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**The status-legitimacy hypothesis revisited: Ethnic-group differences in general
and dimension-specific legitimacy**

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Abstract

The status-legitimacy hypothesis, which predicts that low-status groups will legitimise inequality more than high-status groups, has received inconsistent empirical support. To resolve this inconsistency, we hypothesised that low-status groups would display enhanced legitimation only when evaluating the fairness of the specific hierarchy responsible for their disadvantage. In a New Zealand-based probability sample ($N = 6162$), we found that low-status ethnic groups (Asians and Pacific Islanders) perceived ethnic-group relations to be fairer than the high-status group (Europeans). However, these groups did not justify the overall political system more than the high-status group. In fact, Māori showed the least support for the political system. These findings clarify when the controversial status-legitimacy effects predicted by System Justification Theory will—and will not—emerge.

**The status-legitimacy hypothesis revisited: Ethnic-group differences in general
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Coercion is the least efficient means of obtaining order.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974)

The dominance of one group in society over others is most effectively maintained when subordinate groups buy into unequal social arrangements and see them as legitimate. This prevents the dominant group from having to use hostile means of control to maintain their dominance, which would risk engendering resistance and conflict (Jackman, 1994). While there is general consensus that high-status groups justify their advantage in a variety of ways (often cajoling the groups they exploit using various ideologies; Jost, Wakslack, & Tyler, 2008; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), the question of whether low-status groups actively legitimise systems that disadvantage them is much more controversial (see Reicher, 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 2004; cf. Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

One perspective that has advanced the idea of active legitimation among the disadvantaged is System Justification Theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994). It proposes that members of both high- and low-status groups share a general motivation to perceive existing social arrangements as fair and just. For low-status groups, this motivation arouses dissonance with the competing motives to advance their own personal and group interests (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). Accordingly, SJT makes the provocative prediction that in order to resolve this dissonance; the disadvantaged will sometimes be motivated to legitimise inequality *even more strongly* than members of advantaged groups (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). Brandt (2013) dubbed this “the status-legitimacy hypothesis” (p. 765) – lower status will be associated with higher legitimation. While two early studies found evidence for this

effect (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, et al., 2003), other analyses have either failed to replicate the finding (e.g., Brandt, 2013), or have implied the opposite pattern (i.e. lower status, lower legitimacy; e.g., Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011).

Given these inconsistent findings, the present study aims to provide additional data from a large, representative, national sample in New Zealand, to inform the ongoing debate over the robustness of status-legitimacy effects. Specifically, we investigate ethnic-group differences in perceptions of legitimacy. Jost et al. (2003), who provided the first direct test of these effects, acknowledged that they are unlikely to be universal. Instead, they are most likely to emerge in democratic societies with extensive civil liberties, a meritocratic culture, and high levels of inequality. New Zealand meets all of these criteria (as discussed in detail later). Therefore, a failure to replicate the status-legitimacy effect in this context would cast further doubt on its robustness and the dissonance-related mechanism thought to underlie it. On the other hand, a replication of the effect would help shed light on the circumstances under which low-status groups might legitimise the very systems that disadvantage them.

In addition to providing valuable data from a different cultural context, our study makes a key contribution to the conceptualisation and measurement of system justification. As we will argue, part of the empirical uncertainty surrounding the status-legitimacy effect might stem from (a) a lack of alignment between the status dimension being measured and the hierarchy being legitimised, and (b) an imprecise definition of what “legitimacy” entails in the context of dissonance-reduction. The logic of the dissonance argument suggests that the conflict being resolved is between the need to perceive systems as *fair* and the experience of unfairness within those systems. As such, status-legitimacy effects should be most likely to emerge when legitimacy is measured in terms of fairness, and when these fairness perceptions apply

to the hierarchy responsible for creating the status differences being assessed (what we will call “dimension-specific legitimation”).

To test this thesis, we investigate the effects of ethnic-group status on the perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations. We also test an alternative model which operationalises legitimacy in a manner that does not allude to the fairness of specific hierarchies: general support for the political system (see Brandt, 2013). Thus, our study examines whether differences in how legitimacy is conceptualised account for the mixed empirical support for the status-legitimacy hypothesis.

System Justification Theory

System Justification Theory proposes that socio-political behaviour is not only driven by self- and group-interest, but also by a motive to justify the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, et al., 2001). Engaging in system justification allows people to fulfil their epistemic need for order and structure (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009) and accrues various affective benefits — including increased satisfaction with one’s situation, and reduced moral outrage, guilt and frustration in the face of inequality (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). Indeed, nearly two decades of research on system justification has provided support for the argument that there exists a general ideological motive to legitimize the status quo (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004 for a review). For example, people use various ideologies and stereotypes to legitimize group-based differences in social status (Jost & Burgess, 2000), defend the status quo in response to threats to it (Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011) and accept weak, pseudo-explanations for prevailing social inequality (Haines & Jost, 2000).

A defining feature of the system-justification perspective is the proposition that this bias in favour of the system exists both among those who benefit from it, and

among those who are disadvantaged by it (Jost et al., 2001). For members of high-status groups, supporting the status quo is consistent with their personal and group interests. For low-status groups, however, supporting a system which disadvantages them is in direct conflict with their self- and group-interests. This is the central idea behind the “status-legitimacy hypothesis” (Brandt, 2013): under some circumstances, the dissonance between the system-justification motive and people’s self- and group-interest will lead the disadvantaged to justify the system *more* than the advantaged. In the following sections, we clarify the rationale behind this hypothesis and analyse the existing evidence for and against it.

Clarifying the Concept of Dissonance

The status-legitimacy hypothesis derives from an extension of Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) to the political domain (Jost et al., 2003). Research on cognitive dissonance has shown that people respond to inconsistencies in their thoughts, feelings and behaviours by bringing one of the inconsistent components into alignment with their remaining attitudes (Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999). Jost et al. (2003) speculated that, in the political domain, “dissonance might arise from the contradictory cognitions that (a) the system is putting me (and my group) at a disadvantage, and (b) through our acquiescence, my group and I are contributing to the stability of the system” (p. 16). Under some circumstances, people might resolve this dissonance by justifying the system.

We argue that it is unnecessary to assume that the implicit realisation that one is contributing to one’s own disadvantage elicits dissonance. Instead, we argue that research on cognitive dissonance strongly implies that the conflict being resolved, rationalised, or justified arises from inconsistencies between features of people’s *psychology* (e.g., their beliefs, motives) and features of their *experience* (e.g., their

own or others' behaviour, their social reality). For example, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter's (1956) seminal work showed that, in response to failed predictions of an impending apocalypse, members of a UFO cult expressed even more fervent beliefs in their mythology. This resolved the dissonance between their apocalyptic beliefs and their experience of reality (which disconfirmed those beliefs). Similarly, people express greater commitment to a group after being subjected to harsh initiation rituals (Aronson & Mills, 1969; Gerard & Mathewson, 1966). The dissonance here is between their psychological motive for inclusion and their experience of abuse.

Thus, from our perspective, the most appropriate interpretation of dissonance-induction as it applies to political attitudes is the conflict elicited between the psychological motive identified by SJT (i.e., to perceive existing social arrangements as fair) and the experience of unfairness in the particular social system(s). It is this conflict that should, at least sometimes, yield the status-legitimacy effects hypothesised by the theory. In other words, the unfairness of being lower in status along a specific intergroup hierarchy should induce dissonance with the motive for fairness, leading people to shift their perceptions of fairness in favour of those hierarchies. By measuring legitimacy as support for broader systems (rather than beliefs about the fairness of specific hierarchies), previous analyses may have been ill-placed to detect manifestations of this dimension-specific dissonance (e.g., Brandt, 2013).

Measuring Legitimacy

Part of the reason why research on the status-legitimacy effect has operationalised legitimacy in this broader sense is that SJT has often conflated two theoretically distinct, albeit related, processes: support for the status quo and legitimisation of inequality. The theory's central proposition is that there is a

motivation to legitimise *the status quo* (Jost et al., 2004). Accordingly, SJT proposes that fulfilling this motivation necessitates the legitimization of inequality in the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). This process works well under the assumption that the political, economic and social systems in most societies are hierarchical and unequal. However, to the extent that particular systems are more *equal* than unequal, the legitimization of inequality will not be equivalent to the legitimization of the status quo. Indeed, Brandt and Reyna (2012) showed that a preference for inequality was related to support for the status quo in unequal countries, but not in countries with high levels of equality.

Further, legitimization itself can involve processes that differ in the ways in which they achieve their purpose. Early work on legitimization acknowledged that subordinates could trust the decisions of authorities “independently of judgments of the correctness or acceptability” of the rationale behind those decisions (Simon, 1957, p. 125; see also Tyler, 2006). In a recent review, Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, and Jost (2013) defined legitimization as “psychological processes by which attitudes, behaviors, and social arrangements are justified as conforming to normative standards—including, but not limited to—standards of justice” (emphasis added, p. 230). These definitions imply that any attitude or ideology that increases perceptions of normativity can be used to bolster the status quo, regardless of whether or not it involves arguments about the fairness of the system.

If one accepts that legitimising inequality is theoretically distinct from legitimization of the status quo, and that legitimization can involve more than justice perceptions, then it becomes possible to conceive of ways that systems can be bolstered without making inequality seem fair. In systems already marked by inequality, mere attitudinal preferences for (a) unequal social relations or (b)

deference to authority and tradition will suffice (Brandt & Reyna, 2012). Individual differences in these preferences are indexed by the constructs of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) and Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1996) respectively.

While it has been argued that SDO and RWA are legitimizing ideologies, they differ significantly from other ideologies that fall into this category (e.g., Belief in a just world, Protestant Work Ethic and Meritocracy; see Jost & Hunady, 2005). For example, the Belief in a Just World explains away inequality by asserting that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner, 1980). The Protestant Work Ethic frames those with low status as lazy and those with high status as hard-working (Furnham, 1982). Meritocracy involves subscribing to the view that inequality arises from fair processes in which merit determines people's outcomes (McCoy & Major, 2007). In contrast, the items used to assess SDO and RWA offer no *explanation* for unequal outcomes being fair or deserved, but merely assess the degree to which people see such inequality as normative, desirable or inevitable.

These two ways of bolstering the status quo are differentially appealing to subordinate and dominant group members. For dominant groups, opposition to equality serves their interests by maintaining the hierarchies from which they benefit (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). For subordinate group members, however, categorically opposing the principle of equality is less viable, as it conflicts with their group interests (e.g. Jost & Thompson, 2000). Not surprisingly then, a meta-analysis of status differences in the preference for inequality found that high-status groups were consistently higher on SDO than low-status groups (Lee et al., 2011).

The pattern of status differences in authoritarianism is exactly the opposite. Low-status group members consistently show a greater preference for obedience to

authority than high-status groups (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008), possibly because it buffers them from the effects of stigma and social devaluation (Brandt & Henry, 2011; Henry, 2011). An ironic consequence of this coping mechanism is that the authoritarian attitudes that protect them from the psychological effects of stigma can also engender support for the authority structures on society, thus bolstering the status quo (Sternner, 2009). Together, these findings suggest that when legitimacy is measured in terms of support for the political and economic status quo, the processes of authoritarianism and social dominance operating differently among high-and low-status groups might occlude the dissonance-induced effects of low status.

A Closer Look at the Evidence

Consistent with this reasoning, a closer look at the three studies reporting direct tests of the status-legitimacy hypothesis reveals that the effects predicted by SJT are only found under two conditions: (a) when measuring ideological legitimization of the specific hierarchies relevant to the status dimension being analysed (i.e. dimension-specific legitimization), and (b) when legitimacy is measured as support for authoritarian governance (Jost et al., 2003, Study 1; Henry & Saul, 2006, analysis 2). We argue that the former is a true manifestation of dissonance-reduction, and will therefore be the focus of the present analysis. The latter is likely a reflection of the stigma-driven subscription to authoritarianism that has already been identified in the literature (e.g. Henry, 2011).

We start by considering the most recent study to assess the status-legitimacy hypothesis— a large-scale analysis by Brandt (2013). In a wide array of tests that used different status dimensions in large samples from across Europe and the United States, he found no support for a negative main effect of status on legitimacy (measured as trust in government and societal institutions). In line with our preceding

analysis, we see these measures as indexing general support for the status quo rather than dimension-specific legitimization of inequality, which might partly explain the average null effects across samples.

Nonetheless, trust in government *could* be seen as an index of the legitimization of specific hierarchies to the extent that the government is perceived as disproportionately serving the interests of one group over others. Given that most measures of governmental trust assess perceptions of corruption (see Brandt 2013, p. 6), *income* might be one dimension along which negative effects of status on legitimacy can be expected to emerge. Indeed, Jost et al. (2003; Study 2) found evidence for the status-legitimacy effect when operationalising status as income. Low income Latinos expressed greater trust in the government (by believing it was run for the benefit of all rather than serving special interests) compared to high-income Latinos.

Brandt (2013) also acknowledged that while there was no main effect for status on legitimacy on average, there was considerable variability in the size and direction of the effects. In many of the analyses reported, effects consistent with the dissonance argument were observed. Nevertheless, this variation was not explained by any of the moderators in his analysis (e.g., inequality). We believe that a crucial moderator missing from this study was the extent to which the status dimension being measured aligned with the hierarchy being legitimised. For example, in countries where battles over government were explicitly fought along ethnic lines, the effects of low ethnic-group status on government trust might emerge. Consistent with this notion, Henry and Saul (2006) found that in Bolivia where politics and ethnicity are strongly entwined (Molina, 2007), low-status ethnic groups trusted the system more than high-status ethnic groups.

Further support for a dimension-specific legitimisation process can be found by analysing the situations in which status-legitimacy effects did and did not emerge in the seminal studies by Jost et al. (2003). In line with our distinction between bolstering the status quo and legitimising inequality, they found most support for the status-legitimacy hypothesis when measuring status differences in ideologies and beliefs that legitimised specific kinds of inequality. For example, in Study 3, they found that poor people were more likely than rich people to believe that large differences in income were necessary to motivate effort. Thus, it was a belief that legitimised income inequality that revealed status differences along the dimension of income.

In Study 4, Jost et al., (2003) operationalised status in terms of race, income and geographical location. Legitimacy was measured as support for statements that equated hard work with success and thus explained away status differences in terms of differences in effort (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002). The pattern of interactions in their findings reveals the highly specific nature of dissonance-based legitimation. There was no main effect for race, probably because legitimacy (i.e., the belief that hard work leads to success) in this context was not specifically about justifying racial inequality. However, in the South, where status differences in race and income align more strongly, status-legitimacy effects emerged. For example, poor African Americans in the South (but not in the North) endorsed legitimacy beliefs more than wealthy African Americans. This supports our argument that it is particularly when *specific* status differences are in need of legitimation that the dissonance-based mechanism should yield status-legitimacy effects.

The psychological benefits of subscribing to legitimising ideologies also seem to manifest in a dimension-specific manner. If dissonance arises from suffering

inequality while also being motivated to see society as fair, then processes of legitimation that help resolve this dissonance should buffer people's psychological wellbeing (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Indeed, several studies have found evidence for the palliative effects of legitimising ideologies for members of low-status groups (Jost et al., 2008; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013). Relevant to our argument about dimensional specificity, Sengupta and Sibley (2014) found that subscribing to an ideology that delegitimises ethnic-group-based claims for reparation predicted increased wellbeing, but only among Māori (the low-status ethnic group) living in conditions of high inequality. Thus, it is precisely those who had the most to lose from ideologically legitimising inequality that accrued psychological benefits from doing so.

The Present Study

Here we present a test of the status-legitimacy hypothesis by analysing ethnic-group differences in two kinds of legitimacy beliefs (namely, support for the political system, and the perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations) in a large, national, probability sample in New Zealand ($N = 6162$). The measures in our survey, and the cultural context in which it was conducted, offer a unique opportunity to investigate some of the questions that lie at the heart of the debate over whether the victims of inequality bolster the very systems that disadvantage them. Jost et al. (2003) outlined three important boundary conditions for the dissonance-reduction mechanism hypothesised to drive status-legitimacy effects.

First, if the motive to justify the system competes with the self- and group-interests of the disadvantaged, then the effects of dissonance would be more likely to emerge when the salience of these interests is relatively low. Jost et al. (2003) argued that large-scale surveys are one condition under which the motives for advancement

of the self and the ingroup are low, since people are responding to myriad questions, most of which have nothing to do with their group memberships or system-related beliefs. The New Zealand Attitudes and Values Survey (NZAVS), from which our data are drawn, consists of over 200 items assessing a wide range of variables, including personality, health, environmental attitudes, voting behaviour etc. Thus, our methodology satisfies the first boundary condition by not strongly triggering individual- and group-level motives at the expense of system-level motives.

Second, dissonance research suggests that when people freely choose their behaviour, the need to rationalise the given act is enhanced (e.g., Cooper & Fazio, 1984). Accordingly, Jost et al. (2003) proposed that dissonance about the system would most likely be elicited when people feel that they have a say in how the system is constituted. Thus, democratic societies with extensive civil liberties represent a favourable testing ground for status-legitimacy effects. New Zealand was ranked fifth on an index assessing the robustness of a country's democratic institutions (EIU, 2012) and first on an index of human freedom (McMahon, 2012).

Further, like other postcolonial Western societies, New Zealand has a meritocratic culture in that people subscribe to various ideologies that frame issues of distributive justice in terms of individual deservingness (e.g., Sibley & Liu, 2007; Sibley, 2010). Jost et al., (2003) suggest that this type of cultural context will produce "strong motivational pressures for disadvantaged group members to provide attitudinal support for the system" (p. 17). Thus, the disadvantaged in New Zealand are more likely to engage in processes of legitimation than low-status groups in more authoritarian societies, or in cultures with weaker meritocratic norms.

Finally, because it is the experience of inequality that is hypothesised to elicit dissonance, status-legitimacy effects should be more likely to emerge in societies with

a higher level of inequality (Brandt, 2013). While New Zealand is less unequal than the United States, it has experienced the sharpest rise in inequality in the OECD over the past 20 years (OECD, 2012). Much of this inequality exists along ethnic lines. The Social Report (2010) by The Ministry of Social Development revealed that compared to European New Zealanders (the ethnic majority group), Māori, Pacific and Asian people fair worse on a host of socioeconomic indicators including income, employment, literacy rate and political representation. Members of these groups also experience worse health outcomes (e.g., higher mortality; The Social Report, 2010) and report lower wellbeing (Ajwani, Blakely, Robson, Tobias, & Bonne, 2003) compared to Europeans. These inequalities create an ethnic status-hierarchy that, when combined with the other features of the New Zealand context noted above, represent a favourable context in which to test if the dissonance-based effects of low-status on perceptions of legitimacy occur in a manner consistent with the predictions of SJT.

Specifically, we will test whether ethnic minorities show higher levels of legitimation than New Zealand Europeans. In line with our argument that dissonance should manifest in terms of a *specific* kind of legitimation (i.e., fairness perceptions) and in relation to *specific* hierarchies, we test ethnic-group differences in the belief that ethnic-group relations in New Zealand are fair. To provide support for our argument that past explorations have operationalised legitimacy in a manner that occludes the effects of dissonance, we also test status differences in the belief that the New Zealand political system operates as it should (analogous to measures such as trust or confidence in government that have been used in prior analyses). Consistent with Brandt's (2013) analysis, we expect that this general form of system justification

will be less likely to bear out the status-legitimacy hypothesis than the specific legitimation of ethnic-group differences.

Finally, while we expect status-legitimacy effects for Asian and Pacific people on the dimension-specific measure, we predict that Māori, the indigenous peoples of New Zealand, will show *lower* levels of both support for the political system and perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations. This is because the nature of Māori identity has important implications for the way in which any potential dissonance might be resolved.

The Political Nature of Māori Identity

Jost et al. (2003) noted that resolving dissonance in favour of the system is only one potential option. Alternatively, when faced with the conflict between the motivation to perceive the system as fair and the experience of inequality, a person could acknowledge the systemic origins of their disadvantage. Justifying the status quo is often the psychologically easier route, as people are apt to feel helpless in the face of systemic inequality (Jost et al., 2008). However, when anti-systemic norms exist, it should be easier to resolve the dissonance between felt inequality and one's motivation to view society as fair by challenging rather than rationalising inequality in the system.

Among disadvantaged groups, such norms are reflected in the content of their ingroup identity (Thomas & Louis, 2013). Research on the content on Māori identity has shown that “sociopolitical consciousness” forms a core aspect of what it means to be Māori. For example, Houkamau and Sibley (2010) showed that a dimension indexing the perceived relevance of historical injustice to contemporary Māori and the willingness to engage in political action to advance Māori interests was more strongly linked to ethnic-identity centrality among Māori than other dimensions such as

cultural efficacy or spirituality. In a similar vein, Sibley (2010) showed that Māori are strongly opposed to ideologies that deny the relevance of historical injustice to contemporary issues of resource distribution in society.

Such a highly politicised ethnic identity leads us to expect that Māori would be more able than other disadvantaged groups in New Zealand (cf. Manuela & Sibley, 2013) to resolve their dissonance by favouring their group. This dovetails with research from the Social Identity tradition showing that identifying strongly with a disadvantaged group increases the motivation to collectively resist unequal systems, especially when the content of the group identity is highly political in nature (Thomas McGarty, & Mavor, 2009; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Thus, consistent with their group interests, Māori should show *reduced* legitimization of both the general political system and the ethnic-group status hierarchy.

Method

Sampling procedure

The NZAVS-2009 questionnaire was posted to 40,500 participants from the 2009 NZ electoral roll and sampled a total of 6,518 participants. The overall response rate (adjusting for address accuracy of the electoral roll and including anonymous responses) was 16.6%.

Participant details

Complete responses to the items analysed here were provided by 6162 participants (95% of the sample; 3669 women, 2493 men). Of those providing complete data, 73% were New Zealand European ($n = 4501$), 17.6% were Māori ($n = 1083$), 4.4% were of Pacific Nations ancestry ($n = 274$), and 4.9% were of Asian

ancestry ($n = 304$). Participants' who were coded as belonging to 'other' ethnicities were not included in the analyses. Participants' mean age was 47.93 ($SD = 15.78$). 80% of the European respondents, 98% of the Māori respondents, 51% of the Pacific respondents and 17% of the Asian respondents were born in New Zealand.

Measures

General support for the political system (conceptually analogous to measures of "trust in government" used in previous analysis) was measured using the following item from Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale: "In general, the New Zealand political system operates as it should." For dimension-specific legitimation, the following item from the gender-specific system justification scale developed by Jost and Kay (2005) was revised to assess the fairness of ethnic-group relations: "In general, relations between different ethnic groups in New Zealand are fair". Both items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We also assessed whether people were born in New Zealand to adjust for the effects of immigrant-status.

Results

Primary Model

A 2 (System Legitimacy: General vs. Specific) x 4 (Ethnicity) mixed-model ANOVA was conducted, with type of system-legitimacy (either general support for the political system or perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations) as the within-subjects factor and ethnicity as the between-subjects factor. Owing to our large sample, the p -value for all effects was set at .001. As predicted, there was a significant main effect for ethnicity ($F(3, 6158) = 31.33, p < .001, \text{partial } \mu^2 = .02$) indicating that people of different ethnic groups differed in the extent to which they believed the

New Zealand political system operates as it should, and that ethnic-group relations are fair.

We also found a significant main effect for type of system-legitimacy ($F(1, 6158) = 69.46, p < .001, \text{partial } \mu^2 = .01$) indicating that levels of support for the overall political system differed from levels of perceived fairness of the ethnic-group system. This effect occurred because people were higher on perceptions of fairness of ethnic-group relations ($M = 4.44, SE = .03$) than on general support for the political system ($M = 4.17, SE = .03$).

Finally, the interaction between type of system-legitimacy and ethnicity was significant ($F(3, 6158) = 34.00, p < .001, \text{partial } \mu^2 = .02$) indicating that the difference in levels of support for the political system and levels of perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations was contingent on participants' ethnicity (see Figure 1). Analysis of the simple effects revealed that Māori ($MD = .43, SE = .05, p < .001$), Pacific ($MD = .56, SE = .11, p < .001$) and Asian people ($MD = .37, SE = .10, p < .001$) were significantly higher on levels of perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations, relative to levels of support for the political system. However, there was no difference in the two types of legitimacy perceptions among Europeans.

For political-system support, Bonferonni post-hoc comparisons revealed that the effect of ethnicity occurred because Māori ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.54$) were significantly lower than Europeans ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.39, p < .001; \text{Cohen's } d = -.37$), Asian ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.39, p < .001; \text{Cohen's } d = -.38$) and Pacific people ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.59, p < .001; \text{Cohen's } d = -.29$). In contrast, there were no significant differences in levels of support for the political system between the European, Asian and Pacific groups. This is consistent with our hypothesis that status-legitimacy effects would not emerge when measuring levels of general support for the political

status quo. It is also consistent with the hypothesis that the group whose identity was most politicised (i.e., Māori) would show lower levels of support for the political system than all other ethnic groups.

For the perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations, post-hoc analyses revealed that the effect of ethnicity occurred because Europeans ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.37$) displayed lower average levels than Asians ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.36$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.32$) and Pacific Islanders ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.51$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.36$). Further, Māori ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.48$) also displayed lower levels of perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations than Asians (Cohen's $d = -.34$) and Pacific Islanders (Cohen's $d = -.38$). There were no significant differences in the levels of perceived fairness between Māori and Europeans (Cohen's $d = -.04$), or between Asian and Pacific people (Cohen's $d = -.06$). This is consistent with our prediction that status-legitimacy effects would only emerge when measuring dimension-specific legitimation, and when legitimation is operationalised in terms of fairness perceptions. However, the hypothesis that Māori would show lower levels of perceived fairness was not supported. Thus, even the group with the most highly politicised identity legitimised the ethnic-group relations at least as much as the dominant ethnic group.

Covariate Adjusted Model

To examine the robustness of our findings, we reanalysed our data using a 2 (System Legitimacy) x 4 (Ethnicity) mixed-model ANCOVA, *adjusting for the effects of immigrant-status* (i.e., whether were people were born in New Zealand). This is because a large proportion of the Asian and Pacific groups in New Zealand are first-generation immigrants. Therefore, our findings might reflect the effects of immigration-status on ethnic-group legitimation. That is, indigenous New Zealanders

and recent arrivals might be engaging in different types of comparisons (i.e., to an imagined ideal versus to their home country) when evaluating the fairness of New Zealand society.

Contrary to this alternative hypothesis, we found that Māori ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.54$) remained significantly lower on support for political system than Europeans ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.39$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.34$), Asians ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.38$, $p < .001$; partial Cohen's $d = -.25$) and Pacific people ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.59$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.21$). There were no significant differences in levels of support for the political system between the European, Asian and Pacific groups. Similarly for dimension-specific legitimation, we again found that Europeans ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.37$) displayed lower average levels of perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations than Asians ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.34$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.28$) and Pacific Islanders ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.50$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -.34$), even after taking into account immigration status. Further Māori ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.48$) also displayed lower levels of perceived fairness of ethnic-group relations than Asians (Cohen's $d = -.30$) and Pacific Islanders (Cohen's $d = -.36$), after accounting for immigration status. There were no significant differences in the levels of perceived fairness between Māori and Europeans (Cohen's $d = -.03$), or between Asian and Pacific people (Cohen's $d = -.08$). Thus, the pattern of group differences in these two forms of legitimacy obtained in the preceding analysis remained unaffected after adjusting for immigrant-status.

Discussion

We aimed to test the conditions under which the controversial status-legitimacy effects hypothesised by System Justification Theory would and would not emerge. Using a large national sample in a highly democratic country (namely, New

Zealand), we showed that some low-status groups do indeed show enhanced legitimacy beliefs compared to the high-status group. Members of the Asian and Pacific minority groups in New Zealand believed that ethnic-group relations were fairer than did their European New Zealand counterparts. Overall, this lends support to the notion that a dissonance-based explanation might help account for why the disadvantaged sometimes legitimise the very inequalities from which they suffer. It also suggests that Brandt's (2013) conclusion that "the status-legitimacy effect is not robust" (p. 11) might be premature.

We believe that this conclusion follows from analyses that do not adequately consider the type of legitimation that would reflect dissonance-reduction processes. Specifically, we argued that dissonance is most likely to result from experiencing low relative status (i.e., unfair disadvantage) within a particular intergroup hierarchy. Justification processes aimed at resolving this dissonance should therefore manifest as increased perceptions of the fairness of that particular hierarchy. Consistent with this argument, we found that Asian and Pacific people showed higher levels of legitimation than Europeans *only* when evaluating the fairness of the ethnic-group hierarchy under which they suffer. They did not trust the functioning of the general political system any more or less than the dominant group. Presumably, the legitimation of the broader system can be accomplished in ways that do not involve framing it as fair, and thus do not trigger mechanisms for the reduction of psychological conflict between unfair experiences and the fairness motive.

Following Jost et al. (2003), we do not contend that this tendency to resolve dissonance in a direction that bolsters intergroup hierarchies is universal. Indeed, it is unlikely that the disadvantaged will always be the ones who most strongly support unequal systems. Clearly unfair social arrangements do get challenged, overturned or

reformed, often by those adversely affected by these arrangements (Reicher, 2011). However, our findings demonstrate that, under some circumstances, low-status groups can rationalise status hierarchies more than the groups who benefit from them. Specifically, in democratic nations with high inequality and extensive civil liberties, disadvantaged groups whose identities do not include anti-systemic norms might be driven to believe that the hierarchies responsible for their lower status are fairer than high-status groups believe them to be.

Our findings also help highlight another important boundary condition for the status-legitimacy hypothesis. Consistent with the social identity perspective on collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008; Simon & Klandermans, 2001), we found that Māori (a group whose identity is highly politicised) show lower support for the political system than all other groups. Further, unlike Asian and Pacific people, they show no more legitimisation of the ethnic-group system than the dominant group. However, it should also be noted that, somewhat inconsistent with the collective action perspective, their politicised identity did not cause them to display *lower* levels of dimension-specific legitimisation. Māori still legitimised ethnic-group relations at least as much as the group that benefits from the ethnic-group hierarchy.

Limitations

Since these data were drawn from a much larger survey, we were necessarily constrained in the comprehensiveness of the measures used. The use of one-item measures for all constructs in the analysis adversely affected the reliability with which we could assess these beliefs. Further, we only compared status effects along one dimension – ethnicity. We chose this dimension because much of the inequality in New Zealand exists along ethnic lines. Future research should extend the analyses reported here by examining legitimisation along other status dimensions and with more

comprehensive measures of legitimacy. Despite these issues, our survey had the advantage of including items that tapped both general/political and dimension-specific legitimation, thereby enabling us to test our argument about why past explorations of the status-legitimacy hypothesis have been inconclusive. Further, testing status-legitimacy effects on a large, nationally representative sample from an as-yet unexplored intergroup context adds valuable information to the international literature on this highly contentious topic.

There are also some competing explanations for our findings that our analyses cannot conclusively rule out. One such explanation is that belonging to collectivist cultures makes Asian and Pacific people more prone to justifying the system than Māori who, it could be argued, might be more acculturated to individualistic New Zealand society. It has been found, for example, that people from collectivist cultures are more tolerant of hierarchy and inequality in the social structure (Lee et al., 2011). So, it might be this cultural difference, rather than increased dissonance, that explains why Pacific and Asian people justify the status quo more strongly than Europeans. However, the fact that Māori and Pacific people share a common (Polynesian) cultural heritage, yet show very different levels of system justification, undercuts this argument.

Further, it could be argued that because Asian and Pacific people are recent immigrant groups in New Zealand, they engage in a different type of comparison when assessing the fairness of the New Zealand system. While indigenous New Zealanders might compare the current system to an imagined ideal, immigrants may compare it to the system in their country of origin. However, this explanation assumes that the comparison being made by immigrants is an advantageous one – i.e.,

that they are judging ethnic-group relations in New Zealand to be fairer than their home country.

While plausible, there is at least one reason to suspect that this explanation does not account for our findings. Asian and Pacific people often belong to the ethnic *majority* (and thus the advantaged group) in their country of origin. When they move to New Zealand, they experience a drop in status relative to their status in their home country. Therefore, it is equally possible that when compared to their home country, immigrants would experience ethnic-group relations as being *less* fair because they find themselves near the bottom of the ethnic-group hierarchy. This sharper experience of relative unfairness would then spark even more dissonance, resulting in higher levels of legitimation. However, we obtained the same pattern of group differences when re-running our analyses while adjusting for whether people were born in New Zealand. This indicates that comparisons with a home country (either advantageous or disadvantageous) are not likely to be driving the effects observed in our study.

Finally, we have argued that in order to tap manifestations of ideological dissonance, measures of legitimacy must be (a) dimension-specific and (b) assess fairness perceptions. Our particular measures, however, cannot establish conclusively that both these features are essential; the ethnic-specific measure contains both elements while the general measure contains neither. Therefore, it is possible that measures that assess general fairness perceptions might also yield status-legitimacy effects. If so, this would suggest that the effects of dissonance for low-status groups generalise to systems beyond the group-based hierarchy directly responsible for their relative status-disadvantage. It is also possible that measures of domain-specific legitimacy unrelated to perceptions of fairness might yield status-legitimacy effects

(although see Lee et al., 2011 for evidence against this possibility). This would mean that being low-status along a particular hierarchy leads people to support the system in ways that extend beyond framing it as fair. Both possibilities imply that the legitimation of one's own disadvantage occurs even more widely than our observations allow us to conclude.

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown that low-status groups can sometimes display higher perceptions of legitimacy than the high-status group. We also showed that these effects occur specifically when evaluating the fairness of the hierarchy along which status differences exist. Further, we provided evidence for an additional boundary condition for these effects – the content of the low-status group's identity. When norms that acknowledge the illegitimacy of group-based disadvantage and promote collective action define a group's identity, the need to legitimise unfairness is probably less stark. Overall, our findings suggest that there may be some dissonance between experiences of unfairness and the motive for fairness that sometimes leads people to legitimise their own disadvantage. This finding implies that those who have the most to gain from social change may be prevented from recognizing that such change is necessary.

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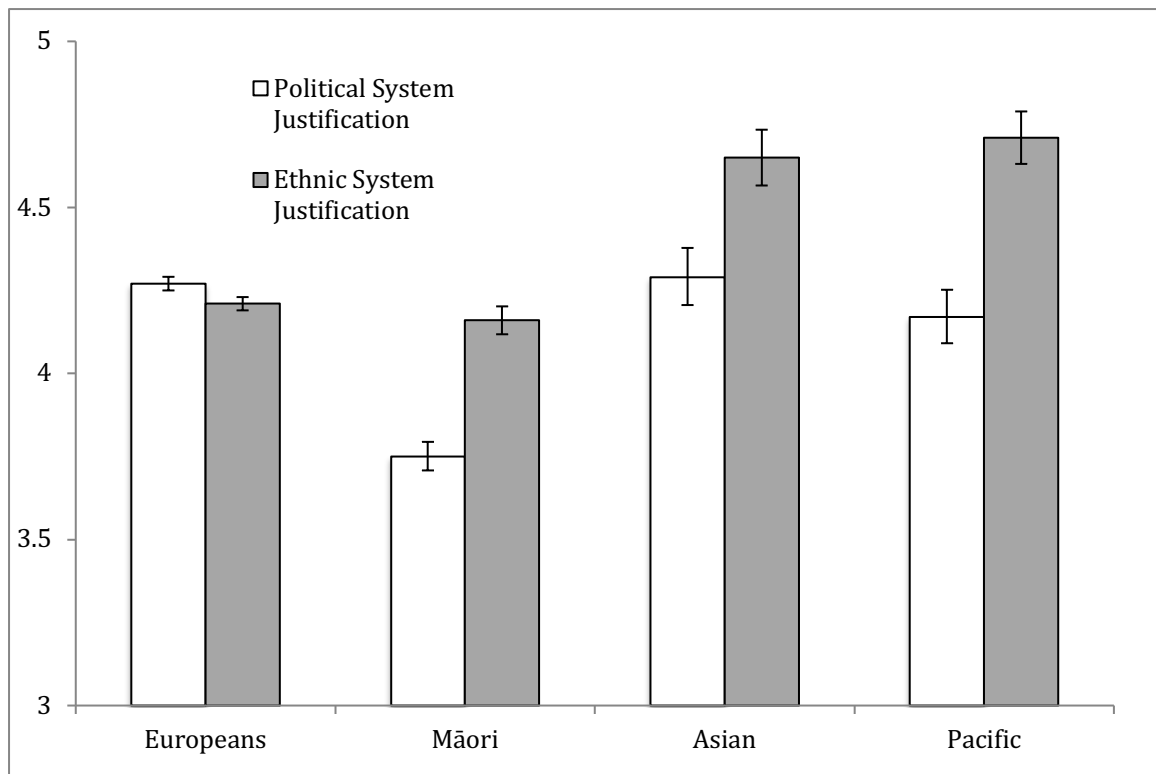


Figure 1. Clustered bar-graph showing levels of political and ethnic system justification in the four major ethnic groups of New Zealand. Note. For the purposes of visual clarity, the X-axis displays system justification scores between 3 and 5. The actual range for the two system justification scales used was 1-7 (error bars represent the standard error of the mean).