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Examining the impact of system threat on evaluation of the poor

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This study investigated the impact of system justification motivations on evaluations of the poor. Using online experiments, we examined whether, under system-threat, people rate the association between the poor and causally related negative traits (e.g., lazy) more highly, and whether they also rate causally unrelated positive traits (e.g., honest) more highly as a form of compensation. In Study 1, we used explicit scales to measure these associations, while Study 2 employed implicit measures (Single Category-IAT). We also explored the effect of system-threat on perceived relative poverty rates. Both studies showed no impact of system-threat on evaluations of the poor and on perceived relative poverty rates. However, system justification tendency was associated with perceived relative poverty rates.

Keywords: system justification, system threat, blaming the poor, discourse of self-responsibility

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All procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Toyo University.

Introduction

Demanding personal responsibility, especially for socially disadvantaged group such as the poor, has become commonplace across the world today. For a long time since the post-war period, many philosophers, social scientists, and politicians have focused on structural issues rather than personal responsibility. However, with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the discourse on self-responsibility has intensified (Mounk, 2017). In Japan as well, there is a widespread acceptance of inequality based on self-responsibility, meaning a tendency to accept inequalities arising from individual choices and efforts across all social strata (Hashimoto, 2018). In this "age of responsibility" (Mounk, 2017), economically disadvantaged individuals are often blamed for their poverty, as it is considered to be their own fault. Some attribution studies have suggested that when economic hardship is perceived as stemming from individual fallings, it is considered unworthy of aid, resulting in insufficient public support for social welfare policies (Appelbaum, 2001; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Considering that people's attitudes have a strong influence on whether or not welfare policies are expanded (Brooks & Manza, 2006), it is necessary to clarify the mechanisms that amplify the condemnation of the poor.

The current study focuses on the system justification motivations, which can be influenced by situational factors. According to System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), individuals are inclined to accept and be motivated to maintain the existing social institutions and systems simply because they exist. The theory proposes that three types of needs—epistemic needs, existential needs, and relational needs—are crucial (Jost, 2020). Under system-threat situation where the system justification is challenged, the motivation to justify the system increases in accordance with these needs. The system justification motivation varies under the influence of not only dispositional factors but also situational factors (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Previous research has shown that when presented with information that threatens system legitimacy, individuals become motivated to justify the system and alter their perceptions accordingly. For example, when exposed to system-threat, people show a greater preference for domestic products (Cutright et al., 2011), express romantic interest towards women who align with benevolent stereotypes (Lau et al., 2008), and high-status group members exhibit ingroup favoritism, while low-status group members show outgroup favoritism (Jost et al., 2005).

It has been shown that system-threat also affects the perception of merit attribution. Presenting information suggesting that meritocracy leads to negative outcomes increases system justification motivation, which in turn enhances preference for meritocracy (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). This suggests that under system-threat, the tendency to attribute outcomes to individuals increases. In addition, individuals with a strong system justification tendency are more likely to evaluate poverty as being attributable to individual shortcomings and controllable (Osborne & Weiner, 2015). Although this study does not manipulate system-threat, it suggests that increasing system justification motivation may lead to an increase in the blame directed at the poor.

Furthermore, it has been shown that system-threat increases a tendency for victim derogation (Kay et al., 2005). In Experiment 1 by Kay et al. (2005), participants were divided into a high-threat group (threat high) and a low-threat group (threat low). The participants in the high-threat group were presented with a negative article about economic and political issues, while the ones in the low-threat group received a positive article. Participants were then asked to evaluate the association between the obesity and a negative trait (laziness). The results showed that the high-threat group rated this association more highly. This system-threat intensifies the tendency to blame individuals.

Victim derogation is used as a means to maintain system justification, but not only that—victim enhancement, as a complementary stereotype, also plays a role in sustaining system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003). In fact, Kay et al. (2005) simultaneously demonstrated that the perceived association between the obesity and a positive trait seen as causally not related (sociability) increased in system-threat situations as a form of compensation for derogation. The results suggest that when the current system justification is threatened, individuals strengthen their perceptions of the association between the target and negative traits seen as causally related, leading to victim derogation. Simultaneously, as a form of compensation, they also increase their perceptions of the association between the target and positive traits seen as causally not related, leading to victim enhancement.

In the current study, following Kay et al. (2005), we aim to clarify the relationship between system-threat and blaming of the poor. Specifically, we investigate whether system-threat lead to an increased perception of the association between the poor and causally related negative traits. Furthermore, we examine whether, as a form of compensation, the perceived association between the poor and causally unrelated positive traits is also strengthened.

Additionally, it is plausible that system-threat affects perceived relative poverty rates. Individuals who justify the economic system tend to perceive wealth redistribution as being fairly implemented and economic inequalities as smaller, leading to lower support for redistributive policies (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017). Based on this, it can be predicted that when system justification motivations are heightened by system-threat, people may underestimate the proportion of those living in relative poverty within the society. The relative poverty rate refers to the ratio of the population whose income falls below the poverty line, which is defined as half of the median household income of the total population (OECD, 2021). Both the United States and Japan have high relative poverty rates among OECD member countries, with over 15% of the population falling into this category (OECD, 2021). Since individuals in relative poverty face material hardships, active wealth redistribution is necessary to alleviate these difficulties. However, if the extent of relative poverty is underestimated due to system-threat, it could hinder the effective implementation of redistributive policies. Therefore, this study also explores the

impact of system-threat on the perceived relative poverty rates.

Specifically, we test the following hypotheses.

H1: The high threat manipulation group rates the association between the poor and negative traits seen as causally related more strongly than the low threat manipulation group.

H2: The high threat manipulation group rates the association between the poor and positive traits seen as causally not related more strongly than the low threat manipulation group.

H3: The high threat manipulation group estimates lower relative poverty rates than the low threat manipulation group.

Although this study is concerned with the blaming of the poor within the discourse on self-responsibility, it does not measure the attribution of responsibility or blame as dependent variables. However, since an increase in the association between poverty and causally related traits is considered nearly synonymous with attributing poverty to the individuals themselves, we conducted based on the method by Kay et al. (2005).

Study 1

Methods

Transparency and Openness

Sample size, procedures, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered. The preregistration, data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/zm6e5/.

Participants

In Experiment 1 of Kay et al. (2005), differences in effect sizes were observed depending on the evaluation targets and the traits being evaluated[1]. Therefore, we determined that it would be difficult to directly apply the effect size from Kay et al. (2005) in designing the sample size for the present study. Given that the effect size of system-threat on evaluations of the poor is unknown, we assumed a moderate effect size ($d = 0.5$) with $\alpha = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.95$. Using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for sample size calculation, we determined that 210 participants were required. To account for potential attrition, we aimed to recruit up to 250 participants. A total of 250 participants who took part in our online survey were recruited from CrowdWorks, Inc, a Japanese crowdsourcing company. Participants were paid 30 yen for completing the survey, which took approximately 10 minutes. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years old, holding Japanese citizenship, and having Japanese as their native language. Among the original sample of 250 participants, twenty-two participants who gave incorrect answer to the following article comprehension check item were excluded. Data analysis was conducted on responses from the remaining 228 participants (116 women, 111 men, and 1 other). Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 72 years ($M = 41.89$, $SD = 9.77$).

Procedure

Participants first randomly read one of two summaries of web news articles. Afterward, they completed questions measuring evaluations of the poor, perceived relative poverty rates and other related variables. Finally, participants completed demographic measures.

System-threat manipulations

System-threat was manipulated by changing the content of articles about the "state of Japanese society" presented to participants. Participants were asked to read the articles carefully and memorize their contents to answer questions about them during the session. The manipulation was based on Kay et al. (2005). In the high-system-threat condition, participants read a critical article about the state of Japanese society (see Appendix A), while in the low-system-threat condition, they read a favorable article about the state of Japanese society (see Appendix B).

Measurement items

Participants first responded to the article comprehension check item by indicating whether the statement "According to the article, Japan has the fourth largest economy in the world" was "*True*" or "*False*". Participants who checked "*True*" were excluded from data analysis. Next, they were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed various traits were typical of the poor. Specifically, they rated traits such as "lazy (怠惰な)", "sloppy (だらしない)", "unhealth lifestyle (不摂生な)", "uneducated (教養がない)", "incompetent (無能な)", "ignorant (無知な)", "honest (正直な)", "obedient (素直な)", "kind (優しい)", "optimistic (楽天的な)", "unique (個性的な)" and "innocent (無邪気な)" on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic of the poor*, 7 = *extremely characteristic of the poor*). To measure the perceived relative poverty rates, participants were first provided with the definition of relative poverty and then they were asked to rate the current relative poverty rates in Japan using a slider scale ranging from 0% to 50%. As part of the threat manipulation check, they were asked to rate "To what extent did the article you viewed assert criticism of Japan's social system?" on a scale from 1 (*not critical at all*) to 7 (*very critical*). They then indicated the extent to which they agreed with the content of the articles presented on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Following this, participants responded to the Japanese version of the General System Justification Scale (JG-SJS; Murayama et al., 2023). As part of the unsupportiveness of the current policies, they rated the statement "To what extent do you think current government policies are wrong?" on a scale from 1 (*I don't agree at all*) to 7 (*I*

[1] The effect size of the association between the obesity and laziness was $d = 0.644$, and between the obesity and sociability, it was $d = 0.470$. Additionally, the effect size of the association between the power and independence/intelligence was $d = 0.561$, and between the power and happiness, it was $d = 0.588$. In calculating effect size d, there was no information provided on the number of participants in the high-system threat and low-system threat groups in Experiment 1 of Kay et al. (2005). Therefore, we assumed that the total of 56 participants were evenly distributed across the two groups for the calculation.

agree very much). Additionally, they indicated their political ideology on a scale from 0 (*liberal*) to 10 (*conservative*) and specified their supported political parties. Finally, they completed demographic information including gender, age, household income, and subjective socioeconomic status (SES).

Results

Manipulation Check

A Welch's *t*-test revealed a significant difference based on perceived threat ($t(225.68) = 25.96$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.43$, 95% CI [3.58, 4.17]). Participants in the high-system-threat condition perceived the article as more critical of the social system ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.10$) than those in the low-system-threat condition ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.16$). The results indicated that the manipulation was successful.

Traits evaluation and perceived relative poverty rates

Before testing hypotheses 1 and 2, traits were grouped into scales. The traits "lazy", "sloppy" and "unhealth lifestyle" were combined into a scale measuring negative attitude (α = .81). "uneducated", "incompetent", and "ignorant" were combined into a scale measuring incompetence (α = .87). "honest", "obedient" and "kind" were combined into a scale measuring positive attitude (α = .84). Finally, "optimistic", "unique" and "innocent" were combined into a scale measuring neutrality (α = .70). To test all hypotheses, we compared the mean values between the high-system-threat and the low-system-threat condition. The results showed no significant differences between the conditions on negative attitude, incompetence, positive attitude, and the perceived relative poverty rates (Table 1). We explored the differences between conditions for neutrality and JG-SJS but found no significant difference.

Exploratorily, we regressed the perceived relative poverty rates on the threat manipulation, JG-SJS, and the interaction between the threat manipulation and JG-SJS. The results showed that only the main effect of JG-SJS was significant (β = −.24, $p = .001$), and this remained significant even after controlling for disapproval of current policies, political ideology, support for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), gender, age, household

Table 1. Effects of threat manipulation in Study 1

Variables	Condition		*t*	*p*	*d*	95%CI
	Low-threat	High-threat				
Negative attitude	4.46 (1.30)	4.62 (1.18)	$t(224.68) = 1.02$	.310	0.13	[−0.16, 0.49]
Incompetent	4.55 (1.23)	4.63 (1.21)	$t(226.00) = 0.53$	.593	0.07	[−0.23, 0.40]
Positive attitude	3.43 (1.10)	3.58 (1.05)	$t(225.89) = 1.05$	.295	0.14	[−0.13, 0.43]
Neutrality	3.34 (1.03)	3.54 (1.00)	$t(225.96) = 1.43$	.155	0.19	[−0.07, 0.46]
Perceived relative poverty rate	22.57 (9.78)	23.86 (10.73)	$t(223.28) = 0.94$	.346	0.12	[−1.39, 3.96]
JG-SJS	3.96 (1.24)	3.66 (1.21)	$t(225.97) = 1.87$	.063	0.25	[−0.02, 0.62]

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis on the perceived poverty rate in Study 1

Variables	Step 1	Step 2				
	β	*β*	*CI_lower*	*CI_upper*	*t*	*p*
Threat manipulation	.04	.05	−0.09	0.19	0.71	.479
JG-SJS	−.24 **	−.24 *	−0.43	−0.06	−2.58	.011
Threat manipulation × JG-SJS	.04	.06	−0.09	0.20	0.76	.445
Disapproval of current policies		−.02	−0.20	0.16	−0.24	.809
Political ideology		.01	−0.14	0.16	0.12	.902
Support for the LDP		.10	−0.06	0.25	1.23	.222
Gender		−.03	−0.17	0.12	−0.35	.723
Age		.07	−0.07	0.21	0.94	.350
Household income		−0.5	−0.23	0.13	−0.54	.589
Subjective SES		−.21 *	−0.39	−0.04	−2.38	.018
Threat manipulation × Political ideology		.04	−0.10	0.19	0.55	.581
R^2	.06 **	.13 **				

*** p < .01, * p < .05*

income, subjective SES, and the interaction between the threat manipulation and political ideology (β = −.24, p = .011, Table 2).

Discussion

As the results showed no significant effect of the system-threat manipulation on negative and positive evaluations of the poor, neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2 was supported. Additionally, as there was no significant difference in the perceived relative poverty rates between the conditions, Hypothesis 3 was also not supported.

It is possible that social desirability influences the evaluations of the poor, making it difficult to exclude this influence with explicit measures. Therefore, in Study 2, we conducted the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) to measure implicit evaluations.

Study 2

We conducted the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure implicit evaluations. In study 2, we used the Single Category IAT (SC-IAT; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006) because it was difficult to set a counterpart target for the evaluation of the poor. Since a SC-IAT cannot simultaneously test Hypotheses 1 and 2, Study 2 tested only Hypotheses 1 and 3.

Methods

Transparency and Openness

Sample size, procedures, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered. The preregistration, data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/d682x/.

Participants

As in Study 1, we aimed to recruit up to 250 participants. A total of 248 participants who took part in our online survey were recruited from Lancers, Inc, a Japanese crowdsourcing company. Participants were paid 30 yen for answering the survey, which took approximately 10 minutes. The eligibility criteria for participation in the experiment were the same as in Study 1. Among the original sample of 248 participants, eighteen who gave incorrect answers to the article comprehension check item were excluded. Responses from the remaining 230 participants were used for data analysis (75 women, 150 men, and 5 others). Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 69 years (M = 45.12, SD = 9.81).

Materials and Procedures

The procedure for Study 2 was similar to that of Study 1, with two changes. First, we conducted the SC-IAT instead of explicit measures. After reading the same system-threat articles as in Study 1, participants completed an SC-IAT using six words in each category, categorized by "The poor", "Good", and "Bad". The six words for "The poor" were "the poor (貧困者)", "the impoverished (困窮者)", "the low-income (低所得者)", "the underclass (底辺層)", "the destitute (極貧者)", and "the lower-class (下層民)". The six words for "Good" were "diligent (勤勉な)", "tidy (きちんとした)", "temperate (節制された)", "educated (学がある)", "competent (優秀な)", and "knowledgeable (知識豊富な)". The six words for "Bad" were "lazy", "sloppy", "unhealth lifestyle", "uneducated", "incompetent", and "ignorant", utilizing the traits employed in Study 1. Then, they responded to the same questionnaire items as Study 1, except for how to answer the relative poverty rates. In the experimental platform used in Study 2, it was not possible to set a slider-type response format. Therefore, participants filled in the blank with the percentage of relative poverty.

Results

Manipulation Check

A Welch's t-test revealed a significant difference based on perceived threat (t(216.82) = 21.45, p < .001, d = 2.81, 95% CI [3.32, 4.00]). Participants in the high-system-threat condition perceived the article as more critical of the social system (M = 5.80, SD = 1.13) than those of the low-system-threat condition (M = 2.14, SD = 1.46). The results indicated that the manipulation was successful as in Study1.

Traits evaluation and perceived relative poverty rates

The calculation of D-scores followed the method of Karpinski & Steinman (2006), except for the exclusion of trials based on prolonged response times. Responses longer than 4,000 ms were eliminated. To test hypotheses 1 and 3, we compared the mean values between the high- and the low-system-threat condition as in Study 1. The results showed there was no significant difference between the conditions on D-score and the perceived relative poverty rates (Table 3). We explored the differences between conditions for JG-SJS but found no significant difference.

As in Study1, we conducted a multiple regression analysis on the perceived relative poverty rates. Although a significant main effect of JG-SJS was observed (β = −.20, p = .004), this effect was diminished by the inclusion of the same control variables as in Study 1 (β = −.19, p = .057, Table. 4). Only age showed a significant effect (β = .23, p = .002).

Discussion

As in Study 1, there was no significant impact of the system-threat manipulation on implicit negative evaluations of the poor, thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Similarly, there was no significant difference in the perceived relative poverty rates between threat conditions, so Hypothesis 3 was also not supported. Unlike Study 1, the effect of JG-SJS on the perceived relative poverty rates was no longer significant after adding the control variables. Additionally, age showed a significant effect: the older the individuals, the higher they perceived the relative poverty rates. In Study 2, subjective SES had no significant effect on the perceived relative poverty rates.

Table 3. Effects of threat manipulation in Study 2

Variables	Condition		*t*	*p*	*d*	95%CI
	Low-threat	High-threat				
D-score	0.555 (0.313)	0.548 (0.313)	$t(221.70) = 0.17$	.865	0.02	[−0.075, 0.090]
Perceived relative poverty rate	26.18 (14.14)	27.89 (14.62)	$t(227.70) = 0.90$	.368	0.12	[−2.03, 5.45]
JG-SJS	3.56 (1.23)	3.72 (1.28)	$t(227.74) = 0.99$	.321	0.13	[−0.16, 0.49]

Table 4. Multiple regression analysis on the perceived poverty rate in Study 2

Variables	Step 1	Step 2				
	β	*β*	*CI_lower*	*CI_upper*	*t*	*p*
Threat manipulation	.06	.05	−0.09	0.19	0.71	.476
JG-SJS	−.20 **	−.19	−0.39	0.01	−1.91	.057
Threat manipulation × JG-SJS	.09	.12	−0.03	0.27	1.62	.108
Disapproval of current policies		−.01	−0.21	0.18	−0.15	.880
Political ideology		−.11	−0.26	0.04	−1.48	.140
Support for the LDP		.06	−0.09	0.20	0.81	.418
Gender		.04	−0.10	0.18	0.61	.544
Age		.23 **	0.09	0.37	3.17	.002
Household income		.08	−0.11	0.27	0.81	.417
Subjective SES		−.05	−0.24	0.14	−0.52	.605
Threat manipulation × Political ideology		−0.6	−0.21	0.09	−0.80	.427
R^2	.05 *	.11 **				

*** p < .01, * p < .05*

General Discussion

This study aimed to clarify the relationship between system-threat and the blame directed at the poor by conducting two studies. In Study 1, we followed the method of Kay & Jost (2005) to investigate the impact of system-threat on the explicit causal association of negative traits to the poor. Study 2 used the SC-IAT to examine the effect of system-threat on the implicit associations between the poor and negative traits. Both studies also explored the impact of system-threat on the perceived relative poverty rates. Across the two studies, the association between system-threat manipulation and evaluations of the poor was not observed in either explicit or implicit measures, and the influence on the perceived relative poverty rates was consistently not demonstrated.

First, we discuss the results related to the evaluations of the poor. Four possible reasons for the lack of support for the hypothesis 1 and 2 can be proposed. First, it is possible that evaluations of the poor remain stable regardless of system-threat. According to the results of Study 1, the poor were evaluated as having a stronger causal relationship with negative attitudes ($t(227) = 10.65$, $d = 0.89$, $p < .001$) and incompetent ($t(227) = 11.11$, $d = 0.94$, $p < .001$) than with positive traits. Additionally, D-score in Study 2 was significantly greater than zero ($t(223) = 26.44$, $d = 1.77$, $p < .001$). Generally, the poor were perceived as lazier, stupider, and less kind compared to the middle-class (Cozzarelli et al., 2001) and were also viewed as incompetent and cold (Fiske et al., 2002). Such stable impressions of the poor as lazy, incompetent, and unpleasant might explain why there were no differences between conditions in the system-threat manipulation. This is also supported by the consistent lack of correlation between JG-SJS and evaluations of the poor across the two studies. Therefore, the results suggest that there may be stable images of the poor regardless of the tendency to justify the system.

Second, there may have been issues with the system-threat manipulation used in this study. We measured the extent to which the presented articles criticized the social system as the threat manipulation check. In both studies, participants in the high-threat group perceived the articles as more critical of the social system than those in the low-threat group, suggesting that the system-threat manipulation was successful. However, in an exploratory analysis of agreement with the articles, Study 1 found that the high-threat group ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.38$) had higher agreement than the low-threat group ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.29$), and the difference was statistically significant ($t(224.49) = 4.90$, $d = 0.65$, $p < .001$). In contrast, Study 2 found the opposite: the low-threat group ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.80$) had higher agreement than the high-threat group ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.44$), and the difference was also statistically significant ($t(210.92) = 2.15$, $d = 0.29$, $p = .033$). According to System Justification Theory, when the current system is criticized or threatened, there is a motivation to enhance the legitimacy of the system, leading to denial or downplaying of the system's flaws (Jost, 2020). Therefore, it would be expected that agreement with the article would either not differ between threat conditions or be lower in the high-threat group. Since the

articles did not yield consistent results regarding agreement, it is possible that the level of threat provided as the manipulation was not sufficient.

Third, cultural and temporal factors may play a role. Research on System Justification Theory in Japan has shown that women who justify the gender system report higher life satisfaction compared to those who do not (Morinaga et al., 2022), and those with stronger system justification tendencies are more likely to support the Liberal Democratic Party, a conservative political party (Nakagoshi & Inamasu, 2023), suggesting that System Justification Theory can be applied in the Japanese context as well. However, Murayama et al. (2023) examined the impact of healthcare system-threat manipulations on healthcare system justification and general system justification but found no effect, indicating that system-threat manipulations may have less influence in Japan. According to *World Happiness Report 2024*, Japan ranks 51st in happiness, the lowest among the Group of Seven (G7) countries, with significantly lower happiness levels compared to the United States, which ranks 23rd (Helliwell et al., 2024). Additionally, in recent years, Japan has been surpassed by Germany in nominal GDP, dropping to fourth place globally, and when compared to the United States, which continues to hold the top position, Japan cannot be considered economically stable. Considering these circumstances, it is plausible that Japanese people may perceive their social and economic systems as less legitimate and stable than Americans do, and thus may be chronically exposed to a certain level of system-threat. This chronic exposure to system-threat might explain why reading critical articles about Japan did not heighten system justification motivations. Moreover, in addition to cultural factors, temporal factors may also influence the results. Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, people's lives have drastically changed, and society has become more unstable. This heightened instability following the pandemic may have contributed to the lack of increased system justification motivations, even when system-threat manipulations were employed. Future studies could explore the role of cultural factors by replicating system-threat manipulation studies in East Asia, where cultural backgrounds differ from the United States, and examine temporal factors by conducting replication studies in the current United States.

Finally, a fourth possibility is the attenuation of effect sizes in online experiments. It has been shown that effect sizes tend to decrease in online replications compared to original face-to-face experiments (Eben et al., 2022). Thus, unlike the face-to-face experiment conducted by Kay et al. (2005), the results of the present study may be due to the use of online experiments. Online experiments are known to include a certain proportion of inattentive responders, and failing to adequately exclude such participants can reduce the quality of the experiments (Fleischer et al., 2015). Although the attention check was included to assess the system-threat manipulation, it cannot be definitively stated that all inattentive responders were removed. To increase the generalizability of the present findings, it will be necessary to conduct face-to-face studies in addition to online experiments in future research (Anderson et al., 2019).

Next, we discuss the perceived relative poverty rates. In the exploratory multiple regression analysis in Study 1, JG-SJS showed a significant negative effect on the perceived relative poverty rates, and this effect remained even when controlling for demographic variables. This indicates that as system justification increases, the relative poverty rates are estimated to be lower. Apart from JG-SJS, subjective SES also demonstrated a negative impact on relative poverty rates, showing that higher subjective SES is associated with lower estimates of the relative poverty rates. In Study 2, JG-SJS also showed a negative effect similar to Study 1, but this effect diminished when control variables were included. Unlike Study 1, the influence of subjective SES was not observed, and only gender showed a significant positive effect, with males tending to estimate relative poverty rates higher than females. While the effect of JG-SJS on relative poverty rates diminished to a trend after controlling for demographic variables in Study 2, across both studies, the results suggest that system justification motivations lead to underestimation of the relative poverty rates.

On the other hand, there was no significant difference in the perceived relative poverty rates between the system-threat manipulation conditions. The lack of support for Hypothesis 3 may be attributed to issues with the system-threat manipulation, similar to those observed with evaluations of the poor. Another potential reason is the difficulty in assessing relative poverty rates. In both studies, the perceived relative poverty rates ($M_{study1} = 23.27$, $SD_{study1} = 10.17$; $M_{study2} = 27.07$, $SD_{study2} = 14.38$) were considerably higher than the actual rate of 15.4% (OECD, 2021). Some participants in Study 2 even rated it as 60%, a value that is not attainable by definition. People often subjectively perceive the extent of inequality based on information from their surroundings and media rather than numerical or statistical recognition (Phillips et al., 2020). Thus, assessing a statistical figure like "half the median household income" may have been unfamiliar and challenging for participants. This may be related to the observation that the relationship between system justification tendencies and the perceived relative poverty rates showed some discrepancies between Study 1 and Study 2.

We now turn to the academic contributions of the present study. This study conducted a conceptual replication of Experiment 1 by Kay et al. (2005). Specifically, we examined the effects of system-threat on evaluations of the poor. The results did not replicate those of Kay et al. (2005). This suggests that the effects of the system-threat manipulation may be influenced by the evaluation target, along with cultural, temporal, and experimental design factors. Furthermore, this study extended the investigation beyond explicit measures to include implicit attitudes. It has been suggested that socially undesirable attitudes, such as negative attitudes, are more susceptible to social desirability bias, and explicit and implicit attitudes may influence behavior in different ways (Dovidio et al., 2002). Although effects of system-threat on implicit attitudes were not observed in this study, the novelty and academic significance lie in the exploration of whether system-threat extends to implicit attitudes. However, it should be noted that implicit attitudes measured by the IAT have been shown to have a weak correlation with both explicit attitudes and behavioral measures (Oswald et al., 2013). Therefore, caution is required when interpreting the measurement of implicit attitudes. In addition, we exploratorily

examined the effects of system justification tendencies on the perceived poverty rates. The results suggested that higher levels of system justification are associated with a tendency to underestimate the proportion of the poor in society. Considering the tendency for individuals who justify the economic system to underestimate economic inequality and oppose wealth redistribution policies (Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017), the present findings suggest that system justification may obscure the presence of the poor, potentially undermining sufficient redistributive policies.

In conclusion, our results indicate that system-threat did not affect evaluations of the poor or perceptions of the relative poverty rates. However, this does not imply that system justification motivations are unrelated to the tendency to blame the poor or to underestimate their proportion. This study suggests that there is room for improvement in threat manipulations and in measuring perceptions of poverty rates, and it also indicates potential influences of cultural and temporal factors, requiring further investigation. In an era where economic inequality is widening and the attribution of economic hardship to individuals is intensifying, clarifying the mechanisms that amplify the blame directed at the poor could contribute to the realization of a more inclusive society.

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Appendix

Appendix A

High-system-threat article

"Japan is stuck in the past."

For a long time, Japan has been recognized as the world's third-largest economy and a peaceful and prosperous country. In the past, the United States and Europe were wary of Japan's rising power. However, the anticipated Japan ultimately did not materialize. Instead, Japan has emerged with problems such as declining birthrates and an aging population, and Japan is at a standstill.

Japan has been seen as a hybrid society that blends old and modern values, but Japan's modernity is ultimately hollow. Despite the age of diversity, Japan remains exclusive towards foreigners. It stubbornly refuses to accept immigrants despite declining birth rates, harboring suspicion and fear towards the outside world.

The number of youth suicides has not decreased at all since before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the number of suicides among elementary, junior high, and high school students reached a record high of 514, an increase of 41 from the previous year. Japan is the only developed country where suicide is the leading cause of death among young people.

The number of Japanese people moving abroad is increasing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the current number of Japanese permanent residents abroad is approximately 557,000, the highest ever recorded. Japanese society is filled with a sense of stagnation.

Will Japan fade away into an insignificant existence? The elements that once made Japan special may already be lost.

Appendix B

Low-system-threat article

"Japan has also learned from the past."

For a long time, Japan has maintained the world's third-largest economy, demonstrating its presence as a peaceful and prosperous nation. Responding to the expectations of the United States and Europe, Japan has promoted transformation towards the future, and these efforts have borne fruit, establishing international trust. While addressing the challenges of declining birthrates and an aging population, Japan is also progressing towards new directions.

Japan has built a hybrid society that blends old and modern values. The harmony between tradition and a future-oriented mindset continues to underscore Japan's presence in the international community. Its stance on embracing diversity and promoting international cooperation is garnering global attention.

Efforts are being made across society to improve the mental and physical care of young people. With a deeper understanding of mental and physical health and the development of support systems, a brighter future awaits.

The number of Japanese people moving abroad is increasing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the current number of Japanese permanent residents abroad is approximately 557,000, the highest ever recorded. As the number of global talents increases, Japan is building a more vibrant society.

We believe that Japan's future will be brilliant through challenge and transformation. Japan's unique values and culture will play a pivotal role, making Japan an even more significant presence in the world.

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