

# A Three-Worldview of System Justification Theory

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System Justification Theory (SJT) coalesced from many other foundational perspectives and must be conceptualized as a unified theory, where the pieces of the puzzle are not discarded but integrated. That is to say, while the whole is more than the sum of its parts, you can not fully appreciate why this is so without understanding the parts. In this sense, a unification theory is a theory about interactions where the combination of things brings into being a new something, a *Gestalten*, which, like the fluidity of water, is something very different than an oxygen-hydrogen compound; and while it must be comprehended in terms of its own uniqueness, its worth is not diminished but enhanced by knowing it is in fact a compound.

As Thomas Kuhn (1970) points out, theories build on theories because in the course of doing normal science anomalies arise, which define boundary conditions constraining predictive and explanatory utility until a critical mass is reached necessitating a theoretical reformulation. Most often, for sciences in the preparadigm stage of development, this means constructing a new competing theory. For sciences with a paradigm, it is more typical to see new theories emerge from and subsume existing theories in a hierarchical sense, much like Hooker's (1987) metaphor of a pyramid, where theories are represented as intellectual generalizations condensing ever greater numbers of facts and laws into fewer and fewer organizing principles. The important point being that scientific theories are inclusive, hierarchical schema enabling description, prediction, and explanation through systemic interrelatedness.

SJT is just such a theory. Not surprisingly, it has a decidedly perspectivist flavor. Perspectivism (McGuire, 2004) is an approach to theory construction, which assumes that all hypotheses and theories are equally true and equally false and are all relative to the perspective from which they are viewed. The perspectivist approach to theory construction capitalizes on a basic scientific realization, that of complementarity. A worldview as first recognized in psychology by William James and articulated in physics by Niels Bohr is not a principle and not a theory, but a conceptual framework where our position as observers accommodates descriptions of phenomena as mutually exclusive and interdependent (Knight & Rupp, 1999). The most popular example is light, which is neither and both a particle and a wave depending on your conditions of observation, your perspective. Is a hill up or down? It is neither and both; up and down being mutually exclusive and interdependent in that one cannot be the other and neither can exist without the other. The most fascinating thing about

complementarity is that it tells you that if you are observing one aspect of a phenomenon, search for its complement. Using a perspectivist approach, Jost and Banaji (1994, 2004) recognized that our considerable knowledge about ingroup favoritism could mean but one thing: it had to exist in its contrary. But what would outgroup favoritism look like? Why would it exist at all, and how could it possibly be sustained?

## A SJT Just-So Narrative

The impetus for theoretical consilience derived from the realization that there is a complementarity between ingroup and outgroup favoritism, and that outgroup favoritism could not be explained by existing theories, which emphasized ego-defense and group-defense protecting self- and social-identity. There had to be something more at work here because outgroup favoritism is a threat, not a defense, to self- and social-identity. It is a truism that problems, which seemed intractable only moments before, appear obvious upon their solution. Jost and Banaji untied this Gordian knot by looking at it from two other perspectives: just world theory and cognitive dissonance theory. Valuing a higher status group, thereby jeopardizing self- and social-identity, is irrational; therefore, it had to be caused by something else, some other need, which was being sated. That need turned out to be the need to believe in a just world.

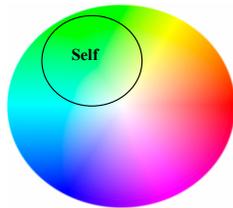
Cognitive psychology has long recognized that we have an innate need for closure, a need to explain, in short, a need for answers; so much so that we would often rather have wrong answers that endure the discomfort of not knowing. In terms of our view of the world, our worldview, we justify it by believing that things are the way they are for a reason, otherwise they wouldn't be that way (Lerner, 1977, 1980). For SJT, the default belief in a just world is axiomatic. Further, it is inculcated as a phenomenal absolute, beyond question. A worldview supersedes all else. The world exists before any particular group or any particular individual. The world is the sea both individuals and groups of individuals swim in. In the constructed reality of the mind, individuals and groups vary, they come and go; but, there is only one sea, so ubiquitous and omnipresent as to go unrecognized. Because the worldview is a given, it is also THE answer, the final arbitrator, resolving any real world inconsistency or conflict. My self-identity derives from my worldview (belief in the system). My social-identity derives from me being in a group and that group being a part of me. But because my group must be located somewhere within the system, I also

have a status-identity. Now here is the question: what if, in the scheme of things, my group has a low status? I have a need to justify and protect my self- and social-identity, and if I believe my low status-identity is unjust, the conflict would produce a tsunamic cognitive or ideological dissonance, which would disable the system. This does not happen because the dissonance is ameliorated by my belief that things are the way they are because they are supposed to be that way; either that, or my one worldview is destroyed, and that is not going to happen, for if there is but one world I have nowhere else to go. Belief in the system makes it possible for self-, social-, and status-identity to coexist harmoniously and the contradiction between ingroup and outgroup favoritism is resolved.

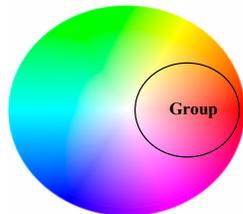
### The Three -Worlds of Self, Group, and Beliefs

SJT is a perspectivist theory, which allows you to view every aspect of the system from every conceivable angle without the encumbrance of right and wrong ballasts dictating a received view. Imagining the world out there as a color spectrum is a good metaphor for perspectivism. One cannot look at a rainbow and ask, what color is it? The red, green, and blue primaries are easily recognized, but yellow as a blending of red and green is less obvious. Seeing yellow, it is easy to be convinced that red and green do not exist. But with knowledge comes a certain sense of wonder, realizing that the color of a rainbow is white, for want of a prism. What better metaphor than to describe the systemic complementarity inherent in perspectivism.

In this way, SJT as a perspectivist theory provides an organizational infrastructure integrating existing knowledge. Much like the outcomes of an analysis of variance, we can ask: what are the equivalent theoretical constructs representing each of the primary effects and their interactions in the spectrum?

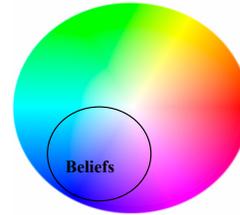


A developmental narrative must begin with the Self construct. We are born premature into a sensory world where we are helpless, in need of others to keep us alive and show us how to survive, to show us the “way” of the people. As we become our “Self” we acquire the language of the Group, a language which reflects the Beliefs of a culture, Beliefs that are our window on the world, the atoms of our worldview.



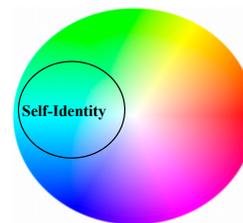
As individuals we exist in a physical world, but we are also born into the world of the Group. The people who care for us, our immediate family, our extended family, our village, this is

the world of the Group. In our ancestral environment we learned our “way”, maturing in small groups where every person touched every other person routinely, so naturally that I became We as a matter of course.

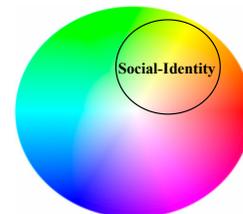


There is a critical period for the acquisition of language. As Chomsky might say we seem to literally inhale it from the cultural air around us. In this same way we breathe in the attitudes and beliefs of our culture. There is an inherent symbiosis between words and beliefs, they are living things with an existence all their own, surviving in competition with other words and beliefs, adapting and changing in response to the selective pressure of social dynamics. To study the history of beliefs is to study the archeology of the mind. Taken together Beliefs constitute the worldview we are born into, a separate world from the more transient worlds of the Self, or the Group.

### The Worlds of Identity

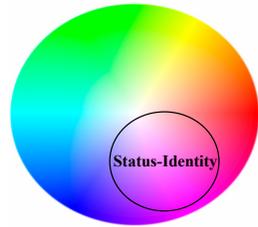


Most psychological theories of personality, from Freud to Allport to Kelly, are primarily concerned with self concept development, how one individuates an identity through a process of acculturation, a merging of the self with the worldview of beliefs, through language, enabling consciousness. Literally teaching the person how to think about themselves as unique individuals, and at the same time a part of something much bigger than they are alone; teaching them how to belong by instilling a longing to be.



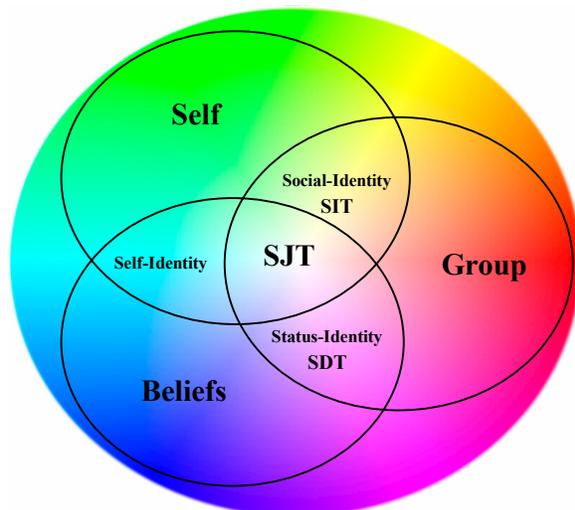
Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) emphasizes the merging of the Self and Group worlds to create a new something, a social identity which is much more than the person simply being a member of a group, it is the person’s internalization of the group; a Piagetian adaptation through assimilation and accommodation, not unlike the give and take of merging traffic. Being a female means much more than your gender, you didn’t enlist, you are a female; or an

African American, or a Vanderbilt etc. From this perspective, phenomena like ingroup favoritism, stereotyping, stereotype threat and stereotype vulnerability are revealed as a natural consequence of a direct threat to the world of Social-Identity.



It is an economical and biological fact of nature that humans have proliferated beyond the capacity of natural subsistence. Because of our numbers we are forced to manufacture the resources to sustain life, an unfortunate Malthusian consequence of greater resources however is enhanced reproductive success, necessitating the need for even more resources, and so it goes... Meaning we no longer live in isolated small groups, but in groups among groups, the natural consequence of which is group hierarchies and intergroup social dominance in much the same way that individuals form natural intragroup dominance hierarchies. The corollary to social-identity arising from intragroup dominance is intergroup status-identity as an outcome of social dominance. Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) focuses attention on the legitimization of status through beliefs. It is my own worldview which informs me of where my group belongs in relation to other groups and creates my status-identity. It is in the world of Status-Identity that we assimilate status beliefs that lead to internalized inferiority if our status is comparatively low or perhaps even more insidiously, internalize superiority if our status beliefs point us in that direction.

### SJT through a Perspectivist Lens



Each of the foregoing perspectives is part of the puzzle, but it is their merger in SJT that completes the picture. From this vantage the reason for outgroup favoritism becomes obvious. The worldview is comprised of beliefs which are a part of the sinew which weaves the fabric creating both self-identity and status-identity. Beliefs are passed to social-identity only

indirectly, like rumors, through the worlds of Self and Group, but have an isomorphic existence in self- and status-identity. Meaning that status and self beliefs are structure coupled, you can not change one without a corresponding change being reflected in the other.

To destroy the beliefs sustaining status-identity would destroy self-identity. It is paramount then to protect the status quo for in doing so you are protecting the self. The naturalness of social dominance among groups brings belief in inequality into being, a belief which defines the system in the form of a dominate ideology and creates the cultural and economic institutions that then manufacture its own legitimization. The individual becomes conscious of self through these beliefs and by virtue of being the way things are they are internalized as a just and natural worldview. Outgroup favoritism then is as much second nature as ingroup favoritism. There is no paradox at all. Like the magician's illusion revealed we see it is simply a matter of perspective.

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