From fighting the system to embracing it: control loss promotes system justification among those high in psychological reactance

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HIGHLIGHTS

- High reactance individuals are anti-system rebels.
- High (not low) reactance individuals system justify after experiencing control loss.
- Ironic effect of control loss on rebels supports the compensatory control model.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

One way to restore a sense of control is to system justify. Individuals high in trait reactance are particularly motivated to regain a sense of control in the face of freedom loss. But will high-reactance individuals system justify to restore control, given that they typically oppose authority? Based on the Compensatory Control Model (CCM), we propose that high-reactance individuals' motivation to compensate for control loss will, at times, overcome this aversion to authority and lead to increased system justification. In Study 1, high-reactance American participants were shown to hold stronger oppositional attitudes toward government authority (i.e., they showed reduced system justification). In Studies 2–4, only high-reactance participants increased their support of government when personal control was reduced. Thus, for high-reactance individuals, the need for control compensation overpowers the need to hold anti-authority attitudes. Outcomes support a CCM account of control compensation for those high (not low) in trait reactance.

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"There is absolutely no greater high than challenging the power structure as a nobody, giving it your all, and winning!"- Abbie Hoffman

The above quote by Abbie Hoffman, an activist who challenged the system, illustrates the view of someone who would most likely feel oppressed by government rules and regulations. Such anti-authority attitudes are held by individuals high in trait reactance (Buboltz, Woller, & Pepper, 1999; Dowd, Wallbrown, Sanders, & Yesenosky, 1994) as they are particularly sensitive to others restricting their freedom (Chadee, 2011; Dowd, Milne, & Wise, 1991; Hong & Page, 1989). However, an interesting and counterintuitive prediction emerges when examining the literature on compensatory control. Sometimes a loss of personal control can *increase* system justification because overarching social systems provide a sense of order, structure and predictability that can

compensate for control loss (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). People who are high in trait reactance are particularly motivated to restore a sense of freedom and control (Chadee, 2011; Hong & Page, 1989), and thus, may actually be more likely to system justify after control loss. The current research examined this possibility.

Psychological reactance

Psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966) is a motivational response to perceived or actual freedom threat that often leads to behavior directed toward re-establishment of a sense of freedom. Although reactance varies situationally, there are established trait differences (Brown & Finney, 2011; Brown, Finney, & France, 2011; Dillard & Shen, 2005; Hong & Page, 1989; Shen & Dillard, 2005, 2007) that have been shown to lead to certain behaviors. For example, high reactance individuals can act counter to a physician's instructions (Dowd et al., 1991; Fogarty, 1997; Tennen, Press, Rohrbaugh, & White, 1981), discredit the source of a freedom removal, or engage in behaviors designed to

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compensate for the loss (e.g., exercising a different freedom in order to restore choice and control; Chadee, 2011; Dillard & Shen, 2005). Although reactance is most often discussed in terms of freedom threat and loss, others have referred to freedom loss negatively impacting upon control (e.g., Dillard & Shen, 2005; Dowd, 1993; Kelly & Nauta, 1997; Propst & Kurtzz, 1989; Seibel & Dowd, 2001). Indeed, it is likely that threatening one's freedom or choices also invokes a threat to personal control.

System justification theory

Even though reactant individuals appear to oppose government authority, research shows that individuals generally support and defend existing sociopolitical systems, norms and values (Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Thorisdottir, Jost, & Kay, 2009). This is because there is a psychological need to view society as fair, desirable and legitimate. According to system justification theory (SJT; Jost & Banaji, 1994) there are strong motivational and cognitive processes which legitimize and engender support for existing sociopolitical structures such as government and its regulation, the economic system and other key institutions (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kay & Zanna, 2009).

System justification is psychologically adaptive as it allows individuals to cope with unfavorable aspects of society: With the knowledge that one is often powerless to change many aspects of sociopolitical structure such as imposed inequities, rules and regulations, a key adaptive responsive is to system justify (Kay & Friesen, 2011). By accepting "what is" as being appropriate, fair, and just, the individual reduces negative psychological states (Kay, Gaucher et al., 2009; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008).

The relationship between control loss and system justification

In general, when personal control is reduced, system justification increases (Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay, Whitson et al., 2009; Rutjens & Loseman, 2010; Rutjens, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2011). This is because social systems such as government provide a sense of order, structure and predictability which remedies that lost with violations of personal control (Kay & Friesen, 2011). For instance, Shepherd et al. (2011) showed there was greater support for national norms, as well as for a politician offering stability, order, and leadership after participants recalled a time they had no control over an outcome, versus a time they were made to feel uncertain.

Some researchers have argued that system justification helps to restore an overall sense of order and structure after control loss (e.g., Kay, Whitson et al., 2009; Kay et al., 2008). Consistent with this possibility, personal control loss leads to attempts to restore order and structure in other ways. For example, personal control reduction increases pattern perception in visually ambiguous stimuli, and also the need for structure (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). In sum, it appears that a need to restore order and structure is activated by control loss and both structure seeking and system justification serve a similar restorative, psychological purpose. Importantly, focusing on other forms of control does not increase personal control, but affirms the belief that events are under control (Rutjens & Loseman, 2010). This is the central tenement of the compensatory control model (CCM; Kay et al., 2008; Kay, Whitson, et al., 2009; Shepherd et al., 2011).

The current research

The current research focuses on furthering our understanding of the boundary conditions of the CCM by examining a trait that could predispose individuals to a greater need to compensate for control loss. We chose trait reactance given that reactant individuals are specifically responsive to freedom and control loss (e.g., Chadee, 2011; Dowd et al.,

1991). More specifically, we set out to show that the need to compensate for lost control would be so powerful in higher reactance individuals (presumed to be low system justifiers) that they will increase their support of government.

To summarize, the existing literature has established that (a) individuals will generally system justify to compensate for control loss, and (b) individuals high in trait reactance are opposed to authority, more sensitive to freedom and control loss, and perhaps have a greater need to restore control. Therefore, in the absence of control loss we anticipated that high reactance individuals would system justify less than low reactance individuals. But what will they do after control loss? Based on the reactance literature alone, we would expect high reactance individuals to oppose the system, perhaps even more so when control is reduced (e.g., Chadee, 2011).

However, by drawing on the CCM we expected that high reactance individuals would actually show *increased* support for government and the establishment when their personal control was reduced. This is because one way that control can be restored is by increasing support for external controlling structures such as government and key sociopolitical systems (Jost & Banaji, 1994). A personally relevant control threat should activate a particularly strong motivation to restore a sense of control in reactant individuals (Chadee, 2011) and this need may perhaps be great enough to overcome negative views toward authority.

Overview of studies

In four studies we used American-only, Amazon-Mechanical-Turk (M-Turk) participants. In Study 1, we examined the association between trait reactance and views toward the government. In Studies 2 and 3 we measured trait reactance and manipulated participants' control. This allowed us to examine whether trait reactance might moderate the established relationship between personal control reduction and system justification. In Study 4 we aimed to show that outcomes were indeed specific to control loss and not control bolstering.

Study 1

The research question is predicated on the notion that high reactance individuals will indeed express more anti-government attitudes, and be less likely to system justify. In Study 1, we sought to establish this relationship before moving onto the main question of how control moderates the relationship between trait reactance and system justification (Studies 2–4). In Study 1, we predicted that higher levels of trait reactance would be associated with anti-authority attitudes generally and this would be reflected in reduced support for police, law and military, increased desire for freedom from government interference, increased support for dissidence, and reduced perceptions that government was benevolent. We also measured political identification and political ideology to gage whether these extraneous variables could explain the link between reactance and system justification. Given that previous research found little association between trait reactance and liberal versus conservative ideology (e.g., Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012), we predicted no association between these particular ideologies and trait reactance.

Method

Participants

There were 121 (63 male, 57 female, 1 participant failed to report gender) American participants.[1] Ages ranged from 19 to 72 (M = 35.42). Participants for this and all subsequent studies were recruited

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[1] There were a small number of missing data (<3% of possible responses). To ensure that outcomes were not due to frivolous or non-committed responding, we excluded participants with missing data on any of the key measures.