Thriving in a Sinking System: When Does a Threatening World Promote Meaningful Behaviors

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Previous research has demonstrated the palliative function of system justification, that is, people rationalize the status quo as a means to satisfy their psychological needs. As a result, people make suboptimal decisions (e.g., less pro-environmental actions). The current research suggests that the same motivation to rationalize the status quo has potential to induce changes that are meaningful to individuals and the society. Across three studies, we demonstrated that individuals who experienced a system threat are more likely to engage in a meaningful behavior construed on a high level than a low level, while individuals who did not experience such threat did not differ in behavioral intentions whether the behavior is construed on a high or low level. We further established that under system threat, a behavior construed on a high level affords a stronger sense of predictability than one construed on a low level, and is thus seen as a more viable means for individuals to cope with the threat.

System justification theory suggests that people tend to perceive current social, economic, and political arrangements as orderly, just, and legitimate (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). Such a tendency is psychologically appealing as it satisfies the existential need to reduce threat and distress, one of the most fundamental needs human beings possess (Hennes, Nam, Stern, and Jost 2012; Wakslak et al. 2007). However, such a tendency is more palliative than functional, as it does not fundamentally change the situations that individuals have the problem with, either by altering the environment or individuals’ own behaviors. For example, Wakslak et al. (2007) found that people who have high motivation to justify the system had less moral outrage toward injustice and inequality, and importantly less support for social programs that help the disadvantaged (e.g., a job training program).

Seeing the world to be orderly and predictable is psychologically appealing (Jost and Hunyady 2002), as unpredictability is inherently unsettling (Hennes et al. 2012). We argue that a desired perception of the world being orderly and predictable even comes from individuals’ view of their everyday behaviors. When a behavior leads to an expected outcome, we argue that people would feel that things around them are predictable and in order. Such a sense of predictability does not always arise, because people sometimes don’t believe that certain behaviors (e.g., regular exercise) will necessarily lead to an expected outcome (e.g., weight loss). When performing a behavior has undetermined consequences, people would feel that things around them are very unpredictable or not in order. This notion that a causal relationship between a behavior and outcome provides sense of order is consistent with the literature. Kay, Jost, and Young (2005) let people use traits to characterize powerful and overweight people. They found that people who experience system threat are more likely to associate laziness with overweight people than those who experience no system threat. They argued that it is because intelligence and independence are causally related to power, and laziness is causally related to overweight. Though it is not specified by the authors, it is the causal link between the traits (means) and the outcome (ends) that provides an order, which meets the needs of people who experience a system threat. We argue that such a quest for predictability and order can be satisfied by a high level representation of an everyday behavior.

Construal level theory suggests that the same object or event can be represented in high or low levels of representation (Trope and Liberman 2003). A low-level representation is contextualized and concrete, capturing subordinate, specific, and secondary information, while a high-level representation is decontextualized and abstract, capturing superordinate, general, and primary information. More germane to our thesis, high level representations are more “integrative”, whereas low-level representations are more “disparate” (Fujita et al. 2006), therefore we argue that high construal level affords a sense of predictability by heightening a causal relationship. Nussbaum, Trope, and Liberman (2003) suggested that traits better predict how people behave in the distant (vs. near) future, and they argued it is because people are expected to respond to specific contingencies of the situational context in the near future and thus traits play a discounted role in predicting the behavior in the near future. They found that people are expected to act more consistently across different situations in the distant (vs. near) future. The takeaway is that a high (vs. low) construal level (larger psychological distance) reduces attention on the process and routes but emphasizes the outcome, rendering the outcome more attainable and expected. It is because a high (vs. low) construal level strips out the detailed process of performing a behavior, the process that may involve obstacles, efforts, changes; such a neglect on process and a focus on the outcome produce a perception that the outcome is likely, expected, and attainable. For example, when thinking about a behavior (e.g., flossing) in the near future, individuals concern about specific situational factors (e.g., efforts, habits) that may prevent them from achieving the expected outcome (i.e., improved dental health), whereas when people think about the behavior in the distant future, they are less likely to think about the specific obstacles but the outcome that the behavior intends to produce. Therefore, the causal relationship between the behavior (e.g., flossing) and the outcome (e.g., improved dental health) is more pronounced in a high than low construal level.

Taken together, individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors construed in a high (vs. low) level when they experience system threat. It is because a high level construal encourages people to see the causal relationship between their behavior and the desirable outcome, and such a causal relationship quenches the thirst of order and predictability among people who experience system threat. In contrast, when people do not experience system threat, they do not look for order or predictability from the surroundings, and therefore the potential difference in inducing order and predictability between a behavior construed in a high level and one in a low level would not actualize. Therefore, when people are not under threat, whether a behavior is construed in a high or low level, individuals would not prefer one over the other.

Study 1
One hundred and seventy-nine participants recruited from a national online sample (95 women, $M_{age} = 35.25$) were randomly assigned to one of 2 construal level (high vs. low) × 2 threat (system threat vs. control) conditions. Participants first wrote down threatening vs. non-threatening thoughts about America. Adapted from (Jost et al. 2011), system threat was manipulated by having participants write down thoughts that were threatening vs. non-threatening about America. Specifically, participants in the system threat condition
read “please think about ways that things are organized or arranged politically, legally, socially or economically in the US. Which of these things would you strongly recommend other countries should NOT follow because they work particularly badly and are bad ways to run things for the country as a whole? You might think of laws, policies or institutions such as parliament, employment, education, family, social norms and roles, cultural traditions or religion”. Then participants read a message that talked about flossing, where construal level was manipulated. Consistent with the literature (Liberman and Trope 1998), construal level was manipulated by messages that induced people to think about how vs. why. Participants in the low construal level condition read a message that began with “American Dental Association recommends flossing daily. Here is how”. Participants in the high construal level condition read a message that began with “American Dental Association recommends flossing daily. Finally, participants responded to behavioral intention measures, “how willing are you to floss daily” (1 = Not at all willing, 7 = very willing), and “how inclined are you to floss daily” (1 = Not at all inclining, 7 = very inclined; r = .88, p < .001). We also collected several control measures, including how many times they brushed their teeth in the past seven days, whether they flossed every day, and whether they have a dental insurance, as well as demographics.

**Results**

In a separate pretest, we sought to confirm that the system threat manipulation would decrease satisfaction with the U.S. system. Sixty-eight participants from a national online panel were exposed to one of the two messages used in the system threat manipulation before completing measures of satisfaction with the national social system. An 8-item measure on satisfaction with the national system was administered (e.g. “In general, American society operates as it should; America needs to be restructured; America is the best country in the world) on a 1-9 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree; Wasklask, Jost, and Bauer 2011). Satisfaction with the national system scale was calculated for each participant by taking the mean of responses to the 8 items (α = .94). One-way ANOVA with system threat (threat vs. control) as the independent variable revealed that participants engaged in system justification more following system threat, as compared with the control condition (M Threat = 4.94 vs. M Control = 4.03), confirming the manipulation of system threat. To test the hypotheses, A 2 × 2 ANOVA on behavioral intention revealed a significant main effect of whether participants flossed every day ($F(1, 172) = 101.25, p < .001$) and a marginally significant interaction effect of threat x construal level ($F(1, 172) = 3.58, p = .06$). Planned comparison revealed that participants in the threat condition expressed greater intention to floss after reading a message about why floss than how to floss ($M_{why} = 5.40$ vs. $M_{how} = 4.79$; $F(1, 172) = 4.09, p = .05$), while participants in the control condition expressed equal intention to floss regardless of the message they read ($M_{why} = 4.83$ vs. $M_{how} = 5.02; F(1, 172) < 1$).

**Study 2**

One hundred and twenty-five participants recruited from a national online sample (83 women, M Age = 35.76) were randomly assigned to one of 2 construal level (high vs. low) × 2 threat (system threat vs. control) conditions. System threat was manipulated in the same way as in study 1, and construal level was manipulated by messages titled “how to meditate” and “why meditate”. Dependent measures were administered (“how willing are you to meditate”, “how inclined are you to meditate”), followed by a process measure (i.e., predictability), “how likely does meditation provide you a structured mode of life?” (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = very likely), and several control measures, including how knowledgeable they are about meditation, whether they practice yoga, as well as demographic information.

**Results**

A 2 × 2 ANOVA on behavioral intention revealed significant main effects of whether participants practiced yoga ($F(1, 118) = 4.08, p = .05$) and their knowledge about meditation ($F(1, 118) = 19.86, p < .001$), and a significant interaction effect of threat x construal level ($F(1, 118) = 4.23, p = .04$). Planned comparison revealed that participants in the threat condition expressed greater intention to meditate after reading a message about why to meditate than to how to meditate ($M_{why} = 4.90$ vs. $M_{how} = 4.15$; $F(1, 118) = 4.54, p = .04$), while participants in the control condition expressed equal intention to meditate regardless of the message they read ($M_{why} = 4.56$ vs. $M_{how} = 4.84; F(1, 118) < 1$).

To test the mediating role of perceived causality, the same 2 × 2 ANOVA on the extent to which a behavior and an outcome are causally related revealed a significant main effect of participants’ knowledge about meditation ($F(1, 118) = 21.65, p < .001$), and a significant interaction effect of threat x construal level ($F(1, 118) = 9.52, p = .003$). Planned comparison revealed that participants in the threat condition perceived that meditation (i.e., means) provided more structured mode of life (i.e., end) after reading a message about why meditate than how to meditate ($M_{why} = 4.75$ vs. $M_{how} = 3.70$; $F(1, 118) = 8.04, p = .01$), while participants in the control condition perceived that meditation provided equal structured mode of life regardless of the message they read ($M_{why} = 4.26$ vs. $M_{how} = 4.83$; $F(1, 118) = 2.34, p = .13$). We followed Preacher and Hayes (2008) guidelines and used model 8 in PROCESS macro (Hayes 2012) to establish that perceived causality mediated the effect of system threat x construal level. A bootstrapping analysis confirmed that the perceived causality mediates the effect of construal level on behavioral intention among those under system threat (95% CI: 18, 1.10) but not those under no threat (95% CI: -78, .08).

**Study 3**

To further validate the mechanism, we look into individual differences in locus of control. Individuals who tend to believe that their behavior doesn’t matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control are those who have an external locus of control (Rotter 1966). Those people tend not to see the “end” as a result of the “means” they perform, until they are being reminded of rewards that they obtain, and therefore should always be conscious of how performing a behavior leads to an outcome, that is, a means-end causal relationship is always accessible to them. Therefore, we hypothesize,

One hundred and twenty-two participants were recruited from a national online panel (83 women, $M_{age} = 35.43$). All participants were assigned in the system threat condition, and then randomly assigned to one of two construal level conditions (high vs. low). Participants in the high construal level condition read a message with a title “think about reasons to make a difference – why recycle”, while
participants in the low construal level condition read a message with a title “think about ways to make a difference — how to recycle”. Dependent measures and control measures were administered after the manipulations, “how willing are you to recycle in your neighborhood” (1 = Not at all willing, 7 = very willing), and “how inclined are you to recycle in your neighborhood”? (1 = Not at all inclined, 7 = very inclined; r = .88, p < .001). Perceived causality was measured by “how likely does recycling make a better society?” (1 = Not at all likely, 7 = very likely). Then, a 23-item locus of control scale (Rotter 1966) was administered, where participants chose one of two options in each item, for example, participants chose between “many of the unhappy things in people’s lives are partly due to bad luck”, and “people’s misfortunes result from the mistakes they make”. The higher the score, the more people believe that their behavior doesn’t matter much and that rewards in life are generally outside of their control (i.e., external locus of control); the lower the score, the more people believe that their own actions determine the rewards that they obtain (i.e., internal locus of control).

Results

Following Aiken and West (1991), behavioral intention was regressed on locus of control (mean-centered) and construal level (dummy coded). A significant main effect of locus of control (β=-.13, t (118) = 3.08, p =.003) and interaction effect of locus of control x construal level (β=.14, t (118) = 2.36, p =.02) emerged. Spotlight analysis suggested that participants with an external locus of control (one standard deviation above the mean) expressed greater intention to recycle after reading a message about why recycle than how to recycle (Mhigh = 6.14 vs. Mlow = 5.24; t (118) = 2.36, p =.02), while participants with an internal locus of control (one standard deviation below the mean) expressed equal intention to recycle regardless of the message they read (Mhigh = 6.10 vs. Mlow = 6.49; |t|< 1). The same regression on the perceived causality revealed a significant main effect of construal level (β=.53, t (118) = 2.28, p=.02), locus of control (β=.13, t (118) = 3.39, p=.001), and a significant interaction effect of construal level x locus of control (β=.09, t (118) = 1.85, p=.07). Spotlight analysis suggested that participants with an external locus of control believed that recycling (i.e., means) created a better society (i.e., end) after reading a message about why recycle than how to recycle (Mhigh = 6.14 vs. Mlow = 5.18; t (118) = 2.92, p =.004), while participants with an internal locus of control believed that recycling provided equal better society regardless of the message they read (Mhigh = 6.46 vs. Mlow = 6.36; t < 1). We tested that believed that the perceived causality mediates the effect of construal level on behavioral intention. Specifically, among participants with an external locus of control, those who construed recycling in a high construal level had higher perceived causality and greater behavioral intentions than those who construed recycling in a low construal level; among participants with an internal locus of control, the perceived causality was similar regardless of level that recycling was construed. Again, we tested the mediating role of the perceived causality and found that the perceived causality mediates the effect of construal level on behavioral intention among those with an external locus of control (95% CI: .11, 1.23) but not those with an internal locus of control (95% CI: -.25, .34).

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