more motivated to support the gender status quo (and thus less likely to challenge it) when they are more focused on how they look as opposed to how they feel or what they can do. This possibility is significant in light of the fact that collective action on behalf of the ingroup is perhaps the most effective way to bring about social change and social justice for the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

When considering why this link between self-objectification and collective action might emerge, it is helpful to remember that self-objectification is a formative component of women's self-concepts (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification might be conceived of as a

specific variant of gender self-stereotyping, with the potential to assuage feelings of incompetence in one domain (e.g., political efficacy) by directing attention and energy toward a distinctly feminine domain in which women have “good prospects” (Steele, 1997) as a basis for short and long-term self-evaluation (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardtstein, 2002; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). Indeed, consistent with our research, Laurin, Kay, and Shepherd (2011) found that men and women engaged in more gender self-stereotyping (women rated themselves as more communal and men as more agentic) when faced with information about the unequal treatment of women compared to a control group. When these complementary self-perceptions were experimentally manipulated, women who believed they conformed to communal stereotypes reported greater satisfaction with the societal status quo than women who believed they conformed to agentic stereotypes. These findings further bolster the idea that the application of complementary gender stereotypes to the self increases perceptions of the system’s legitimacy.

### **Some Next Steps**

The data described above provide preliminary evidence for a motivational and ideological account of self-objectification derived from an integration of objectification theory and system justification theory. There are a variety of ways in which this integrative framework should be further tested. Along with several colleagues, I am investigating a number of mechanisms that are expected to work in concert with self-objectification to impact women’s support for the status quo and social change. For example, we expect that endorsement of beauty ideologies (e.g., importance of beauty for women’s success, effort in appearance is required of women, thinness equals success and respect for women) will moderate the impact of self-objectification on support for the gender status quo. Preliminary evidence does support this

hypothesis: the relationship between self-objectification and gender-specific system justification is significantly stronger among women who highly endorse the idea of beauty as women's currency compared to those with low levels of such endorsement (Calogero, Grader, & Medrano, 2013). For women who self-objectify, if they have also adopted the belief that beauty is critical for women's success, they seem especially motivated to support the current state of gender relations. We also aim to examine self-efficacy, perceived injustice, anger, social dominance orientation, and collective identity as potential mediators of the relationship between self-objectification and collective action among women, as demonstrated in other models of collective action (Becker & Wright, 2011; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).

It would also be important to investigate other contextual factors that might magnify or attenuate the link between self-objectification and collective action. For example, a recent experimental study (Calogero, 2013) demonstrated that women who received the "latest report on gender relations" describing the gender system as broken and chivalry as dead in American society were less likely to respond in self-objectifying ways (i.e., lower levels of self-surveillance, body shame, and appearance management) compared to women who received the "latest report on gender relations" describing chivalry as intact and still working in American society. Women also responded with more gender-based collective action in response to information about the broken gender system. Although a broken gender system would be interpreted as a threat to the status quo, and therefore should be more likely to evoke system-justifying responses (Jost et al., 2007), it is possible that framing change in the gender system as inevitable was sufficient to alter women's self-objectification (Kay & Friesen, 2011). In particular, the notion that chivalry is dead suggests that male protection of the damsel in distress and the desired sex object may no longer operate as an effective exchange in the system of

gender relations, and thus women may be more inclined to engage in collective action on their own behalf.

In addition, since exposure to widely available sexist ideologies and sexual objectification is at the crux of the argument as to why adopting a self-objectified perspective is system-justifying, to fully contextualize the model researchers need to simultaneously test the relations among sexist ideology, self-objectification, and system-justifying motives and behaviors. In particular, this research should attempt to isolate which components of benevolently sexist ideology sanction the system and pacify lower status groups, thereby affecting social activism (e.g., paternalism, gender differentiation, heterosexual intimacy). Other circumstances that make salient women's dependence on the system of gender relations and/or the perceived inescapability of that system may exacerbate the relationship between self-objectification and system justification and also merit investigation (Kay & Friesen, 2011).

One of the most novel aspects of this program of research is what it suggests about ways to alter system-justifying behaviour, at least among women. If a woman views and treats herself as an object to be acted upon, it is perhaps not surprising that she would engage in less social action. This self-objectified lens, then, becomes the target for intervention. We may be able to alter the particular lens through which lower status groups view themselves by disrupting their dependence on the system of sexual objectification that constructs and sustains that lens. Thus far, the research demonstrates that sanctioning women's subordinate status through legitimizing ideologies reduces their motivation to challenge the dominant social system. Yet, we also found evidence to suggest that social inequalities might be challenged if members of low status groups (e.g., women) believe they can no longer depend on higher status groups (e.g., men) for security and protection within the system. Drawing on this integrative perspective, my colleague and I

(Calogero & Tylka, 2013) look more closely at the system of sexual objectification and how to disrupt psychological and social support for it. This perspective suggests that it may not be sufficient to target women's individual body image and self-esteem or provide media literacy training, as most girls and women are already deeply entrenched in the gender system. This idea may explain why some body image and/or self-esteem intervention programs fall short or produce the undesired effect of increasing women's appearance focus (e.g., Choma, Foster, & Radford, 2007). Instead, we propose that delegitimizing the system of sexual objectification and the gender status quo is necessary to reduce women's reliance on it.

It is important to note that the research reported here in support of this integrative perspective has focused on the appearance investment component of self-objectification within a westernized societal context. Drawing from Nussbaum's (1995) framework on objectification, there are multiple ways for a woman to self-objectify. Future research should investigate whether self-objectification also encompasses the treatment of oneself as a tool for a specific end (instrumentality), as lacking in autonomy and self-determination (denial of autonomy), as lacking in agency and activity (inertness), as interchangeable with others of the same or different types (fungibility), as permissible to break, smash, or break into (violability), as something that is owned by another (ownership), and/or as something whose experience and feelings do not need to be considered (denial of subjectivity). All or some aspects of this broader phenomenological experience of self-objectification may be relevant to women's motivation to support the status quo and should be further investigated, especially across other cultures and subcultures where the objectification of women is pervasive and women's agency is directly thwarted (Crawford et al., 2009; Jeffreys, 2005; Moradi, 2010, 2011; Tiggemann, Verri, & Scaravaggi, 2005; United Nations, 1995).

In particular, the quality of reduced agency must be explored further in relation to self-objectification. Objects do not act, but clearly women do act under objectifying conditions. We know that self-objectification does reflect some degree of agency for women in the domain of appearance investment and management—although it potentially strips them of agency in other domains. It is useful to remember here that sexual objectification is not under women’s control and often occurs within those public, mixed-gender, and unstructured settings that women cannot easily opt out of (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gardner, 1980; Kaschak, 1990). In theory, self-objectification operates as a psychological strategy that allows women to anticipate and exert some control over how they will be viewed and treated by others in these contexts. The question is: Do women who self-objectify perceive themselves as more or less agentic? If so, in which domains do they experience reduced agency? Is political efficacy a particularly vulnerable domain in the context of self-objectification? Extensive research has documented the gender gap in political ambition and political participation, whereby women report lower levels of political efficacy and remain grossly underrepresented in every branch of government (Lawless & Fox, 2010). In conjunction with a host of other barriers, it is plausible that reduced perceptions of political agency explain women’s increased support for the status quo and decreased gender-based social activism under conditions of objectification. In contrast, perhaps women who are lower in self-objectification are less likely to view their appearance as a source of social power and currency, and thus are more motivated to seek social change and challenge gender inequities. Alternatively, women who do not self-objectify might experience less of the positive veneer of the benevolent sexist status quo and thus are less motivated to defend it. The role of agency warrants more attention in self-objectification research.

Only selected objectification theory variables have been tested thus far in relation to the

integrative perspective proposed here. Future investigations should include appearance anxiety, interoceptive awareness (i.e., awareness of internal sensations and inner life), and flow—not only body shame—to account for all four subjective experiences in relation to women's system justification. Internalization of the thin ideal (and other cultural appearance standards) is another important variable to include in future tests of this integrative framework, as this variable has been identified as another manifestation of self-objectification (e.g., Kozee et al., 2007; Moradi, 2010; Moradi, 2011).

Moreover, the homogenous samples of women represented in the research described for this integrative framework obviously limit the generalizability of these findings to young, White, college-educated, heterosexual women who were also very likely able-bodied. Patterns of sexual and self-objectification in relation to other outcomes (e.g., disordered eating, depression) have been shown to vary by sexual orientation (Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007), gender (Calogero, 2009; Parent & Moradi, 2011; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004), age (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), and ethnicity (Buchanan, Fischer, Tokar, & Yoder, 2008; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003). It is necessary to examine the extent to which the link between self-objectification and system justification is observed in subgroups of women as well as other lower status groups, as these groups will vary in the extent to which they are disadvantaged by the gender status quo and the wider prevailing system. Clearly, an intersectional approach to this program of research is sorely needed (Moradi, this volume). Finally, the relationship between self-objectification, system justification, and gender-based social activism across the life span, and among non-university samples, also requires further examination. Since self-objectification has been found to decrease with age (McKinley, 2006; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001), it is plausible that older women's motivations and behaviors

around collective action are unrelated to self-objectification, although it is not clear at what age we would begin to observe this alternative pattern.

In sum, although a great deal of research has examined the effects of self-objectification on women's subjective health and mental performance (Calogero et al., 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008), this is the first program of work to examine how self-objectification affects women's support for the gender status quo and engagement in social action on behalf of women. This integrative framework locates the construct of self-objectification within a system justification context, extending the scope of impact beyond the domains of body image and mental health. Further research is needed to articulate how and when self-objectification impacts women's collective action and support for the status quo as well as what aspects of self-objectification drive this impact. An important direction for the next generation of objectification research would be to fully illuminate the extent to which self-objectification is a factor in maintaining gender inequality.

### **Conclusion**

A growing body of evidence is demonstrating the direct and indirect ways that self-objectification works as a system-justifying device for many women. The integration of objectification and system justification theories locates self-objectification as a critical psychological event that bolsters women's support for the gender status quo and disrupts gender-based social activism, further cementing their disadvantaged status in the gender hierarchy. By situating self-objectification in a system justification context, this integrative framework takes to heart the idea that the personal is political. Given that self-objectification is a profound and nearly universal experience for girls and women at some point in their lives, the harm exacted will also be profound and far-reaching. On the basis of this proposed framework, further research

is strongly encouraged to determine the utility of this motivational and ideological account of self-objectification for understanding women's lived experiences and the potential for social change.

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