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Abstract
Are hiring decisions affected by knowledge that a job applicant was previously laid off? We expected decisional biases to be linked with the motivational tendency to believe that society is fair and outcomes are just and deserved (hereafter, system justifying beliefs [SJBs]). Indeed, hiring decisions were more likely to disadvantage a laid off applicant as SJBs increased both when detailed job application information was reviewed for one laid off applicant (Study 1) and when the applicant was described as one of many laid off as the result of corporate downsizing (Study 2). Furthermore, both experiments supported a mediation model, whereby greater endorsement of SJBs was associated with greater perceptions of weaknesses in the laid off applicant, which in turn led to less sympathy, and finally to biased hiring decisions. Study 2 additionally demonstrated that all findings held when controlling for other ideologies.

Keywords
system justification, stigma, employment decisions, laid off

Layoffs are carried out strategically to increase organizational profits by reducing labor costs. They are common during difficult economic periods, such as when over 8 million Americans lost their jobs during the 2007–2009 economic recession in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Sometimes layoffs are massive and across the board, and other times, they are more limited and allegedly linked to job performance. Even in these cases, biased supervisor evaluations may be used as a justification (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995) when the financial state of the company is the real culprit. Thus, the reasons for being laid off may often have little to do with employees’ actual job performance or strategic company “rightsizing.”

Researchers have studied negative consequences experienced by people who are laid off (e.g., their health; Kivimaki, Vahtera, Pentti, & Ferrie, 2000), by employees who are spared from layoffs (e.g., their motivation, absenteeism, and voluntary turnover; Brockner, Grover, Reed, DeWitt, & O’Malley, 1987; Wagar, 2001), and by the organizations themselves (e.g., falling stock prices; Flanagan & O’Shaughnessy, 2005). A topic receiving little attention is the potential stigma faced by laid off workers when attempting to gain future employment.

In his formative writing about stigma, Erving Goffman (1963) categorized unemployment as a type of stigma involving “blemishes of character.” We investigated whether people who have been laid off are likewise assumed to have personal weaknesses, elicit unsympathetic reactions, and ultimately are disadvantaged in hiring decisions. Alternatively, laid off individuals may invoke sympathetic reactions and be conferred a hiring advantage. We reasoned that both sets of reactions are plausible, and they may vary systematically with the extent to which people endorse certain system justifying beliefs (SJBs).

System Justification (SJ)

SJ theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) maintains that people are motivated to believe that societal systems and institutions are fair, legitimate, and desirable because of the psychological need to maintain stability, predictability, and safety. SJ produces the desire to defend existing social systems and institutions (i.e., the status quo). It can reduce uncertainty and anxiety in the short run but can lead to various negative long-term consequences (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002). For instance, people may infer traits in others and even the self that are causally relevant to outcomes, leading to stereotype application (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

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**SJBs and Judgments of People Who Have Been Laid Off**

A variety of ideologies can serve as SJBs (see Jost & Hunyady, 2005), and which ideologies are used can depend on their relevance to the context. For example, Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; e.g., strict adherence to conventional norms, Altemeyer, 1998) can justify benevolent sexism (e.g., putting women on a pedestal; Glick & Fiske, 1996). In contrast, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; e.g., preference for group hierarchy, Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) can justify hostile sexism (antipathy for women who challenge male power; see Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). Other researchers have likewise established connections between certain SJBs and particular discriminatory outcomes (e.g., Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; O’Brien & Major, 2005; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007).

In the context of judgments about people who have been laid off, we expected just world beliefs to be particularly relevant (Jost & Banaji, 1994). According to the just world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978), people make attributions to observed outcomes, so that they appear to be deserved, which can preserve or even boost the belief that the world is fair. Just world ideology can result in internal attributions (Weiner, 1995) and victim derogation, such as assuming that poor people are lazy and unintelligent (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and obese people lack self-control (Crandall, 1994). Thus, we expected people who strongly endorse just world beliefs to view targets of layoffs as having personal shortcomings and to feel unsympathetic toward them.

Although SJ research typically focuses on the consequences of endorsing SJBs, people with weak system justifying tendencies might also be biased. These individuals’ ideological mind-set is that the world is unjust and people do not always get what they deserve, which should prepare them to view laid off people as victims of unfair circumstances. Rather than perceiving weaknesses, sympathetic and compassionate reactions should arise from learning of the laid off person’s plight (e.g., Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978). This in turn should motivate the desire to help (Coke et al., 1978) and restore equity (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), which we expected to manifest in a hiring preference for the laid off applicant.

**Study 1**

Participants varying in endorsement of SJBs reviewed materials of two job applicants with similar credentials for a bank branch manager position. One applicant was previously laid off from his job and the other applicant was seeking employment because he had relocated.

We operationally defined SJBs with Lipkus’s (1991) Belief in a Just World (BJW) scale. In addition, we used Kay and Jost’s (2003) diffuse measure of SJ, which measures perceptions of “fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability of the prevailing social system” (p. 828) and has been used as a predictor in past research (e.g., Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010). We used both measures because (1) both tap into beliefs that society is fair so people end up with deserved outcomes (i.e., the ideology of present interest; see Table 1), (2) the scales are strongly correlated ($r = .67$ in Jost & Kay, 2003; $rs = .50$ and .55 in the studies reported herein), and (3) our results are largely redundant when the two scales are used as separate predictors.

In addition, we explored potential mediating mechanisms driving the effect of SJBs on hiring decisions. Our reasoning suggests that as SJBs increase, people should be more likely to infer personal weaknesses of the laid off applicant. In turn, the greater the endorsement of SJBs, the less sympathetic participants should be toward the laid off applicant. Finally, less sympathy was expected to correspond with a greater likelihood of hiring the relocated rather than the laid off applicant.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 166 introductory psychology students (34% female) who received experimental course credit.$^1$

**Procedure**

Up to 15 participants completed the study at a time. The cover story conveyed that a resident industrial/organizational psychologist consults with companies to evaluate their hiring practices. Participants learned that Charlotte Community Bank had secured this person’s services, giving her information on the bank’s hiring decisions from the past decade to analyze. Next, participants learned that each hiring case was compiled as a file of materials, and we were collecting data on lay people’s decisions for these cases. Each participant received a file with detailed information about a bank branch manager job and two applicants for the position, which participants were to study for about 10 min.

The applicants were Jonathan Meyers and Mark Thompson. The materials for each applicant included a cover letter and a detailed résumé. Materials were developed to be matched in
terms of the applicants’ qualifications but to vary sufficiently to avoid participant suspicion.

All participants learned that one applicant had been laid off from his previous job, whereas the other was unemployed due to relocation. Specifically, the laid off applicant noted in his cover letter that “due to unforeseen economic conditions, I was laid off from my previous position.” The relocated applicant explained, “I left my previous position because my family relocated.”

We counterbalanced whether Thompson or Meyers was laid off.

**Hire decision and perceived weakness and sympathy**. Participants first responded to a question asking which of the two applicants they would hire (0 = laid off applicant and 1 = relocated). Then, the perceived weakness of each applicant was measured with the items, “I thought that the job applicant’s own weaknesses must have played a role in his termination from his prior job” and “I thought that the job applicant must have significant shortcomings because . . . he was laid off from his prior job [for the laid off applicant] / he terminated his job due to relocation” [for the relocated applicant]. The two weakness ratings were reasonably correlated for each applicant (laid off, r = .44; relocated, r = .45). A weakness index was computed by subtracting weakness scores for the relocated applicant from weakness scores for the laid off applicant, so that higher numbers reflected greater perceived weakness in the laid off applicant. The sympathy items were “I felt sympathy toward the job applicant because he . . . had been laid off/lost his job when relocating” and “I thought that the job applicant should be given a break with the current hiring decision because he . . . had been laid off/lost his job when relocating” (laid off, r = .47; relocated, r = .56). A sympathy index was computed by subtracting sympathy scores for the relocated applicant from sympathy scores for the laid off applicant, so that higher numbers reflect greater sympathy for the laid off applicant. Participants responded to all weakness and sympathy items on response scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

**SJ beliefs.** SJBs were assessed with the BJW Scale (Lipkus, 1991) and the SJ Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003; α = .82; M = 4.02, SD = 0.80). The placement of the measure was counterbalanced such that it came either at the beginning or conclusion of the study. No order effects were obtained.

**Manipulation check.** Participants were asked which applicant had been laid off and which had relocated. Excluding six cases with incorrect responses did not alter the results, so they were retained.

**Results and Discussion**

Reported regression analyses used SJBs (mean centered), gender (dummy coded), and their interaction as predictors.

**Hire Decision**

A one-sample t-test comparing hire decision to .5 tested for an overall preference for the relocated versus laid off applicant. The likelihood of choosing each applicant was equal, t(165) = .62, p > .54, M = 0.52, SD = 0.50.

A logistic regression analysis predicting the hiring decision revealed the expected significant effect for SJBs, B = 0.51, SE = .21, Wald = 6.08, p < .02, odds ratio (ORs) = 1.66. With every one-unit increase in SJBs, participants were 1.66 times more likely to choose the relocated applicant rather than the laid off applicant. Participants who scored in the upper third of the SJB distribution chose the relocated applicant 61.5% of the time, whereas participants in the lower third chose the relocated applicant 41.8% of the time. Thus, both low and high supporters of SJBs had biased hiring decisions but in favor of different applicants.

**Perceived Weakness and Sympathy**

One-sample t-tests comparing the weakness and sympathy difference scores to 0 showed a significant effect for the weakness, t(163) = 8.13, p < .001 (M = 1.05, SD = 1.66), and sympathy, t(164) = 2.48, p < .02 (M = 0.28, SD = 1.43), indexes. Overall, participants perceived greater weaknesses in and experienced greater sympathy for the laid off applicant compared to the relocated applicant.

A linear regression analysis predicting the weakness index revealed a significant effect for SJBs, t(161) = 2.03, p < .05, B = 0.33, such that greater weakness was perceived for the laid off applicant than the relocated applicant as participants’ SJBs increased. SJBs also significantly predicted sympathy, t(161) = 2.14, p < .04, B = −0.30, such that sympathy for the laid off applicant relative to the relocated applicant decreased with increasing SJB scores.

**Serial Multiple Mediation Model**

Our mediational hypotheses were that SJBs should lead to greater perceived weakness in the laid off applicant than the relocated applicant, which in turn should predict less sympathy, and finally a greater likelihood of hiring the relocated over the laid off applicant. Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS analysis (Model 6) was used with 5,000 bootstrap samples to test this mediation model. As shown in Figure 1, SJBs were positively related to perceived weaknesses, which in turn was negatively associated with sympathy, and sympathy was negatively related to hiring the relocated over the laid off applicant. The effect of SJBs on hire decision after controlling for perceived weaknesses and sympathy was not significant. Most importantly, the full model indirect effects test (i.e., $X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$) was significant, as indicated by a confidence interval (CI) that did not include zero [0.001, 0.13].

**Study 2**

The context surrounding the layoff in Study 1 was ambiguous, with the target claiming that “unforeseen economic conditions” were the cause, and no information about whether other people were laid off. This ambiguity may have maximized the
likelihood that SJBs could taint judgments. In Study 2, the laid off applicant was described as one of many people let go during a corporate downsizing event. The details of the layoff were taken from actual layoffs within Target Corporation. We sought to determine whether SJBs would still shape hiring judgments in a massive layoff context typical of corporate downsizing. Moreover, we tested whether our measure of SJBs was related to judgments of a laid off target when controlling for other types of SJBs. We maintain that judgments of laid off people should be related to beliefs that society is fair and just, so that people who experience negative outcomes must have character defects. We expected that this particular ideology would predict judgments of a laid off applicant even when controlling for a variety of other SJBs (Jost & Hunyady, 2005): Protestant Work Ethic (PWE; people have a duty to be hard working and thrifty), SDO (preference for group hierarchy and domination over low-status groups), RWA (submission to authorities and strict adherence to societal conventions and norms), and economic SJ (economic inequality is fair and legitimate).

Method

Participants

Participants were 170 introductory psychology undergraduate students (30% female) who completed the study online for course credit.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study was sponsored by industrial/organizational psychologists interested in workplace selection processes. Participants first completed a task that was consistent with the cover story, which involved selecting an award winner.

The next task involved selecting one of the two applicants for a corporate job with General Mills in Minneapolis, MN. One applicant was described as recently laid off from his job with Target in Minneapolis. Indeed, layoffs occurred at this Target a couple of months before data collection, and the situation was described to participants exactly as it was reported (Ramstad, Ewoldt, & Painter, 2015). Specifically, participants read the following:

The first applicant, Mark Thomas, recently lost his job with Target. Target Corp. recently cut 1,700 people at its corporate offices in Minneapolis, the largest downsizing of its headquarters staff ever and the biggest at any Minnesota company since 2002. The cuts amounted to 13 percent of the 13,000 headquartered employees in the metro area. They come on top of the 550 corporate workers in the Twin Cities who were let go last month because of Target’s decision to close its Canadian operations. The cuts are part of an effort by Target to save about $500 million this year. Mr. Thomas was laid off when these cuts occurred.

Participants also read another paragraph similar in length about another applicant, Jonathan Meyers, who had recently left his job with Hormel in Detroit Lakes, MN, and relocated to the Minneapolis area to be near family. The two candidates were noted to have similar work histories, credentials, and qualifications.

Hire measures, perceived weakness, and sympathy. Participants indicated which applicant (a) they felt most positively about, (b) was likely to do the best work, and (c) they would be most likely to hire on scales that ranged from 1 (definitely Thomas) to 7 (definitely Meyers). These ratings were reverse scored and averaged to form a “hire index,” with higher numbers indicating greater support for the relocated applicant over the laid off applicant (α = .89; M = 4.12, SD = 1.34). Next, participants indicated their hire decision (0 = laid off applicant and 1 = relocated).

Participants then reported ratings for the same two applicant weakness items as in Study 1 for the laid off (r = .44) and relocated (r = .53) applicants, and the same two sympathy items for the laid off (r = .46) and relocated (r = .45) applicants. Difference scores were computed, so that higher scores reflect greater perceived weakness of and sympathy for the laid off applicant relative to the relocated applicant.

Ideology measures. Ideology measures were presented either at the beginning or conclusion of the study (no order effects were obtained), and the order of the measures was randomized for each participant. In addition to the BJW and SJ Scales, participants completed Katz and Hass’s (1988) 11-item PWE Scale, Pratto et al.’s (1994) 16-item SDO Scale, Zakrisson’s (2005) 15-item RWA Scale, and Jost and Thompson’s (2000) 15-item Economic System Justification (ESJ) Scale.

Manipulation check. Participants recorded why each applicant was seeking employment. Excluding the six participants who answered incorrectly did not affect results.

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![Figure 1. Mediation model, Study 1. Path values are unstandardized coefficients. *p < .05. **p < .001.](image)
Results and Discussion

Ideology Measures

Table 2 shows descriptive information for the ideology measures. The fact that our SJBs measure shows weak to moderate correlations with the other ideology measures supports its uniqueness. In addition, the fact that the SJ Scale correlates more strongly with the BJW Scale than with any of the other ideology measures (z > 2.82, ps < .01) suggests that SJ Scale dovetails best with BJW.

Hire Decision and Index

A one-sample t-test comparing hire decision to .5 was not significant, t(170) = 1.54, p = .12, M = 0.44, SD = 0.50, indicating no overall bias. Likewise, comparing the continuous hire index to a test value of 4 (i.e., the midpoint of the scale anchored by each applicant) showed no overall bias, t(169) = 1.16, p > .24, M = 3.88, SD = 1.34.

A logistic regression analysis predicting hire decision with gender and all mean-centered ideology variables (i.e., SJBs, PWE, SDO, RWA, and ESJ) simultaneously revealed only one significant effect for SJBs, B = 1.02, SE = 0.28, Wald = 13.30, p < .001, ORs = 2.77. With every one-unit increase in SJBs, participants were 2.77 more likely to hire the relocated applicant. Participants scoring in the upper third of the SJB distribution chose the relocated applicant 60% of the time, and participants in the lower third chose this applicant only 23% of the time, illustrating decisional bias at both strong and weak levels of SJBs.

Linear regression using gender and all ideology variables to predict the continuous hiring index likewise showed that SJBs were uniquely predictive, t(163) = 3.10, p < .003, B = 0.48, such that ratings favored the relocated over the laid off applicant more as SJBs increased. We also found marginal, negative relations for PWE, t = 1.90, p = .059, B = −0.29, and RWA, t = 1.75, p = .081, B = −0.28.

Perceived Weakness and Sympathy

One-sample t-tests comparing the weakness and sympathy difference score indexes to 0 indicated that overall, participants perceived greater weaknesses and had more sympathy for the laid off than the relocated applicant, ts(169) = 5.85 and 7.86, ps < .001 (Ms = 0.70 and 0.90, SDs = 1.56 and 1.50), respectively.

The regression analysis predicting the weakness index with gender and all ideological variables simultaneously revealed a significant effect for SJBs, t(163) = 2.38, p < .02, B = 0.43, such that the laid off applicant was perceived as having greater shortcomings than the relocated applicant. Also, as RWA increased, participants reported greater weakness for the relocated relative to the laid off applicant, t = 3.07, p < .004, B = −0.57.

Analysis of the sympathy index indicated that the effect of SJBs was not significant, t(163) = 1.38, p = .17, B = −0.24, although the direction of the effect suggested greater sympathy for the relocated than the laid off applicant as SJBs increased. The only effect reaching significance was for PWE, t = 2.30, p < .03, B = 0.40.

Serial Multiple Mediation Model

The hypothesized mediation model was tested twice, with hire decision (dichotomous) and then hire index (continuous) as the outcome variables. As shown in Figure 2, all paths between variables were in the expected directions and replicated Study 1, although the indirect path from SJBs to hire decision remained significant. Most importantly, the test of the full model (i.e., X → M1 → M2 → Y) had a CI that just barely included zero when hire decision was the outcome variable and did not include zero with hire index as the outcome variable. Overall, these results align very well with those of Study 1 and support our theoretical analysis.

General Discussion

These investigations suggest that job seekers who have been laid off may experience a hiring bias that either disadvantages or favors them, depending on decision makers’ endorsements of certain SJBs. Across two studies, beliefs that society is just
and fair and that people who experience negative outcomes must deserve them were related to hiring decisions. Strong supporters of SJBs were biased against hiring a laid off applicant, whereas weak supporters were biased in favor of a laid off applicant. Furthermore, a mediation model was supported such that stronger endorsement of SJBs led to inferences of greater weakness in a laid off applicant relative to an applicant seeking work because of relocation. Weakness perceptions, in turn, were associated with less sympathy for the laid off relative to the relocated applicant. Finally, sympathy in turn predicted hiring bias.

Our findings replicated across two contexts. Whether participants considered detailed applicant résumés and no mention was made of other people laid off or participants were told that two applicants differed only in that one was laid off during a large corporate downsizing, the same hiring biases were evident. Study 2 also established that our SJ measure predicted layoff decisions above and beyond the effects of four other systems justifying ideologies. These results helped to isolate BJW and diffuse SJBs as uniquely related to judgments of laid off people.

Indeed, only a few relations between other ideologies and judgments of laid off people emerged. To be sure, these other ideologies may serve to justify the status quo in relevant contexts. For instance, SDO (Pratto et al., 1994) and economic SJ (Jost & Thompson, 2000) are especially relevant for justifying inequality in the status quo. However, in the case of layoffs, perceptions appear to be determined uniquely by the extent to which society is viewed as fair and outcomes are just and deserved.

Our findings are consistent with past research concerning the just world hypothesis (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978) and SJ theory (Kay et al., 2005), which shows that dispositional inferences (in this case, personal weaknesses) are made that correspond with observed outcomes. Further, we established that reactions to those inferences (i.e., sympathy or the lack thereof) figure importantly in subsequent decisions. However, the present research is unique in its emphasis on weak as well as strong endorsers of SJBs. People not only exhibited biases to justify the status quo and outcomes as deserved, but biases also resulted from disagreement with SJBs. Future research might test whether these latter biases are linked with broader justice concerns (Greenbaum, Folger, & Ford, 2011).

We consider the bias against laid off people by high system justifiers to be especially dangerous, given its potential to create a permanent underclass by discouraging reentry into the labor force. Note also that certain groups of people are more likely than others to be laid off and thus targets of this stigma. For instance, Wilson and McBrier (2005) found that Black individuals are on average more than twice as likely as White individuals to be laid off. They also found that, controlling for seniority, layoffs are related to stratification-based causal factors (e.g., time with employers and educational level) among White but not Black people. Thus, layoffs may systematically disenfranchise minorities not only when they occur but also when their occurrence influences subsequent hiring decisions.

Future research should test our analysis in actual workplace settings. What types of workplace settings are studied may be important, as ideology endorsement may vary with professions (see Sidanius, van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2003). Also important is understanding whether forewarning of this potential bias triggers processes that guard against it, or whether forewarnings fall silent on the ears of individuals who are strongly motivated to justify the status quo.

Conclusions

Many people who have been laid off experience anxiety, self-doubt, and fear (see Karren & Sherman, 2012). They face overwhelming financial difficulties and experience considerable difficulty finding new employment, particularly at the same level of employment and in the same industry (Keith, 2012). The present research reveals a hiring bias against the laid off that may intensify and prolong their distressing experiences. Clearly, additional research on reemployment barriers resulting from layoffs could have important practical and policy implications.

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Notes

1. Because this research relies heavily on reading and responding in English and being familiar with the concept of layoffs in the U.S. context, an a priori decision was made to exclude certain data. Experiment 1 excluded 30 international students living in the United States for less than 5 years. The exclusion criteria were modified to be more specific in Experiment 2: 11 International students who indicated that English was their second language and their English fluency was 4 or less on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all fluent) to 7 (very fluent) were excluded. The reported sample sizes do not include these participants.

2. We varied whether both applicants had been out of work for approximately 1 or 16 months. This manipulation was not associated with any significant effects.

3. Participants also rated each applicant’s qualifications and traits (e.g., intelligence). As expected, given our intention to equate the applicants’ credentials, no significant effects were obtained.

4. Our goal was to assess weakness and sympathy for the laid off candidate, relative to the candidate who was not laid off because the ultimate outcome (hiring decision) is relative. This is why we used difference scores. Alternatively, we could covary ratings for the relocated applicant in the analysis of ratings for the laid off.
applicant. Doing so yielded virtually identical results in both experiments.
5. Two participants failed to complete the sympathy and weakness items.

References


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