

Does the Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status (SES) and System Justification Depend on Civic Engagement?

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and system justification, a topic with varied findings in existing literature. Some studies suggest that lower SES individuals are more likely to justify the social system, while other studies report conflicting results. However, justifying the system while having a low-SES can have adverse consequences. It is associated with lower levels of self-esteem, increased levels of depression, neuroticism, ambivalence, and internalized stigma. Therefore, promoting a reduction in system justification among those with low-SES is important. Civic engagement could play a key role in reducing system justification. This study utilizes cross-sectional data from the Youth Got Talent database to examine whether the relationship between SES and system justification depends on civic engagement among vocational education students. A total of 434 students with a mean age of 17.5 participated in the study. Results indicated that SES was not negatively associated with system justification; instead, a non-significant positive relationship was observed. An explanation for this non-significant relation could be the way SES was measured. This highlights the need for future studies to examine the relationship between SES and system justification by measuring subjective and objective SES separately to gain a nuanced understanding of their distinct impacts on system justification. Furthermore, results showed that the relationship between SES and system justification did not depend on civic engagement. However, civic engagement had a significant positive association with system justification, underscoring the need to further explore how discussing and reflecting on societal issues influences perceptions of social justice.

Keywords: system justification, socioeconomic status, migration background, civic engagement, status-legitimacy hypothesis, adolescence

Introduction

In society, individuals often adopt attitudes and beliefs that reflect their interests and the groups they identify with (Jost et al., 2002). However, Brown's study (1997) found that a significant portion—around 40% to 50%—of individuals from a low-socioeconomic background, harbor implicit biases against their group and show favoritism towards more high-status outgroup members. This raises the question: why do individuals with a low-socioeconomic status (SES), hold beliefs that seemingly go against their self-interests? System justification theory provides insights that help answer this question, suggesting that individuals sometimes justify societal inequalities, for example, poverty, as a means of maintaining stability and coherence in their worldview (Jost & Banaji, 1994). However, this belief in system justification can have negative long-term consequences for individuals with low-SES (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Godfrey et al. (2017) and Jost & Thompson (2000) found that low-SES individuals who justify the system exhibit lower levels of self-esteem, reduced ingroup favoritism, and compromised psychological well-being. This is evidenced by increased levels of depression, neuroticism, ambivalence, and internalized stigma. Furthermore, accepting the status quo as fair can lead individuals to become indifferent toward efforts for social change (Osborne et al., 2018). Therefore, in this study, system justification beliefs are considered problematic among low-SES individuals, as they perpetuate inequality and hinder collective efforts toward positive societal transformation.

Encouraging adolescents to feel empowered and capable of effecting social change can be an approach to challenge system justification beliefs. By promoting social change initiatives, adolescents are less likely to adhere to the status quo and justify existing societal inequalities (Curtin et al., 2015). Adolescents play a pivotal role in driving social change due to their fresh perspectives and willingness to challenge prevailing norms and values (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010). For instance, individuals like Greta Thunberg have gained

prominence for their outspoken criticism of issues like climate change, catalyzing shifts in societal attitudes towards pro-environmental behavior (Sabherwal et al., 2021). However, low-SES adolescents often underestimate their ability to enact meaningful change (Schroeder, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to invest in programs and initiatives aimed at empowering and supporting low-SES youth. This study aims to explore one particular strategy that could help young individuals from low-SES backgrounds feel empowered and mitigate system justification beliefs.

Moreover, combating beliefs that justify the system can be achieved through civic engagement. Civic engagement involves discussing and reflecting on current news events, whether individually or within peer and familial settings (Schulz et al., 2008). These discussions allow adolescents to challenge prevailing beliefs and contribute to positive social change, fostering a sense of empowerment that can increase their motivation to take action (Chan & Mak, 2020; Strobel et al., 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that the literature does not indicate that civic engagement always mitigates system justification beliefs. Additionally, there is a possibility that civic engagement could inadvertently reinforce system justification beliefs. When individuals become more aware of societal inequalities, they may feel compelled to cope with these disparities by rationalizing or justifying the existing system (Kay & Friesen, 2011). This study aims to examine these contrasting hypotheses.

Therefore, the current study examines the extent to which the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and system justification depends on civic engagement among vocational education students.

Theoretical framework

Socioeconomic Status and System Justification

Empirical research has produced varied findings regarding the relationship between SES and system justification (Li et al., 2020; Sengupta et al., 2014). It is generally more

logical for high-SES individuals to justify the prevailing system, as it typically benefits them (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Li et al., 2020). Following this reasoning, low-SES individuals are expected to perceive the system as unfair or insufficiently supportive. However, the status-legitimacy hypothesis posits that low-SES individuals are more likely to legitimize the social system compared to their high-SES counterparts (Brandt, 2013; Jost et al., 2002).

Jost et al. (2010) have made significant contributions to understanding why low-SES individuals would engage in system justification. They argue that system justifying beliefs are motivated and goal-oriented. In general, low-SES individuals have fewer resources which makes them feel less secure. This often leads them to resort to self-deception, convincing themselves that their situation is acceptable to make it more bearable. System justification thus functions as a coping mechanism, providing reassurance that societal inequalities are minimal. In this process, low-SES individuals selectively focus on information that supports these beliefs, avoiding stress-inducing realities (Peters, 2020). For instance, Jost & Haines (2000) found that low-SES individuals perceived power differences as more legitimate than they were, thus justifying existing inequalities. Furthermore, system justification tendencies can be seen as goal-directed actions that serve various needs (Jost et al., 2010). Firstly, these tendencies address epistemic needs by reducing uncertainty. Secondly, they fulfill existential needs by helping individuals manage threats. Thirdly, they satisfy relational needs by fostering a shared reality with others. These tendencies provide a sense of stability and coherence in individuals' understanding of the world, even in the face of adversity and inequality.

Empirical evidence supports the status-legitimacy hypothesis, indicating that low-SES individuals are more likely to engage in system justification. For example, among women, denying gender discrimination is associated with higher subjective well-being compared to acknowledging it, as denial reinforces the belief in a fair system (Napier et al., 2020). In U.S.

national samples, low-income respondents were more likely to justify the social system, perceiving income differences as necessary and criticizing the government less than higher-income respondents (Jost et al., 2002). Similarly, in China, individuals with higher income and education levels were more likely to criticize social unfairness (Whyte & Im, 2014).

Notable, the above research predominantly focused on adult populations, with limited studies on younger populations. However, Henry & Saul (2006) observed that children and adolescents from low-status ethnic groups endorse a stronger belief in governmental effectiveness showing that low-SES youth can also engage in system justification.

Contrary evidence challenges the status-legitimacy hypothesis, revealing either no correlation or a positive correlation between SES and system justification. For instance, a cross-national study in 36 countries found that low-SES individuals viewed income distribution as less fair than high-SES individuals (Caricati, 2016). Furthermore, Vargas-Salfate et al. (2018) demonstrated that SES positively predicted system justification, indicating that high-SES individuals are more likely to believe in a justified system than low-SES individuals. Additionally, multiple studies by Brandt (2013) found weak negative or even positive correlations between SES indicators and system justification, using representative data from the United States and worldwide.

In this study, adolescents will be used as the sample because there is a lack of research focusing on this group. While some empirical studies suggest that low-SES individuals may exhibit a higher tendency towards system justification compared to high-SES individuals (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost et al., 2002; Napier et al., 2020; Whyte & Im, 2014), this finding is not universally consistent. Other studies have shown that low-SES individuals do not justify the system to the same extent (Brandt, 2013; Caricati, 2016; Li et al., 2020; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). Due to these conflicting outcomes, this study challenges the status-legitimacy

hypothesis and it hypothesizes that SES is positively associated with system justification beliefs.

SES, System Justification, and Civic Engagement

Building upon the relationship between SES and system justification, it is plausible that this relationship could depend on civic engagement. However, there are arguments supporting both a positive and a negative association. Civic engagement is defined as the extent to which individuals debate and reflect on societal concerns, with for instance parents, friends, or themselves (Schulz et al., 2008). As adolescents mature, they naturally begin to engage in conversations and contemplate societal issues, forming their own opinions (Ragelienè, 2016). Adolescents from low-SES backgrounds often experience inequalities firsthand, which can lead to a heightened awareness of societal disparities (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016). There are two strategies in how adolescents act on this. One strategy is engaging in more civic engagement, discussing their experiences with others which could lead to exposure to information that criticizes the system, fostering skepticism towards it (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016; Watts et al., 2011). This suggests that the relationship between SES and system justification negatively depends on civic engagement, as it helps develop an awareness of the inequalities that low-SES individuals experience. Freire's (1973) critical consciousness theory explains how low-SES individuals develop an awareness of structural inequality and oppression.

The theory of critical consciousness suggests that individuals move through three stages, characterized by different cognitions and actions regarding oppression and injustice (Freire, 1973). The first stage, semi-intransitive consciousness, posits that individuals attribute events and outcomes to supernatural forces or personal shortcomings rather than recognizing existing structural barriers as causes. This aligns with the system justification theory, where individuals also place the blame for their disadvantaged status more on their shortcomings

than on structural factors, such as government policies (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000). During the second stage, known as naïve consciousness, individuals start to reflect on their personal challenges and societal issues, a process also observed in civic engagement, where individuals actively participate in discussions and contemplation regarding societal matters (Freire, 1973). However, in this stage, individuals tend to oversimplify both personal and social problems and lack awareness of the intricate cause-and-effect dynamics. The third stage, critical consciousness states that individuals develop an increasing awareness in which ways economic, political, historical, and social forces operate and have shaped certain individuals and society. In addition, individuals now feel an agency to take action against the oppressive elements of society. In this stage low-SES individuals no longer attribute blame to themselves but rather to the system, thus refraining from justifying it (Godfrey & Wolf, 2016). Consequently, this is how critical consciousness serves to mitigate system justification beliefs.

Empirical evidence from Roy et al. (2019) indicates that Black youth with stronger system justification beliefs are less likely to perceive inequality or support beliefs in critical action, consistent with the critical consciousness theory. Conversely, Black youth who report higher levels of perceived inequality also report greater political efficacy. This suggests that, for Black youth, dimensions of system justification and civic engagement may capture a common underlying construct related to societal perceptions and participation. In this context, rejecting the status quo, perceiving inequality, and engaging in critical action appear to be interconnected elements.

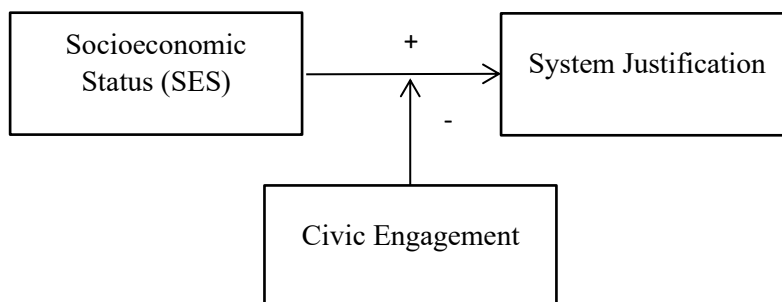
The second strategy for dealing with disparities is to ignore them as a coping mechanism. In this approach, adolescents exhibit less civic engagement and avoid discussing these inequalities. Instead, they justify the inequalities to avoid the emotional and cognitive costs of addressing them (Jost et al., 2010). Individuals deceive themselves and selectively process information to rationalize the inequalities, even to the extent of blaming themselves or

their group. This behavior fulfills various needs, including reducing uncertainty and managing perceived threats. Exposure to disparities can lead to increased system justification (Napier et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the relationship between SES and system justification beliefs can depend on civic engagement in either a positive or negative manner. On the one hand, individuals who become more aware of societal disparities through civic engagement may feel compelled to rationalize or justify the existing system as a coping mechanism, thereby strengthening the relationship between SES and system justification (Kay & Friesen, 2011). However, this study hypothesizes that the relationship between SES and system justification beliefs negatively depends on civic engagement. This is because civic engagement aligns with the critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973), which suggests that increased awareness and critical reflection on social inequalities can weaken the tendency to justify the system.

Figure 1

Visual Model of the Hypotheses



Methods

Design and Sample

In this study, data from the YOUth Got Talent project was used (Stevens et al., 2018). The YOUth Got Talent project is a longitudinal survey study among first-year vocational education students (16+) in the Utrecht region of the Netherlands, assessing their well-being, health, and social relations. Three vocational education schools agreed to participate in 2019

and another school in 2021. In this study, only the data from the school that participated in 2021 will be used, because that school was the only school that used the concept of civic engagement. The sample consisted of 541 students, but because 107 students did not answer all questions for all the relevant variables the total sample was reduced to 434. The sample consisted of 192 girls and 242 boys, with an average age of 17.5 years. Additionally, 49% of the sample had a migration background. In terms of family affluence, 91 adolescents had a low score, 305 adolescents had a medium score, and 124 adolescents had a high score. Among adolescents with a low family affluence score 63.7% (58 out of 91) had a migration background, compared to 46.6% among those with a medium score and 41.9% among those with a high score. It is important to note that the results of this study cannot be generalized to the Dutch population, as the sample only consisted solely of vocational education students. This limitation introduces selection bias, which could have affected the study's representativeness and the applicability of its findings to broader demographic groups.

Procedure

Within the vocational education school, a selection of classes was made, and all students in these classes were invited to participate (Stevens et al., 2018). For students under the age of 18, parents were notified in advance through consent letters. All students were informed at least one day before the study took place. Participants were provided with information about the study, including the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw their consent at any time. They gave active consent and were assured that their data would be anonymized. Students were given the option to decline participation at any time before or during the hour in which the questionnaires were administered. The research assistant, present in the classroom, reiterated this information and ensured that all students were aware of their rights. The completion of the questionnaires required approximately 20-30 minutes.

Notably, certain cases were excluded from the analysis for various reasons, such as blank responses (e.g., only containing an ID), duplicates, participants under 16 years old, refusal to grant permission to participate, difficulty completing the questionnaire, lack of seriousness in responding, or providing extreme and/or unusually repetitive answers (Stevens et al., 2018).

Ethics

Participants gave active consent and were informed that their data would be anonymized. Ethical approval was gained from the Ethics Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Utrecht University in 2018 and 2021.

Instruments

System Justification

Endorsement of system justifying beliefs was measured using the system justification scale (Godfrey et al., 2017), which was adapted to the Dutch context by Stevens et al. (2018). This scale contains eleven items that assessed adolescents' perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability of the Dutch socio-political and economic system (e.g., "In general, Dutch society is fair", "People get fair treatment in the Netherlands, no matter who they are") with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The mean score was computed in a new variable with a higher score meaning stronger system justification beliefs. Unfortunately, not all participants filled in all questions about system justification which led to 98 missing's. All missing's were deleted listwise. The internal consistency of this scale was $\alpha = .904$.

Socioeconomic Status

SES was measured with the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) (Torsheim et al., 2015). Family affluence reflects on the objective material and financial resources in the family. The scale consists of six items about family material assets: car(s)/van(s), own bedroom,

holiday(s) abroad, computer(s), dishwasher, and bathroom(s). To effectively convert this ordinal scale into an interval scale, as done in other studies (e.g. Finkenauer et al., 2023), the following method was used. First, the item scores were summed to normalize the range and distribution of the FAS score (Elgar et al., 2017). Next, a riddit-transformation of the sum score was applied, creating a continuous FAS score ranging from 0 (lowest) to 1 (highest). A higher score reflects having more material assets. A riddit-transformation involves assigning each score a proportional rank, calculated as the proportion (P) of observations with lower scores plus one-half of the proportion with equal scores (Elgar et al., 2017). On this variable, 28 cases were deleted due to missing data. The internal consistency of this scale was $\alpha = .715$.

Civic Engagement

The civic engagement scale measured the extent to which adolescents discuss and seek information about the news outside of school hours (Schulz et al., 2008). It consists of the following 4 questions, “How often ... do you talk to your parent(s) about what is in the news?” and “.. do you talk to friends about what is in the Netherlands and the rest of the world in the news?” and “... do you search the internet for information about what is in the news in the Netherlands and the rest of the world?” and “.. do you talk online about what is in the news in the Netherlands and the rest of the world (e.g. on social media like Instagram)?”. These questions were answered by filling the gap with these four possibilities, “(Almost) never”, “At least once a month”, “At least once a week” or “(Almost) daily”. The mean score was computed in a new variable with a higher score meaning more civic engagement. Unfortunately, not all participants completed all questions about civic engagement, resulting in 104 missing values. These missing values were deleted listwise. The internal consistency of this scale was $\alpha = .768$.

Control Variable

This study controls for migration background because this concept is likely related to both SES and system justification. Similarly, Godfrey & Wolf (2016) included migration background as a confounder in their research on the relationship between SES and system justification. Furthermore, research indicates that migration background is associated with SES (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2023). To measure migration background, participants were asked where their parents were born, with responses categorized into three groups: “Dutch”, “other Western”, and “non-Western”. This variable was dichotomized to differentiate between having a migration background (coded as 1) and not having a migration background (coded as 0). 12 cases with missing values were identified and deleted.

Analysis strategy

Before proceeding with the data analysis, several key assumptions were assessed. The first assumption was checked by examining histograms and Q-Q plots to ensure that the residuals for the variables SES, system justification, and civic engagement were normally distributed. Both graphs appeared satisfactory. Secondly, homoscedasticity and linearity were checked, to ensure that the residual variance of each predictor remained constant across all values of that predictor. This was evaluated using residual plots comparing residuals to predicted values, and the assumptions were met. Outliers and influential cases were checked using Cook's distance, confirming that no scores exceeded 1. Missing data were deleted listwise.

Next, descriptive statistics for all relevant variables were examined using the software program JASP. Subsequently, a correlation matrix was conducted to explore associations between the dependent and independent variables, along with the moderator and control variable. Following this, a linear multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the hypotheses. For the first hypothesis, a first and second models were created. The first model included only the independent (SES) and dependent (System Justification) variables, while

the second model added the control variable (Migration Background). For the second hypothesis, the analysis included the moderator (civic engagement), which was introduced in the third model. However, upon adding civic engagement and the interaction term (Civic Engagement * SES) to the model, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) exceeded 10, indicating a problem with the multicollinearity. To solve this problem civic engagement was centered, effectively reducing the VIF score.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all variables. On average, system justification scores were a little above average with a mean of 4.27. The standard deviation of system justification (SD = 1.11) showed that there is variance in how fair and equal the participants perceived society. SES was rdit scored to create a continuous scale so it has a mean of 0.50, a minimum of 0.00, and a maximum of 1.00. Scores on civic engagement were a little above average with a mean of 2.61. An average of 0.49 indicates that 49% of the participants had a migration background.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
System Justification	4.27	1.11	1.00	7.00
SES	0.50	0.29	0.00	1.00
Civic Engagement	2.61	0.80	1.00	4.00
Migration Background ^a	0.49	0.50	0.00	1.00

Note. ^a Reference category: adolescents without a migration background

As shown in table 2 a correlation analysis was conducted to test the associations between the dependent variable system justification, the independent variable SES, the

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moderator civic engagement, and the control variable migration background. All variables were significantly related to each other, but they had small effect sizes. Levels of system justification showed significant positive correlations with SES, civic engagement, and not having a migration background. This indicates that higher SES, increased engagement in discussions and reflection on news events, and not having a migration background are correlated with stronger system justification beliefs. Migration background was also correlated with SES, indicating it was a suitable control variable.

Table 2

Pearson's Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. System Justification	-	-	-	-
2. SES	.108*	-	-	-
3. Civic Engagement	.216***	.130**	-	-
4. Migration Background	-.165***	-.164***	.106*	-

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

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

The results of the first hypothesis, testing whether there is a relationship between SES and system justification beliefs are shown in Table 3. In Model 1 the association between SES and system justification beliefs was found to be positive and significant ($B = 0.391, p = .035, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.027, 0.754]$). The regression coefficient of 0.391 indicated a small positive effect, suggesting that an increase of one in the SES score was associated with a 0.391 increase in system justification beliefs. However, as shown in Table 2, Model 2, when controlling for migration background, SES was no longer significant ($B = 0.333, p = .075, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.033, 0.700]$). In contrast, migration background had a significant association with system justification ($B = -0.327, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.533, -0.121]$), indicating that not having a

migration background predicted stronger system justification beliefs. The fact that SES is no longer significant means that migration background is a better predictor for system justification than SES is. The first model, without the control variable migration background, explained 1% of the variance in system justification. When migration background was added to the model, the explained variance increased to 3.3%, significantly improving the model ($p < .001$). In conclusion, the hypothesis that SES is positively associated with system justification beliefs was not supported. When controlling for migration background, SES does not significantly predict system justification.

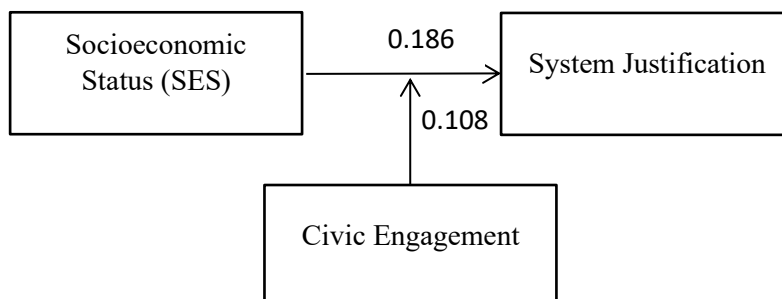
Interaction Effect of Civic Engagement

The results of the second hypothesis, testing whether the relationship between SES and system justification is dependent on civic engagement are shown in Table 3 Model 3. In Model 3 civic engagement and the interaction term ‘Civic Engagement * SES’, was added. After adding civic engagement, the model improved significantly ($p < .001$), increasing the explained variance to 8.5% for system justification. In Model 3, SES remained a non-significant predictor of system justification, while migration background still was a significant predictor of system justification ($B = -0.405, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.612, -0.198]$). Furthermore, civic engagement emerged as a positive predictor of system justification ($B = 0.267, p = .047, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.004, 0.529]$), indicating that discussing and reflecting on societal news events predicts higher system justification. However, the interaction term (Civic Engagement * SES) was not significant. Therefore, the second hypothesis which suggested that the relationship between SES and system justification negatively depends on civic engagement was not supported.

Table 3*Multiple Linear Regression Predicting System Justification*

Model	R ²	Variable	B	SE	95% CI	β	p
1	0.010*	Constant	4.074	0.107	[3.863, 4.285]		
		SES	0.391	0.185	[0.027, 0.754]	0.099	0.035
2	0.033*	Constant	4.249	0.124	[4.005, 4.493]		< .001
		SES	0.333	0.186	[-0.033, 0.700]	0.084	0.075
		Migration Background	-0.327	0.105	[-0.533, -0.121]	-0.147	0.002
3	0.085*	Constant	4.365	0.126	[4.117, 4.613]		< .001
		SES	0.186	0.188	[-0.183, 0.555]	0.047	0.323
		Migration Background ^a	-0.405	0.105	[-0.612, -0.198]	-0.181	< .001
		Civic Engagement	0.267	0.134	[0.004, 0.529]	0.190	0.047
		Civic Engagement* SES	0.108	0.233	[-0.351, 0.567]	0.044	0.643

Note. * $p < .001$ ^a Reference category: adolescents without a migration background

Figure 2*Visual Model of Results*

Discussion

This study investigated if the relationship between SES and system justification depends on civic engagement. Initially, it was hypothesized that SES would significantly predict system justification beliefs, suggesting that adolescents with higher SES would likely endorse the system more strongly, while those with a lower SES would be less likely to do so. After controlling for migration background, SES was positively related to system justification but was not a significant predictor. Similarly, the second hypothesis was not supported, as the relationship between SES and system justification did not depend negatively on civic engagement. Although not the primary focus of this research, the analysis revealed a significant relationship between civic engagement and system justification, as well as between migration background and system justification.

A potential explanation for the non-significant relationship between SES and system justification could be the broad nature of SES as a concept. Research by Li et al. (2020) highlighted the distinction between subjective SES (individuals' perceptions of their social standing) and objective SES (measurable factors such as income, education, and occupation) and their relationship with system justification. Subjective SES often positively predicted system justification, as higher perceived social status enhanced beliefs in personal upward mobility and system fairness (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Day & Fiske, 2017). This trend was observed across various cultures, including the United States (Davidai, 2018; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013) and globally (Brandt, 2013; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). Conversely, in China, objective SES tended to negatively predict system justification, with lower SES individuals often exhibiting more conservative attitudes that supported system justification (Li et al., 2020; Pan & Xu, 2018). In contrast, this study used the FAS scale, an objective measure of SES, and found a positive correlation with system justification. One reason for this difference could be that the Dutch system is more equitable compared to the Chinese system; the

Netherlands has one of the lowest poverty rates, while China has a significant proportion of its population living in poverty (Caminada et al, 2020). Additionally, Sengupta et al. (2014) provided insights that especially in nations with high inequality, low-status groups sometimes rationalize status hierarchies more than high-status groups. In countries with high inequality, low-SES individuals might legitimize existing structures to align with societal norms and mitigate feelings of discontent or marginalization (Sengupta et al., 2014). In conclusion, the level of inequality in the Netherlands may be too low to produce results comparable to those found in the studies by Li et al. (2020) and Pan & Xu (2018).

The second hypothesis, which proposed that the relationship between SES and system justification would negatively depend on civic engagement, was not supported. Instead, the findings revealed a positive association between civic engagement and system justification. This suggests that adolescents who engaged more in discussions about societal issues were more likely to perceive the system as fair and legitimate. Engaging in social discourse might have fostered a belief in the fairness or effectiveness of societal structures, possibly because these interactions enhanced understanding and acceptance of the system's workings. This aligns with the study of Toff et al. (2021) which found a strong correlation between reflecting on the news, social and interpersonal trust, and satisfaction with democracy. Therefore, increased civic engagement could positively influence system justification.

Additionally, the definition and measurement of civic engagement in this study are different from those used in other research, which could explain why the relationship between SES and system justification did not depend on civic engagement. In other studies, civic engagement is broadly defined to include activities such as voting, volunteering, activism, and political participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). In this study, however, civic engagement was specifically defined as discussing and reflecting on current news events (Schulz et al., 2008). This narrower focus on news discussion might not capture the full spectrum of civic activities

and can result in discrepancies when comparing results with studies that use a broader or different conceptualization of civic engagement.

Limitations

This study had several limitations which should be mentioned. For instance, measuring adolescents' SES is inherently challenging due to its complex and multifaceted nature (Hammond et al., 2021; Merola, 2005; Svedberg et al., 2016). SES includes various dimensions such as income, education, occupation, and wealth, which can differ significantly across different contexts and populations (Baker, 2014). In this study, SES was measured using the family affluence scale, which focuses solely on the presence of specific material assets at home. However, family affluence alone might not fully capture the complexity of an adolescent's socioeconomic environment.

Additionally, a significant amount of missing data, particularly for questions on civic engagement and system justification, raised concerns about potential response bias. Participants might have found these questions difficult to understand, leading to non-responses. Such missing data could introduce bias and distort the findings, limiting the study's ability to draw robust and generalizable conclusions about these aspects.

Implications

This study presents findings that contradict the status-legitimacy hypothesis, which posits that low-SES individuals are more likely to justify the social system compared to high-SES individuals (Brandt, 2013; Jost et al., 2002). Contrary to this hypothesis, SES did not exhibit a negative relationship with system justification among adolescents in this sample. These results challenge conventional assumptions about the relationship between SES and system justification, suggesting that other factors may play a more significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes toward societal structures. Future studies examining the relationship between SES and system justification should separately measure subjective and objective SES

to gain a nuanced understanding of their distinct impacts. By comparing the effects of subjective and objective SES, researchers can identify how perceived versus actual socioeconomic conditions shape attitudes toward societal structures. This approach will provide deeper insights into the psychological and material dimensions of SES and their implications for system justification beliefs. Moreover, the FAS scale serves as an accurate measure of objective SES for adolescents (Torsheim et al., 2015). However, measuring subjective SES remains challenging, as adolescents may base their perceived status on their family's financial situation, often overestimating or underestimating it based on their own experiences and comparisons with peers (Svedberg et al., 2016). Future research could qualitatively explore which aspects adolescents consider when assessing their status in society to develop accurate measures of subjective SES.

Initially, it was believed that civic engagement could help low-SES youth mitigate system justification. However, this study found that civic engagement is a positive predictor of system justification. Adolescents who frequently engage in discussions about social trends tend to have stronger system justification beliefs. This may be because active engagement in societal discourse can enhance their understanding and acceptance of the current social system (Knowles & Castro, 2019). These findings suggest that encouraging civic engagement and facilitating open discussions about societal issues could play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' perceptions of societal structures. By fostering an environment where young individuals are encouraged to think critically and engage in meaningful conversations, it can better understand which factors contribute to system justification beliefs and work towards more informed and engaged citizens.

Conclusion

In summary, this study examined if the relationship between SES and system justification depends on civic engagement. Contrary to the status-legitimacy hypothesis, SES was positively related to system justification but was not a significant predictor. This

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discrepancy may be due to the broad use of SES as a variable. Future studies should separately examine subjective and objective SES to gain a nuanced understanding of their distinct impacts on system justification. Additionally, the relationship between SES and system justification did not depend on civic engagement. However, civic engagement had a significant positive association with system justification, underscoring the need to further explore how discussing and reflecting on societal issues influences perceptions of social justice. Creating environments that encourage young individuals to think critically and engage in open discussions about societal issues could play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' perceptions of societal structures.

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Appendix 1

Interdisciplinarity

This study explores if the relationship between SES, and system justification depends on civic engagement. These constructs have a background in the disciplines of sociology and psychology. This study integrated both disciplines to create a comprehensive understanding of these concepts.

System justification pertains to psychological theories about individuals' perceptions and evaluations of societal fairness. It involves the belief that existing social, economic, and political arrangements are legitimate and justified. This psychological construct can be influenced by personal experiences, social identity, and cognitive biases. Over time, individuals' opinions about the fairness of the system can evolve, reflecting changes in their personal circumstances and societal context.

SES represents an individual's position within the social hierarchy, encompassing factors such as income, education, and occupation. From a sociological perspective, SES provides insight into the structural context in which individuals grow up and live. It influences access to resources, opportunities, and social networks, thereby shaping life chances and experiences. Understanding SES involves examining the broader social structures and inequalities that impact individuals' lives. SES also has a psychological dimension, affecting how individuals perceive their social standing and identity. Awareness of one's position in the social hierarchy can influence mental health, self-esteem, and social behaviors. Understanding where one comes from and recognizing their place within societal structures can shape attitudes toward social mobility, equity, and justice. This psychological aspect highlights how socioeconomic factors intersect with individual cognition and emotions.

Civic engagement is rooted in sociological theory, it involves discussing and reflecting on societal concerns. Furthermore, civic engagement reflects an individual's interactions

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within their social environment and their contributions. This concept emphasizes the role of direct social relations in shaping societal norms and values. Thinking critically about these norms and values would be seen as a cognitive process that has a psychological background.

By examining system justification, SES, and civic engagement through both sociological and psychological lenses, this study offers a more holistic understanding of how these factors interact. Civic engagement not only reflects sociological interactions within society but also influences psychological perceptions of social justice, reflected in adolescents' system justification beliefs. Similarly, SES provides a structural context while impacting psychological well-being and system justification beliefs. This interdisciplinary approach facilitates a deeper exploration of how individuals navigate and interpret their social realities, contributing to broader theoretical and practical insights into social dynamics and individual behaviors.