

## SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION BELIEFS, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, AND RESISTANCE TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Julie E. Phelan and Laurie A. Rudman  
*Rutgers University*

The present research examined whether system justification results in resistance to companies that promote diversity and equal opportunity by means of affirmative action policies. Results supported hypothesized links among system justification beliefs, attitudes toward affirmative action, and implicit attitudes toward equal opportunity organizations (i.e., companies that recruited employees using affirmative action advertisements). To the extent that participants endorsed the status quo, they implicitly preferred merit-based companies to equal opportunity companies. Furthermore, system justification beliefs predicted attitudes toward affirmative action policies, and these attitudes mediated the relationship between system justification beliefs and both implicit and explicit company attitudes. The implications of these findings for the influence of system-justifying ideologies on support for policies designed to offset systemic, institutionalized discrimination are discussed.

Affirmative action policies are those that take race, ethnicity, or gender into consideration in an attempt to ensure that typically underrepresented groups are adequately represented in an organization. Because years of state-sponsored second-class citizenship barred women and racial minorities from many of the opportunities others took for granted, affirmative action seeks “not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result” (Johnson, 1965). Thus, these policies are designed not only to promote equal opportunity and maximize diversity in educational and business organizations, but also to rectify perceived disadvantages due to past and continuing overt, institutionalized, or nonconscious forms of discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Affirmative action is defined by Dictionary.com as, “a policy or a program that seeks to redress past discrimination through active measures to ensure equal opportunity, as in education and employment.” Thus, technically affirmative action refers to policies designed to ensure equal opportunity.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor Laurie A. Rudman, Department of Psychology, Tillett Hall, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 53 Avenue E, Piscataway, NJ 08854-8040. E-mail: rudman@rci.rutgers.edu.

Since the advent of affirmative action in 1961, attitudes in the U.S. might best be described as ambivalent. On the one hand, the majority of academic institutions and businesses have adopted the policy, at least as reflected in recruitment advertisements in which the statement “We are an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer” appears more commonly than not. On the other hand, there are many vocal opponents of affirmative action, including intended beneficiaries (e.g., African Americans; Sowell, 2004; Steele, 1990), some of whom argue that affirmative action devalues the accomplishments of people who are chosen ostensibly because of their minority status rather than their qualifications (Sowell, 1978, 2004; Steele, 1990). More commonly, opponents claim that affirmative action leads to preferential treatment or reverse discrimination (Garry, 2006). This argument is based on a misconception because it assumes that the policy mandates selecting unqualified over qualified candidates when in fact, affirmative action is only meant to guide selection decisions when candidates’ qualifications are equal (Plous, 2003). Nonetheless, the purchase that this argument has on the American imagination no doubt reflects the strong belief that people ought to be chosen on the basis of individual merit, not their group membership. In other words, opponents argue that affirmative action violates American values of hard work and personal autonomy by denying the rights of individuals to succeed by their own merits (Schuck, 2002).

In the present study, we examined whether negative attitudes toward affirmative action policies—and the organizations committed to them—may stem from legitimizing ideologies that deny the existence of discrimination in contemporary society (Glaser, 2005). Affirmative action policies are based on the assumption that our society has not yet achieved equality of opportunity, and that women and minorities remain disadvantaged with respect to education and employment in comparison with dominant group members (i.e., White men). The fact that group-based inequities persist is well documented (e.g., Council of Economic Advisors, 1999; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998). For example, racial minorities and women are still more likely to be unemployed, employed at lower wages, and hold jobs with lower base pay than are White men (American Civil Liberties Union, 2000). Within Fortune 500 companies, men hold 95% of senior management positions and 97% of them are White (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Despite these facts, many people resist affirmative action, perhaps in part because of system-justifying motives that lead to the denial of group-based inequities.

### SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY

According to system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003), humans are motivated to perceive existing social, economic, and political arrangements (i.e., the system) as legitimate and fair, in part because of their need to view the world as a fair and just place. As Lerner (1980) described, “People want to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope, and confidence in the future” (p. 14). Thus, in addition to powerful motives to evaluate oneself and one’s groups favorably (Brewer, 1979; Cialdini, Henrick, & Hoerig, 1976; Greenwald, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), system justification theory argues that there are motives to evaluate the status quo favorably. For minority groups (e.g., women and people of color), this motive often conflicts with self-enhancing and group-enhancing motives because it opposes changing a

system that disadvantages their group (Jost et al., 2001; Jost & Thompson, 2000). But it also operates against egalitarian values that may be held by dominant group members (i.e., men and Whites). Due to this conflict with personal interest and values, theorists have argued that system justification motives often operate at an implicit, nonconscious level of awareness (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Liviatan & Jost, 2009).

Because system justification tendencies manifest themselves in a desire to maintain and protect the status quo, it stands to reason that such motives can interfere with taking action to correct existing injustices or group-based inequities. Unwavering support for the system may blind people to social injustices, and therefore dampen support for any policies designed to redress them. Moreover, system justification theory suggests that individuals do not simply believe that the status quo is fair, but they are motivated to believe that is the case (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kay et al., 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2009). Therefore, any policy implying that the status quo is unjust, such as affirmative action, may be threatening and therefore, rejected. To our knowledge, system justification has not been used to predict attitudes toward affirmative action, whether in the form of policies or employers. Although people who reported opposition to equality (i.e., who scored high on this aspect of social dominance orientation) also showed low support for affirmative action, as well as programs that help the disadvantaged (Jost & Thompson, 2000; see also Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007), the motivation to oppose equality is distinct from the motivation to perceive society as fair and just, and likely stems from prejudice rather than system justification. If resistance to affirmative action also stems from system justification, we expect that people who believe that society is already fair and that equal opportunity has already been achieved (i.e., system-justifiers) will show negative attitudes toward (1) affirmative action policies and (2) organizations that support them. Indeed, we predicted that if system justification promotes resistance to equal opportunity, attitudes toward affirmative policies might mediate (i.e., account for) the relationship between system-justifying beliefs and opposition to companies committed to affirmative action. In other words, legitimizing ideologies like system justification can block progress by promoting negative attitudes toward affirmative action policies that, in turn, foster resistance to organizations that embrace them.

### THE IMPLICIT ASSOCIATION TEST

To measure attitudes toward equal opportunity organizations, we used the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) because system justification theory argues that motives to legitimize the status quo frequently operate at the nonconscious level (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Thus, even if individuals do not explicitly reject companies that support diversity because anti-egalitarian attitudes are in conflict with norms to be nonprejudiced, they may automatically react negatively to these companies. If system justification predicts automatic resistance to companies that endorse equal opportunity policies, this would suggest a subtle way in which legitimizing ideologies hinder societal change. The IAT relies on reaction time tasks that afford insight into the ways in which people automatically evaluate social objects. Such implicit measures (Fazio & Olson, 2003) have the advantage of avoiding people's tendency to

ensor politically incorrect responses, and they bypass the limitations of human introspection (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). In other words, people may not be willing or able to accurately report their attitudes, and implicit measures circumvent these problems. Moreover, because individuals may hold multiple attitudes toward a single attitude object (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000) the use of implicit as well as explicit measures may yield a more complete assessment of an individual's beliefs. Support for system justification theory has been found using the IAT in past research (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo & Johnson, 2008; Jost, Pelham, & Carvalho, 2002; Livingston, 2002; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). For example, the IAT has revealed that social hierarchies predict automatic preferences for dominant over minority group members even when explicit attitudes are not influenced by the groups' relative status (Jost et al., 2004; Lane, Mitchell, & Banaji, 2005; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002). In addition, IAT-assessed prejudice and stereotypes predict discriminatory behaviors better than explicit counterparts (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009), suggesting that it might be an effective means of measuring attitudes toward organizations that oppose discrimination.

The IAT is based on the principle that when concepts are strongly associated (e.g., attitude objects with positive or negative evaluations), they will be categorized together more quickly and accurately than when they are not mentally associated. In other words, when congruent concepts are categorized together, response times will be facilitated relative to when incongruent concepts are categorized together. The task involves sorting stimuli into superordinate categories by pressing designated computer keys as stimuli appear on a video monitor (see Figure 1). The stimuli consist of positive and negative words, and two attitude objects. In the present research, the attitude objects consisted of equal opportunity companies that used affirmative action advertisements and companies that refrained from using them (hereafter, merit-based companies). Prior research has shown that the IAT is sensitive to the formation of attitudes toward novel objects (e.g., Olson & Fazio, 2001; Lane et al., 2005).

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY

To examine whether system justification predicts opposition to equal opportunity organizations, six advertisements from companies seeking job applicants were created. Half of the advertisements indicated that the company engaged in affirmative action policies; the other half excluded this information. Participants completed the company attitude IAT, reported their attitudes toward each of the companies, and reported their attitudes toward affirmative action policies. System justification beliefs and attitudes toward affirmative action were assessed in advance as part of an online mass-testing session. Support for our hypothesis would be demonstrated if attitudes toward affirmative action programs mediate the hypothesized link between support for system justification and company attitudes. This would suggest that system justification spurs resistance to equal opportunity organizations because system-justifiers reject affirmative action. Because system justification is thought to operate frequently at a nonconscious level (Jost et al., 2004), this may be particularly true when attitudes toward the companies are assessed implicitly.

		Respond Left	Respond Right
Block 1	20 trials	GOOD	BAD
Block 2	20 trials	MERIT-BASED	EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
Block 3	60 trials	MERIT-BASED + GOOD	EQUAL OPPORTUNITY + BAD
Block 4	20 trials	EQUAL OPPORTUNITY	MERIT-BASED
Block 5	60 trials	EQUAL OPPORTUNITY + GOOD	MERIT-BASED + BAD

FIGURE 1. Illustration of the company attitudes IAT. The IAT takes five minutes to complete and starts by familiarizing participants with the four categories used in the task. Individual stimuli (i.e., company names or good or bad adjectives) are randomly presented on a computer screen. In Block 1, participants are asked to respond left to good words and right to bad words (e.g., by pressing the A or L key on the keyboard). In Block 2, they respond left to merit-based company names and right to equal opportunity company names. The IAT effect is obtained by comparing responses latencies in Block 3 (in which merit-based company names and good words are assigned to left and equal opportunity company names and bad words are assigned to right), to response latencies in Block 5 (in which equal opportunity company names and good words are assigned to left and merit-based company names and bad words are assigned to right). The order in which these tasks are performed is counterbalanced (i.e., half of the respondents perform Block 5 before Block 3), a procedural factor that did not influence results. If a participant responds more rapidly when equal opportunity companies and bad words share a response compared with when equal opportunity companies and good share a response (i.e., if they show a positive IAT effect), this indicates a negative implicit attitude toward equal opportunity companies.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Two hundred and ninety-seven undergraduates (152 female) participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of their Introductory Psychology research requirement. Of these, 155 (52%) were White, 18 (6%) were Black, 75 (25%) were Asian, 25 (8%) were Latino, and the remaining 9% reported another ethnicity.

### MATERIALS

*Job Descriptions.* Job advertisements for six companies were constructed based on genuine company descriptions, including actual affirmative action statements (e.g., drawn from Craigslist). However, the company names were changed to rule out any effects of familiarity. All companies were described as local start-ups that were currently searching for employees. The companies provided a variety of services (e.g., food, media, and technology) and indicated they were hiring in multiple divisions (e.g., sales, information technology, writing, and administrative assistance). Half of the job advertisements indicated that the company was an equal opportunity employer by including an affirmative action statement such as:

We are an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer. We support all aspects of diversity and provide equal opportunity to all employees and applicants without regard to race, color, religion, sex, marital status, national origin, age, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a veteran in accordance with applicable nondiscrimination laws.

For the remaining half, the affirmative action statement was excluded. The order in which the six companies were presented was counterbalanced across participants. In addition, the companies described as equal opportunity versus merit based was counterbalanced. These procedural variables did not influence results. For examples of the job descriptions, see Appendix A.

*Implicit Company Attitudes.* Prior to completing the company attitude IAT, participants were informed that we were interested in “the cognitive processes that are used in decisions that involve memory” and that the task involved distinguishing categories by pressing assigned keys. The company attitude IAT used the category labels Merit Based and Equal Opportunity which were represented by the company names (e.g., Engage Entertainment, Interactive Media, Advance, Inc.). The attribute categories were Good (represented by good, right, fair, innocent, love, paradise, beauty, and just) and Bad (represented by bad, awful, disaster, unfair, harmful, wrong, evil, and terrible). The company attitude IAT obliges people to categorize each type of company with both positive and negative words and differences in response latencies reflect implicit attitudes. Specifically, the amount of time it takes to categorize merit-based and equal opportunity companies with positive and negative stimuli, respectively (e.g., merit-based + good and equal opportunity + bad) is subtracted from the amount of time it takes to perform the reverse pairing (e.g., merit-based + bad and equal opportunity + good) so that positive scores indicate automatic preference for merit-based companies (i.e., nonconscious resistance to equal opportunity organizations). To compute the recommended *D* statistic, we divided the mean differences in latencies by participants’ standard deviation, resulting in an effect size that is similar to Cohen’s *d*, but it is based on individual variances rather than pooled variances (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003).

*Explicit Company Attitudes.* After reading each advertisement, participants responded to the following questions: “Are you interested in learning more about the company?”; “Do you think you would be interested in working for this company?”; and “Based on this ad, do you think this company will get a lot of applications?” on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Responses to merit-based companies were averaged ( $\alpha = .80$ ), as were responses to equal opportunity companies ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Because the IAT is a relative instrument (and it correlates best with relative explicit measures; see Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005), a difference score was computed such that a positive score indicated preference for merit-based over equal opportunity companies.

*System Justification.* Participants’ perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of the prevailing social system were assessed with Kay and Jost’s (2003) eight-item system justification scale (SJS). Sample items include, “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness,” “In general, the American political system operates as it should,” and “Our society is getting worse each year” (reverse coded). Participants indicated their agreement with each of the items on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) scale. After appropriate recoding, responses were combined such that higher scores on the SJ scale indicated greater support for the system ( $\alpha = .79$ ;  $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

*Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action.* Participants’ feelings toward affirmative action were assessed using the Attitudes toward Affirmative Action scale (ATAA; Brutus, Parra, Hunter, Perry, & Ducharme, 1998; Parra, 1991). Sample items

include, "Affirmative action is beneficial to society" and "Affirmative action practices lower the overall quality of an organization" (reverse coded) on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. After appropriate recoding, responses were combined ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## PROCEDURE

The SJS and ATAA were administered online during a mass-testing session at the beginning of the semester (in that order). At least three weeks later, participants signed up for a project ostensibly investigating aspects of the job search process. After arriving at the lab, they were brought to individual cubicles that were equipped with a standard desktop PC. The experimenter then started a program that informed the participant that the research was investigating the types of companies that are most likely to attract potential job applicants, and as such they would be reading several job advertisements from local companies and subsequently indicating their interest in the company. Participants were instructed to carefully read the six job advertisements and forewarned that their memory would be tested. After each advertisement, participants indicated their explicit attitude toward the company.

The IAT requires that people learn the companies well enough to categorize them accurately as belonging to equal opportunity or merit-based. Therefore, after all of the advertisements had been studied, participants completed a sorting task that served as a reinforcing reminder of which companies were equal opportunity employers and which were merit-based. Specifically, instructions for the sorting task stated that "several of the companies were listed as Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employers whereas others were not." Equal opportunity employers were defined as those that "engage in hiring practices that ensure that women and minorities are well-represented in their workplace" whereas merit-based employers were defined as those that "do not especially encourage women and minorities to apply." Participants then indicated which companies were Equal Opportunity and which were Merit-Based by pressing designated keys when the company name appeared on the video monitor (for 18 trials). After completing the sorting task, participants then completed the company attitude IAT followed by demographic items (gender and race). A subsequent memory check indicated participants could successfully distinguish merit-based and equal opportunity company names ( $M$  accuracy = 94%). Finally, participants were debriefed and compensated.

## RESULTS

### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

Overall, participants indicated more positive implicit attitudes toward the affirmative action companies than the merit based companies, resulting in a negative IAT effect ( $D = -.12$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) that was significantly different from zero,  $t(296) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .27$ . Participants also evaluated the affirmative action companies ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) more favorably than the merit-based companies ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = .94$ ), resulting in a negative explicit company attitude difference score ( $M = -.28$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) that was significantly different from zero,  $t(296) = 4.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .27$ .

TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables by Participant Gender

	Male Participants		Female Participants		Gender Difference	
	M	SD	M	SD	F	d
Company IAT	-.05 <sub>a</sub>	.44	-.20 <sub>b</sub>	.47	9.18	.33
Explicit Company Attitudes	-.14 <sub>a</sub>	1.01	-.43 <sub>b</sub>	1.01	7.11	.29
System Justification	5.07 <sub>a</sub>	1.13	4.69 <sub>b</sub>	1.21	9.22	.33
Attitudes Toward AA	3.92 <sub>a</sub>	.90	4.23 <sub>b</sub>	.90	10.39	-.34

Note. Means with differing subscripts differ at (at least)  $p < .01$ .  $N = 297$  (145 male, 152 female). Effect sizes are Cohen's  $d$ . By convention, .20, .50, and .80 correspond to small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

### KNOWN GROUPS VALIDITY

The company IAT is a novel measure; therefore, it is important to establish its validity, including investigating gender and race effects. Separate 2 (gender)  $\times$  2 (race: White, non-White) ANOVAs were conducted on each of the dependent variables. Table 1 shows the results by gender; Table 2 shows them by race. As can be seen in Table 1, female participants indicated more positive implicit and explicit attitudes toward the affirmative action companies than did men. In addition, women had lower levels of system justification and more positive attitudes toward affirmative action than did men. As seen in Table 2, non-White participants indicated significantly more positive attitudes toward the affirmative action companies than did Whites (both implicitly and explicitly). In addition, they had lower levels of system justification and more positive attitudes toward affirmative action than White participants. These results support the known groups validity of our measures, including the IAT.

### SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION AND RESISTANCE TO EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Despite mean differences on the dependent measures, preliminary analyses suggested that controlling for gender or race in the correlation analyses did not significantly alter the findings. That is, the patterns were similar for men and women, and for Whites and non-Whites. This concurs with system justification theory's argument that defense of the status quo operates similarly for minority and majority group members (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000). We therefore collapsed across groups for the focal analyses.

*Correlations.* As can be seen in Table 3, implicit and explicit attitudes toward the companies were significantly correlated. Moreover, implicit and explicit company attitudes were significantly related to attitudes toward affirmative action. However, only the company IAT was significantly related to system justification; for explicit company attitudes, this relationship was marginal,  $p = .06$ .

*Mediation Analysis.* Our focal hypothesis predicts that system justification fosters the rejection of affirmative action policies, which, in turn, promotes resistance to companies that promote equal opportunity. Specifically, we expected attitudes toward affirmative action to mediate the relationship between system justification and company attitudes, at least when company attitudes were assessed using the

TABLE 2. Means and Standard Deviations by Participant Race

	White Participants		Non-White Participants		Racial Difference	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>d</i>
Company IAT	-.08 <sub>a</sub>	.47	.17 <sub>b</sub>	.46	4.13	.20
Explicit Company Attitudes	-.17 <sub>a</sub>	1.00	-.41 <sub>b</sub>	1.03	5.27	.24
System Justification	5.01 <sub>a</sub>	1.33	4.73 <sub>b</sub>	.98	5.69	.25
Attitudes toward AA	3.94 <sub>a</sub>	.97	4.23 <sub>b</sub>	.81	9.94	-.33

Note. Means with differing subscripts differ significantly (all  $ps < .05$ ).  $N = 297$  (155 White, 142 non-White). Effect sizes are Cohen's  $d$ . By convention, .20, .50, and .80 correspond to small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

IAT. Explicit attitudes were not significantly related to system justification, but theoretical advances have shown that mediation can nonetheless be tested using asymmetrical confidence intervals (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, and Lockwood, 2007). This approach has two main advantages. First, it acknowledges that the mediation effect is seldom based on a normal distribution (Shrout & Bolger, 2002)—an assumption of Baron and Kenny's (1986) Normal Theory (NT) approach. Second, it results in low Type I errors while simultaneously increasing power (MacKinnon et al., 2007). We therefore tested our mediation hypothesis using both implicit and explicit company attitudes. Results are shown in Table 4. For readers more familiar with NT, we included a Sobel's test for significant mediation.

As can be seen in Model 1, support for our hypothesis using the company IAT was shown whether we used NT or asymmetrical confidence intervals. That is, after accounting for attitudes toward affirmative action, the significant effect of system justification on the company IAT was reduced to nonsignificance and the asymmetrical confidence intervals of the indirect effect did not include zero. In Model 2, similar results were shown for explicit company attitudes. These findings suggest that participants high in system justification beliefs indicated more negative implicit and explicit attitudes toward equal opportunity employers at least in part because of their rejection of affirmative action policies.

## DISCUSSION

The present research reveals that system-justifying processes foster resistance to companies that use affirmative action to promote equal opportunity for women and minorities. In fact, mediation analyses suggested that the relationship between system justification and company attitudes was accounted for by attitudes toward affirmative action. Thus, system justification dampens enthusiasm for equal opportunity organizations by promoting resistance to social policies designed to alleviate group-based inequities. Because system justifiers are motivated to perceive society as fair and just, they resist social change policies designed to reduce inequality and thereby, improve society's fairness. Although system justification can meet human needs for certainty and safety by preserving the belief that the world is just, predictable, and fair (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), the side effects of protecting the status quo are likely to be negative, especially for members of low status groups (e.g., Jost & Thompson, 2000; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Moreover, to

TABLE 3. Correlations Among the Variables

	Company IAT	Explicit Company Attitudes	System Justification	Affirmative Action
Explicit Company Attitudes	.28***			
System Justification	.12*	.11+		
Affirmative Action	-.27***	-.25***	-.16**	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the extent that system justification motives operate at the nonconscious level (Jost et al., 2004), they may be a particularly insidious barrier to achieving a more equitable society.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The company IAT was a useful strategy for measuring the predicted link between system justification and attitudes toward equal opportunity organizations because it allowed us to test whether system justification predicts implicit responses to equal opportunity organizations better than explicit, controlled responses (which may be influenced by social norms and self-presentation concerns). Results were inconclusive. Although the correlation between system justification and company attitudes was only reliable when we used the IAT, the correlation between system justification and explicit company attitudes was marginally significant. That is, participants were somewhat less likely to be interested in applying to work for, or even learning more about, affirmative action companies to the extent that they endorsed legitimizing beliefs (e.g., Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.). In addition, mediation analyses were comparable whether we used the IAT or explicit company attitudes. Thus, system justification played a role in both implicit and explicit company attitudes, and did so because of its dampening effect on support for affirmative action policies.

Because the underlying motives involved in legitimizing the status quo are thought to be frequently nonconscious (Jost & Banaji, 1994), an important direction for future research is to develop implicit tools to assess system justification motives, not just the implicit outcomes of endorsing such beliefs. In the present research, nonconscious motives to view the world as fair and just should predict implicit attitudes toward equal opportunity organizations better than the SJS (an explicit measure of system-justifying beliefs). For example, measuring automatic links between concepts related to society and concepts related to justice and fairness may provide an indication of the extent to which individuals are motivated to view the world as (already) equitable. Testing whether these associations increase in response to threats to the status quo would more directly test the role of nonconscious motives in legitimizing the system.

Nonetheless, the company IAT may prove to be useful in future research, given that the present findings supported its known groups and convergent validities. For example, are system justifiers less likely to do business with companies they know to be equal opportunity employers because they automatically dislike them? In the present research, the company IAT was associated with a decreased

**TABLE 4. Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action as a Mediator of Relationship between System Justification and (Implicit and Explicit) Company Attitudes**

Path/effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Sobel's <i>Z</i>	95% Confidence Intervals
Model 1				
<i>c</i> (SJ → Company IAT)	.048*	.023		
<i>a</i> (SJ → ATAA)	-.120*	.044		
<i>b</i> (ATAA → Company IAT)	-.131*	.029		
<i>c'</i>	.033	.022		
<i>a</i> × <i>b</i> (mediation effect)	.016*	.007	2.33**	.0041, .0304
Model 2				
<i>c</i> (SJ → Explicit Attitudes)	.093†	.050		
<i>a</i> (SJ → ATAA)	-.120*	.044		
<i>b</i> (ATAA → Explicit Attitudes)	-.270**	.063		
<i>c'</i>	.060*	.049		
<i>a</i> × <i>b</i> (mediation effect)	.032*	.014	2.30*	.0084, .0633

Note. *N* = 297. Estimates are unstandardized. SJ = system justification; ATAA = attitudes toward affirmative action. In Model 1, Path *b* is the effect of ATAA on the Company IAT after accounting for SJ. Path *c'* is the effect of SJ on the Company IAT after accounting for ATAA. In Model 2, the Company IAT is replaced by explicit attitudes toward equal opportunity companies. Sobel's *Z* tests the significance of the mediation effect based on a symmetrical distribution of *a* × *b*. Confidence intervals for *a* × *b* are based on an asymmetrical distribution. Intervals that do not include zero support rejecting the null hypothesis that *a* × *b* = 0.

†*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

willingness to work for (and learn more about) affirmative action companies. Thus, automatic negativity toward affirmative action companies may also translate into a decreased willingness to support their products or make use of their services; future research should directly investigate this possibility. Moreover, we assessed implicit attitudes toward equal opportunity organizations, and system justification might also predict attitudes toward individuals who are committed to diversity and fairness (e.g., human resource managers who implement or engage in affirmative action).

In addition, because the current findings are correlational, they are unable to address causal hypotheses. Future research that manipulates system justification (e.g., by exposing participants to rags-to-riches stories of successful individual achievement versus stories of innocent victims; Wakslak et al., 2007) to examine its causal influence on resistance to equal opportunity policies and employers would be beneficial.

Finally, although the present research focused on opposition to affirmative action, there are many other policies that might be similarly informed by system justification (e.g., global warming; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010). For example, opposition to same-sex marriage typically revolves around the belief that nontraditional unions undermine the family institution (Glaser, 2005). Because the traditional family structure is the predominant system for close relationships, those desiring to uphold it may well resist extending the rights of marriage to same-sex couples (because they perceive these rights as challenging the extant system) and

may be unwilling to recognize the injustices caused by withholding these rights. However, this possibility, as well as how system justification affects reacting to other progressive policies, remains an empirical question.

## CONCLUSION

Affirmative action is under siege in the courts and in public opinion (Cokerinos, 2003). In 2009 alone, anti-affirmative action initiatives were on voting ballots in several states (American Civil Liberties Union, 2009). The present findings suggest that system justification presents a significant barrier to achieving equal opportunity because it fosters resistance to hierarchy-attenuating policies and organizations that put them into practice. Ironically, the people who most strongly believe that the system is fair are also likely to resist progressive actions that strive to create the world they already believe in.

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## APPENDIX A.

### Example of a Merit-Based Company Advertisement

Vines.com is revolutionizing the way people buy wine. We're the world's largest and fastest growing wine marketplace. We're a nimble, New Jersey-based, venture-capital-backed company and a great place for smart, hard working people to make a difference and help us change the wine industry. Vines.com is a small start-up with less than 100 employees, but we're a unique group of people with a wide range of previous experience. We're hiring across multiple divisions, so if you're interested in our company, send us an email telling us about yourself, your relevant experience, and what you can do to help improve our company.

### Example of an Equal Opportunity Company Advertisement

If you love great food and are ambitious and adventuresome, Ultra Fresh may be for you. Our crew is responsible, knowledgeable, friendly, and fundamental to our success. And at our headquarters in Ramapo, NJ, we offer the training and development our crew needs to move into leadership positions. At Ultra Fresh, we offer you the potential for upward mobility, a creative and fast-paced work environment and a chance to look forward to going to work! So if you've ever thought about working for a challenging, upbeat, people-oriented company, Ultra Fresh could be the right place for you.

Ultra Fresh is an equal opportunity employer and all qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to age, race, creed, color, national origin, qualified disability, sex, or any other legally-protected category.

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