

Spring 6-14-2024

Empowerment as a Predictor of System Justification Moderated by Race

Nicole Belcher
DePaul University, nfb2000@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/csh_etd



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Belcher, Nicole, "Empowerment as a Predictor of System Justification Moderated by Race" (2024). *College of Science and Health Theses and Dissertations*. 525.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/csh_etd/525

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Science and Health at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Science and Health Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Empowerment as a Predictor of System Justification Moderated by Race

Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Psychology

DePaul University

By Nicole Belcher

DePaul University

June 2024

Thesis Committee

Kathy Grant Ph.D., Chairperson

Jocelyn Carter, Ph.D.

Jessica Clevering, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for my mentor and thesis chair Dr. Kathy Grant for all her support, insight, and assistance throughout this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Jocelyn Carter for all of her support as well. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Jessica Clevering for her support through my undergraduate degree and supporting my interests by allowing me to use her data.

Biography

The author was born in Louisville, Kentucky, May 13, 2000. She graduated from Martha Layne Collins High School, in Shelbyville, Kentucky. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Trinity Christian College in 2022. And will receive her master from DePaul University in 2024.

Table of Contents

<i>Thesis Committee</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Biography</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Empowerment as a Predictor of System Justification Moderated by Race</i>	<i>2</i>
How System Justification Maintains Social Injustice	<i>2</i>
How System Justification Maintains Racial Injustice	<i>3</i>
How Empowerment May Undermine System Justification	<i>4</i>
<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Procedure</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Measures</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Race and System Justification</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Empowerment and System Justification</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Race as a moderator between Empowerment and System Justification</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Supplemental Analyses</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Discussion:</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Empowerment and Systems Justification</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Race, Empowerment, and Systems Justification</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Limitations and Future Directions</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Implications</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Appendix A: System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005)</i>	<i>33</i>

List of Tables

Table 1. <i>Demographic Frequencies</i>	12
Table 2. <i>Age Frequencies by Race</i>	13
Table 3. <i>Gender Frequencies by Race</i>	13
Table 4. <i>Descriptive Statistics for Empowerment and System Justification for White Individuals</i>	13
Table 5. <i>Descriptive Statistics for Empowerment and System Justification for Racially Minoritized Individuals</i>	14
Table 6. <i>Correlation Matrix for Race, System Justification, and Empowerment</i>	14
Table 7. <i>Regression Results for Empowerment and System Justification for Racially minoritized Individuals</i>	15
Table 8. <i>Multiple Regression Results for Empowerment, Race, and System Justification</i>	16
Table 9. <i>Simple Slopes Analysis for Multiple Regression Results for Empowerment, Race, and System Justification</i>	16
Table 10. <i>Highest Scoring Items on the System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005)</i>	18
Table 11. <i>Highest Scoring Items on the Empowerment Scale (Rodriguez et al., 2018)</i>	18

List of Figures

Figure 1. Simple Slopes Analysis of Race as a moderator between Empowerment and System Justification 17

Abstract

The attitudes people hold about the social structure around them have varying explanations in the field of psychology. System justification represents the idea that people will accept and enforce the social structures that exist because of the underlying need for consistency (Jost et al., 2004). Also central to this theory is the idea that people will legitimize structures because of a desire for the status quo to remain (Jost, 2001). These ideas seek to explain the problematic ideologies that maintain unfair social structures and why people allow them to remain. Studies have found individuals will support unjust systems because either it benefits them or seems too daunting to change. However, there are factors that may make system justification of unfair systems less likely (Jost, 2001). The purpose of this study is to look at the impact that empowerment and race have on system justifying beliefs. The study examines 604 participants (ages 18-65+) who completed self-report questionnaires on empowerment, system justification, and demographic information. Findings from this study will further our understanding of how someone's psychological empowerment and their race can affect the strength of their system justifying beliefs.

Empowerment as a Predictor of System Justification Moderated by Race

How System Justification Maintains Social Injustice

For years, research has looked at why a social hierarchy exists and what perpetuates it. Theories like social dominance theory and social identity theory argue that unfair systems are maintained by ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, however this does not account for those of the outgroup who also may legitimize the system that hurts them (Jost et al., 2004). System justification theory, on the other hand, includes mechanisms to explain why outgroups may also bolster the status quo (Jost et al., 2004). System justification theory counters the idea that social order is always imposed by one group and resisted by another. Instead, this theory considers the idea of outgroup favoritism and how those not only in the dominant group, but also those in the subordinate group, work to support an unfair system (Jost et al., 2004).

Research by Jost (2001) found that (while advantaged individuals favor the system because it benefits them) disadvantaged people often favor preservation of the social order even over their own personal interest. Jost and colleagues (2002) found that people will engage in a system contrary to their own personal and social self-interests because it leads to uncertainty reduction, the illusion of control, and the belief in a just world. Jost and colleagues (2002) found that people accept the system because it may feel less hopeless and overwhelming to say something is fair than to accept there is a problem in the large systems that we are a part of. These findings indicate that those with lower social power will sometimes justify flawed systems because change seems too daunting to undertake. Therefore, it may be that low social status individuals who are empowered, and see the system as changeable, will be less likely to justify unfair systems.

How System Justification Maintains Racial Injustice

In the American social structure, systems of racial injustice are some of the most obvious and primary systems of injustice. Systemic racial discrimination and resulting disparities are so widespread that they affect schooling, employment, health care, and the criminal justice system. This racial discrimination system is the product of both race-linked disparities as well as a belief system that perpetuates them. Reskin (2012) claims that these disparities exist on a societal level, not just in subsystems. Reskin (2012) found that racial disparities have led to negative consequences that can be seen in the vast differences between school systems in areas of people of color in comparison to predominantly White areas. Those of low power and disadvantaged social groups, typically people of color, are often stereotyped frequently to justify the social hierarchy that exists and to perpetuate these distinct groups.

Because those who are of low social power experience disparities, they also can recognize a flawed system easier than those of high-power groups who do not experience the same discrimination. While low power individuals may recognize that a system is flawed, they do not always act on this realization. Those in low power do not usually have the tools to enact change. They have fewer financial resources in comparison to high power groups, and deal with other systemic and social barriers (Reskin, 2012). Stereotypes are one barrier low power groups deal with. Stereotypes are a large part of the justification of the American social system as they justify marginalization of the low power groups (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Research by Jost and Banaji (1994) negative stereotyping of the outgroup most often occurred by ingroup members. This research indicates that there are systemic beliefs by those with social power that perpetuate injustice of disadvantaged groups and keeps them in low power positions without the social resources to bring about change. Stereotypes allow groups of people to believe that the systems

in place are fair and just because those in positions of low power deserve to be there. Those in power often use and continue to stereotype low power groups because it helps them rationalize social hierarchies that are in place and allows them to rationalize why some groups may have more power than others (Martorana et al. 2005). Those who are in power can also create and control the narratives about the low status groups using stereotypes which keep low status groups without power. Those in power have the tools to create psychological devices that lead to social ideologies that certain groups deserve their low status (Martorana et al., 2005). When people with power support the systems that they are a part of, they are not only keeping unjust systems in place and allowing people to be stuck in a system that is harming them, but also often use harmful methods to keep the power dynamic and hierarchy the way that it is. These psychological devices, like stereotyping also make it even harder for change to occur, because it limits the social power and resources of the lower power groups.

How Empowerment May Undermine System Justification

This study will examine empowerment. Empowerment is defined as “the psychological aspect of dynamic, ongoing, and participatory processes by which individuals gain greater mastery and control over their lives and affairs and engage more in democratic participation in their communities” (Rodrigues et al. 2018, pg. 61). Those who are high in empowerment are likely not only to recognize when change is needed, but to act on it. Regarding system justification, they may have both the knowledge of what a just system may look like and have the internal motivation to want to make change in their communities.

Research done by Lanier and colleagues (2020) describes empowerment, particularly psychological empowerment as multifaceted. It is more complex than powerlessness explored by Van der Toorn (2015). Those who are empowered have clear knowledge about disparities and

beliefs about the need for social change. Lanier and colleagues (2020) further explain that empowerment is characterized by high knowledge of the source of power, the nature of power and the instruments of social change for both low and high social status individuals. Further, Lanier and colleagues (2020) found that knowledge about social systems and the desire to change them work together as a critical understanding of the social system may lead an individual to be more effective and strategic and therefore likely to take productive and intuitive action. It is logical that those who are high in empowerment may also be less likely to justify the systems they are a part of because they not only see change as plausible but understand that the system is flawed and how it could be fixed. In contrast, those who are lower in empowerment have less knowledge of the social system they exist in, therefore making it seem unchangeable.

Empowerment can strongly influence the way that people view the systems around them. Those high in the social hierarchy often have power but do not necessarily have *empowerment*. This distinction is important. Empowerment has to do with wanting to bring about change (Van der Toorn et al., 2015). Empowerment is a crucial factor when looking at who views systems as flawed. Even among those who are high in social power, those who are empowered and see there is a flawed system in need of changing are more likely than other high-power individuals to believe that change is necessary. Additionally, there are individuals as Jost (2012) mentioned who are low in social power and still system justify. This is because change is seen as daunting and overwhelming. Empowerment offers a counterpoint to this idea as it promotes the idea that individuals can work for and participate in social change. Therefore, we predict that when both lower social status individuals and higher social status individuals believe that change is a rational and valid option, individuals would be less likely to justify flawed social systems.

Because power is seen as influential in decreasing system justification in research done by Van der Toorn and colleagues (2015), it is predicted that empowerment will have similar effects.

Empowerment and the effect it can have on system justification is an under-researched area. Only one study by Van der Toorn and colleagues (2015) has looked at how powerlessness can lead to high levels of system justification. In the study, the researchers wanted to see if powerlessness would predict system justification in the workplace. A sample of 140 undergraduate students enrolled in a sociology course at the University of California at Berkeley participated online for extra course credit. 27.1% identified themselves as European American, 2.1% as African American, 24.3% as Asian-American, 15.7% as Latino, and 30.7% as “Other” or missing. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-power condition. Specifically, they were asked to write an essay about an actual event in their lives that made them feel high or low in power. They also completed the System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003). Through the study Van der Toorn (2015) found that participants primed with low power scored significantly higher on system justification than participants primed with high power. Participants who were relatively powerless were more likely to perceive existing societal arrangements as fair and legitimate. Empowerment specifically was not examined. Nonetheless, there were some relevant findings. Results of this study suggested that those low in power will have high levels of system justification (Van der Toorn et al., 2015).

Additional research is needed to explore empowerment as a predictor of system justification, as this predictor variable has not yet been studied. Race has been used in some studies on system justification studies but never specifically in relation to empowerment. A study done by Major and colleagues (2002) found that system-justifying beliefs also significantly increase perceptions of reverse discrimination among white individuals. These results indicate

that system justification and race can be statistically related. Another study done by Bahamondes et al. (2021) showed that system justification increased perceptions of discrimination among ethnic majority group members. These results also indicate that system justification and race can be statistically related. Another study found that white individuals high in system justification report that their ingroup faces discrimination to a greater extent after reading that ethnic minorities benefit from racial progress. These rates were higher in white individuals than in other ethnicities (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). One last study that looked at race was a study done by Essien and colleagues (2021). In this study they found significant results between socioeconomic status, race, and system justification, indicating that race can moderate a relationship with system justification as an outcome variable. Overall, these studies do not explicitly look at race as a moderator for empowerment and system justification, but it proves that race has the ability to moderate and influence relationships between certain variables and system justification.

Because power was found to statistically influence levels of system justification along with race acting as a moderator for other variables, we find it worth exploring race (in relation to empowerment) as an important designation of power differences.

To address these gaps in the literature, this study will examine the effects of empowerment and race on levels of system justification. Prior research has shown that empowerment can lead both dominant and oppressed groups to believe and act on social system change. In addition (although outgroup members can still buy into system justification beliefs), they are still more likely to see the system as unjust and recognize that change needs to occur. Therefore, the hypotheses outlined below will be tested in this study.

Hypotheses

- H1: Racially minoritized individuals will report lower rates of system justification than White individuals.
- H2: Individuals who report higher rates of empowerment will report lower rates of system justification.
- H3: Race/ethnicity will moderate the relationship between empowerment and system justification such that the negative relationship between empowerment and system justification will be accentuated for racially minoritized individuals.

Method

Participants

The participants for the study were collected through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The goal was to get over 500 participants to ensure a large sample size for high statistical power. In total, there were 604 participants who completed the survey. Participants were Americans aged 18-65+. There were 283 men and 312 women and 7 who identified as other or chose not to answer. There were 460 White participants, 57 African Americans, 38 Asian Americans, 32 Hispanic Americans and 15 who identified as “other”. The participants were asked to complete self-report questionnaires about their behaviors and thought patterns. Anyone willing to complete the survey on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk was allowed to participate.

Procedure

Participants were informed that the survey would be asking them about their social opinions. They were told that they were participating in a research project that was designed to explore the relationships between various social attitudes. The online invitation stated “We are looking at how people think about the society and social systems that we exist in, and how their

personal life and behavior impacts this.”. If participants felt comfortable continuing, they were given a survey with the system justification and empowerment scales measured first followed by demographic questions at the end. After the survey was completed, participants were given resources for any distress that might have occurred as well as contact information for the researchers. Participants received \$2 for the completion of the survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Measures

Participants completed two separate scales focused on psychological empowerment and system justification. To limit any response bias that may come from some scales proceeding other scales, the order of the scales was randomized for each participant. The System Justification (SJ) scale created by Jost and Kay, (2005) is a commonly used measure to assess system justification and the social and psychological needs to support the status quo and to see it as good, fair, natural, desirable, and even inevitable. It is an 8-item measure that uses a seven-point Likert scale. Examples of these items include: “In general, I find society to be fair” and “American society needs to be radically restructured” (Jost and Kay, 2005). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements about the current American social structure. Answers ranged from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). The overall score for each participant was the average response for the scale. Questions 2 and 5 were reverse scored. Higher scores on the SJ scale represent higher levels of system justification. This scale can be found in Appendix A. Research indicates that the System Justification scale is a reliable measure for assessing system justification (Roccatò, Rosato, Mosso, & Russo, 2014). We found the internal reliability for the System Justification scale was relatively high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.733).

The Empowerment Scale created by Rodrigues, Menezes, and Ferreira (2018) measures psychological empowerment. It assesses “a higher order multilevel framework used to evaluate individuals, groups, organizations, and communities as they engage in the practice and execution of the participatory process” (Lardier et al. 2020, pg.1). It is a 52-item measure that uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure four subscales: cognitive (14 items), behavioral (7 items), emotional (8 items), and relational empowerment (19). The total scale made up of all four subscales was used. Examples of these items include: “I can impact community issues only by working in an organized way with other people” and “To improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual” (Rodrigues, Menezes, and Ferreira, 2018).

Participants indicated the extent to which they agree with each of the statements about their feelings and possible actions around their community and how change can occur. Answer options range from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) for the cognitive empowerment, emotional empowerment, and rational empowerment subscales. For the behavioral empowerment subscale, answers options range from one (very unlikely) to seven (very likely). The overall score was the average of each response. Higher scores on the Empowerment Scale indicate higher levels of empowerment. This scale can be found in Appendix B. Research indicates that the Empowerment Scale is a reliable measure for assessing empowerment (Rodrigues, Menezes, and Ferreira, 2018). We found reliability for the Empowerment Scale to be high with Cronbach’s alphas of 0.834 for the cognitive subscale, 0.87 for the emotional subscale, 0.927 for the relational subscale, 0.859 for the behavioral subscale and a Cronbach’s alphas of 0.919 for the scale overall.

Race (the moderator) was scored categorically, 1 for White and 2 for participants who identified as either Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black/African American,

Hispanic/Latina, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Other-Write in. For this study, participants were grouped into “White” and “racially minoritized individuals” to look at how the social status of those who have social power from their race (White participants) view system justification, and those who have less power than White participants (racially minoritized individuals) view system justification.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

All analyses were done on R studio. Checks of normality were done to ensure that data had validity. We looked at the homogeneity of variance and tested for any severe violations of which there were none. In addition, descriptive analyses (by race/ethnicity) and correlational analyses will be conducted. A series of ANOVAs were run to determine if there were demographic differences between White and racially minoritized participants. We found that there was no significant difference of gender but there was a significant difference in the age between White and racially minoritized participants ($p < 0.001$), so that the average age of White participants was significantly older than racially minoritized participants. A chi squared analysis indicated that the category of 25-34 was significantly different across the groups. As a result of these significant differences, the variables were dummy coded for analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Frequencies were calculated for demographic variables including race/ethnicity, gender, and age (see Table 1). Demographic frequencies were again calculated by racial category to better understand the demographic makeup of each group (Table 2 and 3). Descriptive statistics were performed to obtain the mean, standard deviation, and skewness of the scores for system justification for White participants ($M = 3.43$; $SD = .821$) and empowerment ($M = 3.58$; $SD =$

.50) (Table 4). Descriptive statistics were again performed to obtain the mean, standard deviation, and skewness of the scores for system justification for racially minoritized participants ($M = 3.361$; $SD = .828$) and empowerment ($M = 3.58$; $SD = .57$) (Table 5). Results of an ANOVA revealed there was a statistical difference for average age between White participants and racially minoritized participants. Correlational analyses were also conducted (see Table 6).

Table 1

Demographic Frequencies

Demographic	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	283	47.3%
	Female	309	51.6%
	NA	7	1.2%
Age	18-24	32	5.4%
	25-34	194	32.4%
	35-44	163	27.3%
	45-54	95	15.9%
	55-64	74	12.4%
	65-74	37	6.2%
	75+	3	0.5%
Race and Ethnicity	White	460	76.4%
	Black/ African American/African American	57	9.5%
	Asian/Asian American	38	6.3%
	Hispanic	32	5.3%
	Other	15	2.5%
	Total	599	100%

Table 2*Age Frequencies by Race*

Age	White	Racially Minoritized Individuals	Total
18-24	21	11	21
25-34	130*	64*	160
35-44	124	16	140
45-54	81	6	87
55-64	65	4	68
65-74	35	1	36
75+	3	0	3
Total	459	139	598

*Statistically significant difference between groups (*p < .05)

Table 3*Gender Frequencies by Race*

Gender	White	Racially Minoritized Individuals	Total
Male	215	68	283
Female	238	71	309
Transgender Male	1	0	1
Transgender Female	1	0	1
Gender Variant/Non- conforming	2	0	2
Other	1	0	1
Total	458	139	597

Table 4*Descriptive Statistics for Empowerment and System Justification for White Individuals*

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness
Empowerment	460	1.6	4.89	3.58	0.50	-0.21
System Justification	460	1.37	5.37	3.43	0.81	-0.11

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Empowerment and System Justification for Racially Minoritized Individuals

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness
Empowerment	139	2.34	4.89	3.58	0.57	0.06
System Justification	139	1.0	6.00	3.36	0.88	0.42

Table 6

Correlation Matrix for Race, System Justification, and Empowerment

	Race	System Justification	Empowerment
Race	1	.419	.962
System Justification	.419	1	.026*
Empowerment	.962	.026*	1

* $p < .05$

Race and System Justification

We first looked at whether system justification differed across racial groups, it was hypothesized that race would predict system justification so that those who were of minoritized racial status would have lower levels of system justification (H1). Race was categorized into two categories: White and minoritized racial status (participants who did not identify as White). The independent sample t-test indicated that level of system justification did not vary as a function of race ($p = .4114$).

Empowerment and System Justification

We then examined associations between empowerment and system justification (see Table 7). We had hypothesized that high levels of empowerment would predict low levels of system justification (H2). Results of a regression analysis, controlling for age, indicated there was a significant positive relationship between empowerment and system justification, ($R^2 =$

.0099, $F(2,595) = 3.985$, $p = .019$) such that higher levels of empowerment were associated with higher levels of system justification.

Table 7

Regression Results for Empowerment and System Justification for Racially minoritized Individuals

Independent Variable	t	p	Beta	F	df	R ²
Empowerment	2.181	0.030*	0.141	2.369	3,595	0.016

* $p < .05$

Race as a moderator between Empowerment and System Justification

Next, we included race and the interaction between race and empowerment in the regression to test race as a moderator of the relationship between empowerment and system justification, controlling for age (see Table 8). We had hypothesized that race would moderate a negative relationship between empowerment and system justification (H3). With race and the interaction term included, the positive relationship between empowerment and system justification was no longer significant. ($b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.195$, $p = .218$). But race emerged as a significant predictor ($b = -1.112$, $SE = 0.522$, $p = .033$) indicating that White participants had higher rates of system justification. These effects were moderated by a significant interaction between empowerment and race ($b = 0.3013$, $SE = 0.1439$, $p = .014$) such that empowerment had a stronger positive effect on system justification for participants who were racially minoritized individuals.

A simple slopes analysis was conducted, and it was determined that, when race is identified as “White”, empowerment is not significantly associated with system justification. But, when race is identified as “racially minoritized”, empowerment is significantly positively associated with system justification (Table 9). In other words, empowerment in White

participants is not a strong predictor of system justification but is a significant predictor for nonwhite participants (Figure 1).

Table 8

Multiple Regression Results for Empowerment, Race, and System Justification

	Independent Variables	t	p	Beta	F	df	R ²
Control	Overall Model		.034*		2.098	8,589	.014
	Empowerment	2.18	.029*	.089			
	Race	-.467	.074	-.019			
Interaction							
	Overall Model		0.014*		3.145	9,588	0.020
	Empowerment	-1.17	0.244	-0.23			
	Race	-2.05	0.041*	-0.55			
	Empowerment*Race	2.01	0.045*	0.301			

*p < .05

Table 9

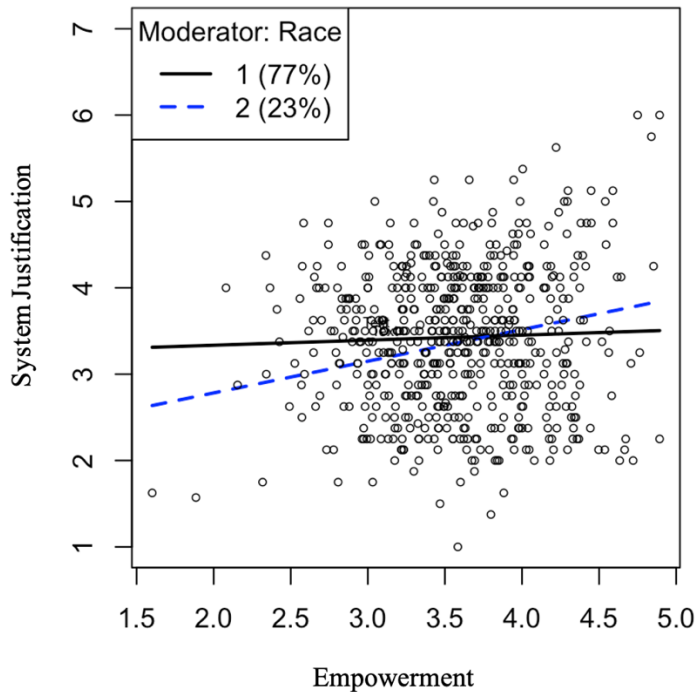
Simple Slopes Analysis for Multiple Regression Results for Empowerment, Race, and System Justification

Variables	Est.	SE	t	p
White	0.06	0.08	0.77	0.44
Racially minoritized	0.37	0.12	3.00	0.00*

*p < .05

Figure 1. Simple Slopes Analysis of Race as a moderator between Empowerment and System Justification

(1 = white, 2 = nonwhite)



Supplemental Analyses

For this study, all minority status individuals were grouped together into a group that was classified as “lower status”. White participants were classified as higher status, which made up the two groups that were compared for the analyses. However, different ethnicities and races have different cultures and backgrounds, which could impact where they fall on the social hierarchy, which in turn could impact results. To address these concerns, supplemental analyses were conducted comparing Black/ African American participants (who made up the largest subgroup of participants who did not identify as White) with White participants. The original analyses were redone on the sample of just White and Black/ African American participants. There was a lack of significant results with just White and Black/ African American participants

for all the hypotheses that were tested. To determine if this was a sample size issue or was because the results did not apply to Black/ African American/African American participants, the analyses were rerun with White and racially minoritized participants excluding Black/ African American participants to explore whether this sample would have significant results. There were no significant results found for any of the analyses run with this sample as well.

To better understand the implications of the study the 4 highest scoring items were found for the system justification measure (Table 5) and the 10 highest scoring items were found for the empowerment measure (Table 6). The analysis found that the highest scoring items for the empowerment scale came from only the cognitive empowerment and relational empowerment subscales and there were no items included from the emotional empowerment and behavioral empowerment subscales.

Table 10

Highest Scoring Items on the System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005)

Item	Mean	SD
The United States is the best country in the world to live.	3.96	1.673
American society needs to be radically restructured (R).	3.74	1.659
Our society is getting worse every year. (R).	3.64	1.498
Most policies serve the greater good	3.57	1.417

Table 11

Highest Scoring Items on the Empowerment Scale (Rodriguez et al., 2018)

Item	Mean	SD
To improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual.	4.39	.786
I can impact community issues only by working in an organized way with other people.	4.28	.794
Only by working together can people make changes in a community.	4.13	.874

If given the opportunity to youths, I think that we could be able to organize something great for our community.	4.01	.889
Honestly, I feel that if we engage more, we will have opportunity to improve things for youths.	4.00	.889
People who live in this community could change things that are not working well.	3.98	.865
I think this is a good place to live in.	3.94	1.018
If the people here were to organize, they would have a good chance of reaching their goals.	3.92	.891
I feel like talking I can generally find someone to talk to.	3.91	1.074
The powerful control what information gets to the public.	3.88	1.012

Discussion:

The purpose of this study was to examine relationships among empowerment, race, and system justification. We tested the hypotheses that race and empowerment are significantly associated with system justification and that race moderates the relationship between empowerment and system justification. We found that race was not a predictor of system justification, proving out hypothesis incorrect. However, the other two hypotheses, that empowerment predicted system justification and that race acted as a moderator for empowerment on system justification was supported.

Empowerment and Systems Justification

Results revealed that empowerment was a predictor of system justification. Those who reported higher levels of empowerment were more likely to report higher levels of system justification. This is contrary to our hypothesis and may indicate that empowerment as measured in this study better represents power itself than a tool for challenging systems of oppression.

Research by Pratto (2016) found that power can be equated with empowerment when people are able to meet their social goals. Individuals who are high in empowerment can act on

their needs and be active in communities because they are able to get results from those actions. In other words, those who are empowered may also benefit from the system and may be more likely to support it.

On the other hand, these results also counter previous literature like the results found by Van der Toorn and colleagues (2015) that powerlessness was a predictor of system justification. These results also challenge previous findings that those who are empowered have knowledge of the systems and therefore are less likely to system justify because they understand the flaws of current systems. Future research should explore whether empowerment equates to knowledge of the flaws of the system and whether that leads to likelihood to system justify.

Race, Empowerment, and Systems Justification

Our findings that system justification did not differ across racial groups suggest that race alone does not have a strong impact on system justification. This finding is tempered, however, by the finding that race moderated the relationship between empowerment and systems justification such that racially minoritized individuals higher on empowerment were more likely to systems justify. How and why might these findings fit together?

First to the finding that systems justification did not differ across racial groups: Research by Bahamondes and colleagues (2021) as well as a study by Wilkins and Kaiser (2014) and Essien and colleagues (2021) have found race can be a significant predictor of system justification. But the results from the current study were not consistent with that previous research. There were no methodological differences between the current study and the previous research explored in this area done by Bahamondes and colleagues (2021), Wilkins and Kaiser (2014) and Essien and colleagues (2021) other than additional variables that were explored in relation to race/ethnicity and system justification. The discrepancy between results of the current

studies and the other studies could be because race alone is not a predictor of system justification and instead variables like SES, income and education level are strong predictors and more accurate measures of social power as an influence of system justification. The previously mentioned studies did find race as a predictor for system justification, but only when being analyzed in combination with other variables. Bahamondes and colleagues (2021) found that ethnic identity could predict system justification when also including perceived ethnic based discrimination. Perceived discrimination could have been a stronger indicator of status than ethnicity. Wilkins and Kaiser (2014) looked at race and system justification, along with perceptions of anti-White discrimination. Perceptions of discrimination may have influenced system justification and been a strong predictor of social status or power. Essien and colleagues (2021) found race as a predictor for system justification when also looking at conservatism and intergroup evaluation. In this study it is possible that intergroup evaluation acted as a predictor of status more than race did. All of these studies differed from the current study in that they looked at perceptions of discrimination or intergroup evaluation. Perceptions of discrimination may have been the actual predictor for system justification as they are able to social status or power because it was able to capture the oppression a person may feel from a system. And intergroup evaluation may have also been a strong predictor of system justification as it was able to capture if someone belongs to a high or low status group.

The current study hypothesized that race would predict system justification levels because those who identified as White would have more social power than those who did not identify as White and therefore system justify more. However, research has shown that variables particularly income and education can strongly predict system justification (Agadullina, 2023). Those with higher income and education are likely to system justify and found that education

level and income positively predict system justification, although evidence was not as strong as the results for SES. The relationship between SES and system justification was hypothesized by Agadullina (2023) to occur because people often are not able to accurately assume their position in the social hierarchy and often place themselves in the middle. This suggests that those who have objectively low social status, like those with racially minoritized social status, will often overestimate their social position and therefore assume they are doing better in a system than they actually are. And therefore, also supporting that system. This allows these minoritized individuals to maintain a positive self-image and have high self-esteem and leads them to defend their overvalued position by justifying the current system (Agadullina, 2023). If those who were empowered also had high SES, or even mid-level SES they likely viewed themselves as socially powerful and therefore saw themselves as able to benefit from the system and therefore were likely to support it. Race may not have been able to fully capture social power if those of racial minoritized status were in high income brackets as they would likely have power because they have money. Therefore, SES or income is likely a better variable to represent social status compared to race.

Despite the lack of difference in systems justification between White and racially minoritized individuals, we found that empowerment was most strongly positively associated with system justification for participants who were racially minoritized. So, while those who are high in empowerment are more likely to system justify compared to those who are not high in empowerment, our results indicated that minorities with high empowerment are the group most likely to system justify. These results suggest that membership in minoritized and marginalized racial groups may intensify the link between empowerment and system justification. This counters the research done by Jost and Van der Toorn (2012) and others reviewed above,

indicating that advantaged groups are more likely to engage in system justification. This could be because those who are low in power and social class are likely to perceive themselves dependent on the system for rewards and punishments. Therefore, these individuals may be more likely to support, bolster, and justify existing social arrangements to alleviate the stress of living in systems that can cause them harm (Liu, 2017). Additionally, those who are in low power positions may system justify to create a sense of predictability to manage perceived threats. Research by Liu (2017) found structural instability at the lower social class levels may increase system-justifying attitudes and beliefs which ultimately benefits the interest of the wealthy and affluent classes.

Additionally, research by Owuamalam and colleagues (2023) explain how system justification amongst the disadvantaged could be related to social identity. Owuamalam and colleagues (2023) found that system justification shown by a disadvantaged group can sometimes support identity needs that are tied to a more inclusive subordinate in-group, due to the social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA). The researchers claim that people tend to categorize themselves often based on the context that they are in, which can determine attitudes and behaviors. The researchers found that system justification may occur because members of disadvantaged grounds will identify with their subordinate ingroup instead of identifying with a disadvantaged subgroup based on the environments that they are in. This may lead to individuals of disadvantaged groups who identify with an ingroup to have a positive bias towards their subordinate ingroup which may lead them to support the systems that benefit their subordinate ingroup identity (Owuamalam et al., 2023). The researchers discuss how individuals will identify with a subordinate ingroup like one's nationality, which overshadows their identifications with the disadvantaged subgroup like their gender identification as a woman for instance. They

determined that subordinate ingroup identification was positively associated with system justification, so that the stronger one's identification with an ingroup with higher status, led to higher levels of system justification.

Those who are empowered may also system justify because they think systems are not flawed because it worked for them. In America, our social systems heavily rely on the ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that social mobility is based on merit and hard work (Liu, 2017) Endorsement of meritocracy has been found to increase levels of system justification (Liu, 2017). As mentioned earlier, if someone can feel empowered it may mean they are benefiting from the system, so it is likely that they will endorse meritocratic beliefs because they view the system as fair because it worked for them. It is also possible that those who are empowered but lower in social status may not fully understand disparities or their own location in the social hierarchy. So, if they can reach any sort of success, they may think they are succeeding from the system and are not actually aware of the oppression and harm they are experiencing because of unjust systems. So even people of color who may socially not be as high on the social ladder as White individuals, if they were able to succeed in the current system and acquire social power and a sense of empowerment (or power), they may believe the system is fair because it worked for them. This can explain why empowerment positively predicted system justification in our study.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has a few limitations. The main issue is the sample size and inclusivity of the sample. While the sample had over 500 participants, a majority of those who responded were White. A larger sample with an equal number of White participants, Black/ African American, Hispanic, Asian, and participants from other ethnic and racial groups would have increased the

power, reliability, and generalizability of the analyses. Furthermore, a larger sample size with more inclusivity would allow for analysis by race/ethnicity and eliminate the need to group by White and racially minoritized individuals, which is better for research practice and will allow for more in depth results to better understand how different ethnicities and races understand our systems and support them.

To accommodate these limitations, analyses were rerun with only the largest subgroup (Black/ African American). The results for the analyses for the sample with just White and Black/ African American participants varied from the results with the entire sample. The analysis for this sample found there was not a significant effect of empowerment on system justification. There was also not a significant effect of race as a moderating variable. With only White and Black/ African American participants, none of the test hypotheses were significant. The lack of significant results for this subsample could reflect the diminished power of this smaller sample to detect significant effects or it could indicate that, empowerment is not a predictor of system justification for Black/ African American individuals. To test these two alternative interpretations of the results, analyses were re-run with White participants and racially minoritized individuals excluding Black/ African American participants. Results of these analysis also failed to reveal a significant effect of empowerment on system justification or a significant effect of race as a moderating variable. Taken together, these results suggest that the lack of findings for the African American subsample likely reflect diminished power to detect significant effects given that this was the largest racially minoritized subgroup in the larger sample and the findings did not hold for the racially minoritized subgroup that excluded African Americans. As noted above, additional research is needed to test this study's hypotheses with larger and more diverse samples.

Another potential limitation was the overlap of the questions from the empowerment measure and the system justification measure. Future research could explore a different empowerment measure that has less overlap with the system justifications scale to ensure they are not capturing the same thing. Of the ten highest scoring empowerment items, there seemed to be several questions that also captures system justifying ideologies. These questions ask participants agree that their community is a “good place to live” which overlaps with the question for the System Justification measure that asks if the participant agrees with the statement “The United States is the best country in the world to live”. The empowerment scale also asks participants if they agree with the statement that “The powerful control what information gets to the public” which could potentially overlap with the system justification measure when it asks about the fairness of the American political system and society. It seems that there is an overlap of concepts with the Empowerment Scale and the System Justification Scale, which could have contributed to the fact that empowerment positively predicted system justification. Additionally, the scale focuses many of the questions on community empowerment over an individual level empowerment with questions like “I can impact community issues only by working in an organized way with other people” and “To improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual” (Rodrigues, Menezes, and Ferreira, 2018).

Future studies should also explore different variables to see what is truly causing high levels of system justification. Power is one variable that could be evaluated with empowerment and system justification to see if empowerment is a proxy for power. Additionally, other variables should be explored in relation to system justification, like perceptions of discrimination and intergroup evaluation. SES, income and education may also play a role in levels of system justification and should be looked at in connection to empowerment and system justification.

Implications

This study found that empowerment predicted system justification and race moderated that relationship. These findings have implications for potential clinical interventions and policy work. As reviewed in the introduction, there are systems that lead to cycles of poverty, mass incarceration, and unequal opportunities in education (Reskin, 2012). The systems are flawed, and change is needed. But taking on that large level of system change is daunting, which is one reason why system justification exists. As mentioned earlier, those who are empowered tend to understand the systems around them and are more likely to be active in their communities (Lanier et al., 2020), however the results of this study found that empowerment can lead to higher levels of system justification. In future clinical work it should be important to better understand how empowerment can be a reason that people are supportive of flawed systems.

This study challenges previous research that those who are empowered do understand systems. It is possible based on the current study that those who are empowered may not fully understand the harms of certain systems if they are benefitting from said systems. They therefore may only have empowerment in certain aspects of their life that align more with power than empowerment. The highest scoring empowerment items in this study came from the cognitive and relational subscales. The top ten items failed to include any high scoring items from the emotional and behavioral empowerment subscale. This indicates that it is possible that cognitive and relational empowerment are strong positive predictors of system justification. Therefore, it is possible that emotional and behavioral empowerment could be a negative predictor of system justification since they were not extremely prevalent in the participants of this study. It is possible that those who are active in empowerment movements, and sign petitions and do work in their community (behavioral empowerment) may be less likely to system justify because they

are integrating themselves into different communities and exposing themselves to those who are harmed by the system. And those who feel an emotional connection and have long term thoughts about social change (emotional empowerment) may feel more connected to those who are being harmed and want to bring about change to the systems that are hurting those around them that they may feel emotionally connected to.

Knowing this, policy makers should work to build efforts for behavioral empowerment by increasing resources to be active in your community and make it possible to bring about social efforts for change. If people can participate more in community activism, they may feel change is possible and care more about systems and start to recognize that the systems are changeable. If there are more opportunities to get involved in communities in activism projects it could lead to an increase in behavioral empowerment and start to make people want to be active in bringing system change, therefore decreasing levels of system justification. Policy makers should also work to increase community involvement in many different areas with many different groups of people. If individuals who have power can interact with those who do not have power, it may increase their emotional investment towards these groups and lead to an increase in emotional empowerment as well. If people can become emotionally invested in their communities and the groups that exist around them, they may start to see how systems don't work for everyone and also want to bring about change to these systems.

Lastly, bringing awareness about one's spot in the social hierarchy may also be able to decrease the levels of system justification an individual has. If people can understand the fact that systems are flawed and harmful, then system change can start to occur. The results of the study seem to indicate that even when people are oppressed in a given system, if they are able to still find success and power/empowerment then they will justify these flawed systems that they

exist in. Again, a way to counter this is for policy makers to encourage community involvement and integration of different social groups. People may start to better understand oppressive systems if they interact with those who are different or even similar to them but are not able to find the same successes that they have. If community involvement initiatives can focus on bringing about attention to one's social power, it may be able to not only increase one's awareness of the power that they have but also work to increase emotional investment in communities which can increase the type of empowerment that can combat system justification.

Conclusion

The current study highlights the potential importance of empowerment in challenging system justification and addressing systemic injustices. The study found empowerment as a positive predictor of system justification and race as a moderator for this relationship. The findings from this study suggest that there are different variables that can impact system justification, as it counters previous research and suggest that there are more variables that should be explored in connection with empowerment, like SES, income, and education. Because the influence of empowerment on system justification is an understudied area, these results are new to the field and future research is needed to determine whether they can be replicated. There are currently no other studies that have looked specifically at empowerment with race as a moderator, so this study is bringing new findings to the field and there is need for replication. However, because of the limited sample size and variables that were not controlled for, it is important for the study to be replicated with a larger sample and include other variables. These findings provide a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at reducing system justifying and unjust ideologies. The results show how behavioral and emotional empowerment have the potential to negatively predict system justification.

References

- Agadullina, E. R. (2023). The Role of income in system Justification. *Psychology in Russia*, *16*(1), 66.
- Akey, T. M., Marquis, J. G., & Ross, M. E. (2000). Validation of scores on the psychological empowerment scale: a measure of empowerment for parents of children with a disability. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *60*(3), 419-438.
- Bahamondes, J., Sibley, C. G., & Osborne, D. (2021). System justification and perceptions of group-based discrimination: Investigating the temporal order of the ideologically motivated minimization (or exaggeration) of discrimination across low-and high-status groups. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *12*(4), 431-441.
- Essien, I., Calanchini, J., & Degner, J. (2021). Moderators of intergroup evaluation in disadvantaged groups: A comprehensive test of predictions from system justification theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *120*(5), 1204.
- Jost, J. T. (2001). Outgroup favoritism and the theory of system justification: A paradigm for investigating the effects of socioeconomic success on stereotype content. In *Cognitive social psychology: The Princeton Symposium on the Legacy and Future of Social Cognition* (pp. 89-102).
- Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *33*(1), 1-27.
- Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, *25*(6), 881-919.

- Jost, J. T., Pelham, B. W., & Carvallo, M. R. (2002). Non-conscious forms of system justification: Implicit and behavioral preferences for higher status groups. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 38*(6), 586-602.
- Jost, J. T., & Van der Toorn, J. (2012). System justification theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology, 2*, 313-343.
- Kay, A. C., & Jost, J. T. (2003). Complementary justice: effects of "poor but happy" and "poor but honest" stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(5), 823.
- Lanier, D. T., Jr, Opara, I., Garcia-Reid, P., & Reid, R. J. (2020). The Cognitive Empowerment Scale: Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analysis Among Adult of Color. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal: C & A, 37*(2), 179–193.
- Liu, W. M. (2017). White male power and privilege: The relationship between White supremacy and social class. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(4), 349.
- Major, B., Gramzow, R. H., McCoy, S. K., Levin, S., Schmader, T., & Sidanius, J. (2002). Perceiving personal discrimination: the role of group status and legitimizing ideology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*(3), 269.
- Martorana, P. V., Galinsky, A. D., & Rao, H. (2005). From system justification to system condemnation: Antecedents of attempts to change power hierarchies. In *Status and Groups* (Vol. 7, pp. 283-313). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Owuamalam, C. K., Caricati, L., Spears, R., Rubin, M., Marinucci, M., & Ferrari, A. (2023). Further evidence that system justification amongst the disadvantaged is positively related to superordinate group identification. *Acta Psychologica, 232*, 103813.
- Pratto, F. (2016). On power and empowerment. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 55*(1), 1-

20.

Reskin, B. (2012). The Race Discrimination System. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38, 17–35.

Rodrigues, M., Menezes, I., & Ferreira, P. D. (2018). Validating the formative nature of psychological empowerment construct: Testing cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational empowerment components. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1), 58-78.

Sibley, C. G., & Duckitt, J. (2010). The Ideological Legitimation of the Status Quo: Longitudinal Tests of a Social Dominance Model. *Political Psychology*, 31(1), 109–137.

Van der Toorn, J., Feinberg, M., Jost, J. T., Kay, A. C., Tyler, T. R., Willer, R., & Wilmuth, C. (2015). A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government. *Political Psychology*, 36(1), 93–110.

Wilkins, C. L., & Kaiser, C. R. (2014). Racial progress as threat to the status hierarchy: Implications for perceptions of anti-White bias. *Psychological Science*, 25(2), 439-446.

Appendix A: System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005)

Instructions:

We are looking at how people think about the society and social systems that we exist in, and how their personal life and behavior impacts this.

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement (1 - strongly disagree, 2 - moderately disagree, 3 - slightly disagree, 4 slightly agree, 5 - moderately agree, 6 - strongly agree).

Sample Items:

1. In general, I find society to be fair.
2. American society needs to be radically restructured. (Reverse Scored)
3. Most policies serve the greater good.
4. Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.
5. Our society is getting worse every year. (Reverse Scored)
6. In general, the American political system operates as it should.
7. The United States is the best country in the world to live in.
8. Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

Appendix B: Empowerment scale (Rodrigues, Menezes, & Ferreira, 2018)

Instructions:

For questions 1-41, Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement (1- strongly disagree, 2 - slightly disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - somewhat agree, 5 - strongly agree).

Sample Items:

1. Only by working together can people make changes in a community.
2. I can impact community issues only by working in an organized way with other people.
3. To improve my community, it is more effective to work with a group than as an individual.
4. The only way I can act to improve the community is by connecting to others.
5. Changing a community almost always results in conflicts.
6. Because the interests of the powerful are so different from the interests of common people, sooner or later conflict is to be expected.
7. When community groups work to improve schools, housing, public safety, and the like, then they must be ready for conflict with social institutions.
8. When community groups work to improve things like public health or crime, they sooner or later come into conflict with business leaders or public officials.
9. Things happen in my community because those with power reward their friends.
10. The powerful punish their enemies.
11. The powerful control what information gets to the public.
12. Those with community influence keep many issues out of the news.
13. Those with power shape the way people think about community.
14. Influential groups shape the way a community interprets local events.
15. There are plenty of ways for people like me to have a say in what our community does.
16. My opinion is important because it could someday make a difference in my community.
17. I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the important issues, which confront my communities.
18. People like me can participate effectively in community decision making.
19. I enjoy participation because I want to have as much say in my community as possible.
20. Most community leaders would listen to me.
21. People like me can really understand what's going on with my community.
22. It is important to me that I actively participate in local teen issues.
23. I like to stay with other people that live in this town.
24. In the community where I am living, I feel I can share experiences and interests with other people.
25. I feel like talking I can generally find someone to talk to.
26. I spend a lot of time with other people that live in my community.

27. People in this community support each other.
28. Many people in this community are willing to help each other.
29. People in my town/village collaborate.
30. People in my community work together to improve things.
31. In the community where I am living, there are many initiatives for people my age.
32. In the community where I am living, there are enough opportunities to meet other men and women.
33. In this place, people can find many opportunities to amuse themselves.
34. This is a pretty town / village.
35. I think this is a good place to live in
36. I feel like I belong to this town / village.
37. As compared to others my community has many advantages.
38. If the people here were to organize, they would have a good chance of reaching their goals’.
39. Honestly, I feel that if we engage more, we will have opportunities to improve things for people.
40. If given the opportunity to people, I think that we could be able to organize something great for our community.
41. People who live in this community could change things that are not working well.

For questions 42-48, Please rate how likely you are to engage in the following actions (1 - very unlikely, 2 - somewhat unlikely, 3 - neutral 4 - somewhat likely, 5 - very likely).

How likely are you to...

42. Sign a petition.
43. Attend a public meeting or demonstration dealing with political or social issues.
44. Volunteering
45. Wear symbols or emblems to show support for a social or political cause (badges, t-shirt with a message)
46. Donate and collect money to a social or political cause of organization.
47. Write or send contents about politics or societal issues (emails, blogs, Facebook, etc.)
48. Discuss societal or political issues with other people on the internet.