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Psychological distance and system justification: status- and political ideology-related differences in the legitimization of inequality as a function of construal level

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Abstract

The main purpose of the current doctoral dissertation was to contribute to the research on the socio-psychological mechanisms that legitimize social inequalities. In particular, the relationship between psychological distance and system justification was examined through the lens of Construal Level Theory (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010). We hypothesized that the fundamental motivations of individuals to defend their interests, their group, and the status quo would vary with psychological distance. Study 1 and 2 investigated the moderating effect of construal level on the relationship between membership in different status groups (defined by income and gender) and system justification (in economic and gender inequality, respectively). Study 3 expanded the results by examining the influence of construal level on the extent to which individuals with opposing political ideologies justify the system. Finally, Study 4 deepened the results by comparing the impact of a self-related threat to that of a system-related threat as a function of construal level. Overall, the results suggest that psychological distance may be a crucial element in resolving the conflict between ego, group, and system justifications. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

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Introduction

In recent years, economic inequality has increased throughout the industrialized world despite numerous and persistent efforts to curb it, and global wealth has accumulated and consolidated in the hands of only a few (e.g., Solt, 2016; 2020). In addition, ethnicity-related income disparities and racial biases continue to permeate societies (e.g., Richeson & Sommers, 2016), and despite progress, gender pay gaps persist (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In the United States, economic inequality has reached its highest point in the last three centuries (Lindert & Williamson, 2016; Piketty et al., 2018). In Italy, the wealthiest 20% of Italians control 69.8% of the nation's wealth and 40% of total income, despite a decline in absolute poverty in the country (ISTAT, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic disparities, both in terms of mortality risk and economic vulnerability (e.g., Clouston et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021).

In light of evidence indicating that social inequality is becoming more pervasive, researchers from a variety of disciplines have devoted significant attention to the study of inequality's causes and effects, in an attempt to understand and intervene in the economic, political, and social processes that contribute to its spread. In recent decades, social psychology has helped identify a number of mechanisms at the individual, group, and system levels that contribute to legitimizing and maintaining inequality, as well as factors that serve as motivational antecedents for actions to address inequality, both among disadvantaged and privileged group members.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the study of the psychological and social mechanisms underlying the legitimization of inequality. In particular, the main focus is on a topic that has received relatively little attention to date, namely the relationship between system justification (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994) and psychological distance, a contextual variable with

which mental representations of objects, events, actions, goals, and other people are associated based on different levels of abstraction (or construal; e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010). The purpose of the present research was to determine whether, as conditions of psychological distance vary, differences emerge between individuals from groups with distinct status, ideology, and values in their system justification motivation.

In the following section, the theoretical perspectives and mechanisms identified in the study of social inequality at the individual, group, and system levels will be reviewed. After that, an analysis of the research supporting the relationship between psychological distance and construal level and its application to the context of inequality will be presented. Following this, an overview of System Justification Theory and studies examining its relationship with psychological distance will be presented. After concluding the theoretical review, the present research hypotheses and their validation through four experimental studies will be illustrated. Finally, the results will be discussed considering the existing literature, along with their limitations and potential directions for future research.

Socio-psychological perspectives of social inequality

Understanding and acting on the mechanisms underlying social inequality - i.e., differential access to resources and opportunities between different social groups (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Kraus et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2012) - is a challenge requiring the interplay of multiple disciplines, such as economic, political, and social sciences. Inequality in access to material, social, and cultural resources, which include money, power, education, status, and rank, leads to the structuring of social stratification according to economic status and categorization processes based on social class (e.g., Markus & Stephens, 2017). Therefore, material resources, power, and status have a significant impact on people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Establishing a hierarchy of social classes implies that those at the top can enjoy abundant economic resources, influential social networks, and advantageous employment opportunities. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy have fewer resources and face greater competition as a result of social and environmental threats, such as discrimination, unemployment, and poor health conditions (e.g., Kraus & Park, 2017). The increasing focus of the social sciences on the study of inequality has revealed that hierarchies based on power and resource disparities are self-perpetuating. This is because they are psychologically and socially determined and reinforced by mechanisms that contribute to the maintenance of the status quo (e.g., Eidelman & Crandall, 2014; Jost et al., 2004; Kraus et al., 2017; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Sidanius et al., 2000). Therefore, the primary contribution of social psychology to the study of inequality is the persistent effort to analyze and investigate a variety of psychological and social mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of class hierarchies based on disparities in people's wealth, education, and occupational prestige (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2012). Consequently, this section will provide a brief overview of the theoretical approaches and empirical evidence regarding the social and psychological factors and processes that maintain or, conversely, impede social and economic inequality. In addition, it will highlight the potential

contribution that recent research on the relationship between psychological distance and inequality can make to our understanding of inequality and our ability to combat it.

Social and health-related outcomes

Inequality is linked to numerous far-reaching negative outcomes that burden the economy, health, and social relationships of smaller communities and society. Some studies have shown, for instance, that countries with high income inequality experience slower and less stable economic growth over time (e.g., Alesina & Rodrik, 1994; Easterly, 2007; Berg & Ostry, 2011) and that increases in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) tend to be concentrated on a small portion of the population (Piketty & Saez, 2014). In addition, economic inequity is associated with worse health − both among lower and higher social classes − (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006; Subramanian & Kawachi, 2006; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015), lower well-being both physical, e.g. obesity (e.g., Pickett et al., 2005), and mental (Burns et al., 2014; Messias et al., 2011), and with increased rates of crime, drug abuse, discrimination, status competition, and other social issues (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Paskov et al., 2013). Moreover, research has demonstrated that class differences impact the likelihood of educational success (Pascarella et al., 2004), social mobility (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 2005), and life expectancy (Chetty et al., 2016). Easterlin's paradox (1974), concerning the relationship between economic growth and people's happiness, is of particular interest: in countries with high levels of inequality, economic growth does not predict higher levels of well-being; rather, as the economy grows, people's unhappiness increases. In contrast, as expected, people in countries with low inequality are happier when the economy is growing (e.g., Oishi & Kesebir, 2015). Thus, when only a small portion of the population accumulates disproportionately, economic growth does not increase national prosperity. Mechanisms underlying the relationship between income inequality and subjective well-being include anxiety associated

with status competition, mistrust, and future-related fears (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Buttrick et al., 2017). Well-being is influenced less by objective measures of wealth distribution than by individuals' perceptions of their status and, more generally, of inequality (e.g., Cruces et al., 2013; Oshio & Urakawa, 2014).

Political and status-related differences in sociopsychological outcomes

Numerous research studies have demonstrated that social class structure influences how individuals think, feel, and behave in social settings (e.g., Kraus et al., 2012). For example, higher-class individuals may perceive greater levels of control and self-sufficiency, factors that focus more attention on their own internal goals and states. In contrast, lower-class individuals are more susceptible to environmental threats and, as a result, are more likely to develop an other-oriented focus − i.e., greater vigilance for the context and for other individuals (e.g., Kraus et al., 2009; see also Markus & Stephens, 2017). Other studies have found that higher levels of income and status correlate with greater support for conservative political candidates, diminished support for social welfare programs and inequality-reducing interventions (e.g., Kraus & Callaghan, 2014; Andersen & Curtis, 2015; McCarty et al., 2006). In addition, while upper-class individuals engage more in politics, lower-class individuals tend to withdraw from political participation and are, therefore, less likely to vote and attend debates, even on issues that concern them (e.g., Mcelwee, 2015; Gelman, 2009). Members of the upper (as opposed to the lower) class have been found to have higher levels of intergroup bias and ingroup favoritism (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1991; Guimond et al., 2002). In addition, several studies have demonstrated that individuals from lower social classes are more concerned with the wellbeing of others, are more empathetic, and have a greater capacity for compassion for the suffering of others. They also engage in more prosocial actions, such as donating time and money to those in need (Piff & Robinson, 2017; Varnum et al., 2016; Stellar et al., 2012; Piff et al., 2010; Miller

et al., 2015). In contrast, members of the higher social class are more focused on self-interest maximization and less willing to share with others (e.g., Piff & Robinson, 2017; Piff et al., 2016).

Therefore, it would appear that wealthy and high-status individuals are more likely than poor individuals to engage in behavior that maintains inequality (e.g., Bratanova et al., 2016). As evidence, Alesina and Giuliano (2011) discovered that preferences for resource redistribution in the United States depended on specific individual characteristics, such as personal wealth − i.e., greater wealth correlates with less support for redistribution. In addition, the study found that black Americans (vs. white), women (vs. men), the young (vs. the elderly), those with a low level of education, and those who supported a left-wing (vs. right-wing) political ideology were more likely to support redistribution. Further analysis revealed that the interaction between education and political ideology positively influenced the preference for redistribution, i.e., more educated and left-wing individuals tended to be more in favor of redistribution (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011). In line with these findings, other studies have found that political conservatives (vs. liberals) and people with a high level of right-wing authoritarianism tend to express less support for inclusive policies promoting equality (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Kauff et al., 2013; Citrin et al., 2001). In general, the beliefs and ideological values that are shared within the society or group to which a person belongs can influence how he or she evaluates inequality and, consequently, how they behave in relation to this issue. In other words, individual beliefs, political ideologies, and values can influence how inequality is perceived and how it is acted upon.

Legitimization of social inequalities among privileged and disadvantaged groups

So far, the evidence seems to contradict the notion that humans value fairness, equality, and justice as fundamental values for establishing cooperation and reciprocity between different

social groups (Keltner et al., 2014; Tyler, 2011). Based on this premise, it would be expected that individuals would oppose social and economic inequality. Empirical research has demonstrated, however, that a set of structural configurations, social processes, and individual motivational processes intersect to maintain and legitimize social and economic inequality. Legitimization refers to the processes by which social arrangements, attitudes, and behaviors are validated as conforming to normative standards, such as justice standards (Costa-Lopes et al., 2013). In societies where egalitarianism and fairness are fundamental cultural values, legitimacy is essential for maintaining the stability of intra- and intergroup relations, as individuals are more likely to respect and perceive the system as characterized by legitimate means and fair decision-making procedures (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2000). Thus, the processes underlying legitimacy operate at the level of the individual, the group, and the system, as they serve three distinct functions: at the individual level, they enable people to maintain a positive self-image by adhering to socially desirable norms and values while subtly discriminating against those who do not. At the group level, they reinforce the dominant groups' privileged position and the hierarchical structure that results. Finally, at the system level, legitimacy permits the defense, reinforcement, and justification of society's status quo (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2000; Jost et al., 2001; Costa-Lopes et al., 2013).

The interest in studying the social and psychological processes underlying the legitimization of inequality has resulted in the development of widely accepted, context-specific theoretical frameworks. Social Dominance Theory (SDT; e.g., Sidanius, 1993) and System Justification Theory (SJT; e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994) are two of the most well-known theoretical paradigms in the field of social psychology that are undergoing constant development.

SDT was founded on the premise that human societies are composed of group-based social hierarchies in which one or more groups have greater status, power, and resources than

the others (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1994; Pratto et al., 1994). Consequently, members of high-status groups are motivated to consolidate their dominant positions, which promotes social inequality (e.g., Sidanius et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Sidanius et al., 2004). The factors that maintain group hierarchies, according to SDT, can be traced to shared beliefs and ideologies that take the form of legitimizing myths. The authors distinguish between myths that strengthen the hierarchy and those that weaken it. Myths of the first category are the most pernicious because they serve as moral justifications for actions that cause the oppression of non-dominant groups and therefore promote social inequality. Numerous studies have found that supporters of these ideologies tend to exhibit social dominance orientation (SDO), i.e., a general desire to dominate over other groups. In line with the notion that membership in a high-status group elicits greater preferences for inequality (e.g., Bratanova et al., 2016), some research indicates that members of high-status (vs. low-status) groups tend to report higher social dominance orientation scores in both natural and experimental settings (Levin, 2004; Guimond et al., 2003; Huang & Liu, 2005). Meritocratic ideology, i.e., the belief that economic inequality is due to differences in people's ability, effort, and talent, is a widespread myth that legitimizes and reinforces social hierarchy, especially among members of the uppermost social class. Therefore, the possession of wealth and high social status is attributed to the individual characteristics of group members as opposed to structural influences at the level of society (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 2017; Kraus et al., 2009). Meritocratic ideology compels members of the upper social classes to support the economic status quo and oppose efforts to alter it, e.g., by opposing the redistribution of resources and rejecting the entry and integration of people from different cultures (e.g., McCoy & Major, 2007; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015). As a result, dominant groups tend to oppose diversity recognition and multiculturalist ideology (e.g., Unzueta et al., 2012; Citrin et al., 2001; Morrison et al., 2010; Plaut et al., 2011; Kauff et al., 2013; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2011), which would instead permit the structuring of positive intergroup relations and more inclusive policies

that promote equality (e.g., Plaut et al., 2009; Todd & Galinsky, 2012; Wolsko et al., 2006; Gieling et al., 2014; Hahn et al., 2015). Moreover, meritocratic ideology can activate processes that legitimize and exacerbate inequality in narrower contexts such as workplaces (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2020). Similarly, essentialist beliefs − i.e., the tendency to attribute stable genetic causes to differences between groups of different social status (e.g., Heine et al., 2017) − also frequently contribute to the maintenance of hierarchies and the activation of intergroup biases and stereotypes (Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008; Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004).

However, high-status individuals are not always the only ones who share legitimizing myths. Some research has found that the acceptance of meritocracy among socially disadvantaged groups is associated with a greater tendency to attribute the causes of inequality to the disadvantaged group rather than to structurally rooted phenomena like racism or sexism (e.g., McCoy & Major, 2007). Attributing success to those with high status and blaming the victims of inequality helps people maintain the belief that the world is just − because good is rewarded and bad is punished − and that they have some control over their lives (e.g., Lerner, 1970; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). The just world belief (Lerner, 1980) has been observed in a variety of contexts. However, as much as the motivation to perceive the world and social systems as fair can provide a sense of greater stability and control, this psychological process can also contribute to the acceptance and legitimization of social inequality, as it leads individuals to blame individual victims for their situation rather than situational or social factors (e.g., Lerner, 1970; Rubin & Peplau, 1975; Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Jost & Kay, 2010; Lerner, 1980). As a result, it encourages members of disadvantaged groups to disaffiliate from their ingroup and seek membership in groups with higher status (e.g., Ellemers, 2001). Therefore, it would appear that the persistence of inequality is due not only to the desire of dominant groups to maintain the status quo, but also to the active and passive forms of support exercised by

members of non-dominant groups (e.g., Jost et al., 2004). Just world belief, meritocracy, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988), benevolent sexism (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 2001), and political conservatism have been identified as ideologies that contribute to legitimizing inequality, perpetuating social inequalities, maintaining the status quo, and therefore fostering system justification processes (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005). People are motivated, according to System Justification Theory (SJT), to defend, justify, and reinforce the status quo, including existing social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements, especially in the presence of system threats (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost et al., 2010; Liviatan & Jost, 2014; Jost, 2019). Consequently, people tend to view inequality as not only legitimate but also natural and essential (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). This motivation can manifest itself explicitly or implicitly among dominant and disadvantaged groups, such as through prejudices, stereotypes, and endorsement of legitimizing ideologies (e.g., Kay et al., 2005; Jost et al., 2005). The belief that the status quo is legitimate and desirable is the result of epistemic motivations to reduce uncertainty, existential motivations to reduce threat, and relational motivations to restore traditional society (Jost et al., 2008; see also Jost, 2017). Several factors, such as the perception of being dependent on the system (e.g., van der Toorn et al., 2011) or being trapped in an inevitable system (e.g., Laurin et al., 2010), can trigger these motivations. These beliefs cause individuals and groups to view society as fairer and more desirable than it is, thereby giving rise to an inherently conservative disposition to maintain the status quo (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Understanding the dynamics underlying this motivation can therefore shed light on why individuals support ideologies that maintain and legitimize social inequality. In the following sections, a comprehensive review of research pertaining to system justification will be presented.

Influencing factors of social change

To date, the literature has primarily focused on the psychological and social processes that facilitate an understanding of the origins and perpetuation of inequality. On the other hand, a growing body of research has highlighted the factors that encourage individuals to engage in social protest against the status quo. In addition to understanding how inequalities become entrenched in societies and are perpetuated, it is crucial to identify the conditions under which inequalities can be reduced. Identifying the factors that increase the capacity of collective action to bring about a change in the status quo, both through mass political actions (such as demonstrations and strikes) and actions at the individual level, such as signing a petition, is particularly important (e.g., van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). The empirical evidence pertaining to the Relative Deprivation Theory (e.g., Stouffer et al., 1949; Runciman & Runciman, 1966; Pettigrew, 1967; Crosby, 1976) and the Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has largely influenced the organization and systematization of psychological models of collective action. These models have assisted in identifying the antecedents, or underlying motivations, that encourage individuals to engage in protest activity. Specifically, according to the Relative Deprivation Theory, when a comparison with other individuals or groups reveals that one's ingroup is deprived and unfairly disadvantaged, people experience anger, which motivates participation in the protest and acts as a catalyst for social change (e.g., Walker & Smith, 2002; Hussain & Howard, 2013). To motivate people to take collective action, it has been suggested that deprivation should be perceived based on the group, not the individual (e.g., Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Smith & Ortiz, 2002). In addition, other research has revealed that the emotional component of relative deprivation, i.e., group-based feelings of anger and resentment, is the most influential factor in fostering commitment to social protest (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2004; Iyer et al., 2007; Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013). In contrast, Social Identity Theory suggests that identification with the disadvantaged ingroup and how it relates to other outgroups are the most important predictors of an individual's propensity to take

action for social change. Individuals must perceive the impermeability of group boundaries, view their disadvantaged position as unjust or illegitimate, and be persuaded that the social structure can be altered from this vantage point (e.g., Kawakami & Dion, 1995; Mummendey et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1990). Subsequently, it has been proposed that group identification should be politicized, as collective actions are more likely to be stimulated by a strong and politicized identification with a social movement, which includes a clear normative and action-oriented meaning (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Klandermans, 2014). The Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) makes a significant contribution to the identification of the antecedents of collective action by emphasizing that individuals must perceive that they possess resources, opportunities, and collective efficacy prior to taking protest action (e.g., Sturmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2004).

The Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) is currently the most comprehensive and widely used psychological model of collective action (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2018; van Zomeren, 2019). In its original form, the model accounted for three central (or core) motivations underlying collective action. These motivations include group identification (the psychological bonding of individuals with the group), group-based anger (the perception of injustice related to a disadvantaged position that provokes feelings of group-based anger), and group efficacy beliefs (the beliefs that the group can achieve its goals through collective effort). This model considers politicized identification with the "relevant" group to be the most significant predictor of collective action, as it can influence the desire to protest both directly and indirectly via the other two motivations. The model was then expanded to include a fourth, more distal, individual predictor, which feeds into the other three, more context-dependent motivations. Moral convictions, which reflect individual differences in fundamental beliefs about what is right and wrong, are the fourth antecedent of collective action (e.g., Skitka, 2010; De Cristofaro et al.,

2021). Thus, SIMCA has traced a model of unique and positive antecedents of individuals' willingness to engage in social protest, spawning a large body of research that has demonstrated its broad applicability across a variety of cultures and contexts (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2018; van Zomeren, 2019). Jost et al. (2017) have recently argued that the SIMCA should also consider ideological processes at the system level, particularly those associated with the phenomenon of system justification (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013). Therefore, Jost et al. (2017) proposed an integrative theoretical model of SIMCA that considers the likelihood of individuals to take supportive − as opposed to challenging − actions of the system, which is determined by differences in epistemic, existential, and relational needs, as well as ideological processes related to system justification and identification with dominant or disadvantaged groups (see also Osborne et al., 2019).

A different perspective on inequality

Inequality research conducted in recent years has also been marked by a growing interest in contextual variables that may be implicated in the psychological and social processes that maintain or impede the perpetuation of social and economic inequality. Even though the issue of economic inequality has been the subject of numerous studies in recent decades, utilizing, for the most part, theoretical approaches that originated explicitly in the field of inequality, the pervasiveness and severity of the problem necessitate a constant updating of the literature to include empirical contributions from theoretical paradigms that originated in contexts unrelated to inequality. Recent lines of research that have focused on the relationship between psychological distance and the social, ideological, and motivational processes typically involved in social and economic inequality have produced particularly intriguing implications. The current dissertation examines inequality through the lens of Construal Level Theory (CLT; e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010), a model that postulates a relationship between psychological

distance and the level of abstraction (or construal) of mental representations of objects, events, actions, goals, and other individuals. Literature pertaining to Construal Level Theory and its applications to the context of socio-economic inequalities will be outlined in the following section.

Construal Level Theory

Any stimulus − an event, an action, an object, a target, or another individual − can be mentally represented at different levels of abstraction (or construal), and this process is closely related to psychological distance (for reviews on CLT, see Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010; Giacomantonio et al., 2010; Rim et al., 2013; for a meta-analysis, see Soderberg et al., 2015). Different levels of psychological distance − the subjective experience of what is distant from an egocentric reference point (the self) in the here-and-now (e.g., Liberman & Trope, 2014) − impact how information about a stimulus is processed. According to Construal Level Theory, humans can predict, evaluate, and plan events that are remote from their direct experience and, as a result, can transcend the present. In other words, humans can traverse psychological distance, and abstraction makes this process possible (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010). Consequently, depending on the psychological distance from the self, stimuli are represented in the mind at various levels of construal. Psychologically distant stimuli activate high-level construals, which include abstract, holistic, decontextualized, and schematic representations (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010; Förster et al., 2004). In contrast, psychologically close stimuli elicit low-level construals, i.e., concrete, unstructured, detailed, and contextualized representations (Förster, 2009; Förster et al., 2008; Freitas et al., 2004). Thus, a low-level construal includes subordinate, secondary, peripheral, and incidental stimuli characteristics, such as how to perform an action (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 1987; 1989). In contrast, a high-level construal emphasizes the principal, central, global, prototypical, and superordinate features of the stimuli by extracting the essence from available information, such as the motivations behind an action (Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Maglio et al., 2013; Rim et al., 2013). For instance, an abstract construal of the action "shopping" could be "purchasing something" or "refreshing the wardrobe", whereas a concrete construal could include information about the stores or items purchased. As the psychological distance between the

individual and the event decreases, the likelihood of shifting from an abstract to a concrete representation increases. However, as one moves along the continuum of psychological distance, high-level construals remain constant, as they emphasize the distinctive characteristics of objects and are therefore useful for relating to more remote stimuli. For dealing with the here-and-now, low-level construals are utilized, as they emphasize secondary and contextual features (e.g., Amit & Greene, 2012; Bar-Anan et al., 2006).

According to CLT, the relationship between psychological distance and the level of construal is bidirectional; that is, not only does psychological distance influence construal level, but construal level also influences distance (e.g., Bar-Anan et al., 2006; Bar-Anan et al., 2007), thereby expanding or contracting people's psychological horizons. Numerous studies have identified four distinct dimensions of psychological distance that, however, are interrelated and influence one another to produce a unified perception of distance (e.g., Bar-Anan et al., 2006; Bar-Anan et al., 2007; Maglio et al., 2013a; Maglio et al., 2013b). Initially, research focused on temporal distance − the present versus the past or the future − (e.g., Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Liberman et al., 2007; McCrea et al., 2008). Later, three other dimensions were identified, namely spatial distance − near versus far − (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006), social distance − ingroup versus outgroup; similar versus dissimilar; friend versus stranger; familiar versus outsider; greater versus lesser social power − (e.g., Smith & Trope, 2006; Liviatan et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 2011) and hypotheticality − probability versus improbability; reality versus speculation (e.g., Wakslak et al., 2006). People can transcend the present self through abstraction by projecting onto a past or future self, another self in a different place, in the minds of other people, or in situations with varying probabilities. The evaluated stimulus will be represented more abstractly if it is psychologically distant in terms of time, space, familiarity, or hypotheticality. In contrast, processing will be more concrete if the stimulus is psychologically close. For instance, Liberman and Trope (1998) used an adapted

version of Vallacher and Wegner's (1989) Behavioral Identification Form in which 19 activities are listed (e.g., "Locking a door"), each followed by two reformulations, corresponding to the purpose of the action (high level: "Protect the house") and the means to perform the action (low level: "Put the key in the lock"). In accordance with the hypotheses, the results indicated that participants tended to choose the high-level option when the activities were described as occurring at a more remote time point than when the same activities were described as occurring at a more immediate time point (Liberman & Trope, 1998). In addition, research indicates that when an event is anticipated to occur in the more distant future (as opposed to the near future), it is more likely to be classified, described, and recalled in terms of desirable characteristics than feasible characteristics. This is because evaluations of the desirability of a situation reflect its value and purpose, resulting in high-level construals, whereas evaluations of the event's feasibility focus on the means used to achieve the end state, resulting in low-level construals (e.g., Liberman & Trope, 1998). Consequently, as psychological distance increases, there is a tendency to prioritize a situation's desirability over its feasibility. This suggests that psychological distance increases the attractiveness of alternatives that are desirable but difficult to attain while decreasing the attractiveness of alternatives that are less desirable but easy to attain (e.g., Liberman & Trope, 1998; Fujita et al., 2006; Liviatan et al., 2008; Todorov et al., 2007).

The introduction of such a structured theoretical paradigm has spawned numerous lines of research that, over time, have contributed to the understanding of how the construal level influences the evaluations, decisions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. Principal areas of inquiry concern the impact of construal level on cognitive processes such as object evaluation and categorization (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2000; Liberman et al., 2002), self-perception (Pronin & Ross, 2006; Wakslak & Trope, 2009), behavior prediction (e.g., Nussbaum et al., 2003; Nussbaum et al., 2006; Wakslak et al., 2008; Rim et al., 2009), language (e.g., Fujita et

al., 2006; Semin & Smith, 1999; Snefjella & Kuperman, 2015), self-control (e.g., Freitas et al., 2008; Fujita et al., 2006; Fujita & Carnevale, 2012), problem solving and creativity (e.g., Förster et al., 2004; Jia et al., 2009), politeness and formality (e.g., Stephan et al., 2010), decision-making (e.g., Sagristano et al., 2002; Eyal et al., 2004), intergroup perception (e.g., Levy et al., 2002), moral judgement (e.g., Eyal et al., 2008; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009), and negotiation (e.g., Henderson et al., 2006; Henderson & Trope, 2009; Henderson, 2011). For instance, Trope and Liberman (2000) discovered that when people think abstractly about an object − in this case, a radio − they tend to evaluate its central characteristics (such as sound quality) primarily. In contrast, when adopting a concrete mentality, individuals give equal weight to an object's primary and secondary functions (for example, display quality). In addition, a well-known experiment revealed that high-level construal is associated with broader and more inclusive categorization of stimuli, indicating that abstract thinking makes salient higher-level categories that include many similar objects, whereas adopting a concrete mindset highlights the distinctions between objects (Liberman et al., 2002). Participants were instructed to imagine a future activity (e.g., a camping trip) and were provided with a list of objects associated with the activity (e.g., a sleeping bag, a jumper, and a pillow). Next, they were asked to categorize the objects. The results revealed that participants tended to group objects into fewer but broader categories when the action occurred in the distant (vs. near) future. In contrast, when participants had to consider the activity in the near future, they tended to classify objects into smaller categories. Therefore, when thinking abstractly, people are more likely to classify items based on their central and common features rather than their secondary and peripheral features (Liberman et al., 2002). According to another study, when predicting the behavior of others in the distant future, people rely more on dispositional information, such as personality traits, which are abstract and tend to be stable. In contrast, when people must draw inferences about short-term behavior, they consider situational and concrete factors to a greater

extent (Nussbaum et al., 2003). Similarly, subsequent research has demonstrated that people are more likely to form spontaneous inferences about the personality traits of distant (vs. nearby) individuals based on their behavior (e.g., Wakslak et al., 2008; Rim et al., 2009). People are more likely to attribute more stable dispositions to their future selves than to their present selves when they are required to draw inferences about their behavior (e.g., Pronin & Ross, 2006). In general, these studies demonstrate that when people consider psychologically distant actions, they tend to disregard situational causes and instead view behaviors as diagnostic information about their own and other's personalities.

Studies have shown that people use more abstract (vs. concrete) language when discussing psychologically distant topics (vs. close; Snefjella & Kuperman, 2015) or when addressing someone formally (e.g., Stephan et al., 2010). Moreover, adopting an abstract mindset has been found to promote self-control, as it facilitates focusing on long-term rather than short-term goals and, as a result, protects against temptation (e.g., Fujita & Carnevale, 2012), and to stimulate creativity and problem-solving (e.g., Förster et al., 2004). In terms of decision-making, Sagristano et al. (2002) found that participants assigned to the high psychological distance condition favored wagers with a high payoff but a low likelihood of winning. In contrast, participants in the low psychological distance condition favored wagers with low payoffs and high probabilities. These findings suggest that the probability is subordinate to the payoff when choosing a wager, as the latter represents a higher-level element. Similarly, a separate study revealed that when individuals must decide whether to act, arguments against are subordinated to considerations of the benefits (Eyal et al., 2004).

Research on CLT suggests that it is possible to activate high or low-level construal in people, inducing them to adopt an abstract (as opposed to concrete) mindset through experimental manipulations that then influence their behavior in unrelated tasks (for a meta-analysis, see Soderberg et al., 2015). Some studies have demonstrated that an abstract mindset

can be induced by asking participants to list commonalities (as opposed to distinguishing features) between objects (e.g., Fujita & Roberts, 2010, Study 2), higher-order categories that include the target object (as opposed to specific examples of objects belonging to the category; e.g., Fujita & Han, 2009; Wakslak & Trope, 2009; Fujita et al., 2006), and "why" the action should be performed (as opposed to the "how" such an action should be performed − why/how task; e.g., Freitas et al., 2004). Some studies have found, for instance, that focusing on the purpose of behavior (why; high level) rather than the means to perform it (how; low level) causes individuals to believe that the action will occur at a later time (e.g., Freitas et al., 2004; Liberman et al., 2007; McCrea et al., 2008). It also leads to experiencing greater social distance and, specifically, greater social power (e.g., Smith et al., 2008), as CLT suggests that individuals who perceive themselves to have greater social power feel more distant (vs. close) to others (e.g., Smith & Trope, 2006). According to research (e.g., Liberman & Förster, 2009), incentivizing participants to use a more global (vs. local) processing style results in the perception of greater psychological distance. Similarly, it has been demonstrated that considering general (high-level) goals rather than specific (low-level) actions influences participants' judgements and behavior in unrelated tasks (e.g., McCrea et al., 2008). Similar to psychological distance, these and other manipulation techniques can induce an abstract mindset that emphasizes fundamental values, as opposed to the context-specific aspects that characterize a concrete mindset (Burgoon et al., 2013).

In conclusion, years of research on Construal Level Theory have led to the development of a theoretical and experimental paradigm applicable to the study of phenomena in a variety of fields, including consumer behavior (e.g., Liberman et al., 2007; Evans & Bridson, 2005), pro-environmental behavior (e.g., Park et al., 2000; Evans & Bridson, 2005), marketing (e.g., Dow, 2000; Evans & Bridson, 2005), health behaviors (e.g., Park & Morton, 2015), and organizational contexts (e.g., Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). In recent years, interest in the application

of Construal Level Theory to the context of social inequalities has increased. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, the research lines connecting psychological distance to this domain will be outlined to illustrate how CLT can provide tools for understanding and intervening on the mechanisms that maintain − or, conversely, impede − inequalities.

Social perception and intergroup relations

According to the findings of a body of research, variations in psychological distance and the level of construal associated with it may influence social perception and intergroup relations. Overall, however, there is no clear and unambiguous evidence of the effect of abstraction on the social processes that maintain inequality. The adoption of an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset − or greater psychological distance (vs. closeness) − may reduce prejudice against non-normative groups among conservatives because it makes moral principles such as fairness salient (Luguri et al., 2012) and encourage preference for diversity (Jaffé et al., 2019). Luguri et al. (2012) discovered, across two studies, that political conservatives who adopted an abstract rather than a concrete construal − both detected through the Behavioral Identification Form (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) and experimentally induced − exhibited more positive feelings toward members of groups considered non-normative by prototypical Americans (gay men, lesbians, Muslims, and atheists). In their third study, Luguri et al. (2012) tested the hypothesis that the salience of moral principles could mediate the effect of construal level on prejudice. They discovered that, among conservatives, the induction of an abstract mindset increased concerns about fairness, which positively affected attitudes toward non-normative groups. The findings of these studies highlight the positive effects of adopting an abstract mindset on reducing prejudice against certain discriminated social groups. Two subsequent studies reached the same conclusion, namely that adopting an abstract perspective reduces prejudice (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014; Mahfud et al., 2018).

However, an abstract mindset facilitates the activation and application of stereotypes (McCrea et al., 2012) and promotes discriminatory behavior (Milkman et al., 2012). This contrast between positive and negative outcomes may be due to the fact that thinking abstractly (vs. concretely) may highlight central, common, and shared aspects among members of different social categories, thereby increasing the perception of similarity and, as a result, fostering more favorable attitudes toward particular outgroups. Simultaneously, however, abstraction increases similarity even among members of the same social category by blurring personal details and contextual characteristics, thereby facilitating the activation of stereotypes (e.g., Levy et al., 2002). The processes just described perpetuate economic inequality by widening the gap between social classes, which can be further reinforced by political preferences, moral principles, and ideological beliefs that legitimize and promote existing social hierarchies. In subsequent paragraphs, evidence of the relationship between psychological distance and these variables will be examined.

Values, moral principles, political attitudes, and legitimizing ideologies

Individual factors in the domains of values, morality, and political attitudes play a role in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals with regard to inequality (e.g., Alesina & Giuliano, 2011; Kraus et al., 2012). Due to their general, central, and generally abstract nature, values, moral principles, and political beliefs have been studied in relation to the construal level and have spawned a substantial body of research. Studies conducted within the CLT framework have yielded mixed results. In general, a large body of research indicates that evaluations of psychologically distant (vs. close) objects, events, and situations are less influenced by factors relevant to the immediate social context and instead reflect more global values, moral principles, and ideologies. This research indicates that psychological distance is associated with harsher evaluations of moral transgressions and more laudatory evaluations of

morally virtuous behavior (e.g., Eyal et al, 2008; Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009; Lammers, 2012; Agerström & Björklund, 2013), with a greater salience of one's own value system in guiding evaluations and behavior (e.g., Eyal et al., 2009; Fujita et al, 2008; Hunt et al., 2010), with a greater consideration and endorsement of moral foundations such as fairness and care (e.g., Luguri et al., 2012; Napier & Luguri, 2013; Wright & Baril, 2011; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2017; see also Yudkin et al., 2021), with a more consistent and equitable application of principles of justice (e.g., Mentovich et al., 2016), and with the polarization and sophistication of political attitudes (e.g., Alper, 2018; Luguri & Napier, 2013; Chan, 2016).

Nonetheless, some replication studies and other research in the field of morality have found contradictory evidence (e.g., Gong & Medin, 2012; Žeželj & Jokić, 2014; Kahn & Björklund, 2017; Alper, 2020; Alper & Yilmaz, 2020, Study 1). In addition, other studies have offered the possibility of a slightly different reinterpretation of the findings' implications. It would appear that adopting an abstract mindset is able to reconcile the opposing views of conservatives and liberals, thereby reducing the ideological divide associated with attitudes towards non-normative groups (Luguri et al., 2012), attitudes towards the construction of the Ground Zero mosque (Yang et al., 2013), and traditionalism (Chan, 2016). One study suggests that this effect of reducing ideological differences may be attributable to the fact that the adoption of an abstract mentality highlights common, general, and constant aspects between the parties, such as national identity, thereby promoting the convergence of opposing political positions (Luguri & Napier, 2013).

On the other hand, recent research has determined that abstract thinking increases the likelihood of attributing intergroup differences (such as racial differences) to genetic factors, and that this effect is associated with an increase in prejudice against blacks, regardless of the political orientation of the participants (Napier et al., 2018). This result contradicts previous findings that, among conservatives, abstract construal increases the salience of values such as

fairness (Luguri et al, 2012) and, in the case of multiculturalism, reduces the perception of a threat to national identity (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014; Mahfud et al., 2018), thereby decreasing prejudice (specifically, towards non-normative groups such as gay men, lesbians, Muslims and atheists, towards ethnic minorities such as Hispanic Americans, and towards immigrants).

Overall, the variety of results obtained in the fields of morality and political ideology highlights the need to evaluate the significance of replicability, generalizability, and the manipulations and instruments used in the experimental context.

Intergroup prosociality

The literature connecting CLT to prosociality provides intriguing insights into the conditions under which individuals are more likely to act in the interest of those in need. Numerous studies have demonstrated that psychological distance increases the attraction and expected gratification associated with enacting prosocial behavior (e.g., Henderson et al., 2012; Aknin et al., 2015), strengthens the link between intention and actual prosocial behavior (Yang et al., 2018) and emphasizes the correspondence between motivational orientation and behavior − and, thus, between individuals with a pro-social (vs. pro-self) orientation – it facilitates cooperation and the attainment of integrative agreements in negotiation contexts (Giacomantonio et al., 2010; see also Henderson et al., 2006; De Dreu et al., 2009; Giacomantonio et al., 2010). It also encourages individuals to make decisions based on maximizing common outcomes related to the collective units that the individual considers motivationally relevant (Stillman et al., 2018).

Other studies, however, have demonstrated that individuals who perceive less psychological distance from the target of prosocial behavior are more likely to participate in charitable initiatives (Lee et al., 2018) and evaluate cause-related marketing campaigns more

favorably when they are aimed at a local rather than a national target (Grau & Folse, 2007, study 1). It would appear, therefore, that the adoption of an abstract mindset has a greater influence on people's willingness to engage in pro-social behavior and that it makes values and interests related to the larger collective social unit salient, whereas psychological proximity, which may be expressed through a greater perceived similarity and familiarity with the social target, appears to be more effective in encouraging people to help others through concrete means such as monetary donations. In addition, a number of studies have demonstrated that the likelihood of individuals engaging in prosocial behavior, such as donating, increases when there is congruence between psychological distance and the level of target specificity/abstractness (e.g., specific person associated with low psychological distance or larger charity associated with high psychological distance; Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Similarly, in marketing contexts, individuals are more persuaded by appeals to donate containing messages whose construal level matches the degree of psychological distance that they perceive from the target (Tangari et al., 2010; Zhu et al., 2017; Goldsmith et al., 2020). Overall, these studies suggest that the application of CLT to the field of prosociality provides fertile ground for social psychology research that seeks to identify intervention tools for reducing inequality.

Willingness to engage in collective action

The majority of research on collective action has focused on how factors at the individual or group level can act as motivational antecedents that motivate or dissuade people from engaging in social protest (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2017). Recent research has shown, however, that it is also important to consider contextual factors, such as psychological distance, that may influence the propensity of individuals to engage in collective action. One study found that individuals are more likely to react to an injustice suffered by others when they perceive the victims to be more familiar and nearby in space and time

(Glasford & Caraballo, 2016). This finding is consistent with prosociality studies indicating that individuals are more likely to help those in need when they perceive less psychological distance between themselves and the target of their prosocial action (e.g, Rachlin & Jones, 2008; Lee et al., 2018; Grau & Folse, 2007).

On the other hand, a number of recent studies found that individuals from groups typically subject to discrimination (i.e., Hispanics, black Americans, white women, and members of the LGBTQ community) who tended to attribute their experiences of racism or sexism to structural (rather than interpersonal) factors − and therefore had more abstract representations of their situation and coping strategies − were more supportive of other stigmatized outgroups and were more likely to take collective action (Craig et al., 2020). Consequently, it would appear that processing experiences and information in an abstract manner can encourage members of disadvantaged groups to act collectively to address common problems, in favor of a broader shared identity that increases the perceived similarity between different targets subject to discrimination. Other scholars argue for a positive association between utopian thinking and mental representations of better alternative societies − which could lead to a greater engagement in social change − (Badaan et al., 2020; 2022) and the potential effect of abstract thinking in stimulating broader social comparisons − i.e., not only with individuals in a similar situation, but also with members of the higher social class − that could foster the intention to take collective action (Pliskin et al., 2020). However, in testing their model empirically, Badaan et al., (2022) only partially confirmed their hypotheses.

Overall, it appears that the application of the CLT theoretical framework to the study of collective action may have interesting and promising implications for research that seeks to identify the factors that motivate people to engage in actions aimed at social change and, as a result, may be a useful tool for addressing inequality.

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of the current doctoral dissertation is to investigate how psychological distance can influence system justification. Therefore, the following section will outline studies conducted in the field of System Justification Theory (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994) and, finally, studies that have examined the relationship between psychological distance and system justification.

System Justification Theory

According to research conducted in the last decades, even in contexts of inequality, individuals are motivated to defend, justify, and reinforce the status quo, including existing social, economic, and political systems, institutions, and arrangements (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2003, 2005; Jost et al., 2008; Jost & Kay, 2010; Jost, 2019). This tendency frequently manifests itself unconsciously, i.e., without deliberate intent (e.g., Jost et al., 2002; Rudman et al., 2002), both in attitude and behavior (e.g., Jost, 2019). The motivation to legitimize the system, defined as "*the overarching institutions, organizations, and social norms within which [people] live and the rules that they, to at least some extent, are required to abide*" (Kay & Zanna, 2009 p. 158), explains certain irrational and unexplainable aspects of social behavior. Commonly, people do not rebel against injustice, legitimize inequalities between privileged and disadvantaged groups, do not engage in social change, and sometimes even favor the interests of a privileged outgroup over their own ingroup (e.g., Jost et al., 2004; Jost et al., 2009; Liviatan & Jost, 2011; Jost et al., 2017). In fact, a distinctive principle of the theory is that nearly everyone, regardless of their position within the social system, possesses some degree of system justification motivation. Numerous studies have demonstrated that even members of disadvantaged groups can be motivated to defend and justify the status quo, sometimes even more so than those who benefit more from it (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). Therefore, members of both disadvantaged and privileged groups in society may, to some extent, use the available resources to legitimize existing inequalities rather than engage in social change. For instance, they may trigger processes of stereotyping, prejudice, and favoritism towards the outgroup (e.g., Jost, 2001; Jost et al., 2005; Kay et al., 2005), as well as endorse belief systems and justifying ideologies (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a; Jost et al., 2003b; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Indeed, numerous studies indicate that conservative ideology adherents are more inclined to defend the system than liberal ideology adherents (e.g., Jost et al., 2008).

Epistemic, existential, and relational motivations

System justification can be viewed as a goal-oriented and motivated process (e.g., Jost et al., 2007; Jost et al., 2010). Individuals are motivated to defend and rationalize the status quo (system justification), as well as their self-esteem (ego justification), and their group (group justification). This is due to the fact that system justification satisfies a variety of psychologically basic needs that all humans possess to varying degrees (e.g., Jost et al., 2017; Jost et al., 2008): epistemic needs (e.g., Jost & Krochik, 2014), existential needs (e.g., Jost et al., 2007), and relational needs (Jost et al., 2008). Epistemic motivations respond to the need for certainty, control, and cognitive closure, as well as the desire to perceive the world as coherent, structured, and ordered (Federico et al., 2014; Jost & Krochik, 2014; Kay et al., 2009). The greater people's desire for predictability and/or certainty, the greater their motivation to defend the system on which they rely (Jost, 2017). For instance, in a study conducted by Jost et al. (2012), participants assigned to the high uncertainty condition (vs. control condition) indicated a decreased willingness to engage in disruptive forms of protest. In addition, individuals have existential needs to manage and reduce internal and external threats, anxiety, and distress, and to seek safety (e.g., Jost et al., 2007). Ullrich and Cohrs (2007) demonstrated that as the salience of terrorism rises, participants are more likely to justify the system. Lastly, relational motivations serve to coordinate social relationships and achieve a sense of shared reality with others (Jost et al., 2008). Therefore, the relational desire to belong can motivate individuals to justify the social order, as challenging the status quo could result in relational discord. Several studies have demonstrated that relational threats, such as social exclusion, motivate system justification (e.g., Hess & Ledgerwood, 2014). In a study by Cheung et al. (2011), the threat of social exclusion led low status participants to adopt the system-justifying attitudes of higher status participants. Therefore, according to System Justification Theory, situational or dispositional activation of epistemic, existential, and relational motivations is

associated with a stronger preference for ideologies that legitimize the system, such as conservative ideology, and the rejection of ideologies that challenge the system (e.g., Jost & Krochik, 2014). The perception of dependence on the social order restores people's sense of certainty, security, and belonging. Engaging in protest actions and challenging the status quo, on the other hand, involves a high degree of future uncertainty, the risk of severe punishment, and social marginalization (e.g., Jost et al., 2018). Hennes et al. (2012) have demonstrated that a low need for cognition, a high level of death anxiety, and a high need for shared reality are predictive of greater political conservatism and a greater propensity to justify the system both in general and in the economic realm. In turn, economic system justification mediated the effects of epistemic, existential, and relational motivations on support for the conservative Tea Party movement and opposition to the progressive Occupy Wall Street movement (Jost et al., 2017).

Thus, it is evident that the motivation to justify the system generally discourages people from actively participating in social change and sometimes even impedes it, reducing support for collective action among those who would benefit most from it (e.g., Becker & Wright, 2011; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Wakslak et al., 2007). For instance, in a study by Osborne and Sibley (2013), participants who had been placed in a group-based situation of relative deprivation were more likely to support collective action, but this relationship was weaker for those with high (vs. low) system justification. In light of these and other findings, Jost et al. (2017) developed a model that considers the dual effect of system justification in predicting social change. System justification reduces the probability of collective action against the system and increases the probability of collective action in favor of the system (Osborne et al., 2019). Despite the fact that the motivation to justify the system typically induces resistance to social change, a number of studies have demonstrated that individuals are more likely to support change when they perceive it to be inevitable or extremely likely (e.g., Laurin

et al., 2012) and/or if it involves the preservation of certain ideals and goals of the social system. For instance, Feygina et al. (2010, Study 3) conducted research on environmental attitudes and discovered that the system justification motivation can be utilized to promote social change. In fact, the researchers reformulated pro-environmental initiatives to be consistent with the objective of maintaining the status quo. Participants who had received this information and were more motivated to defend the system were more likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior. Thus, one strategy for promoting social change may consist of formulating calls for change in ways that are consistent with the motivation to maintain the status quo and that are "authorized" by the system.

Disadvantaged groups

One of the most surprising predictions of system justification theory is that disadvantaged groups can also maintain existing inequalities against their own interests. As a result of outgroup favoritism, a body of research indicates that individuals from disadvantaged groups may attribute more positive characteristics to privileged members of society (e.g., Cichocka et al., 2015; Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Samson, 2018). Typically, one would anticipate that the most disadvantaged would be more likely to support systems that benefit them, as opposed to those that work against their interests. It has been demonstrated, however, that disadvantaged individuals can legitimize existing inequalities by tolerating injustice and supporting an unequal distribution of resources within society (e.g., Major, 1994). Thus, both privileged and disadvantaged members contribute to the maintenance of the system, albeit under variable circumstances.

The activation of system justification is influenced not only by epistemic, existential, and relational needs (e.g., Jost et al., 2010), but also by the interaction with two other fundamental motivations: ego justification and group justification (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). For

the members of privileged groups, ego, group, and system justification most often coincide and reinforce one another. For members of disadvantaged groups, however, these three motivations frequently conflict. Thus, system justification and group justification are positively correlated among members of the dominant group, but negatively correlated among members of the subordinate group. Thus, disadvantaged people frequently view the social arrangement as legitimate and fair, despite the fact that it undermines their self-esteem and social identity (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Owuamalam et al., 2019; Owuamalam & Spears, 2020). Thus, social hierarchies can reinforce and perpetuate themselves via bottom-up processes of system justification (van der Toorn et al., 2014).

Research demonstrates that the effect of outgroup favoritism among the disadvantaged appears both when explicit and implicit measures are employed. A number of studies utilizing instruments such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to investigate implicit or automatic attitudes have found that high percentages of members of disadvantaged groups (often forty to fifty percent or more) exhibit implicit biases against their ingroup and in favor of the outgroup. For instance, one study found that poor and obese individuals implicitly rated rich and normal-weight individuals more favorably than their own ingroup (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017; Rudman et al., 2002). Other evidence relates to ethnic minorities, specifically Latinos, Asians, and African Americans, who have demonstrated implicit internalization of inferiority (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2002; Jost et al., 2004). For instance, it has been found that minority American university students implicitly evaluate white students more favorably than their own group (e.g., Jost et al., 2002; Jost et al., 2004). Similarly, black African children implicitly favor whites (Newheiser et al., 2014), a phenomenon observed also between Morenos and Blancos in Chile (Uhlmann et al., 2002). Other studies on sexual minorities have revealed that many homosexuals implicitly view heterosexuals more favorably than their own group (Hoffarth & Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2004). A study conducted in Italy revealed that homosexual

men with higher system justification scores and a right-wing political orientation were more likely to exhibit internalized homonegativity (Pacilli et al., 2011). According to studies conducted in Chile and the United States, numerous homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgenders justify discrimination against their own group. On the one hand, legitimizing discrimination is associated with greater internalized homonegativity, but also with greater mental health benefits, such as reduced anxiety and depression symptoms (e.g., Bahamondes-Correa, 2016; Suppes et al., 2019). Thus, system justification emerges as both a threat to the wellbeing of members of disadvantaged or discriminated groups and a solution to this threat, as it eliminates the painful awareness of living in an unjust state (e.g., Barclay & Saldanha, 2015). These findings suggest that system justification may result in short-term welfare benefits but may lead to worse outcomes in the long run as it undermines support for collective action and, consequently, social change (e.g., Jost et al., 2008; Sengupta et al., 2017; Wakslak et al., 2007).

Some studies have demonstrated that disadvantaged individuals are sometimes even more likely than privileged individuals to defend the system. Some nationally representative cross-sectional surveys (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Henry & Saul, 2006; Sengupta et al., 2015) and experimental studies (e.g., van der Toorn et al., 2015) have demonstrated that disadvantaged people may support social systems more than their advantaged counterparts, particularly when they are dependent on such systems. The tendency of disadvantaged groups to internalize a sense of inferiority and, consequently, to favor the advantaged outgroup has been the subject of numerous explanations and hypotheses over the years.

The strong SJT hypothesis (Jost et al., 2003) predicts that low status groups are more motivated to justify the system than high status groups, particularly in less developed and unequal social contexts. This is because people who perceive themselves to be disadvantaged experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) − a psychological dilemma that motivates them to resolve it − due to a conflict between ego, group, and system justification motivations.

Justifying the status quo is an effective method for resolving cognitive dissonance, leading the disadvantaged to rationalize and support systems that are against their economic, social, and political interests. According to Strong SJT, cognitive dissonance encourages the disadvantaged to legitimize inequalities even more than their advantaged counterparts. Furthermore, Jost et al. (2003) argue that certain contextual factors amplify the motivation to justify the system among the disadvantaged, thereby generating greater cognitive dissonance: high income disparity (see also Herny & Saul, 2006), the democratic system, and low group identification.

Several studies have demonstrated, contrary to the cognitive dissonance hypothesis, that system justification increases as social advantage rises (e.g., Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012; Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2017; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018; Trump & White, 2018; Owuamalam & Spears, 2020). Specifically, Caricati (2017) conducted an international study on a sample of 36 countries and found, contrary to the strong SJT hypothesis, that more privileged individuals legitimize income disparities in their societies than their less privileged counterparts. On the other hand, Sengupta et al. (2015) demonstrated that the disadvantaged (vs. privileged) justify the status quo more within the specific social system from which their inferiority position derives but not when assessing the legitimacy of the general system governing society.

Following this evidence, another argument concerning the system's stability has been presented. According to Owuamalam et al. (2016; 2017), disadvantaged individuals are more likely to justify the system if they perceive social arrangements to be stable. If the system is stable, low-status members may believe that they can improve their social position in the future, whereas if the system is unstable, they would be more likely to engage in collective action aimed at social change, to the detriment of the system justification. In contrast, Kunst et al. (2017) contend that when social arrangements are perceived to be stable, the costs of coping with the status quo are too high for the disadvantaged, so they prefer not to act.

Political ideology

Conservatism is regarded as a prototypical ideology of system justification because it satisfies the epistemic, existential, and relational needs of individuals effectively (Jost et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2007). Jost et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis on the correlates of political conservatism and discovered that the needs for certainty, security, and belonging are positively correlated with conservatism. This correlation has also been discovered in other nations (e.g., Badaan et al., 2018). In addition, other studies have demonstrated that conservative attitudes and behaviors are negatively correlated with openness to experience, a personality trait that is inversely associated with epistemic needs for certainty and closure (Osborne & Sibley, 2015; Sibley et al., 2012). Thus, individuals with a high need for clarity and order and a low tolerance for uncertainty are attracted to conservative ideology (Jost, 2019).

Studies conducted in numerous nations demonstrate that system justification is almost always positively correlated with political conservatism or right-wing ideology (e.g., Kay et al., 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008). This is consistent with the notion that conservatism's fundamental characteristics are resistance to change and acceptance of inequality (Jost, 2006). Thus, conservative and right-wing individuals, more so than left-wing individuals, view social and economic disparities as legitimate and desirable, favoring the status quo (Jost et al., 2003; 2004; 2009; 2017). Therefore, politically conservative individuals are more likely to defend the general, economic, and gender-specific system than liberal or progressive individuals (e.g., Jost 2019).

Individuals' epistemic needs are satisfied by conservative-style beliefs. However, other authors have examined the relational needs component, such as the need to share reality with others, and discovered that it is positively associated with the propensity to justify the system (e.g., Hennes et al., 2012; Jost et al., 2017). Moreover, Jost et al. (2018) noted that conservatives

(vs. liberals) place a higher value on tradition, are more eager to share their worldview with others, place a higher value on consensus, and discourage diversity in their social networks. Concerning existential motivation, Echebarria-Echabe and Fernandez-Guede (2006) analyzed data collected before and after the 11 March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid − an event that should have prompted existential motivation - and discovered that conservatism increased after the attacks. Individual differences in perceived threat accessibility (Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2007; Perry et al., 2013) and situationally induced threats (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; van der Toorn et al., 2017) were also found to positively correlate with conservatism. These findings are intriguing in light of research indicating that individuals frequently respond to threats by legitimizing and defending the system, which will be discussed in the following section.

Affirmation of conservative ideologies generates palliative outcomes, such as increased satisfaction with the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; 2005). Based on the assumption that system justification has a palliative function, Napier and Jost (2008) hypothesized that conservatives (or right-wing individuals) should report being, on average, happier than liberals (or left-wing individuals). According to this study, even after adjusting for income, age, marital status, religion, and other demographic factors, conservatives score significantly higher than liberals in terms of subjective wellbeing (happiness and life satisfaction). The belief that inequality in society is fair and justifiable mediates the ideological divide in subjective wellbeing. These results have also been confirmed in other nations (e.g., Bixter, 2015; Burton et al., 2015; Butz et al., 2017). In addition, Napier and Jost (2008) discovered that rising economic inequality in the United States is associated with a significantly greater decline in liberal happiness than in conservative happiness. The authors argue that because conservatives justify inequality more, they are less affected by social injustice and therefore experience greater happiness and satisfaction. Butz et al. (2017) found that the justification of social and

economic inequality, as measured in a representative sample of Germans, mediates the relationship between conservatism and life satisfaction, confirming this hypothesis.

Moderators

It is evident from studies of epistemic, existential, and relational motivation that people do not always or invariably justify the system. Variations in the intensity of system justification motivation and its manifestation depend on dispositional and situational factors. This implies that certain contextual variables increase or decrease the motivational tendency to justify the status quo, and that certain types of individuals are more likely to justify it than others (e.g., Kay & Friesen, 2011). Several studies have identified situational moderators of system justification: threat to the system (e.g., Jost et al., 2003), dependence on the system (e.g., Zhu et al., 2013), stability and inevitability of the system (e.g., Chernyak-Hai et al., 2014), perceived lack of personal control (e.g., Kay et al., 2008; Cutright et al., 2011), attention to the presence of inequalities in the system (e.g., Yoshimura & Hardin, 2009), perceived longevity of the social system (e.g., Blanchar & Eidelman, 2013), and national identification (e.g., Jasko & Kossowska, 2013).

Studies on system-related threats have demonstrated that individuals frequently defend the status quo in response to threats, criticism, and challenges to the system (e.g., Jost et al., 2005; Kay et al., 2005; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Kay et al. (2005) discovered that American participants assigned to the high (vs. low) threat condition subsequently rated (a) powerful (vs. powerless) people as more (vs. less) intelligent and more (vs. less) independent; and (b) obese people as lazier and more sociable than non-obese people. Similar results were also found in an Israeli sample study (Jost et al., 2005). According to these and other studies, failures or criticism of the system frequently do not result in constructive change processes, but rather in greater reinforcement and defense of the status quo (Kay & Friesen, 2011).

People are more likely to justify social, economic, and political systems when they feel powerless or reliant on them. In fact, systems on which people are highly dependent and, as a result, have a significant impact on their lives, may cause more harm, heightening the importance of bolstering their legitimacy and rationalizing their flaws (Friesen et al., 2019). Confirming this, Kay et al. (2009) discovered that when study participants felt dependent on the university system, they were more likely to justify the university's unequal funding policy but not the government's one. In contrast, when participants had the perception that they were dependent on the government, they tended to justify the government's unfair funding policy more than the university's one. In other words, participants' support for the status quo was contextual and specific to the system they perceived themselves to be dependent on. In addition, dependence on the system leads to support for the authorities representing it (such as police officers), enhancing the perception of their legitimacy and deference to them (e.g., Van der Toorn et al., 2011; van der Toorn et al., 2015).

Other studies have demonstrated that people are more likely to accept inequalities or disadvantageous policies when they perceive the system to be stable and unavoidable (e.g., Laurin et al., 2013; Laurin et al., 2012; Laurin et al., 2010; Chernyak-Hai et al., 2014). In an experiment conducted by Laurin et al. (2010), participants who were made to believe that leaving their country was extremely difficult (inevitability condition) defended the system more vigorously in areas unrelated to migration, such as gender inequality. Similarly, when participants in studies on the effects of system stability believed their system was stable and unchanging, they tended to support policies that legitimized existing inequalities (Chernyak-Hai et al., 2014; Laurin et al., 2013). Thus, people are more likely to justify and defend a particular social system when they feel trapped within it.

Further studies have demonstrated that people are more likely to justify the system when (a) they perceive a lack of personal control, which is compensated for by defending social

systems that may confer a greater sense of control (Kay et al., 2008); (b) inequality in the system is highlighted (Yoshimura & Hardin, 2009); (c) the system is perceived as long-lasting and traditional (vs. recent; Blanchar & Eidelman, 2013); and (d) superordinate national identity is highlighted (Jasko & Kossowska, 2013).

As evidenced by the accumulated body of research over the past several years, understanding the moderators that increase or decrease the system justification motivation requires further investigation. This is where the current research project comes in, as it seeks to examine the effect of another contextual variable: psychological distance.

Psychological distance and system justification

Recent evidence suggests that psychological distance and abstract thinking can amplify the motivation to prefer and justify the social status quo (e.g., Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Laurin et al., 2013; Chan, 2016; Alper, 2018), consistent with other research demonstrating that abstraction can amplify a person's underlying attitudes, values, principles, and ideologies.

In one study, participants' support for the social status quo was initially measured and selected as a potential ideological predictor for the evaluation of a policy issue (introduction of a policy for the deportation of illegal immigrants) to which they were exposed weeks later (Ledgerwood et al., 2010, Study 3). Participants were informed in advance that they would have to discuss the issue with an unidentified individual who either opposed or supported the deportation of illegal immigrants. In addition, they were informed that the policy would take effect either the following week (low time distance) or the following year (high time distance). The participants were then asked to indicate the likelihood that they would support the deportation policy. The results showed that in the condition of low temporal distance, participants' voting intentions were more congruent with those of their presumed interaction partners. In contrast, when the policy was to be implemented in the more distant future, participants who expressed high support for the social status quo also expressed higher support for the policy. Thus, a high level of support for the social status quo, as indicated by the pretest, corresponded with a higher level of support for the deportation policy when it was scheduled to be implemented in the more distant future. In a separate experiment, which involved the direct manipulation of construal level, the same results were obtained (Ledgerwood et al., 2010, Study 4).

Chan (2016, Study 2) proposed that abstract thinking could amplify the preference − among both liberals and conservatives − for maintaining the status quo, as an abstract construal increases adherence to global and enduring social values, norms, and customs and, thus, could

promote the maintenance of the status quo. In this research, participants were asked about their attitudes toward social inequality issues (such as racial discrimination and illegal immigration) and the maintenance of the status quo (e.g., homosexuality and abortion). The analyses revealed that abstract (vs. concrete) thinking increased liberals' willingness to support social equality and conservatives' preference for a hierarchical society, but also made liberals and conservatives alike in their aversion to social change. The interaction analysis revealed that making traditionalism salient strengthens the preference − of both conservatives and liberals − for maintaining the status quo. Conversely, emphasizing its irrelevance and little need reduces aversion to social change, and again, the effect was observed regardless of political ideology.

Another research investigated the hypothesis that an abstract mindset could result in greater internal consistency of attitudes, thereby leading to greater political sophistication (Alper, 2018). Through seven experiments conducted on a Turkish and a US sample, in which four different construal level manipulations were used, it was discovered that abstract thinking decreased standard deviations and increased internal consistency − as measured by Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) − of responses to four self-report scales widely used in the literature to measure general system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003), right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998), economic system justification (Jost & Thompson, 2000) and social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It was discovered that abstract thinking reduced the variability of responses to the scales and, consequently, made the presence of a superordinate latent factor that determines similar responses between different items on the same scale more discernible.

A longitudinal study was conducted in the natural context of the 2016 US presidential election, taking Hillary Clinton's potential victory into account as a threat to those who supported traditional gender roles. This study has found that those who supported traditional gender roles more strongly a few months before the election exhibited more negative reactions

to the candidate and were less likely to vote for her as the threat approached (Miller & Borgida, 2019). In this instance, the focus was on the potential for temporal proximity to a threat to the status quo to heighten the motivation to justify the system among individuals who initially − that is, from a greater distance − demonstrated greater support for legitimizing ideologies. However, Miller and Borgida (2019) argue that their research is structured differently than previous CLT studies, as CLT studies typically involve participants representing a future event away from their egocentric reference point, whereas in this study changes in participants' responses to the event were measured as the event approached.

Finally, Badaan et al. (2020; Badaan et al., 2022) have recently proposed a model that theorizes the mechanisms by which utopian thinking, which reflects social imagination and thus evokes counterfactual cognitive alternatives of better societies, can promote social change (e.g., Levitas, 2013; Fernando et al., 2018; Kashima & Fernando, 2020; Fernando et al., 2022). The authors have identified two pathways by which utopian thinking can lead to social change. The affective pathway emphasizes the role of social hope in promoting change − as an approach-oriented emotion (vs. avoidance) that, as a result, encourages action (e.g., Wohl et al., 2006). The cognitive-motivational pathway is based on the ability of mental abstraction to reduce the psychological distance between ideal alternative social states and the current status quo. Similarly to the affective pathway, the authors hypothesized that the cognitive-motivational pathway can reduce motivation for system justification to the extent that abstraction produces a contrast between ideal societal alternatives and the here-and-now status quo. The model of Badaan et al.'s (2020) predicts, therefore, that utopian thinking encourages individuals to engage in collective action through the mediation of two mutually influencing pathways: social hope and abstraction. Through this mediation effect, utopian thinking promotes mental representations of better societies that transcend the present moment, while simultaneously reducing the motivation to justify the system. The researchers' hypotheses regarding the

affective pathway were confirmed. However, concerning the cognitive pathway, no significant relationship was found between construal level (abstraction) and system justification (Badaan et al., 2022).

Therefore, this evidence contributes to the complex picture of the varied and multifaceted effects of construal level in the study of inequality, especially in the context of system justification.

This was the premise of the current research project, which aimed to shed light on the relationship between psychological distance and system justification.

The current research objectives and hypotheses

The general aim of the current doctoral dissertation was to contribute to the comprehension of the psychological mechanisms that facilitate the legitimization of inequalities. The primary research question was whether psychological distance influences the motivation to defend the status quo. There are currently a few studies investigating this relationship: the findings outlined in the previous section suggest that adopting an abstract mindset (i.e., under conditions of high psychological distance) makes the activation of system justification processes more probable (e.g., Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Laurin et al., 2013; Chan, 2016; Alper, 2018). However, the use of different methodologies and assumptions, as well as the existence of studies with inconsistent findings (e.g., Miller & Borgida, 2019; Badaan et al., 2022), necessitates additional research into this relationship.

On the basis of the theoretical premises outlined in the preceding sections, we formulated the general hypotheses of the present research. Our predictions were inspired by the findings of Ledgerwood et al. (2010, Studies 3 and 4), although these studies had a different purpose than ours. Ledgerwood et al.'s research discovered that, under conditions of low temporal distance, participants who had discussed a deportation policy for illegal immigrants with another person tended to align their opinion with that of their discussion partner, who either supported or opposed the policy. In conditions of low psychological distance, therefore, participants let the opinion of the group (dyad) to which they belonged prevail. In contrast, under circumstances of high temporal distance, participants who expressed strong support for the social status quo also expressed strong support for the policy. Additionally, studies using the Construal Level Theory framework have observed that when psychological distance is low, people tend to prioritize their own interests, while when psychological distance is high, the larger collective impact predominates (e.g., Giacomantonio et al., 2010; Stillman et al., 2018). Another aspect underlying our hypotheses is that, according to System Justification Theory, the

activation of the system justification motivation may be influenced by interactions with the ego-justification and group-justification motivations (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). These three motivations frequently coincide for privileged members, as system justification serves their own interests as well. In contrast, disadvantaged members face a conflict between their motivation to defend the system and their desire to advance their group's interests, which would lead them to challenge the status quo. We propose that psychological distance may play a crucial role in emphasizing the relative importance of the two conflicting factors for disadvantaged individuals.

On the basis of the evidence presented in the literature review, we hypothesized that when adopting a low-level construal (or when psychological distance is low), the motivation to protect one's own interests as well as those of their group prevails. Therefore, the tendency to legitimize inequalities is influenced by ego justification and group justification motivations depending on the group to which individuals belong and its values. As a result, differences between individuals with various statuses and ideologies in the system justification can be detected. In contrast, in situations of high psychological distance, the motivation to safeguard the interests of the larger system becomes salient. As a result, status disparities and the ideological divide in the system justification motivation are reduced. In other words, we hypothesized that, under conditions of high psychological distance, groups with opposing status and ideologies would not differ in their system justification motivation.

Therefore, the present research contributes to the literature on system justification by providing additional evidence regarding the circumstances under which people tend to justify the status quo to a greater (or lesser) extent. One aspect of novelty is that this research focuses on differences between groups with distinct status and ideologies in system justification. System Justification Theory literature demonstrates that both members of privileged groups and those disadvantaged by the system tend to legitimize the status quo (e.g., Jost & Hunyady,

2005). To our knowledge, no research has examined how psychological distance affects the degree to which disadvantaged and privileged members justify the system. Another objective of the current research was to determine the conditions under which disadvantaged members tend to justify the system to a lesser (e.g., Caricati, 2017), greater (e.g., Jost et al., 2003), or equal extent as their advantaged counterparts. We decided to test our hypotheses in two areas of inequality, economic and gender inequality, in order to compare differences between low- and high-income groups and between females and males. Numerous studies within the System Justification Theory have focused on economic inequality and gender inequality, beginning with stereotype-based evidence (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kay & Jost, 2003; Jost & Kay, 2005). We believe that investigating the relationship between psychological distance and system justification in the context of economic and gender inequality can provide a significant contribution to the literature on these topics.

System justification research has also revealed that individuals with diverse ideologies hold divergent positions and viewpoints regarding the legitimization of inequality. It has been demonstrated that conservative (or right-wing) individuals are more motivated than liberal (or left-wing) individuals to maintain the status quo, because conservative ideology is effective at satisfying the epistemic, existential, and relational needs underlying the motivation to justify the system (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Nonetheless, the literature on Construal Level Theory suggests that sometimes, under conditions of high psychological distance or when high-level construals are activated, the ideological divide reduces, including with regard to issues of inequality, making conservatives occasionally more liberal and liberals occasionally more conservative (e.g., Luguri et al., 2012; Chan, 2016; Napier et al., 2018). The present research investigated how psychological distance affects differences in system justification between individuals with opposing political ideologies (right-wing versus left-wing).

Therefore, we hypothesized that, when adopting a low-level construal, members of disadvantaged groups (low-income and females) and left-wing individuals justify the system less than privileged members (high-income and males) and right-wing individuals.

In contrast, when adopting a high construal level, disadvantaged members (low income and females), as well as left-wing individuals, justify the system to the same extent as privileged members (high income and males) and right-wing individuals.

The hypotheses of the current research have been empirically tested. The following section will present the results.

Overview of the studies

We conducted four online experiments to test our hypotheses. In the first three studies, we tested the general hypothesis that, under conditions of low psychological distance, ego and group justification motivations would predominate, implying that individuals of varying status and political ideology would justify the system differently. In addition, we examined the hypothesis that, under conditions of high psychological distance, the motivation to maintain the status quo would predominate, resulting in a reduction of the ideological divide and status differences in system justification. Research has demonstrated that psychological distance and construal level have a bidirectional relationship (e.g., Bar-Anan et al., 2006; 2007), so we decided to only manipulate the construal level. We used the same experimental manipulation in all four studies, to investigate whether construal level moderates the relationship between membership in groups of different status and ideology (income, gender, and political orientation) and system justification. We examined system justification in general, in the economic sphere, and in the gender inequality sphere.

In Studies 1 and 2, we compared disadvantaged and privileged groups, specifically low-income versus high-income individuals and females versus males. We tested the interaction hypothesis on economic system justification (Study 1) and gender gap justification (Study 2) by considering the specific contexts of inequality that were related to participants' group membership. In Study 1, we examined, in addition to the interaction between construal level and income, whether economic system justification influenced support for a progressive taxation system.

In Study 3, we expanded the investigation to determine whether construal level also moderates the relationship between support for opposing political ideologies and system justification. In this study, we examined the interaction between political orientation (left vs. right) and construal level with regard to general system justification.

In the final study, we delved deeper into the previous findings by comparing self- versus system-related threat scenarios. We hypothesized that in the low construal level condition, the self-related (vs. system-related) threat would cause greater emotional distress, be perceived as more relevant, and generate a greater coping response. In contrast, we hypothesized that the system-related (vs. self-related) threat would have a greater impact in the high construal level condition.

In each of the four studies, participants were recruited and compensated 1.20 £ through Prolific. For Study 1, which involved a moderated mediation analysis, sample size was determined according to Fritz and McKinnon's recommendations (2007). Taking into account a small α path and a large β path, the percentile bootstrap test necessitates approximately 398 participants to reach a .8 power. In Studies 2 and 4, in which a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed between groups, G*Power was used to determine the sample size. About 201 participants are required for this type of analysis between four groups, assuming a statistical power of .85, an expected f^2 of .25, and an alpha probability level of .05. Finally, for Study 3, in which moderation analysis was performed, the sample size was determined using G*Power. About 182 participants are needed for a multiple regression analysis with three predictors, a statistical power of .85, an expected f^2 of .05, and an alpha probability level of .05.

Study 1. Income-related differences in economic system justification

The first study investigated whether construal level moderates the relationship between income and economic system justification. It also investigated whether support for policies aimed at reducing economic inequality is indirectly influenced by income through economic system justification. The objective was to understand the circumstances under which there are differences between disadvantaged and privileged groups in system justification.

According to research (e.g., Jost et al., 2003), disadvantaged members occasionally justify the system more than privileged members, and occasionally they justify it less than their advantaged counterparts (e.g., Caricati, 2017). Some studies have investigated the effects of legitimizing ideologies and beliefs, such as the meritocratic one (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 2017). In a sample of French students, it was discovered that system justification was associated with the belief that academic success depended solely on meritocratic criteria for children of low socioeconomic status (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Furthermore, it was discovered that worse long-term outcomes for self-esteem, classroom behavior, and risky behaviors outside the classroom were associated with low-income American adolescents' increased system justification (Godfrey et al., 2017). According to a nationally representative study by Azevedo et al. (2017) conducted in the context of the 2016 U.S. election, among Donald Trump (vs. Hillary Clinton) supporters, both high- and low-income people strongly defended the economic system. According to another nationally representative study, in Lebanon poorer people justified the economic system more strongly than wealthier individuals (Jost et al., 2017). By investigating the contextual variables that account for these differences, it is possible to better understand how system justification processes work and how they affect support for policies that seek to restore equality (e.g., Wakslak et al., 2007). In particular, it has been demonstrated that system justification is associated with a decrease in people's preference for a progressive tax system (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2022).

Therefore, in this study, we induced participants' construal level to observe how it affects their motivation to maintain the status quo and, as a result, how system justification impacts preference for a progressive tax system, regardless of their political orientation. We tested our hypotheses that in conditions of low psychological distance, ego and group justifications predominate, whereas in conditions of high psychological distance, system justification prevails.

Thus, the first hypothesis was that, when adopting a concrete mindset (low construal level), individuals with lower income would justify the economic system less than those with higher income, regardless of their political orientation (hypothesis 1).

In contrast, we hypothesized that there would be no difference in the propensity to justify the economic system among those who adopt the abstract mindset (high construal level) (hypothesis 2).

We also hypothesized that in turn, economic system justification would negatively predict the preference for a progressive tax system (hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

In Study 1, 382 participants were recruited online via Prolific. The sample included Italian participants, ranging in age from 18 to 63 years (M = 28.55, SD = 9.18). In the sample, 52.1% of the participants identified as male, 48.2% as female, and 2.1% as non-binary. Full descriptive statistics are reported in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Descriptive of the sample's characteristics (Study 1)*

Variable	*Frequency*	*Percentage*	*M*	*SD*
Education			2.77	.91
Middle school diploma	5	1.3%		
High school diploma	179	46.9%		

Bachelor's degree	113	29.6%		
Master's degree	72	18.8%		
Postgraduate level	10	2.6%		
Other	3	0.8%		
Employment			1.68	.73
Student	183	47.9%		
Employed	138	36.1%		
Unemployed/Other	61	16%		
Income			1.87	.95
Up to 15.000 Euros	167	43.7%		
15.001 to 28.000 Euros	124	32.5%		
28.001 to 55.000 Euros	71	18.6%		
55.001 to 75.000 Euros	13	3.4%		
Over 75.000 Euros	7	1.8%		
Political orientation			4.94	1.18
Extreme right	1	0.3%		
Right	10	2.6%		
Moderate right	42	11%		
Center	57	14.9%		
Moderate left	142	37.2%		
Left	107	28%		
Extreme left	23	6%		

N = 382

Procedure

Participants were directed to the Qualtrics page containing the experiment via Prolific. After reading and accepting the informed consent, participants filled out demographic information, including their income and political orientation. Then, a text on economic inequality in Italy was displayed to highlight the topic of the study:

> "In Italy and throughout the world, economic and social inequality persist and are becoming increasingly evident. Oxfam's global survey revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the exponential growth of inequality in all nations, including Italy. This inequality, which primarily stems from income, gender, and ethnicity, has an impact on the equality of opportunities and outcomes among individuals. There are substantial gaps between the wealthy and the poor, as well as disparities in employment, health, and education".

Each participant was then randomly assigned to an experimental condition involving manipulation of construal level. Half of the participants were exposed to the low construal level condition, and the other half were subjected to the high construal level manipulation. After the manipulation was completed, participants were presented with a manipulation check. Finally, all participants had their degree of economic system justification and preference for a progressive tax system measured. At the conclusion of the experiment, participants were thanked and compensated for their contribution.

Measures

Income. We employed a single item to assess participants' income. They were asked to respond on a scale ranging from 1 to 5: "Up to 15.000 Euros", "15.001 to 28.000 Euros", "28.001 to 55.000 Euros", "55.001 to 75.000 Euros", and "Over 75.000 Euros."

Political orientation. Participants were asked to indicate, in the current Italian context, their political orientation on a scale ranging from 1 (Extreme Right) to 7 (Extreme Left).

Construal level manipulation. To manipulate construal level, participants were asked to imagine what they would do at a moment near in time (Monday of the following week) or far in time (a Monday next year). Participants were invited to describe their activities, emotions, and events. The following are examples of responses to the low construal level condition:

> "Monday, April 4 will be a day filled with both thoughts and concrete obligations for me. In fact, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. I must complete a remote internship; meanwhile, I will be organizing my birthday celebration (Thursday, April 7) and making preparations for my imminent departure to Milan. My state of mind will be both tense and excited, but I am certain that I will be exhausted by the end of the day".

"Next Monday, early in the morning, I will take the bus from the city in which I reside to the city in which I study. After that, I will attend classes at my university. Before the afternoon classes begin, I will eat lunch with my friends and perhaps enjoy a cocktail. After classes conclude, I will return home for dinner and then attend a cultural association to watch a film about the Mafia".

The following are examples of responses in the high construal level condition:

"On a hypothetical Monday next year, I will likely be at work. I hope to have a well-paying job with no risk of injury. This would enable me to lead a normal life consisting of work and minor hobbies".

"I hope to be working in a context that is as closely aligned with my interests as possible and that allows me to utilize the knowledge I have gained through my studies. I would like to work in a challenging international context and avoid repetitive tasks. I would also like time to take a language course, participate in a sport, or do both".

This manipulation has been used in previous studies and shown to be effective at inducing low vs. high construal levels (e.g., Giacomantonio et al., 2010; De Dreu et al., 2009).

Construal level manipulation check. To test the validity of the manipulation, participants were asked to reflect on their responses to the task and indicate, for seven semantic differentials, whether they pertained to low or high level: (1) Insignificant - Significant, (2) Unimportant - Important, (3) Low priority - High priority, (4) Particular - Global, (5) Concerning "how" - Concerning "why," (6) Short-term goals - Long-term goals, (7) Secondary in life - Central in life. These items were averaged and constituted a construal level index (α = .73) with low scores indicating low construal level and high scores indicating high construal level.

Economic System Justification. A brief version of the Economic System Justification Scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Caricati, 2008; Jost et al., 2012) was used to measure participants' tendency to justify the economic system. Participants responded to six items on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Examples include: "Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements", "There are many reasons to think that the economic system is unfair" (reverse-scored), "Equal distribution of resources is unnatural". The ESJ index was calculated by averaging the item scores (α = .62).

Support for progressive taxation. We used the Preference for a Progressive Tax System Scale (Pántya et al., 2016), which consists of 5 items (α = .81), to measure the dependent variable. Participants rated their agreement with the statements on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Examples of such statements include: "The only fair way is to collect more tax from rich people", "Tax dues should be decreased from the high-income group to the low one", "If we want the distribution of resources to be fairer, we need to deduct taxes primarily from the income of rich people".

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 27 (IBM Corp., 2020). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the efficacy of the construal level manipulation. Participants assigned to the high construal level condition were predicted to have significantly higher check variable scores (corresponding to high level characteristics) than participants assigned to the low construal level condition. *Table 2* displays descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables. Next, a moderated mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals was conducted, using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 7; 2013). Prior to analysis, all variables were mean centered. Support for progressive taxation was entered as a dependent variable, with income as a predictor, experimental condition (low

vs. high construal level) as a moderator, and economic system justification as a mediator. Political orientation was included as a covariate.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (Study 1).*

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Income	382	1.87	.95	–				
2. Construal level	382	1.50	.50	.01	–			
3. Economic system justification	382	2.94	.87	.07	-.02	–		
4. Preference for a progressive tax system	382	5.33	1.06	-.08	.09	-.40***	–	
5. Political orientation	382	4.94	1.18	-.12*	.03	-.42***	.32***	–

**p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*

Results

Construal level manipulation check

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that participants assigned to the high construal level condition (M = 4.43, SD = 1.04, N = 190) reported a significantly higher mean for the check variable (higher scores indicate higher level characteristics) than participants assigned to the low construal level condition (M = 4.01, SD = .97, N = 192), $F_{(1,380)} = 16.439$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$. Consequently, the manipulation can be considered valid.

Moderated mediation analysis

The interaction analysis revealed that neither income (B = .01, SE = .04, t = .35, p = .72, *95% CI* [-.07, .10]) nor experimental condition (B = -.02, SE = .08, t = -.21, p = .83, *95% CI* [-.18, .14]) had a significant direct effect on economic system justification. In contrast, and consistent with the hypotheses, the interaction between income and experimental condition was significant and negative (B = -.23, SE = .08, t = -2.75, p < .01, *95% CI* [-.40, -.07]). Political orientation had a negative and significant relationship with ESJ (B = -.32, SE = .03, t = -9.18, p < .001, *95% CI* [-.39, -.25]). Consistent with the literature, this result indicates that participants with a left-wing political orientation justify the economic system less than participants with a

right-wing political orientation (e.g., Kay et al., 2009). The model accounted for 19.5% of the variance in economic system justification ($F_{(4,377)} = 22.88$, $p < .001$).

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 1*) revealed that among the participants who were exposed to the low construal level manipulation, those with low income reported significantly lower scores on the economic system justification scale than participants with high income ($B = .13$, $SE = .06$, $t = 2.18$, $p < .05$, *95% CI* [.01, .25]). As a consequence, hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed, as there were no significant differences in ESJ levels between low- and high-income participants who were induced with a high construal level ($B = -.10$, $SE = .06$, $t = -1.70$, $p = .09$, *95% CI* [-.22, .02]).

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that, among high-income participants, those exposed to the low construal level manipulation reported significantly higher scores on the economic system justification scale than those exposed to the high construal level manipulation ($B = -.24$, $SE = .11$, $t = -2.09$, $p < .05$, *95% CI* [-.46, -.01]).

There were no significant differences in economic system justification scores between low-income participants exposed to the high construal level manipulation and those exposed to the low construal level manipulation ($B = .18$, $SE = .11$, $t = 1.70$, $p = .09$, *95% CI* [-.03, .40]).

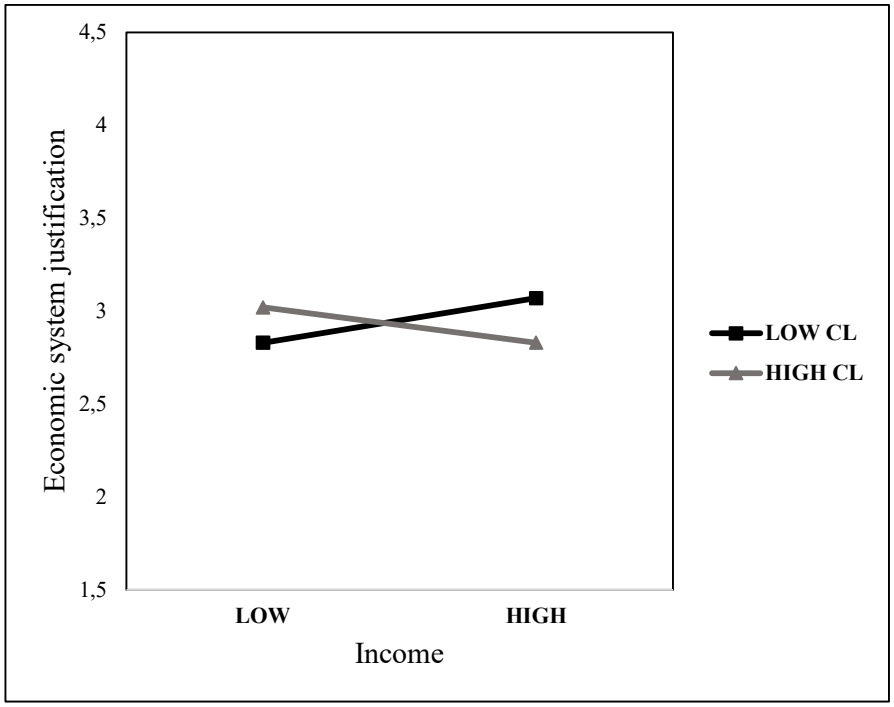

Figure 1. *Economic system justification as a function of income and construal level (Study 1).*

The results of moderated mediation indicated that *path b* of mediation was also significant. Specifically, economic system justification significantly and negatively predicted support for progressive taxation (B = -.39, SE = .06, t = -6.37, p < .001, *95% CI* [-.51, -.27]). Thus, as ESJ scores increased, support for progressive taxation decreased. Political orientation also had a significant and positive relationship with support for progressive taxation (B = .16, SE = .05, t = 3.43, p < .01, *95% CI* [.07, .25]), indicating greater support among those with a left-wing political orientation. There was no significant direct effect of income on support for progressive taxation (B = -.04, SE = .05, t = -.72, p = .47, *95% CI* [-.14, .06]). The model accounted for 19% of the variance in the preference for progressive taxation ($F_{(3, 378)}$ = 29.5, p < .001). The conditional indirect effects revealed a significant and negative indirect effect for the low construal level condition (B = -.05, *bootstrapped SE* = .03, *95% CI* [-.12, -.01]), whereas the indirect effect for the high construal level condition was not significant (B = .04, *bootstrapped SE* = .03, *95% CI* [-.01, .10]). The total effect of the proposed model attained

statistical significance (*Index* = .09, *bootstrapped SE* = .04, *95% CI* [.02, .19]), so we concluded that the moderator was related to the model's dependent variable and that hypothesis 3 was confirmed.

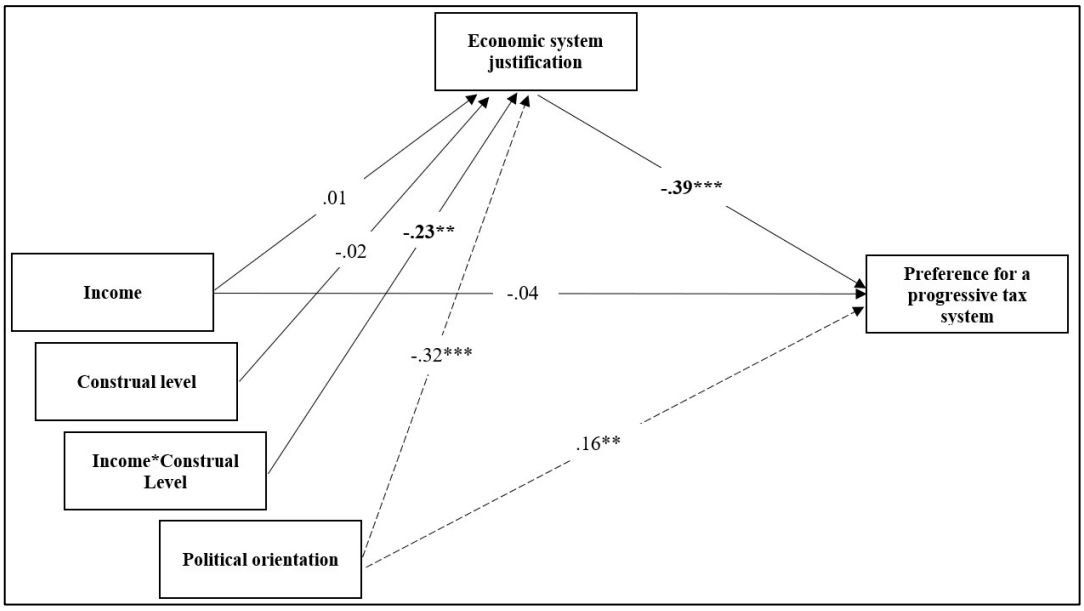

Figure 2. *Moderated mediation model of construal level and economic system justification on the relationship between income and preference for a progressive tax system (Study 1).*

Discussion

Study 1 confirmed the general hypothesis that psychological distance influences system justification and provided initial insight into the processes that lead individuals to justify existing inequalities.

These results suggest that, regardless of their political orientation, disadvantaged and privileged groups differ in their motivation to justify the system when they adopt a concrete mindset (i.e., low psychological distance). In the first hypothesis, we expected low-income individuals to be less inclined to defend the economic system than high-income individuals. Our findings confirmed this hypothesis and are consistent with research indicating that system justification increases as the advantage grows (e.g., Caricati, 2017). However, results confirming the second hypothesis indicate that it is possible, under circumstances of high

psychological distance, for disadvantaged individuals to be motivated to legitimize and maintain a status quo that penalizes them, aligning with the motivations of those who benefit from the system instead (e.g., van der Toorn et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2017). This suggests that the manner in which disadvantaged individuals process information (concrete or abstract) and, consequently, the psychological distance from a given stimulus, influences their propensity to justify the injustices they experience.

The third hypothesis, which is also supported, is consistent with research demonstrating a negative relationship between system justification and support for equality-supportive policies (e.g., Waklslak et al., 2007; De Cristofaro et al., 2022). Second, it reveals the troubling but well-documented finding in the literature that as advantage increases, the tendency to oppose more equitable economic systems − such as progressive taxation − at the expense of social change, increases (e.g., Kraus & Callaghan, 2014; Andersen & Curtis, 2015; McCarty et al., 2006). This takes place indirectly through the mediation of system justification. Specifically, our findings indicate that at low psychological distance (i.e., low construal level), people with higher incomes express less preference for a progressive tax system, and that economic system justification mediates this effect. On the other hand, our results indicate that, in low psychological distance settings, disadvantaged individuals are less likely to justify the system and, consequently, more likely to support more equitable economic policies. This may suggest that disadvantaged individuals are less likely to oppose social change and more likely to participate in collective action when they process stimuli in a more concrete manner. This hypothesis needs to be investigated in future research. The only condition in which the mediating effect of economic system justification was significant was when the construal level was low. In the high construal level condition, there was no significant indirect effect.

This initial study allowed us to begin examining the influence of psychological distance on system justification, albeit with some limitations. For instance, self-reported measures were

used to assess economic system justification and preference for a progressive tax system, which may be subjected to the effects of social desirability, given that this is a sensitive issue in which individuals may tend to present a more favorable image of themselves and their opinions than they actually have. In order to lessen the impact of social desirability, it is necessary to conduct additional research utilizing techniques for measuring implicit attitudes toward inequality and fairer economic policies. Second, participants were selected to respond in relation to the Italian context; therefore, it would be appropriate to replicate these results using samples from other countries to increase generalizability. In addition, the context of the study was limited to economic inequality, so the effect of construal level in other contexts of inequality was not examined. The objective of the second study in this dissertation was to contribute to the generalizability of these results to another type of pervasive inequality, gender inequality.

Study 2. Gender-related differences in gender gap legitimization

Study 2 aimed to replicate and extend the findings of the first study in the context of gender inequality. Research indicates that women are disadvantaged relative to men, particularly in terms of employment, wages, and career opportunities (e.g., Bowles & McGinn, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Barreto et al., 2009; Hoyt, 2010). This study was also inspired by the fact that women, like individuals with low socioeconomic status, tend to legitimize the status quo despite being disadvantaged by it (e.g., Friesen et al., 2019). For instance, research has demonstrated that when women feel dependent on the social system, they view gender inequality in politics and the workplace as natural and fair (e.g., Kay et al., 2009). In a study conducted by Calogero and Jost (2011), it was discovered that exposure to stereotypes legitimizing gender inequality is associated with greater levels of self-objectivation, self-surveillance, and body shame among women, but not among men. Becker and Wright (2011) discovered that women who are exposed to the more subtle and "benevolent" form of sexism score higher on gender-specific system justification, which leads to a decrease in support for feminist collective action. Another study found that modern expressions of sexism are less likely to be perceived as discrimination and to encourage collective action among women than traditional and "old-fashioned" expressions of sexism (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009). In a study conducted on a sample of young Spanish adolescents, it was found that benevolent sexism toward women was correlated with a greater contribution to housework in tasks traditionally performed by women (gender-typed tasks) among female participants (Silvan-Ferrero & Lopez, 2007). Napier et al. (2020) discovered that the denial of the persistence of gender discrimination among women is associated with greater subjective well-being because the denial promotes the perception that the system is fair and, therefore, serves a palliative function.

On the basis of these theoretical premises and the findings of the preceding study, we decided to investigate whether construal level moderates the relationship between gender and

related system justification. Specifically, for this study, we examined people's motivation to legitimize the gender gap phenomenon, which has been the subject of previous research on system justification (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2021).

According to our general hypotheses, we predicted that among individuals with concrete mindsets (low construal level), those who identified as female would justify the gender gap less than those who identified as male (hypothesis 1).

In contrast, among individuals with a high level of abstraction (high construal level), the tendency to justify the gender gap would not differ by gender (hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

This study's participants were recruited through Prolific. The original sample consisted of 215 Italian participants. 43.7% of the sample was male, 53.7% was female, 2.2% was non-binary, and only one participant (0.4%) decided not to declare their gender. Six participants who did not specify their gender as male or female were excluded from the analyses because, based on the study's underlying hypotheses, we decided to only include participants who strongly identified with either the male or female gender. The final sample consisted of 209 participants, with a mean age of 29.07 years (*SD* = 10.22) and an age range of 18–75 years. *Table 3* contains full descriptive statistics.

Table 3. *Descriptive of the sample's characteristics (Study 2)*

Variable	*Frequency*	*Percentage*	*M*	*SD*
Education			2.86	.94
Middle school diploma	3	1.4%		
High school diploma	87	41.6%		
Bachelor's degree	68	32.5%		
Master's degree	38	18.2%		
Postgraduate level	13	6.2%		
Other	0	0%		
Employment			1.70	.74

Student	98	46.9%		
Employed	76	36.4%		
Unemployed/Other	35	16.7%		
Income			1.95	.96
Up to 15.000 Euros	81	38.8%		
15.001 to 28.000 Euros	75	35.9%		
28.001 to 55.000 Euros	40	19.1%		
55.001 to 75.000 Euros	9	4.3%		
Over 75.000 Euros	4	1.9%		
Political orientation			5.14	1.12
Extreme right	0	0%		
Right	7	3.3%		
Moderate right	16	7.7%		
Center	19	9.1%		
Moderate left	75	35.9%		
Left	83	39.7%		
Extreme left	9	4.3%		

N = 209

Procedure

After the study was published in Prolific, participants were directed to Qualtrics to complete the experiment. They initially viewed and approved the informed consent and then provided demographic information (including gender). Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: low construal level or high construal level. They were subjected to the same experimental manipulation as in Study 1, using the same task (Giacomantonio et al., 2010; De Dreu et al., 2009). All participants were instructed to carefully read a text describing the gender gap phenomenon in Italy following the construal level manipulation:

> "The economic consequences of the pandemic have exacerbated gender disparities in Italy, particularly in the economic and wage sectors. According to the 2022 Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum last month, Italy is ranked 63rd in the world. Particularly for women, a low employment rate (less than one out of two women in Italy are employed), a high proportion of part-time contracts (49.8 percent), a lack of career opportunities (only 28 percent of managers

are women), and a lack of access to STEM training (16 percent of women versus 34 percent of men) have been highlighted. Regarding the gender wage gap, the male advantage is confirmed. Five years after graduation, men earn an average of 20 percent more than women: 1,374 euros for women and 1,651 euros for men among first-level graduates; 1,438 euros and 1,713 euros, respectively, among second-level graduates".

Next, the participants' propensity to legitimate the gender gap was measured. At the conclusion of the study, participants were thanked and compensated for their participation.

Measures

Gender. Participants' gender was determined by an item in which they indicated whether they were male, female, non-binary, or did not wish to declare their gender.

Construal level manipulation. We used the same experimental manipulation as in Study 1 (Giacomantonio et al., 2010; De Dreu et al., 2009): participants were asked to describe activities, events, and emotions in the near future (low construal level condition) versus the distant future (high construal level condition).

Construal level manipulation check. Participants were asked to indicate via 7 semantic differential items (1 to 7) whether responses to the previous task included low-level features (insignificant, unimportant, low priority, particular, pertaining to "how", short-term goals, secondary in life) or high-level features (significant, important, high priority, global, concerning "why", long-term goals, central in life). These items were averaged to generate a construal level index, with lower scores indicating low construal level and higher scores indicating high construal level (α = .63).

Gender gap justification. We used three items (Jost & Burgess, 2000) that asked participants to rate on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much) how "fair", "justifiable", and "legitimate" they believed the gender gap to be, in order to determine the extent to which they justified gender inequality in employment and wages. A global gender gap justification index was derived from the mean of the three items (α = .83).

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 27 (IBM Corp., 2020). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the assumption that participants assigned to the high construal level condition would describe task responses in terms of higher-level features than participants assigned to the low construal level condition. After validating the efficacy of the manipulation, descriptive analyses and inter-variable correlations were performed and reported in *Table 4*. Finally, to test our main hypotheses a 2 (construal level: low/high) x 2 (gender: male/female) ANOVA was conducted.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (Study 2).*

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Gender	229	1.57	.50	–		
2. Construal level	229	1.48	.50	-.08	–	
3. Gender gap justification	229	1.67	1.14	-.27***	-.02	–

**p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*

Results

Manipulation check

ANOVA revealed that participants assigned to the high construal level condition (M = 4.73, SD = 1.01, N = 101) reported a significantly higher mean at the construal level index (higher scores indicate high level characteristics) than participants assigned to the low construal

level condition (M = 4.35, SD = .87, N = 108), $F_{(1,207)}$ = 8.48, p < .01, η_p^2 = .04, confirming the effectiveness of manipulation.

Analysis of variance

The main effect of construal level on gender gap justification was not found to be statistically significant, $F_{(3, 205)}$ = 1.05, p = .31, η^2_p = .01. Instead, a main effect of gender emerged, indicating that female participants (M = 1.40, SD = .95, N = 120) reported lower gender gap justification scores than male participants (M = 2.03, SD = 1.28, N = 89), $F_{(3, 205)}$ = 17.14, p < .001, η^2_p = .08. The most important result relates to the statistically significant interaction between construal level and gender, $F_{(3, 205)}$ = 5.91, p < .05, η^2_p = .03. Analysis of the means revealed that female participants assigned to the low construal level condition (M = 1.30, SD = .67, N = 66) legitimized the gender gap less than male participants assigned to the low construal level condition (M = 2.31, SD = 1.41, N = 42). Also in the high construal level condition, female participants (M = 1.52, SD = 1.21, N = 54) reported lower gender gap justification scores than male participants (M = 1.78, SD = 1.11, N = 47).

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 3*) revealed that the difference between the means was statistically significant only in the low construal level condition (b = -1.01, SE = .21, t = -4.67, p < .001, *95% CI* [-1.43, -.58]), but not in the high construal level condition (b = -.26, SE = .22, t = -1.20, p = .23, *95% CI* [-.69, .17]). These results confirm both hypotheses 1 and 2 and converge with the previous study's findings on economic inequality.

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that, among male participants, those assigned to the low construal level condition justified the gender gap significantly more than those assigned to the high construal level condition (b = -.53, SE = .23, t = -2.28, p < .05, *95% CI* [-.99, -.07]).

Female participants' gender gap justification scores did not differ significantly between the low construal level and the high construal level conditions (b = .21, SE = .20, t = 1.08, p = .28, *95% CI* [-.18, .61]).

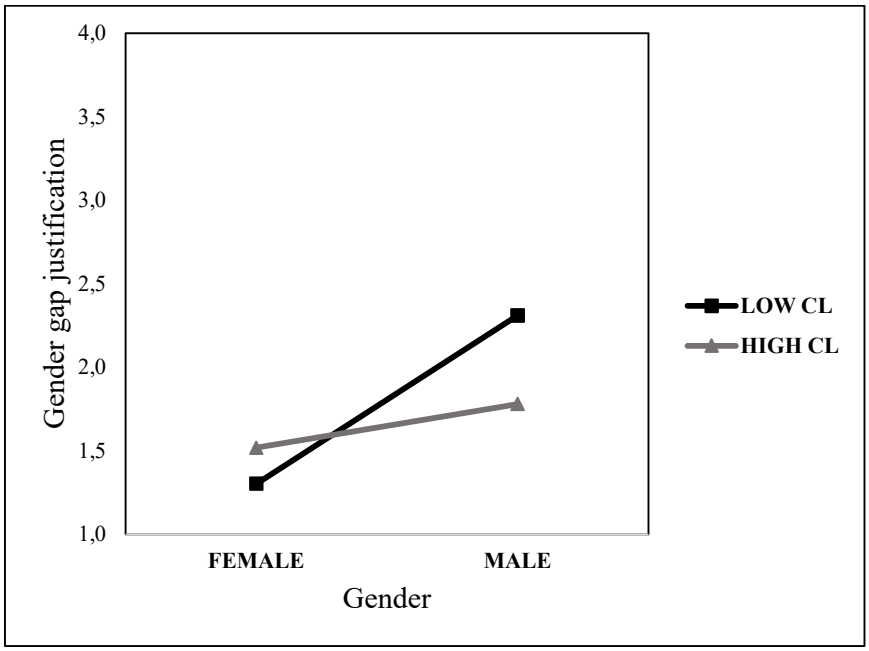

Figure 3. *Gender gap justification as a function of gender and construal level (Study 2).*

Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine gender-based differences in the justification of the gender gap as a function of construal level. The results confirmed that, even in the context of gender inequality, psychological distance can act as a moderator of the relationship between (disadvantaged vs. privileged) status and system justification.

In this study, the opposition between disadvantaged and privileged individuals was operationalized by examining the differences between those who identify with the female gender and those who identify with the male gender, given that the context concerned gender

inequality (Friesen et al., 2019; Kay et al., 2009). We hypothesized that, in the low construal level (i.e., low psychological distance) condition, women would justify employment and wage disparities less than men. The results supported this hypothesis and are consistent with research contending that system justification increases as advantage increases (e.g., Caricati, 2017), as opposed to studies that support the strong SJT hypothesis (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Furthermore, these findings support the general hypothesis of this doctoral dissertation that, under conditions of low psychological distance, ego and group justification motivations predominate (e.g., Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost et al., 2001). For women, ego and group justification result in less justification for the gender gap, whereas for men, they result in a greater legitimization of the status quo that already favors them in the economic and employment spheres.

The second hypothesis was also consistent with our previous study, in that we predicted that there would be no difference in gender gap justification based on the gender of the participants in the high construal level condition. This hypothesis was also confirmed, supporting the notion that psychological distance may shed light on the conditions under which disadvantaged and privileged groups are equally or to varying degrees motivated to justify the system.

In contrast to Study 1, we did not consider the impact of interaction on individuals' propensity to support equality policies in Study 2 (nor in subsequent studies), as the primary research question of this doctoral dissertation is whether psychological distance can influence system justification. Future research could test the extension of this model, as in Study 1, by considering differences within gender inequality in the willingness of individuals to support policies and collective actions aimed at changing the status quo (e.g., De Cristofaro et al., 2021).

In addition, in contrast to Study 1, we did not use the gender-specific system justification scale (Jost & Kay, 2005) as a measure of system justification. Rather, we utilized a method

already implemented in other studies on the topic of system justification and gender inequality (e.g., Jost & Burgess, 2000; De Cristofaro et al., 2021). This aspect did not, however, allow us to overcome the limitations regarding social desirability, which should be taken into account in future developments, as well as the limitations concerning the generalizability of the results across samples of various nationalities.

This study, however, allowed us to replicate the findings of the previous study in another context of inequality, by comparing two distinct groups of disadvantaged and privileged individuals. At this point, we investigated whether psychological distance-related differences only emerge when comparing disadvantaged or privileged groups, or also when comparing members of groups with conflicting values and ideologies regarding the legitimization of inequality. This hypothesis was investigated in Study 3.

Study 3. Political ideology and general system justification

The findings of Studies 1 and 2 indicate that, under conditions of low psychological distance, disadvantaged members (low income and females) justify the system less than privileged members (high income and males), whereas under conditions of high psychological distance, there is no difference. To further test our hypothesis that a concrete mindset makes ego and group justification prominent, whereas an abstract mindset makes system justification prominent, we compared members of groups with opposing ideologies regarding system justification. Therefore, the focus of the current study was not on the distinction between disadvantaged and privileged groups but rather on the distinction between groups that support a non-justifying versus legitimizing ideology of social inequality.

Specifically, we decided to consider political ideology as the predictor variable and general system justification as the dependent variable. Research indicates that conservatism (or right-wing political orientation) is a prototypical system-justifying ideology (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Numerous cross-national studies have demonstrated that right-wing individuals tend to justify the system (both generally and in its economic and gender-related aspects) more than left-wing individuals, and that they view inequalities as legitimate and desirable, thereby opposing social change (e.g., Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2008).

So, based on the general hypothesis of this doctoral dissertation, we hypothesized that in the low construal level condition, left-wing individuals would justify the system less than right-wing individuals (hypothesis 1). If in the low psychological distance condition more personal (and relevant to one's social group) motivations and values prevail, then left-wing individuals, who are typically more progressive and supporters of values like fairness, should be less likely to legitimize inequality than right-wing political ideology supporters, who embody values like traditionalism and typically oppose social change (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Graham et al., 2009; Alesina & Giuliano, 2011; Jost et al., 2018).

Second, we hypothesized, in line with our previous studies, that there would be no differences in system justification between left- and right-wing individuals in the high construal level condition, consistent with the notion that under circumstances of high psychological distance, the motivation to defend the status quo predominates (hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

Through Prolific, we collected data from a sample of 350 Italian participants with a mean age of 28.17 years (*SD* = 8.34), and an age range of 18–62 years. 181 participants (51.7% of the total sample) identified as male, 161 as female (46%), 7 as non-binary (2%), and 1 as unwilling to answer (0.3%). *Table 5* contains the complete descriptive statistics.

Table 1. *Descriptive of the sample's characteristics (Study 3)*

Variable	*Frequency*	*Percentage*	*M*	*SD*
Education			2.85	.98
Middle school diploma	8	2.3%		
High school diploma	152	43.4%		
Bachelor's degree	93	26.6%		
Master's degree	82	23.4%		
Postgraduate level	11	3.1%		
Other	4	1.1%		
Employment			1.63	.69
Student	170	48.6%		
Employed	138	39.4%		
Unemployed/Other	42	12%		
Income			1.92	.95
Up to 15.000 Euros	149	42.6%		
15.001 to 28.000 Euros	100	28.6%		
28.001 to 55.000 Euros	82	23.4%		
55.001 to 75.000 Euros	17	4.9%		
Over 75.000 Euros	2	0.6%		
Political orientation			4.93	1.20
Extreme right	0	0%		
Right	14	4%		
Moderate right	37	10.6%		
Center	56	16%		
Moderate left	107	30.6%		
Left	123	35.1%		
Extreme left	13	3.7%		

N = 350

Procedure

Directly from Prolific, participants chose to take part in the research voluntarily. After being redirected to Qualtrics, participants were required to carefully read and accept the informed consent document. The participants then responded to demographic variables, such as political orientation. To highlight the topic of our study, participants read a brief text emphasizing the issue of social inequality in Italy (also utilized in Study 1):

> "In Italy and throughout the world, economic and social inequality persist and are becoming increasingly evident. Oxfam's global survey revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the exponential growth of inequality in all nations, including Italy. This inequality, which primarily stems from income, gender, and ethnicity, has an impact on the equality of opportunities and outcomes among individuals. There are substantial gaps between the wealthy and the poor, as well as disparities in employment, health, and education".

The participants were then randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: low or high construal level. The manipulation of construal level was identical to that of Studies 1 and 2. Finally, the tendency for all participants to justify the system was measured. Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked and rewarded.

Measures

Political orientation. The participants' political orientation was measured by a single item that asked them to indicate, in the current Italian context, their political orientation on a scale ranging from 1 (extreme right) to 7 (extreme left).

Construal level manipulation. Participants were asked to describe events, actions, and emotions that might occur in the near future (low construal level condition) or in the distant future (high construal level condition), using the same task as in Studies 1 and 2.

Manipulation check. The manipulation check consisted of seven semantic differentials, to which participants responded by referring to what they had written in the preceding task. At one end of the scale were low-level characteristics (e.g., insignificant, particular), while at the other end were high-level characteristics (significant, global). Items were averaged to create a construal level index (α = .71) where higher scores indicate a high construal level, and lower scores indicate a low construal level.

System Justification. The General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003; Roccato et al., 2014) was administered to measure participants' tendency to preserve and defend the system. It consists of eight items with response scales ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Examples include, "In general, you find society to be fair", "Most policies serve the greater good", and "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness." The index of general system justification was calculated by averaging the 8 items (α = .70).

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 27 (IBM Corp., 2020). First, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test the efficacy of the experimental manipulation of construal level, with the assumption that participants assigned to the high construal level condition (as opposed to the low construal level condition) would rate their task responses in terms of higher construal level features. *Table 6* displays the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables utilized in the study. A moderation analysis was performed to test the study's main hypothesis using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1; 2013). Prior to analysis, all variables were centered on their respective means. Political orientation was the

model predictor, experimental condition (low versus high construal level) was the moderator, and the dependent variable was general system justification.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (Study 3).*

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Political orientation	350	4.93	1.20	–		
2. Construal level	350	1.50	.50	-.01	–	
3. General system justification	350	4.12	.65	-.15**	-.02	–

$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$

Results

Manipulation check

The ANOVA results demonstrated the effectiveness of manipulation. Participants in the high construal level condition (M = 4.41, SD = .97, N = 175) reported a significantly higher mean construal level index than participants in the low construal level condition (M = 4.02, SD = .97, N = 175), $F_{(1,348)} = 14.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$.

Moderation analysis

Political orientation was found to have a significant and negative relationship with general system justification, indicating that left-wing (right-wing) participants tended to justify less (more) the status quo (B = -.08, SE = .03, t = -2.77, p < .01, *95% CI* [-.14, -.02]). The relationship between the moderator (low vs. high construal level) and the dependent variable was not significant (B = -.03, SE = .07, t = -.47, p = .64, *95% CI* [-.17, .10]). As in the previous two studies, interaction was found to be significant and positive (B = .13, SE = .06, t = -2.36, p < .05, *95% CI* [.02, .25]). The model accounted for 4% of the variance in the general system justification ($F_{(3, 346)} = 4.61$, $p < .01$).

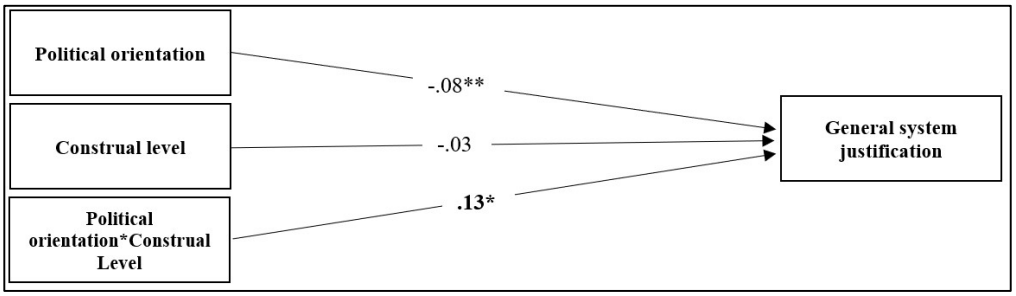

Figure 4. *Moderation model of construal level on the relationship between political orientation and general system justification (Study 3).*

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 5*) revealed that among those assigned to the low construal level condition, left-wing participants justified the system less than right-wing individuals (B = -.15, SE = .04, t = -3.68, p < .01, *95% CI* [-. 22, -.07]), whereas in the high construal level condition there were no differences in system justification (B = -.01, SE = .04, t = -.29, p = .77, *95% CI* [-.09, .07]). These results are consistent with the findings of Studies 1 and 2 and confirm both hypotheses 1 and 2.

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that, among right-wing participants, those exposed to the low construal level manipulation reported significantly higher scores on the general system justification scale than those exposed to the high construal level manipulation (B = -.19, SE = .10, t = -2.01, p < .05, *95% CI* [-.38, -.01]).

There were no significant differences in general system justification scores between left-wing participants exposed to the high construal level manipulation and those exposed to the low construal level manipulation (B = .13, SE = .10, t = 1.34, p = .18, *95% CI* [-.06, .32]).

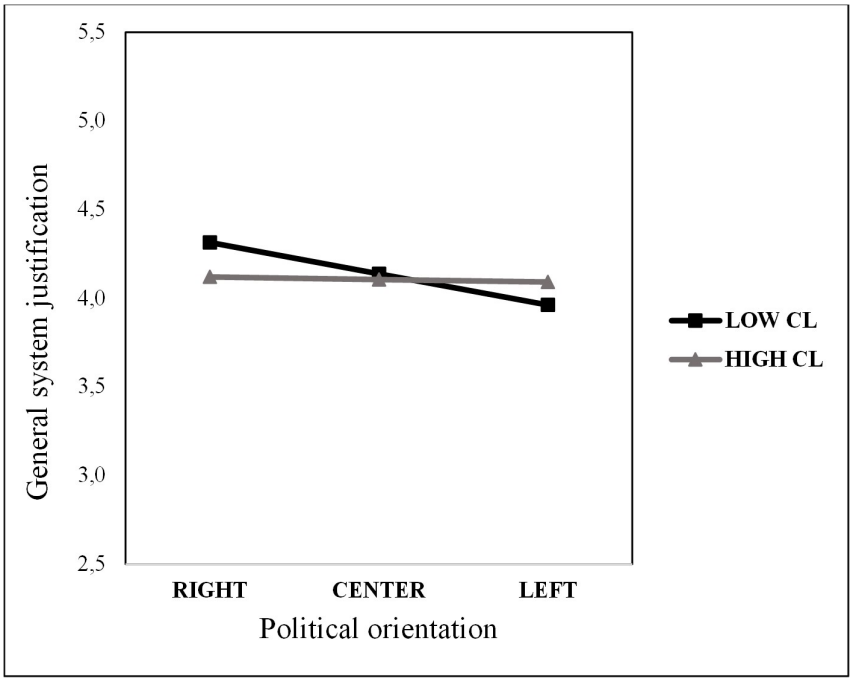

Figure 5. *General system justification as a function of political orientation and construal level.*

Discussion

The objective of the third study was to extend the findings of the previous two by comparing a participant characteristic that is related to system justification but does not make them the direct protagonists of the disadvantage (vs. advantage) provided by inequality. In fact, this study examined whether construal level moderates the relationship between political orientation and general system justification.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that, in the condition of low construal level, left-wing individuals would justify the system less than right-wing individuals. Analyses of the collected data confirmed this hypothesis, which is consistent with research indicating that right-wing (conservative) ideology supporters are more likely to legitimize existing inequalities than left-wing individuals (e.g., Kay et al., 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008). These findings are also consistent with the notion that when psychological distance is low, individuals are more motivated to

defend their ideologies and the values they share with their social group. Thus, left-wing individuals adhere to the values of equity and inclusion, justifying the system less, whereas right-wing individuals are motivated to defend their group and the status quo, leading to a greater justification of inequality.

The second hypothesis, which was also confirmed, has interesting implications. The results indicated that in the high construal level condition there were no significant differences in system justification between left- and right-wing individuals. This implies that, under certain conditions, even left-wing individuals, who typically favor social change to combat existing inequalities (e.g., Alesina & Giuliano, 2011), may align themselves with a more typically conservative ideology. This finding is consistent with research that has investigated the conservative ideological shift, which is the process by which certain variables may trigger a greater preference for conservatism, which is considered attractive because it proposes a clear, consistent, and stable view of reality (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). According to research, the conservative shift typically occurs after exposure to a threat (e.g., Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Echebarria-Echabe & Fernandez-Guede, 2006; van der Toorn et al., 2017). Conservatism allows individuals' epistemic, existential, and relational needs to be satisfied, so it has been argued that liberals react to threats by becoming more conservative (e.g., Nail & McGregor, 2009). Other studies, however, have demonstrated that after exposure to a threat, both conservative and liberal ideological shifts are possible, depending on which value is most prominent at the time of the threat (e.g., Gailliot et al., 2008; Jonas et al., 2008). Some research in Construal Level Theory has also demonstrated that, under certain conditions of high psychological distance, opposing political positions tend to converge on either the liberal or conservative side (e.g., Luguri et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2013; Luguri & Napier, 2013; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014; Chan, 2016; Mahfud et al., 2018; Napier et al., 2018). The results of our study are consistent with research that appears to suggest that psychological

distance can induce an ideological shift. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore this topic in future studies.

Study 3 is subject to limitations similar to the previous two studies. Also for this study, self-reported measures that do not control for the effects of social desirability were used, and the sample was Italian. Therefore, future research should also consider a measure of social desirability and replicate the results in multiple countries.

Despite these limitations, Study 3 contributed to the confirmation of the current dissertation's general hypothesis by extending it to ideological differences in system justification. We argue that the results of Studies 1, 2, and 3 are attributable to the fact that, under conditions of low psychological distance, individuals are motivated to defend themselves and their group, whereas under conditions of high psychological distance, individuals are more inclined to defend the system. Study 4 will further explore these hypotheses.

Study 4. The distinct impact of self- and system-related threats based on construal level

According to the findings of Studies 1, 2, and 3, psychological distance moderates the relationship between membership in groups (of opposite status and political ideology) and system justification. Our general hypotheses concerned the conflict between ego-, group-, and system-justifications, which, according to the literature, are believed to be aligned for privileged groups and in conflict for disadvantaged groups (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). In our studies, we hypothesized that adopting a low construal level increases the motivation to protect one's own and one's group interests, not only for groups of different status but also for those who support values and ideologies that typically either oppose or legitimize inequality. Nonetheless, when a high construal level is adopted, system justification prevails over the other two motivations, and, as a result, there are no differences in the legitimization of inequality between individuals of different status and political ideology.

In the fourth and final study of the current dissertation, we directly tested the hypothesis that under conditions of low psychological distance, the motivation to defend oneself predominates, whereas under conditions of high psychological distance, the motivation to defend the system predominates. To compare these circumstances, we utilized personal threat versus system threat scenarios.

When people are exposed to system threats or criticism, they are more motivated to defend the status quo (e.g., Kay et al., 2005; Jost et al., 2005; Jost et al., 2010; Wakslask et al., 2011). The most widely used system threat experimental manipulation is that of Kay et al. (2005), who exposed half of the participants in their study to an article apparently written by a journalist highlighting the general dissatisfaction of citizens with their country, which has now reached rock bottom in social, economic, and political terms, especially in comparison to other countries. The other half of the participants, on the other hand, read a text that confirmed the system's effectiveness in addressing problems and fostering citizen satisfaction (low-threat

condition). Analyses revealed that the high threat manipulation motivated participants to strengthen the legitimacy of the system. Numerous studies conducted in a variety of countries have replicated the effect of system threats on motivation to maintain the status quo (see Jost, 2019 for a review). In the same way that threats to the system motivate individuals to defend the status quo, threats to the self and the group motivate people to maintain a positive sense of personal and social identity by attempting to restore their own and the group's value (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ellemers et al., 2002; Nadler et al., 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In addition, a number of studies have demonstrated that psychological distance can influence risk and threat perception (e.g., Lee et al., 2010; Lee, 2019). Several studies have investigated the effect of psychological distance on threat relevance (e.g., Katz et al., 2017), emotional response (e.g., Chandran & Menon, 2004), and coping reactions (e.g., Han et al., 2016) in the context of health risks (e.g., Pounders et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2015).

The objective of Study 4 was to examine how the impact of a threat to the self or system varies with psychological distance. We did not focus directly on system justification in this study because we wanted to determine whether, under varying conditions of psychological distance, the impact of one threat is greater than the other. In contrast to other studies (e.g., Kay et al., 2005), the current study did not use the threat to the system to examine the effects on system justification; rather, it examined how the threat to the system (compared to a threat to the self) affects individuals' reactions under different conditions of psychological distance. We compared the system-related threat to an individual health threat.

On the basis of the findings from our prior studies, we hypothesized that under conditions of low psychological distance, the impact of the threat at the personal level would prevail (and individuals would be more motivated to protect themselves and their group), whereas under conditions of high psychological distance, the impact of the system-related threat would prevail (and individuals would be more motivated to defend the status quo).

In other words, we hypothesized that under low construal level conditions, the self-related threat would be more influential than the system-related threat in terms of relevance, negative emotional reaction, and coping intentions (hypothesis 1).

In contrast, we hypothesized that under conditions of high construal level, the system-related threat would be perceived as more relevant, would cause greater emotional distress, and would elicit a greater propensity to take action to eliminate the threat than the self-related threat (hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via Prolific. The sample consisted of 244 participants, of which 52% identified as male, 42% as female, 3.3% as non-binary, and 0.8% did not wish to specify their gender. The sample ranged in age from 19 to 65 years (*M* = 29.18, *SD* = 8.80). In *Table 7*, complete descriptive statistics are displayed.

***Table 7**. Descriptive of the sample's characteristics (Study 4)*

Variable	*Frequency*	*Percentage*	*M*	*SD*
Education			2.78	.91
Middle school diploma	4	1.6%		
High school diploma	109	44.7%		
Bachelor's degree	77	31.6%		
Master's degree	45	18.4%		
Postgraduate level	8	3.3%		
Other	1	0.4%		
Employment			3.08	2.76
Student	114	46.7%		
Employed	93	38.1%		
Unemployed/Other	37	15.1%		
Income			1.90	.94
Up to 15.000 Euros	100	41%		
15.001 to 28.000 Euros	83	34%		
28.001 to 55.000 Euros	52	21.3%		
55.001 to 75.000 Euros	3	1.2%		
Over 75.000 Euros	6	2.5%		

N = 244

Procedure

Participants were redirected to the experiment through Prolific. They initially read and approved the informed consent and provided demographic information (gender, age, political orientation, income, education, and occupation). The participants were then randomly assigned to the low construal level or high construal level experimental condition and subjected to the same manipulation employed in the other three studies. After completing the task and manipulation check, participants were randomly assigned to either the self-related threat or system threat condition. The participants in the self-related threat condition read a passage about the health risks of cell phone use (developed from van der Toorn et al., 2017):

> "We hear more and more about the health risks associated with cell phone use. The use of cell phones, which are now ingrained in daily life, can impair social and emotional skills, sleep quality, mood, concentration, and learning abilities. Numerous scientific studies have found that exposure to electromagnetic waves from cell phones can harm fertility and the immune system and increase the risk of hearing loss (if you use it for more than 30 minutes a day for more than 4 years). In addition, it can cause damage to the retina and vision (due to blue light), increase the risk of cancer and neurodegenerative diseases, posture issues, and skin ageing".

Participants in the system-related threat condition read a passage highlighting Italian citizens' dissatisfaction with the country's condition (adapted from Kay et al., 2005):

> "These days, many people feel disappointed with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the nation has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People do not feel as safe and secure as they used to, and there is a sense of uncertainty regarding the country's future. It seems that many countries in the world, such as the United States, are enjoying better social,

economic, and political conditions than Italy. More and more Italian citizens express a willingness to leave Italy and immigrate to other nations".

At the conclusion of the reading of the passage, all participants were administered a threat perception manipulation check. The participants were then asked to rate the significance of the threat to which they had been exposed, the emotional distress it had induced, and their propensity to take action to find a solution. Following the completion of the experiment, participants were thanked and compensated for their time.

Measures

Construal level manipulation. To induce a low or high construal level, participants were asked to describe what they believed would occur in the future (low distance) versus the distant future (high distance). The tasks are identical to those used in our previous studies (Giacomantonio et al., 2010; De Dreu et al., 2009).

Construal level manipulation check. Participants rated their task responses on seven semantic differentials, indicating low-level features at one pole and high-level features at the other pole, as in the previous studies. Items were averaged to create a construal level index (α = .66), where low scores indicate a low construal level, while high scores indicate a high construal level.

Threat manipulation. Under the direction of van der Toorn et al. (2017), a text describing the negative health effects of cell phone use was developed in order to induce a sense of personal threat in the participants. Instead, the text employed by Kay et al. (2005) was adapted to the Italian context in order to induce a sense of system-related threat.

Threat manipulation check. To assess the efficacy of threat manipulation, participants rated 12 items on response scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely) to indicate the

extent to which they perceived a personal threat (α = .94) and a system threat (α = .95). Specifically, 6 items were administered to measure self-related threat: "I feel threatened"; "My personal condition is at risk"; "I personally feel I am in danger"; "I feel that my personal condition is in danger"; "I perceive a sense of personal threat"; and "If I think about myself, I do not feel safe". The remaining 6 system-related items were: "The Italian system is threatened"; "The condition of my country is at risk"; "In general, society is in danger"; "The condition of my country is in danger"; "I perceive a sense of threat to society"; and "If I think about the Italian system, I feel that society is not safe".

Threat relevance. On a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely), participants rated the passage they had just read as relevant, salient, important, significant, interesting, marginal (reverse-scored), and negligible (reverse-scored). The items were averaged to determine the threat relevance index (α = .94).

Negative emotional impact. Participants were asked to recall the passage they had just read and indicate, on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely), how strongly they experienced negative and positive emotions. The participants' emotions measured were uneasiness, discomfort, anxiety, sadness, agitation, anger, joy (reverse-scored), and indifference (reverse-scored). The mean of the items was used to create a negative emotional impact index (α = .89).

Coping response. To assess the threat's impact on the behavioral level, participants responded to 5 items with response scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely) that asked how much they desired to engage in behaviors aimed at obtaining information and identifying solutions to what they had just read. The five items were as follows: "I would like to learn more"; "I would like to find a solution"; "I would attend educational meetings on the

topic"; "I would take actions that are useful to change"; and "I would work to make the situation better". A coping response index (α = .92) was derived by computing the mean of the items.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 27 (IBM Corp., 2020). To test the efficacy of construal level manipulation, a one-way ANOVA was performed with the assumption that participants assigned to the low construal level condition would score higher on the check variable than participants assigned to the low construal level condition. To examine the efficacy of threat manipulation, we performed a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with threat manipulation (self-related vs. system-related) as between-subjects factor, and reported threat (personal and system-related) as within-subjects factor. The descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in *Table 8*. For each dependent variable (threat relevance, emotional impact, and coping response), a 2 (construal level: low/high) x 2 (threat: self-related/system-related) ANOVA was conducted to test the study's hypotheses.

Table 8. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (Study 4).*

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Construal level	244	1.50	.50	–				
2. Self- vs. system-related threat	244	1.52	.50	-.02	–			
3. Threat relevance	244	5.25	1.26	-.05	.12	–		
4. Negative emotional impact	244	4.30	1.25	-.12	.27***	.63***	–	
5. Coping response	244	4.52	1.46	-.07	.07	.66***	.52***	–

$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$

Results

Manipulations check

Analysis of variance revealed that participants assigned to the high construal level condition (M = 4.24, SD = .96, N = 122) reported a significantly higher mean at the check

variable (where high scores indicate high level characteristics) than those assigned to the low construal level condition (M = 3.97, SD = .87, N = 122), $F_{(1, 242)} = 5.51$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$.

Regarding threat manipulation, the analysis revealed that the perception of threat to the system (M = 3.95, SD = 1.97) was, on average, more intense than the perception of threat to the self (M = 3.25, SD = 1.34), $F_{(1, 242)} = 56.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .19$. In addition, a significant two-way interaction emerged between exposure to self vs. system-related threat and self-reported threat perception, $F_{(1, 242)} = 86.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .26$. In the experimental condition of self-related threat, the mean perception of threat to the self was greater (M = 3.42, SD = 1.30, N = 116) than the mean perception of threat to the system (M = 3.11, SD = 1.36, N = 128). In contrast, in the experimental condition of system-related threat, scores of perceived threat to the system (M = 4.58, SD = 1.32, N = 128) were greater than the scores of perceived threat to the self (M = 3.26, SD = 1.37, N = 116).

These results indicate that both the threat and construal level manipulations were effective.

Threat relevance

The analysis did not find a significant main effect of construal level on the dependent variable, $F_{(3, 240)} = 1.04$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2_p = .95$. Instead, a main effect of threat emerged, indicating that participants assigned to the system-related threat condition (M = 5.40, SD = 1.27) rated the text as more relevant and important than those assigned to the self-related threat condition (M = 5.08, SD = 1.22), $F_{(3, 240)} = 3.97$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. The most important result concerns the statistically significant interaction between construal level and threat ($F_{(3, 240)} = 12.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$). Analysis of the means revealed that, among participants assigned to the low construal level condition, those who were exposed to the self-related threat (M = 5.44, SD = .99, N = 57) rated the passage as more relevant than those who were exposed to the system-related threat (M

= 5.20, *SD* = 1.36, *N* = 65). In contrast, in the high construal level condition, participants exposed to the system-related threat attributed greater relevance (*M* = 5.60, *SD* = 1.15, *N* = 63) than participants exposed to the self-related threat (*M* = 4.73, *SD* = 1.32, *N* = 59).

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 6*) revealed that the difference between the means was only statistically significant in the high construal level condition (*b* = .87, *SE* = .22, *t* = 3.95, *p* = .001, *95% CI* [.44, 1.31]), but not in the low construal level condition (*b* = -.25, *SE* = .22, *t* = -1.13, *p* = .26, *95% CI* [-.69, .19]). Thus, only hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that, among participants exposed to the self-related threat, those assigned to the low construal level condition rated the threat's relevance significantly higher than those assigned to the high construal level condition (*b* = -.72, *SE* = .23, *t* = -3.18, *p* < .01, *95% CI* [-1.17, -.27]).

There were no significant (but marginally significant) differences in threat relevance scores between the high construal level condition and the low construal level condition among participants who were exposed to the system-related threat (*b* = .40, *SE* = .22, *t* = 1.87, *p* = .06, *95% CI* [-.02, .83]).

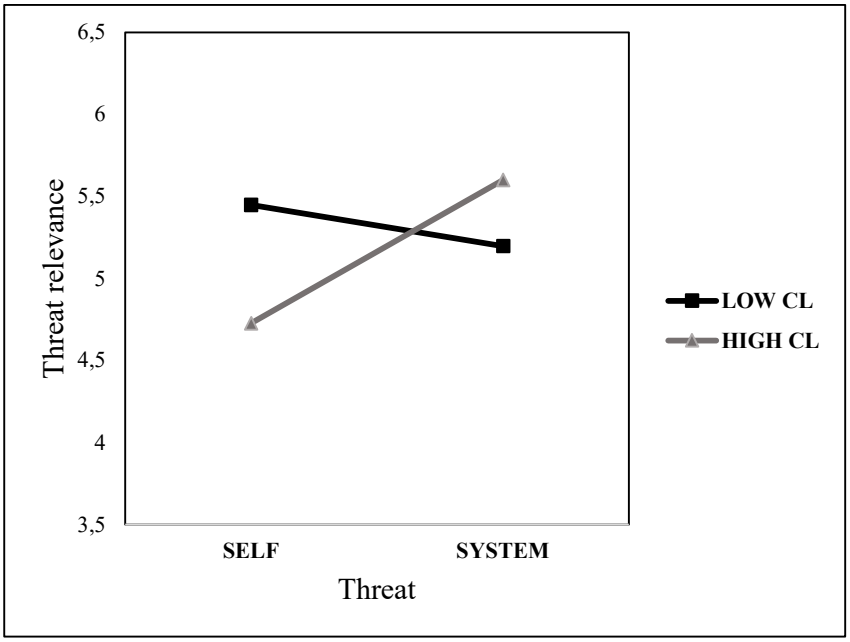

Figure 6. *Threat relevance as a function of threat and construal level*

Negative emotional impact

Analysis of variance revealed that the main effects of both construal level ($F_{(3, 240)} = 5.29$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$) and threat ($F_{(3, 240)} = 21.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$) on emotional impact were significant. Specifically, participants assigned to the low construal level condition ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.15$) exhibited more intense negative emotions than those assigned to the high construal level condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.33$). Participants exposed to the system-related threat ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.26$) experienced a greater negative impact than those exposed to the self-related threat ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.15$). The interaction between construal level and threat was also significant ($F_{(3, 240)} = 30.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .11$), indicating that participants assigned to the low construal level condition were more emotionally affected after exposure to the self-related threat ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .96$, $N = 57$) than when exposed to the system-related threat ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.30$, $N = 65$). Among participants who were induced with a high construal level,

those exposed to the system-related threat (*M* = 4.86, *SD* = 1.17, *N* = 63) reported more negative emotions than those exposed to the self-related threat (*M* = 3.38, *SD* = 1.04, *N* = 59).

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 7*) revealed that the interaction was only significant in the high construal level condition (*b* = 1.48, *SE* = .21, *t* = 7.21, *p* < .001, *95% CI* [1.08, 1.89]) but not in the low construal level condition (*b* = -.13, *SE* = .21, *t* = -.62, *p* = .54, *95% CI* [-.53, .28]). Therefore, only hypothesis 2 was confirmed for negative emotional impact.

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that participants exposed to the self-related threat who were assigned to the low construal level condition reported significantly more negative emotions than those assigned to the high construal level condition (*b* = -1.14, *SE* = .21, *t* = -5.41, *p* < .001, *95% CI* [-1.55, -.72]).

In contrast, participants exposed to the system-related threat who were assigned to the high construal level condition rated a significantly greater negative emotional impact than those assigned to the low construal level condition (*b* = .47, *SE* = .20, *t* = 2.35, *p* < .05, *95% CI* [.07, .87]).

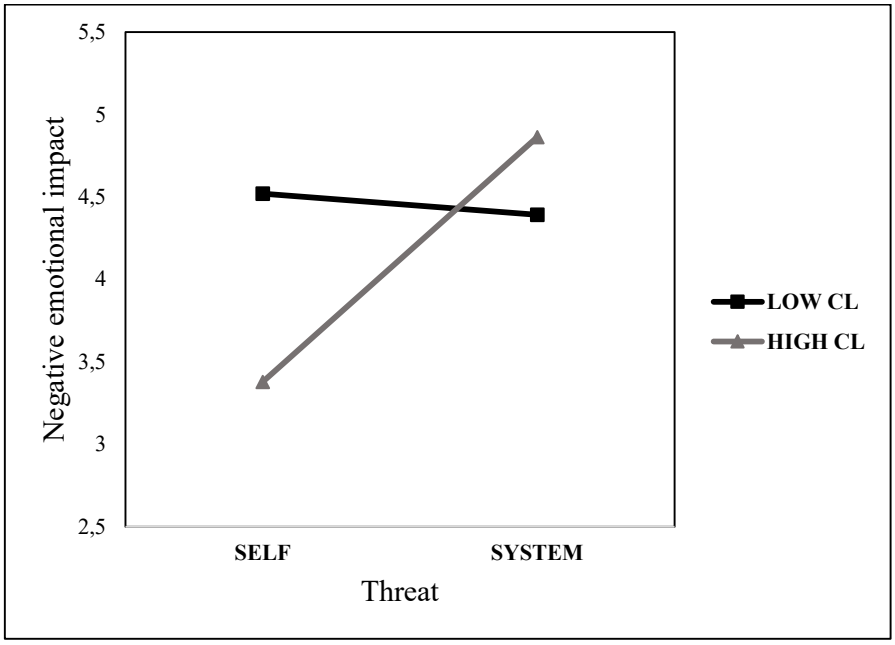

***Figure** 7. Negative emotional impact as a function of threat and construal level*

Coping response

Regarding people's propensity to take action to resolve the threat, neither the construal level nor the self-related vs. system-related threat condition had significant main effects. The interaction between construal level and threat was significant ($F_{(3, 240)} = 12.22$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$). Specifically, analysis of means revealed that, among participants in the low construal level manipulation, those exposed to the self-related threat ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.35$, $N = 57$) reported a greater propensity to act than those exposed to the system-related threat ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.39$, $N = 65$). In contrast, in the high construal level condition, participants exposed to the system-related threat ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.37$, $N = 63$) exhibited a greater intention to find a solution than participants exposed to the self-related threat ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.59$, $N = 59$).

Simple slopes analysis (*Figure 8*) revealed that the interaction was significant in the high construal level condition ($b = .85$, $SE = .26$, $t = 3.31$, $p < .01$, *95% CI* [.35, 1.36]), but not in the low construal level condition ($b = -.42$, $SE = .26$, $t = -1.64$, $p = .10$, *95% CI* [-.93, .09]). Consequently, only hypothesis 2 was supported.

Simple slopes analysis also revealed that participants exposed to the self-related threat and assigned to the low construal level condition reported a significantly greater propensity to act than those assigned to the high construal level condition ($b = -.86$, $SE = .26$, $t = -3.25$, $p < .01$, *95% CI* [-1.38, -.34]).

There were no significant differences in coping response scores between the high and low construal level conditions among participants exposed to the system-related threat ($b = .42$, $SE = .25$, $t = 1.65$, $p = .10$, *95% CI* [-.08, .91]).

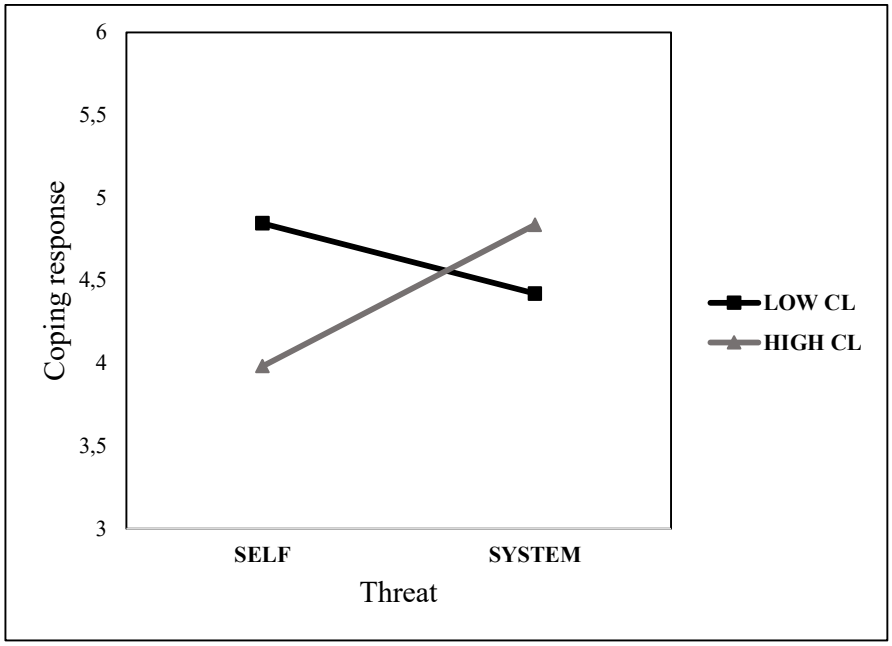

Figure 8. *Coping response as a function of threat and construal level*

Discussion

The purpose of Study 4 was to determine whether, under different conditions of psychological distance, individuals perceive the threat to the self or the system as having a greater impact (in terms of relevance, negative emotions, and intention to act). We hypothesized that, in conditions of low psychological distance, the impact of the self-related threat would predominate, whereas in conditions of high psychological distance, the impact of the system-related threat would be more prominent. Our hypotheses were only partially supported by the results. Although the directions of the slopes were as expected, only the differences between the means corresponding to the high construal level condition were statistically significant for all three dependent variables. Consequently, only the hypotheses regarding the impact differences in the high construal level condition were confirmed. We found that when participants adopted a high construal level, the system-related threat had a significantly greater impact than the personal health threat. Specifically, greater relevance was attributed to the threat, negative emotions were more intense, and the intention to respond to the threat was

stronger. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that, under conditions of high psychological distance, individuals tend to focus more on system-level outcomes than on personal level outcomes. This may explain for why, at greater psychological distance, people tend to justify the system to a greater extent, as some research has shown (e.g., Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Chan, 2016; Alper, 2018), even at the expense of their own group interests, as demonstrated in the three previous studies in this dissertation.

Hypothesis 1 was not supported by any of the three dependent variables. In general, analysis of the means revealed that in the low construal level condition, the self-related threat was perceived as more relevant, caused greater negative emotional impact, and promoted coping responses to a greater extent than the system-related threat. However, these differences were not statistically significant. This result may be due to the fact that we did not account for the possibility that, for some participants, the threat to the system may also be perceived as personal, i.e., for people whose personal interests are aligned with those of the system, such as members of privileged groups (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). Consequently, some participants may have viewed both threats as personally relevant, which would have prevented either threat from emerging clearly. In addition, research on fear appeals in health promotion campaigns has demonstrated that conveying messages emphasizing the risks of a behavior and, in general, communicating threatening health information may elicit defensive responses such as denial and avoidance, resulting in ignoring the threat's effects (e.g., Van't Riet & Ruiter, 2013; Ruiter et al., 2014). In future research, it would be appropriate to operationalize the self-related threat differently and to account for the possibility of overlapping personal interests for some individuals.

Study 4 is subject to limitations. First, the absence of a control group in addition to the two experimental conditions may have affected the study's internal validity (e.g., Fink, 2003). In addition, as in the previous studies, dependent variables were measured using self-reported

instruments, which do not permit control for the effects of social desirability (e.g., Price & Murnan, 2004). Also in this study, we used a convenience sample of Italian participants, making it impossible to generalize the findings to a larger population. Regarding the study's methodology, the wording of the items related to the coping response variable prevents us from determining whether the solutions of the participants in response to the system-related threat will result in system justification or in social change actions. We assumed, based on the literature, that people are motivated to justify the system when it is threatened (e.g., Kay et al., 2005; Jost & Liviatan, 2014). However, we did not directly test this hypothesis by measuring system justification. Also, with regard to the participant emotions we measured, we did not consider separately the effects of anxiety (which is typically generated when a threat is perceived, e.g., Jonas et al., 2014) and anger, which has been identified as one of the emotions that lead to collective action, rather than system justification (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2004). In addition, we did not consider group justification in this study, so future research should include a threat to the group (and a control group) to directly measure participants' motivation to justify the system, to re-establish their group value and personal value.

General discussion

Recent evidence indicates an increase in economic and social inequality (e.g., Solt, 2016, 2020; Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Clouston et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021). Thus, considerable attention has been devoted to studying the causes and effects of inequality, and a number of mechanisms at the individual, group, and system levels have been identified as contributing to the legitimization and maintenance of inequality, both among members of disadvantaged and privileged groups (e.g., system justification, Jost & Banaji, 1994). However, relatively little attention has been given to situational variables, such as psychological distance, that may contribute to the maintenance of inequality.

Consequently, the purpose of this dissertation was to investigate the relationship between psychological distance and system justification. Recent research has examined this relationship through the lens of Construal Level Theory (CLT; e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2010), i.e., a theoretical model that postulates a bidirectional relationship between psychological distance and the level of abstraction (or construal) of mental representations of objects, events, actions, goals, and other people. To our knowledge, studies that have examined the relationship between psychological distance and system justification (e.g., Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Chan, 2016; Alper, 2018; Miller & Borgida, 2019; Badaan et al., 2022) have not investigated how psychological distance influences the extent to which disadvantaged and privileged members, or people with opposing political ideologies, justify the system. In response to this lack in the literature, we conducted four studies in which we manipulated the construal level of participants in order to determine whether psychological distance moderates the relationship between membership in groups (of opposite status and political ideology) and system justification. To formulate our general hypotheses, we began with the premise that the three fundamental motivations of ego justification, group justification, and system justification are in conflict for members of disadvantaged groups, whereas they frequently coincide for members of privileged

groups (e.g., Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost et al., 2001). We therefore hypothesized that, under conditions of low psychological distance, motivations to protect oneself and one's group would prevail, whereas under conditions of high psychological distance, system justification would prevail.

The first study provided initial evidence for the general hypotheses underlying the current dissertation and laid the groundwork for further investigation. Specifically, Study 1 revealed that individuals with lower incomes are less likely to justify the economic system than individuals with higher incomes under low construal level conditions, regardless of their political orientation. In contrast, under conditions of high construal level, there is no distinction in the economic system justification based on income. Furthermore, this study found that economic system justification is associated with less support for progressive taxation. Income is not directly related to the preference for progressive taxation, but, in interaction with the construal level, it has an indirect effect via the mediation of economic system justification. This result suggests that, under conditions of low psychological distance, disadvantaged individuals may demonstrate greater support for economic policies aimed at reducing inequality than privileged individuals, due to the diminished effect of system justification.

The second study replicated and extended the previous findings to the context of gender inequality. This study revealed that under conditions of low construal level, women are less likely to justify the gender gap than men, whereas under conditions of high construal level, there was no difference in the justification of gender inequality in the economic and wage fields.

The third study further extended the results by expanding the scope of the general hypotheses to include political ideology-based distinctions in system justification. Similar to the previous studies, the results revealed that under low construal level conditions, left-wing individuals justify the system less than right-wing individuals, whereas under high construal

level conditions, there is no difference in the levels of system justification by political orientation.

The fourth study expanded the findings by focusing on the contrast between ego and system justification, revealing that, under high construal level conditions, people exposed to a threat to the system consider it to be more relevant, experience more intense negative emotions, and are more likely to act to find solutions than those exposed to a threat to their own health. Conversely, under low construal level conditions, the threat to personal health has a greater impact than the threat to the system, although our analyses did not reveal statistical significance.

Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that psychological distance may be a crucial element in resolving the conflict between ego, group and system justification, particularly for disadvantaged individuals. Under conditions of low psychological distance, group justification is more prominent. Therefore, disadvantaged members tend to oppose the legitimization of the status quo, whereas privileged members tend to justify the system to a greater extent because it serves their group's interests. In contrast, under conditions of high psychological distance, the conflict is resolved by the preponderance of system justification as the impact on the larger collective system is more pronounced than the individual and group impacts.

Implications

The current research has contributed to the advancement of the literature on inequality by providing additional evidence regarding the conditions under which system justification can be diminished or heightened (e.g., Jasko & Kossowska, 2013; Day & Fiske, 2017). First, this research contributed a novel aspect to the study of the relationship between psychological distance and system justification by demonstrating that construal level moderates the extent to which disadvantaged and privileged groups justify the system, taking income and gender

differences into account. In general, our findings are more consistent with research indicating that system justification increases as advantage increases (e.g., Caricati & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 2012; Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2017; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018; Trump & White, 2018; Owuamalam & Spears, 2020) than with research supporting the strong SJT hypothesis (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Henry & Saul, 2006; Sengupta et al., 2015; van del Toorn et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2017). However, our studies revealed that under conditions of high psychological distance, the levels of system justification of disadvantaged and privileged members do not differ. Consequently, our findings suggest that system justification does not always increase as advantage increases; rather, these differences may depend on contextual factors.

A further novel aspect is that our results were replicated both when status differences and political orientation differences were considered, demonstrating a mechanism across diverse groups with different characteristics, interests and values. Moreover, the finding that the ideological gap between left-wing and right-wing individuals reduces under high construal level conditions suggests that psychological distance may be a variable that can promote conservative ideological shift (e.g., Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Echebarria-Echabe & Fernandez-Guede, 2006; Nail & McGregor, 2009; van der Toorn et al, 2017) and is consistent with other studies that have demonstrated that psychological distance can mitigate differences between liberals and conservatives (e.g., Luguri et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2013; Luguri & Napier, 2013; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014; Chan, 2016; Mahfud et al., 2018; Napier et al., 2018).

Our hypotheses were only partially supported in the fourth study, which compared ego and system justification, necessitating further investigation. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that, under high construal level conditions, individuals focus more intently on the system and disregard personal instances was confirmed and is consistent with evidence linking psychological distance with a greater interest in the larger social and collective unit (e.g., Giacomantonio et al., 2010; Stillman et al., 2018).

General limitations and future directions

Current research is subject to a number of general limitations. First, the variables were measured using self-reported instruments, which do not allow controlling for social desirability effects. A second limitation relates to the generalizability of the results. Due to the fact that the studies were conducted on convenience samples consisting solely of Italian participants, and that a large proportion of the samples consisted of students, it is necessary to replicate the results on representative samples from various nations (e.g., Price & Murnan, 2004).

Another limitation is that in all studies, only the construal level was manipulated. Although research has demonstrated that psychological distance and construal level have a bidirectional relationship (e.g., Bar-Anan, 2006; 2007) and that the same results are generally obtained using both construal level and psychological distance (e.g., Ledgerwood et al., 2010), the results have not been replicated in every instance (e.g., Gong & Medin, 2012; Žeželj & Jokić, 2014). Consequently, future research should replicate these findings using psychological distance manipulation.

In addition, although we replicated the results by considering two distinct types of social disadvantage (the income-related and the gender-related) associated with two different types of inequality, additional research is required to determine whether these results are also applicable to other manifestations of inequality, such as discrimination based on sexual orientation and toward immigrants, as well as to other types of ideology, such as meritocratic ideology.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that system justification can undermine motivation to support social change (Osborne & Sibley, 2013; Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2018; De Cristofaro et al., 2021). Therefore, future research could examine the effects identified in these studies by extending them to collective action intention and behavior (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2018; van Zomeren, 2019).

Study 1 examined an extension of the interaction between construal level and income and found that economic system justification mediated the relationship between income and support for progressive taxation under conditions of low construal level. Further research in the field of collective action could have both theoretical and practical relevance in identifying the conditions under which privileged or disadvantaged individuals are more likely to support social change.

Finally, future research could also investigate why, under conditions of high psychological distance, system justification outweighs ego and group justification. For instance, research that seeks to explain why those negatively affected by the system are motivated to defend it suggests that this may depend on how stable social, economic, and political arrangements are perceived (e.g., Owuamalam et al., 2017; Kunst et al., 2017). According to a study by Laurin et al. (2013, Study 2), priming the concept of stability (as opposed to change) increased the likelihood that liberal participants would legitimize gender inequality. This result is consistent with research on the moderators of system justification, which has shown that people are more motivated to maintain the status quo when they perceive the system to be stable, unchanging, and inevitable (e.g., Laurin et al., 2010; Chernyak-Hai et al., 2014). In addition, Johnson and Fujita (2012) found that when individuals perceive the status quo as clearly modifiable, they are less motivated to defend it. If stability, immutability, and inevitability of the system are considered to be high-level features (corresponding to high-level construals), it is possible that under conditions of high psychological distance (or when high-level construals are adopted), individuals perceive the system as more stable, unchanging, and inevitable. This perception can lead to an increase in system justification, even among the disadvantaged and/or those who typically support equity. Future research could test this and other hypotheses with the objective of defining a set of contextual conditions under which

individuals, both disadvantaged and privileged, will be inclined to cope with inequality and no longer legitimize it.

Conclusion

In an attempt to contribute to the paucity of studies examining the influence of contextual variables on the mechanisms of inequality maintenance, this research investigated the relationship between psychological distance and system justification. Four online experiments provided evidence that, under conditions of low psychological distance, disadvantaged (low-income and women) and left-wing individuals justify the system less than privileged (high income and men) and right-wing individuals. In contrast, under conditions of high psychological distance, status differences and the ideological divide are reduced, so there are no differences in the system justification based on the group to which the individuals belong. These results suggest that, under conditions of low psychological distance, individuals are more motivated to defend their group's interests than the status quo, whereas, under conditions of high psychological distance, individuals are more likely to defend the status quo regardless of their own and their group's interests. This research suggests that psychological distance may be a crucial element in resolving the conflict between ego, group, and system justification, and it contributes to our knowledge of the circumstances under which individuals tend to legitimize inequalities to a greater or lesser extent.

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