

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY, FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

Doctoral Programme in Psychology - Socialization and Social Processes

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### PH.D. THESIS SUMMARY

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The summarized thesis investigates the implications of social psychological theories on the perception of social justice, most notably system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004) and the perception of distributive justice (see Tyler & Smith, 1998). System justification theory is one of social psychology's theories about how justice perceptions can be biased, what causes these biases and what their consequences are. According to system justification theory people are motivated to see the existing social conditions as fair and just (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004; see also Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). This motivation is conceptually partly overlapping with Lerner's (1980) 'belief in a just world' hypothesis (people are motivated to see the world as a just place, so that they can maintain a sense of security and avoid anxiety), however, social learning, social institutions and norms, and ideology also play an important role in shaping system-justifying views (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004).

An important consequence of all this is that people often fail to notice injustice or they even 'blame the victim' to protect their existing belief that the social world around them is fair and that 'everyone gets what they deserve and everyone deserves what they get' (Dalbert, 1999; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980). This can happen even at the expense of the perceiver accepting views opposite to his/her own self-interest (that is what is called 'false consciousness' after Marxist social theory – Jost, 1995). One way to justify the system is to maintain favorable stereotypes about advantaged groups while harboring negative stereotypes about the disadvantaged. These stereotypes can serve as attributions to the success or failure of people belonging to various social groups. As stereotypes are organized around two main dimensions (warmth and competence – Fiske et al, 2002, 2006), it seems obvious that system justification occurs in the competence dimension (in the form of lower status groups being devalued in this dimension). However, as Jost and his colleagues have found, positive judgements of warmth of lower status groups may indeed be system-justifying aspects of social stereotypes (i.e. the 'poor but happy/honest' vs the 'rich but unhappy/dishonest'), in some way 'compensating' disadvantaged groups for their low social status (Jost et al, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay, Jost & Young, 2005; Kay et al, 2007).

Just world beliefs, however, may also imply benefits for the perceivers that hold them. People higher in just world beliefs experience a lower level of distress, cope more efficiently, are better motivated and experience a higher level of subjective well-being (Dalbert, 2004; Dalbert et al, 2001; Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005). In comparison, system justification theorists did not suggest any beneficial effects of system justification besides that it works as a kind of 'palliative mechanism' for members of lower status groups. However, data collected in relation to social-political cynicism suggest that highly critical attitudes about the system and higher status actors can have socially undesirable consequences such as a lower level of

political participation (e.g. low voter turnout) and a lack of social cohesion (pl. Flouri, 2004; Helsing et al, 2003; Persell et al, 2001; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Schyns & Nuus, 2008; Southwell & Everest, 1998; Steel & Lovrich, 1998). Indeed, since social or political cynicism is usually defined as a lack of trust in or a set of negative attitudes about important social or political actors (e.g. Schyns & Koop, 2007; Schyns & Nuus, 2008), it can be viewed as the opposite of system justification.

Another social psychological phenomenon closely related to perception of justice is competition, since it implies winning or losing, and the distribution of scarce resources. Indeed, recent results suggest that morality is a very important predictor of attitudes about competition as well as competitive behavior (Fülöp, 2008a; Tjosvold et al, 2003). Competition perceived as moral facilitates constructive behavior (i.e. more effort, development, achievement), while immoral competition facilitates destructive tactics aimed at the other competitor. Considering that modern market economies are built on competition but for them to prosper social cohesion is also necessary, the importance of these results can hardly be underestimated.

Looking at results about the perception of justice in Hungary after the political changes in 1989/90, a very consistent pattern can be seen. While the transition to democracy brought more freedom for Hungarians, they also had to experience a level of inequality that had been unknown to them for decades (Kolosi & Tóth, 2008). Studies conducted in Hungary since 1990 show that the majority of respondents are highly dissatisfied with the level of social justice in the country. Perceptions of corruption, immoral competition, successful people taking 'short cuts' are prevalent (see e.g. Fülöp, 2001, 2008a, 2008b; Fülöp et al, 2004; Fülöp & Orosz, 2006; Gallup Hungary, 1998; Hunyady, 2006, 2008; Hunyady & Berkics, 2006; Örkény, 1997; Szabó & Váriné, 2007; Székelyi et al, 2005). In the framework of the summarized dissertation three studies were conducted to investigate further aspects of these perceptions. Study 1 was a survey exploring justice perceptions and system-justifying stereotypes in an N=800 sample representative of the general Hungarian population. Study 2 was an experiment investigating judgments of more or less fair resource allocations. Study 3 was a modified version of the experiment in Study 2, investigating reactions to different (more or less legitimate) explanations to a resource allocation unfavorable to the participant. There were several questions and hypotheses in all studies (e.g. Study 2 had 32), so of the multitude of results only the most important ones will be mentioned in this brief summary.

### **Study 1**

Study 1 consisted of several self-report measures including a modified version of the Belief in a Just World (BJW) Scale by Dalbert (1999), the System Justification (SJ) Scale by Kay and Jost (2003), a Moral Indignation (MI) Scale by the author of the summarized dissertation, and several bipolar scales measuring stereotypes about various social groups. The MI scale included descriptions of immoral behaviors, and the participants had to rate these according to how much outraged they would feel if they encountered somebody behaving that way. A subscale specifically measured reactions to moral infringements committed by significant social actors. The stereotype ratings were made about Hungarian politicians, businesspeople and engineers (labeled as either 'successful' or 'unsuccessful', e.g. 'a successful Hungarian businessperson'), as well as blue collar workers, homeless people, and the self. The sample consisted of 800 Hungarian adults, and was representative of the general adult population of the country according to gender, age, and type of residence.

Study 1 investigated two broad topics: 1) social-political cynicism as an 'alternative' to system justification; 2) system-justifying effects (or the lack thereof) in social stereotypes.

Regarding cynicism the dissertation argues that the existing view of cynicism (e.g. Schyns & Koop, 2007; Schyns & Nuus, 2008) is simplistic and fails to grasp important aspects of this phenomenon. Besides negativistic perceptions and beliefs, other factors may also be important, like one's reactions to his/her unfavourable experiences. Unfavorable perceptions regarding significant actors in society may be accompanied by strong emotional reactions if one had high expectations of these people, groups or institutions, while they can be regarded as the 'normal' or 'natural' way of things if one had no such expectatons (and even more so if one had negative ones). These hypothetical examples represent distinct sets of attitudes about as well as different emotional and perhaps even behavioral reactions to politics. Study 1 tested if the existence of different kinds of cynicism can be empirically validated.

Indeed, a cluster analysis based on SJ and MI yielded three clusters: one relatively high on both variables ('system justifiers'), one low on SJ but high on MI ('discontented' rather than 'cynics'), and one low on both ('real cynics'). Further analyses validated these clusters by revealing that 1) all groups differed from the other two in their willingness to vote, and that 2) 'real cynics' showed a significantly lower endorsement of various social values than the other two groups.

The analysis of stereotype ratings revealed that the various social groups were indeed rated along the two dimensions of the model by Fiske et al (2002, 2006). While groups perceived to be more successful (either because they were labeled so or because of their occupation) were rated as more competent, they got much less favorable ratings of warmth than their unsuccessful counterparts. This effect, however, was different from that found by Jost et al (2005; see also Kay & Jost, 2003; Kay, Jost & Young, 2005; Kay et al, 2007), because participants low on SJ differentiated more between these categories.

## Study 2

Study 2 was built around an experiment in which 245 participants (students as well as working adults) had to rate eight scenarios describing a salary allocation scheme. Participants had to imagine that while they were working for a company for a slightly above-average salary, they incidentally learned about a colleague performing better/equally/worse having a higher/equal/lower salary than/as theirs. The table below shows how the scenarios made up a 4x2 (within-subjects) design.

<i>The colleague...</i>	<b>Equitable (but unequal)</b>	<b>Equal (but inequitable)</b>	<b>Somewhat unjust</b>	<b>Very unjust</b>
<b>Scenario favors the participant</b>	<i>performs worse, is paid less</i>	<i>performs better, is paid the same</i>	<i>performs equally, is paid less</i>	<i>performs better, is paid less</i>
<b>Scenario favors the colleague</b>	<i>performs better, is paid more</i>	<i>performs worse, is paid the same</i>	<i>performs equally, is paid more</i>	<i>performs worse, is paid more</i>

Participants rated each scenario on three measures: 1) perceived fairness/justice; 2) satisfaction with the (hypothetical) salary; 3) how typical they thought the scenario was of

existing workplace conditions in Hungary. They also completed the BJW and SJ measures used in Study 1, as well as a questionnaire measuring endorsement of equity (as opposed to equality).

The most important results were:

- Participants rated the equal scenarios clearly the highest on fairness; the other three were rated rather low.
- However, they rated these as being the least typical in Hungary, and the others as significantly more (and about equally) typical. This suggests a low level of SJ among participants.
- Satisfaction was significantly more affected when the injustice hurt the participant (as opposed to when it hurt the hypothetical colleague).
- Fairness ratings and satisfaction were generally positively correlated with SJ and BJW (which then functioned as 'palliative mechanisms') in scenarios favoring the hypothetical colleague. The same correlations were generally negative for the endorsement of equity (which then had a sort of 'ameliorative effect').
- Fairness and typicality ratings of scenarios did not correlate within scenarios, but did correlate across them, suggesting that perceptions of social injustice might not just be manifestations of commonly held misconceptions about present day Hungarian society.

### Study 3

Study 3 was an experiment based on the one in Study 2. 192 student participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. All of them read about a salary allocation scenario, in which a hypothetical colleague apparently performing equally well was paid more. The independent variable was the explanation provided for the salary difference (fully legitimate: the colleague actually performed better; somewhat legitimate: the colleague had a higher level of education/qualification; questionable: the colleague was an expat working for the salary he/she would obtain in his/her own country; illegitimate: the colleague was a relative of the boss; control: no explanation was provided). Participants had to rate the scenario on Likert scales of fairness, distress, and typicality. They also had to give short free descriptions of what they would feel/think as well as how they would react in such a situation. They also completed multifactorial Likert scales measuring reactions to winning and losing in general (Fülöp & Berkics, 2007), as well as the modified version of the 'losing'-questionnaire, specifically adapted to the scenario.

The most important results were:

- Participants rated the two 'legitimate' scenarios significantly higher on fairness than the 'questionable', the 'illegitimate' and the 'control' scenarios.
- SJ correlated negatively with distress in the 'illegitimate' scenario (again the 'palliative' effect).
- The 'illegitimate' and the control scenarios were rated significantly higher on typicality (lack of system justification).
- Self-devaluation as a reaction to the scenario presented was highest in the 'legitimate' condition, and gradually lower according to the level of legitimacy.

in the five conditions. This effect was more pronounced for low system-justifiers (that is, for participants more critical of the system), implying that criticism of the system is not motivated by self-justification.

- Other reactions to the scenarios showed interactions between the situation and the self-report measures.
- A detailed content analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions revealed that participants reacted in different ways to the different scenarios. Higher levels of legitimacy facilitated more constructive, lower levels of legitimacy facilitated more destructive thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The three studies reported in the dissertation show a coherent pattern of how Hungarian participants perceive social (in)justice in their country and how they react to more or less legitimate resource allocations. In line with previous research, our studies show a generally low level of system justification, and a high level of discontent in our Hungarian participants. Studies 2 and 3 have shown perceived fairness to be a significant predictor of how people react to outcomes favoring themselves or the other. To the participants even 'losing' situations were much more bearable when the resource allocation was seen to be fair.

It is also interesting that system justification and just world beliefs as person variables (measured by the SJ and BJW Scales) were shown to have a 'palliative' effect in unfavorable situations, endorsement of equity had an opposite, 'ameliorative' effect. Thus, if we are looking for evidence of self-serving biases in our data, it is to be found in relation to SJ and BJW, and not to meritocratic beliefs, suggesting that the generally low level of system justification found in Hungary is not due to a strong motive to justify the self (and blame the circumstances or society for one's failure), but perhaps due to the frustration of the system justifying and justice motives. This, however, is rather a question/hypothesis for further studies to clarify.