

# Why do people defend unjust, inept, and corrupt systems?

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Why do we stick up for a system or institution we live in—a government, company, or marriage—even when anyone else can see it is failing miserably? Why do we resist change even when the system is corrupt or unjust? A new article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal published by the Association for Psychological Science, illuminates the conditions under which we're motivated to defend the status quo—a process called "system justification."

System justification isn't the same as acquiescence, explains Aaron C. Kay, a psychologist at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and the Department of Psychology & Neuroscience, who co-authored the paper with University of Waterloo graduate student Justin Friesen. "It's pro-active. When someone comes to justify the status quo, they also come to see it as what should be."

Reviewing laboratory and cross-national studies, the paper illuminates four situations that foster system justification: system threat, system dependence, system inescapability, and low personal control.

When we're threatened we defend ourselves—and our systems. Before 9/11, for instance, President George W. Bush was sinking in the polls. But as soon as the planes hit the World Trade Center, the president's approval ratings soared. So did support for Congress and the police. During Hurricane Katrina, America witnessed FEMA's spectacular failure to rescue the hurricane's victims. Yet many people blamed those victims for their fate rather than admitting the agency flunked and

supporting ideas for fixing it. In times of crisis, say the authors, we want to believe the system works.

We also defend systems we rely on. In one experiment, students made to feel dependent on their university defended a school funding policy—but disapproved of the same policy if it came from the government, which they didn't perceive as affecting them closely. However, if they felt dependent on the government, they liked the policy originating from it, but not from the school.

When we feel we can't escape a system, we adapt. That includes feeling okay about things we might otherwise consider undesirable. The authors note one study in which participants were told that men's salaries in their country are 20% higher than women's. Rather than implicate an unfair system, those who felt they couldn't emigrate chalked up the wage gap to innate differences between the sexes. "You'd think that when people are stuck with a system, they'd want to change it more," says Kay. But in fact, the more stuck they are, the more likely are they to explain away its shortcomings. Finally, a related phenomenon: The less control people feel over their own lives, the more they endorse systems and leaders that offer a sense of order.

The research on system justification can enlighten those who are frustrated when people don't rise up in what would seem their own best interests. Says Kay: "If you want to understand how to get social change to happen, you need to understand the conditions that make [people](#) resist change and what makes them open to acknowledging that change might be a necessity."

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