

# Rationalizing Social Inequality: A Theoretical Overview of Social Psychology Theories

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## ABSTRACT

‘System Justification Theory’ (Jost and Banaji, 1994) has postulated how differences in social status are maintained by privileging those who belong to dominant/high-income class at the expense of inferior/low-income group members. In addition, members of disadvantaged groups in unfair social systems willingly justify social arrangements and rationalize inequality even when it works against them. This theory has been developed by incorporating the existing work and related ideologies, which emphasizes the processes of justification and rationalization. Theories in social psychology discipline offer exhaustive literature to understand the proposed mechanism, which exists in societies that sustain social inequality and group-based hierarchies. This research paper provides a detailed overview of such theories as well as certain hypotheses and predictions through a visual theoretical framework, which has been significant in the development of ‘System Justification Theory’.

**Key Words :** Social Inequality, Group-based hierarchies, Social Psychology, System Justification

## INTRODUCTION

Group-based hierarchical relationship and social inequality is a universal phenomenon of 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the present times, societies are riddled with different forms of inequalities (social, economic, cultural and linguistic) as experienced by socially constructed groups. In most social arrangements, it is visible that some groups have a higher status in terms of access to more power, prestige and resources as compared to others who above all lack resources for survival. This wide chasm between members of high status groups (*dominant, elite or ‘the haves’*) and low status groups (*subordinate, disadvantaged, or the ‘have nots’*) have always been a part of human condition. These conditions further devalue individuals who are economically and materially disadvantaged, granting them lower class position in the society when compared with upper class. Such realities of unequal conditions as a social issue have been a topic of research inquiry (as well protest and debate) for many

decades especially for individual or groups who face discrimination, stereotype and prejudice due to membership to specific caste, gender, class, race, or sexual orientation.

Prominent theories in social (and political) psychology have been developed by John T. Jost and Mahzarin R. Banaji (1994) – ‘System Justification Theory’, by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) – ‘Social Identity Theory’; and by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (1999) – ‘Social Dominance Theory’. Such theorist offer an exhaustive literature to understand the proposed mechanism, which exist in societies that sustain social inequality and group-based hierarchies. Such theories mainly suggest that differences in social status are maintained in society by privileging individuals from dominant/upper class at the expense of individuals’ from disadvantaged class. That is, when individuals from low-income groups rationalize ideologies which justifies the system they then position high-status group (dominant) members on the top of the social class, while themselves at the bottom end (Jost

and Banaji, 1994). This understanding has been particularly important in the theorisation and development of ‘system-justification’. Therefore, endorsement of such ‘system-justifying’ ideological beliefs motivates individuals or groups to see and accept the “*existing social arrangements as fair, just and legitimate*” (Jost and Hunyady, 2010, p.119) even if it works against them.

Similarly, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (1999) developed a theory ‘Social Dominance’ to affirm that unequal group-based hierarchical relationships are established not only through physical forces (or social pressures), but also through the role of relatively stable system-justifying ideologies which helps to maintain social inequality in society seem as morally legitimate. Therefore, social theorist generally relate this central argument to the role of ideologies which helps people to maintain the support for social system, also helps them to rationalize and explain inequality which they believe they deserve as life outcomes (Major, 1994). Such treatments and outcomes are further propagated through social stereotypes and prejudices of the socially disadvantaged groups as lazy, irresponsible, and unintelligent that allows members of advantaged groups to blame them for their own deprivation, rather blame the system. Therefore, social scientist (Olson and Hafer, 2001), have been long puzzled to understand this profound situation – as to why members of socially disadvantaged groups often fail to express discontent with their dismal situation. According to Wright (2003), social science research have tried to examine and analyse this very tolerant, unresentful and forgiving nature of members from socially disadvantage groups as they fail to challenge the very system which work against them. These researchers support this proposition by asserting that most people seem to find means of tolerating and even justifying inequalities and disparities (social, cultural and economic) as fair, legitimate, just, necessary and inevitable.

Practicing stereotypes and other ideological devices to preserve the legitimacy of the existing social system as stated by Jost and Hunyady (2003) is a major focus of ‘System Justification Theory’. This research paper aims to present and summarize prominent theories and perspectives, which have largely influenced the development of ‘System Justification Theory’. John t. Jost and Mahzarin R. Banaji originated this theory in 1994, which was published in their seminal work: “*The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness*”. Their research

accounts for conforming to social stereotypes and the prevalence of outgroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups. Understanding the various ideologies and sources such as ‘Marxist-Feminist ideology’, ‘Belief in Just World’, ‘Cognitive Dissonance Theory’, ‘Social Dominance Theory’ and ‘Social Identity Theory’. Such theories have been significant for the development of ‘System Justification Theory’ as it puts forth the prevalence of system-justifying motive where people can be seen maintaining and enhancing the legitimacy and stability of existing forms of social arrangements (Jost and Hunyady, 2003). In addition, certain hypotheses and findings as proposed by system justification theorists are highlighted to determine various themes for instance, ‘the rationalization of the status quo’, ‘the internalization of inequality’ (including out-group favoritism and depressed entitlement), ‘relations among ego, group, and system justification motives’, and the reduction of ideological dissonance. It further elaborates upon the alternative possibility for endorsements of system justifying ideologies that may facilitate as palliative (pain-reducing) functions to make people look happier in other ways, thus to establish the theoretical understanding which is applied in this research study.

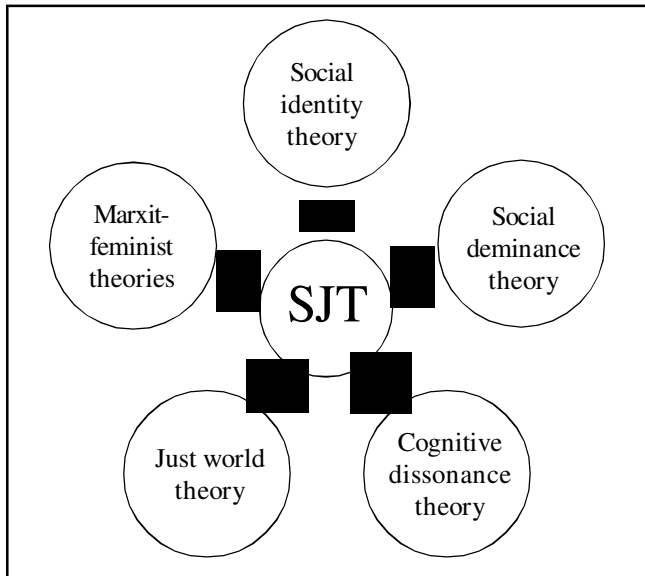
The objective of this paper is, thus to reflect upon the critical question theoretically as raised by system justification theorist (Jost, Banaji and Hunyady) as to - why does justifying social arrangements and rationalizing inequality has psychologically benefits. In addition, address the psychological benefits, which compensate the many negative opposing effects that system justification has for members of socially disadvantaged groups such as dissonance, low self-esteem, depressed entitlement, depression and neuroticism. Therefore, this research paper presents a detailed review of literature related to the relationship of social inequality with ‘System Justification Theory’ in order to understand certain paradoxical propositions related to members of disadvantaged or subordinate groups who appear reluctant to challenge the existing social system and arrangements that suppresses them.

### **‘System Justification Theory’: Origin and Development:**

The origin and development of ‘System Justification Theory’ largely draws and incorporate from existing body of literature and prominent theories (which are elaborated in this section) which have been significant in the

postulation of hypothesis and predictions as represented under system justification perspectives.

### Social Identity Theory:



The foundation of ‘System Justification Theory’ is largely based on ‘Social Identity Theory’ which explains how individuals from low-income groups accept their lower class status in the society and even find the social system to be stable and legitimate (Turner and Brown, 1978).

Further, Jost (2001) stated that ‘Social Identity Theory’ precedes the ‘System Justification Theory’ and is beneficial in certain ways. It elaborates the perspective of socio-psychological ideologies, which is in accordance with inter-group relations. Under this study, it is predicted that differences in status and success between members of the groups will affect their perception towards their own group members as well as other groups. This will subsequently have an impact on their group relationship (in future course) due to uncertainty of the social system (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Second, the theory emphasise on factors which are ideologically related to perceive the social system as legitimate and stable that is directly applicable in ideologies such as ‘*in-group and outgroups favouritism*’ (Ellemers *et al.*, 1993).

Lastly, it describes that group members in extreme social settings make new ideologies that allows them to justify the competition between them (which is one of the identity management strategies) and against other groups. Moreover, when such ideologies are shared it

develops certain dominant role and persuasive power among groups. Such social identity perspectives seek to integrate some of the socio-structural variable in the ‘System Justification Theory’ as it helps to explain the reason behind the existence of stereotypes and other ideas justifying social and material inequalities endorsed by members of inferior groups (Jost and Banaji, 1994).

### ‘Belief in Just World’:

The second most important ideology significant for the development of ‘System Justification Theory’ is derived from the literature of justice research, specifically the research on the “tolerance of injustice” among the disadvantaged groups (e.g., Martin, 1986; Tyler and McGraw, 1986). This suggests the fact that people want to believe in a “just world” as theorized by Lerner (1980) in which people “get what they deserve and deserve what they get”. Even when living in unpredictable, uncontrollable and erratically unjust circumstances which are psychologically threatening, members of disadvantaged groups hold on to the notion that it is fair as people get what they deserve (Olson and Hafer, 2001). ‘System Justification Theory’ (Jost and Hunyady, 2003), thus, considers the aspect of just world theorizing of the socially validated belief that the status quo is necessary and legitimate.

### ‘Cognitive Dissonance Theory’:

This theory was first proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957 to suggest that there are situations where individuals show an inner drive to control attitudes and behaviour in order to avoid mental conflicts or dissonance. This social psychological investigation of 20th century has been particularly significant in justifying and rationalizing social processes and systems, which further promotes inequality. Since individuals are psychologically motivated to maintain and resolve conflicting thoughts and feelings it further explains and justifies them for their social conditions and experiences.

### ‘Marxist-Feminist Theories’:

This ideology was developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which reflected on the importance of ‘*cognitive dimensions of oppression and system preservation*’ (as cited in Jost and Hunyady, 2003, p. 117). Since the literature on Marxist-Feminist is very exhaustive, this research makes use of certain themes of this elaborated theory, which is concentrated on dominant ideology and

creates a false consciousness among inferior groups. Because of this, individuals start to believe in the system, accept their oppression and blame themselves for their disadvantaged position instead of looking at the system, which promotes inequalities based on class positions. Jost and Banaji (1994) highlights that this particular perspective has been fundamental and largely influential for social science disciplines like sociology and political science. Particularly for ‘System Justification Theory’, which largely draws from social philosophical work like Marxist-feminist analysis of “false consciousness” and “dominant ideology” to understand why, individuals from low-income groups justify their inferior status in the social setting. Thus, system justification theorists during their initial phases of establishing work on justification theory applied fundamentals of “false consciousness” and “dominant ideology” in particular.

**‘Social Dominance Theory’ (SDT):**

It emphasizes that intergroup relations among socially constructed groups is based on social hierarchies. The theory focuses on the maintenance and stability of these groups that are socially constructed in societies. As proposed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), social dominance theorist, the theory postulates that social groups in society are formulated conferring to social hierarchies, which are based on the formation of groups in societies. According to this theory, social hierarchies within human beings generally involved dominant group, which is at the uppermost ladder, as well as the subordinate groups, which is at the bottomend. Members of the higher status, dominant, hegemonic or advantaged group (for instance, a white male), occupy more powerful social roles in such conditions. These hierarchies have a structure, which reflects the social structure that individuals are situated. Moreover, such theorist describe that these hierarchies are based on various factors for instance such as the factor of age where grown-ups show more superiority and dominance than youngsters, likewise gender male dominance is perceived

in society as compared to women inferiority, and group-based hierarchies that are socially and culturally construed in few societies.

**Theoretical Understanding of ‘System Justification Theory’:**

The predictions of ‘System Justification Theory’ brings together and forms the various ideas and assumptions from the above-mentioned theories on inter-group relations. At the most fundamental level, Jost and Banaji (1994) postulate that existence of a system justification motive is the process in which the individuals explain and justify things or social processes as they are (especially status quo) so that the social system and arrangement is looked upon as just and legit, eventually trying out to be natural and inevitable. That is the reason they have developed an argument, which tries to find out that:

*“Stereotypes serve ideological functions, in particular; that they justify the exploitation of certain groups over others and that they explain the poverty or powerlessness of some groups and the success of others in ways that make these differences seem legitimate and even natural (Ibid., p. 10)”.*

Thus, theorist (Jost and Hunyady, 2002) under system justification as trying to build an improved effort to formalize the central beliefs of this perspective derived from certain hypotheses and predictions through various theoretical and empirical works on this topic (Ibid. p. 119). The predictions and hypothesis are mentioned below:

SJT- Predictions And Hypothesis			
<b>A. Rationalisation</b>	<b>B. Internalisation of inequality</b>	<b>C. Relations among ego, group, and system justification motives</b>	<b>D. The reduction of ideological dissonance</b>
Rationalisation of the status quo	Ingroup vs outgroup favouritism-	Ingroup ambivalence	Enhanced levels of system justification
Stereotyping as rationalisation.	Depressed entitlement	Self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism	
Stereotypical rationalisation in response to system threat.			
Placating the powerlessness			

**‘Rationalization of The Status Quo’:**

When the likelihood of rationalization of the status quo increases in individuals, the process also enhances their tendency to desire predictable events. This proposition suggested by system justification theorists lay importance on the capacity of individuals towards a rationalization process, which further allows them to support the very social system to which they belong by considering it as stable and secure. Jost and Hunyady (2003) emphasize that it is quite normal for individuals to come to terms with the predictable future outcomes. At the same time, individuals also have this capacity to accommodate their adverse past experiences that are related to unwelcome opportunities and outcomes in life. This remarkable ability of individuals, as explained by Jost (1995) “*may help to explain why social and political systems are successful at retaining cooperation and consent and why social change is so difficult to accomplish.*”

Another tendency, which reflects on the nature of individuals, is to utilize stereotypes to justify the difference in status between groups as suggested by Hoffman and Hurst (1990), Jost (2001) and Jost and Banaji (1994). They further integrates this theme into ‘System Justification Theory’ to assert that this tendency of stereotyping occurs to justify the existing socio-economic differences between groups. This led ‘System Justification Theory’ to propose that groups belonging to either “*in-group or outgroup will be stereotyped differently depending on whether it is perceived to be high or low in status*” (Ibid.). The third type stresses on the increased stereotypic rationalization mostly when the system is under threat (Jost *et al.*, 2003a). Jost and his colleagues proposed that individuals, in particular, would like to use stereotypes that will serve to enhance their status quo and support it which will eventually enable them to attack the system ideologically. They further hypothesized that individuals have a tendency under the threat of social system to exhibit “*increased stereotypic differentiation*” (Ibid.). In relation to ‘System Justification Theory’, this proposition helps to explain the tendency of members from disadvantaged groups self-victimise themselves or bear the blame of others “*self-scapegoating*” to justify the social system. This support for the social system (through the rationalization of inequality) especially in times when it appears to be

most vulnerable (Jost and Hunyady, 2003).

Lastly, Haines and Jost (2000) empirical study suggest that rationalization of status quo produces this tendency for individuals from low-income groups to legitimize and surrender to their lower-status as suppressed and inferior. They argue that individuals generally agree to the idea of rationalization of status quo- “*they would accept and bolster even relatively placebic- explanations for power differences between groups (Ibid.p.1)*”. The study further postulate that in ‘System Justification Theory’ when members from low-income groups are exposed to the idea of “powerlessness” such an explanation enables them to internalize stereotypes. This increase use of stereotypes helps them in rationalization of differences in the society, which later directs them to express positive effects rather than negative (p.222).

**‘Internalization of Inequality’:**

This ideology under the ‘System Justification Theory’ relates to ‘*in-group vs. outgroup favouritism*’ and ‘*depressed entitlement*’. This leads to the prediction that individuals of both high-income and low-income groups are surrounded by thoughts and feelings, which reinforces their behaviour and enables them to justify social system (Jost and Hunyady, 2003). Theorist indicate that it is the tendency of favouring the other group (especially the upper class) which further allows legitimization of unfair social system and inequality between different social class groups.

Jost and Banaji (1994) have even postulated that for individuals of low-income groups subscribing to ‘out-group favouritism’ is an extension, which provides ideological support for existing social arrangements, which stimulates to internalise a sense of inferiority (also mentioned by Jost *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, depressed entitlement suggest the internalisation of inequality, especially observed within gender whereby women at workforce feel inferior in terms of less salary and low status as compared to men (Major, 1994).

**‘Relations among Ego, Group, and System Justification Motives’:**

For members of low-status or disadvantaged groups, motives for ego, group, and system justification are often in conflict with one another (Jost *et al.*, 2001). This is often found among individuals from disadvantaged communities, and are not experienced

by members from high-income groups (Jost *et al.*, 2001).

In this case, the tendency to accept the legitimacy of the social system is at odds with motives for the enhancement of individual or collective self-esteem (Jost *et al.*, 2001). Jost and his colleagues have exemplified the functioning of the motives for - the ego, group, and system justification in two ways. It first translates to those conflicting situations, which are in large number faced by individuals from low-income groups related to the self, group and system. It later suggest that members of low-income groups are most likely to engage in system justification “*when competing for motives for ego or group justification that are low in salience or strength*” (Ibid.).

While, for members of high-income groups, the term ego justification refers to the tendency to develop and maintain a favourable self-image consequently feeling that social system is fair, valid, justified, and legitimate that it “*reward the worthy and punishes the unworthy*”(Jost and Banaji, 1994). Thus, system justification theorists taking from these basic theoretical assumptions have derived certain hypotheses, which are concerned with the “*existence of a system justifying motive*” and its “*relations among ego, group, and system justification motives*” (Jost and Burgess, 2000 as cited in Jost and Hunyady, 2002, p. 122).

#### **‘In-group Ambivalence’:**

Jost and Burgess (2000), have hypothesized that in individuals from low-income groups there is a display of higher level of ‘In Group Ambivalence’ than for individuals from high-income groups. This is particularly observed among lower class groups as it helps them to justify social system and group differences. Therefore, they put forward that there would be increased level of in- group ambivalence for individuals from low-income groups as system justifying motives increases. In addition, decreased level is seen for individuals from high-income groups as the motives increases.

#### **‘The Reduction of Ideological Dissonance’:**

In the last of its predictions and hypotheses, system justification theorists have drawn their assertion from the logic of dissonance theory under which they argue that members of low-status groups should exhibit strongest system justification needs, at least under certain circumstances (Elster, 1983; Lane, 1962; as cited in Jost

*et al.*, 2003b). Jost and his colleagues (2003b) assert that according to dissonance reduction mechanism (researched by Wicklund and Brehm, 1976) when individuals are in a state of suffering, it paradoxically increases commitment to sources, which are related to their suffering.

Thus, as described above these predictions and hypotheses are fully supported by range of empirical evidences, which are relevant to the causes, and consequences of the individual’s psychological understanding towards the social system. Particularly relevant for individuals from low-income groups as such psychological thoughts and beliefs contradicts their own interest as well as the in-group unity and favouritism.

#### **System Justifying Ideology and its Palliative Function:**

The central argument raised by system justification theorists (Jost and Hunyady, 2003) through predictions and hypotheses puts forth the tendencies of ‘outgroup favouritism’, ‘depressed entitlement’, ‘in-group ambivalence’, ‘heightened neuroticism and depression’, and ‘lowered self-esteem’ endorsed by individuals from low-income groups. They further argue that since system justification leads to such tendencies, which are imbibed by members of the low-status group. The question that arises then is why do members of the low-status group ever engage in such system justification tendencies, which are not in favour of them? Such an understanding has been fundamental in the development of ‘System Justification Theory’ by Jost and Banaji (1994) in order to comprehend the social system and the intention of low-income groups to justify to their disadvantaged status. Research studies by social science scholars is making an attempt to unravel such paradoxical cases where individuals often feel satisfied with their disadvantaged situations through the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies.

Jost and Hunyady (2003) believe that this assertion can be answered through the mechanism of stress and coping. This perspective of stress and coping has been influential in order to understand the complex structures wherein individuals justify existing social system to support their disadvantage status and position in society (p.145). To counter this concern, system justification theorists have explored the alternative possibility for endorsements of system-

justifying ideologies, which are unfavourable and disadvantageous for individuals from low-income groups. Since it is understood that system beliefs substitute the complex relations related to stress and coping systems (Jost and Thompson, 2000). Therefore, they adapt system justification propositions and its tendency that helps to provide alternative effects towards the stress caused to members from low-income groups due to stereotype and stigmatization. This tendency to provide alternative effects is important in at least three ways (Jost and Hunyady, 2003).

1. When individuals endorse system justifying ideologies it involves certain beliefs and understanding about the social system. Such beliefs and assumption act as a “*stress-preventing function*” which further allow these individuals to feel at ease with the social system considering it as stable, just, fair and legitimate (Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

2. The process of endorsement of system justification is also considered as a “*coping resource*” (Jost and Hunyady, 2003, p. 147). This resource not only reduces stress through the primary appraisal (the process that prevents the individuals from feeling certain stress) but also through the secondary appraisal (the process that fosters a sense of control to detect and manage stress). The idea of ‘sense of control’ as proposed by McCoy *et al.* (2013) suggest that individuals maintain a belief that they have the ability to shape their future outcomes as well as control it.

3. Last, Jost and Hunyady (2003) suggest that justifying the social system could also act as a “*coping activity or response*” to various stressors as experienced by individuals from both high and low-income groups due to certain inequality and unstable social positions.

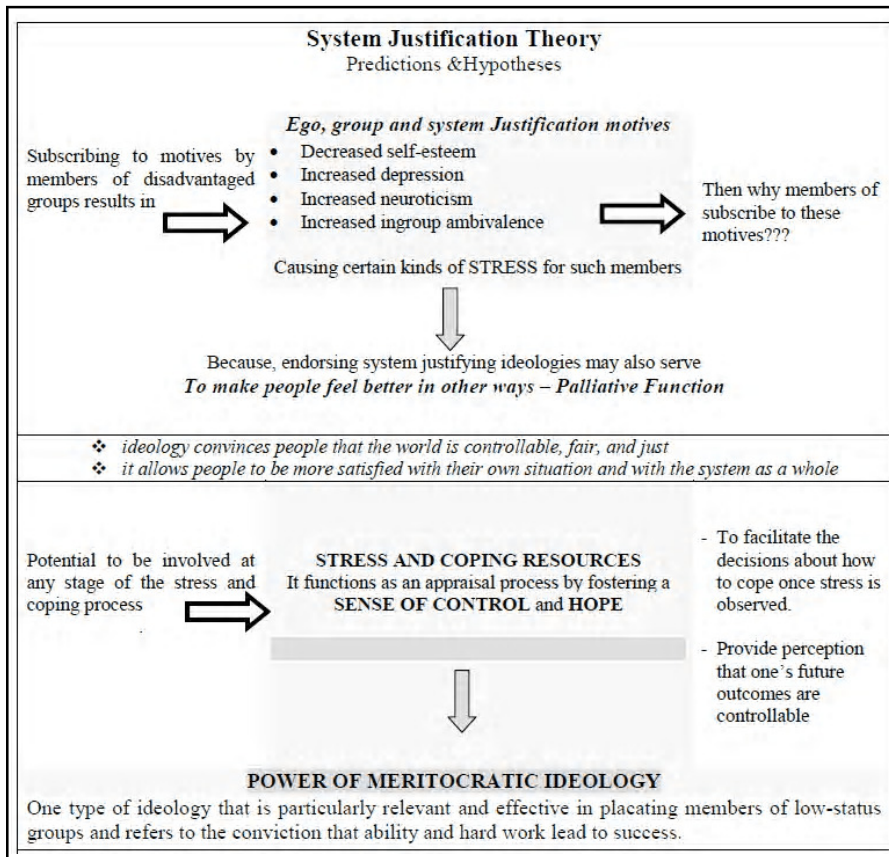
Therefore, ideologies related with system justification may act as a buffer to make individuals feel better about their conditions. It mainly emphasizes that such ideologies convinces individuals to feel that “*world is controllable, fair, and just*” (Major, 1994; Olson and Hafer, 2001). Moreover, it allows individuals to feel more satisfied and content about their own conditions (social positioning) and the existing social system (Kluegel and Smith, 1986) they live in. One particular ideology, which is relevant, effective and appropriate for individuals from low-income groups, is

‘Meritocratic Ideology’.

The notion of meritocratic ideology refers to the idea of ‘merit’ – that is ability and hard work will lead to success. On the contrary, individuals fail or are unsuccessful because they did not put in necessary abilities to achieve successful life outcomes. This idea of meritocracy that anyone can succeed through hard work and determination is a dominant ideology in Western and European Countries (Kluegel and Smith, 1986 as cited in Jost and Hunyady, 2003). Scholars have found that meritocratic ideology is often successful among individuals from high-income groups as “*serves to increase the confidence and the esteem of those who are privileged and to ease their consciences*” (Chen and Tyler, 2001; Montada *et al.*, 1986). Simultaneously, rationalisation of such ideological belief functions in opposite for those who are unsuccessful. It may convince unsuccessful individuals to believe that they were given a fair chance to prove and succeed thus making it easier for them to rationalize and accept inequality (Hunyady, 2003, p.145).

It has been pointed out by Harding and Sibley (2013, p.402) that there are some aspects which relates to the positive psychological outcomes when individuals from low-income group endorse system justifying ideologies, but that studies are cross-sectional. What needs to be understood is whether these palliative effect of system justifying ideologies are present only for immediate short-term or for longer periods to improve their wellbeing. System justification theorists (Jost *et al.*, 2004), for instance, have also hypothesized that “system justification levels will be higher in societies in which social and economic inequality is more extreme than less extreme” (p. 910). They have further acknowledged that more research is needed to be conducted in other cultures especially those, which are different from relatively non-extreme and advantaged continents of North America and Europe. Only limited studies have been conducted in regions, which vary from western cultures. Therefore, to test such hypothesis, which will determine that the levels of system justification will be higher among members of low status groups who reside in similar conditions of extreme cases of poverty, requires future research.

**Visual Summary of Theoretical Framework:**



of this theory that supports rationalization of social inequality by individuals from low-income groups when they endorse system justifying ideologies.

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## Conclusion:

'System Justification Theory' (SJT, Jost and Banaji, 1994) and 'Social Dominance Theory' (SDO, Sidanius and Pratto, 1999) determine that differences in social status are maintained by privileging individuals from high-income groups at the expense of individuals from lower class. System-justifying ideologies as mentioned by Jost, Banaji and Nosek (2004) when particularly held by members of low-income group even at an unconscious level helps to position higher class individuals on top which reinforce their higher status in the society, while it positions low-status members on the bottom end (Jost et al., 2004). Endorsement of various "system-justifying ideologies and beliefs" hence motivates individuals from low-income groups to justify social systems and settings as legit and justifiable, even if the system fails to work against their welfare and social development. Having summarized the above-mentioned prominent theories and perspectives, which has largely influenced the development of system justification and its theoretical framework. This article hence theoretically represented and elaborated upon the different ideological underpinnings

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