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Published online: 05 Dec 2023.

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ABSTRACT

Research on distributive justice has shown that people's judgments on how to distribute resources justly are shaped by various criteria including equity, need, equality, and prior ownership. Yet, an important question remains open: do people's judgments about justice take the power of the actors under consideration? In other words, to people deem the powerful to deserve a larger share even when their contribution, need, and prior ownership are equal? The paper addresses this question. Online, participants had to judge the just distribution of resources among actors who were equal in all respects except regarding power. Results revealed that a substantial proportion of participants believed that more powerful actors deserved more resources, an effect referred to as *power justification*. The effect was related with social dominance orientation (SDO), indicating that high-SDO participants manifested enhanced power justification. These results were replicated in three countries, suggesting that, although cultural differences are possibly important, in most societies power justification might be a criterion advocated by some people in certain occasions. These findings can inspire research about important domains where judgments about justice and power are at play, such as about how juries deliberate and about how public opinion reacts to international conflicts.

1. Introduction

What is justice? This question has not only fostered endless debate among intellectuals, but also within the lay folk. In the Western tradition, one of the earliest glimpses on what common people think about justice is Plato's *Republic* (1943). In this dialogue, the philosopher Socrates encourages fellows of various age, status, and inclination, to come up with a definition of justice. The picture that emerges is one of fierce disagreement among the participants to the discussion. Jumping forward to the modern world, after

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World War II social scientists have employed empirical research to probe what people think about justice (Leventhal, 1980; Tyler et al., 2019). This research has shown that judgments about distributive justice, that is, about how resources should be distributed among individuals, are often guided by three criteria. The first is equity, prescribing that an output should be distributed proportionally to the input (e.g., effort, capital, or labor) put by each person to produce the output (Adams, 1963, 1965; Adams & Freedman, 1976; Homans, 1961; Leventhal, 1980; Pritchard, 1969). Second, people's judgments often take need into consideration, that is, they assess how much each person necessitates the resources at hand (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983, Deutsch, 1975; Folger et al., 1995; Leventhal, 1976). Third, judgments sometimes prescribe an equal distribution among actors (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983, Deutsch, 1975; Folger et al., 1995; Leventhal, 1976). In addition to these common criteria, research has identified other principles that are sometimes advocated, including commitment (requiring that people receive what they have been promised) (Leventhal, 1976; Lerner, 1980Lerner, 1980 Pruitt, 1971; Pruitt, 1972), legality (demanding adherence to existing laws and regulations) (Berkowitz & Walker, 1967; Kaufmann, 1970), ownership (discouraging dispossession of what is already owned) (Ihinger, 1975; Leventhal, 1976), and status (prescribing that, independent of any other factor, higher-status subjects should receive more) (Berger et al., 1972; Sampson, 1963, 1969).

Let us compare the description of distributive justice offered by modern social science against the one depicted by Plato. The former clarifies several aspects that are only sketched in the Republic, and it encompasses elements not covered therein. And yet, not all the positions expressed in the ancient text appear to be fully captured by modern scholarship. A remarkable case neglected by contemporary research is the opinion expressed by the sophist Thrasymachus, who defiantly declares in the Republic: "Listen, I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger". Few decades before the Republic was written, a similar opinion was notoriously expressed, according to the ancient historian Thucydides (1919), by Athenian leaders during the siege of Melos. Ever since, the idea that, to some extent, it is just that the strong exert their power over the weak, an idea I shall call *power justification*, has resurfaced among thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli (1993), Hobbes (2008), and Nietzsche (1998), as well as among modern realist political scientists – especially in the context of international relations (Mearsheimer, 2018; Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 2010). Is power justification confined to a restricted number of intellectuals, or is it shared also by a substantial number of people within the lay public? And how can this be investigated empirically? This paper attempts to address these questions.

To start with, this endeavor requires to come up with a definition of power which is appropriate in the context of distributive justice, the latter

being the focus of the paper. To date, various definitions of power have been proposed in the social science literature, but none appears to be tailored to the specific domain of distributive justice. With the aim of adapting the notion of power to this domain, I propose the following definition of power: in conditions where resources need to be distributed among various actors, the power of actor n corresponds to how much resources actor n can secure if the actors fail to agree and end up fighting over the resources. In other words, in this view the most powerful actors are those with the strength to grab the largest share of the pie in the event of a fight. This definition appears to fit within the context of distributive justice inasmuch as it captures an actor's capability to seize resources from others by employing force.

Armed with this definition of power, we can frame the question of power justification as follows: when judging whether an allocation of resources is fair, do people consider the power possessed by different actors? Put another way, do people think that some actors should receive more simply because they are more powerful, even if their input, need, status, or prior ownership are not superior? Looking at the ethical codes prevailing in the modern world such as those invoked by Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, one is tempted to predict that power justification is a rare occurrence among people. Considering Christianity as an example, here power is viewed as antithetic to justice; if anything, less powerful subjects are deemed to merit a larger share of the pie. Yet, the aforementioned philosophical narratives of Machiavelli (1993), Hobbes (2008), and Nietzsche (1998), echoed by some modern scholars (Mearsheimer, 2018; Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 1979), hint instead to the possibility that power justification might not be as rare after all. This paper aims at asking whether power justification can be observed in a substantial number of people within the general public and, if so, in which percentage.

Moreover, the paper asks which psychological characteristics predispose people to manifest power justification. The following dimensions were considered as potential candidates:

(1) Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), reflecting to what degree one believes that, in a just society, people should be hierarchically organized and receive unequal treatment (Ho et al., 2012, Pratto et al., 1994). Implicit in this definition is the assumption that people characterized by high SDO are inimical to equality and believe that people should be ranked based on some criteria. What are these criteria? This remains to be fully established by research. Here I consider the possibility that power justification might be one of these criteria, predicting a positive correlation between SDO and power justification.

(2) System justification, indicating whether one believes that the current socio-political system is fair (Jost, 2019, Jost & Banaji, 1994, Jost et al., 2004). A possibility is that, during everyday experience in their socio-political context, people commonly observe that powerful actors end up being favored at the expense of weaker ones. This state of affair might be legitimized by individuals scoring high on system justification, predicting that these individuals will manifest higher power justification.

(3) Self-enhancement, a key construct proposed by the Theory of Basic Human values, the latter being one of the most influential contributions on the topic of values (Schwartz, 1994, 2012). This theory posits that all human values are ultimately the expression of two high-order dimensions, one opposing self-enhancement versus self-transcendence, the other opposing openness to change versus conservation. Self-enhancement encompasses values related with promoting one's own power and self-interest, and it opposes self-transcendence, which comprises values concerning the well-being of others and of the planet. This raises the hypothesis that people who justify power also tend to value their own power and to disregard the well-being of others and of the planet, thus manifesting higher scores for self-enhancement versus self-transcendence. Concerning the other high-order axis, the one opposing openness to change (reflecting values promoting novelty seeking and freedom) versus conservation (emphasizing conformity with tradition and avoidance of danger), no particular hypothesis was envisaged regarding its relationship with power justification.

(4) Ideology, expressed on a left- to right-wing spectrum. Right-wing, more than left-wing, ideology welcomes asymmetries in wealth among citizens (Feldman, 2013). What are the criteria advocated by right-wing supporters to justify these asymmetries? Is power one of these criteria? If so, this predicts that right-wing supporters manifest enhanced power justification compared to left-wing supporters.

Finally, by comparing different countries, the paper asks to what extent power justification is a universal phenomenon. The paper addresses these questions in three empirical studies described below.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

Two-hundred participants were recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established a priori based

on an expected Spearman correlation equal to $r = .2$, statistical power equal to $\beta = 0.8$, and two-tailed type-I error probability equal to $\alpha = .05$. This requires a sample of 198 participants, which was rounded to 200. The pre-screening procedure employed by Prolific ensured that all participants were from the U.S.A.. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the UK University to which the author is affiliated. All data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/gjh86/.

2.2. Materials and procedure

To measure power justification in a way consistent with the definition proposed above, participants were presented with the following vignette:

"*Consider the following hypothetical scenario. During prehistory, family A and family B live next to each other and both subsist on agriculture. To improve the harvest, they have decided to cooperate in cultivating the field. At the end of the year, the output they jointly obtain is equal to 100 units. The question for you is: what is the just way to distribute the output between the two families? To make this judgement, consider the following information:*

(1) *the two families possess an equal amount of land, and they have jointly cultivated the total land*
(2) *the labour and equipment the two families have employed is equal*
(3) *the two families are equal in terms of wealth and status*
(4) *the two families have not yet discussed how to distribute the output*
(5) *in military terms, family A is much stronger than family B. If the two families had to fight over the output, family A would secure all 100 units for itself, while family B would get nothing*
(6) *The two families live in a society where there is no authority who has the legitimacy or power to intervene in settling conflict among families.*

Based on this information, please indicate how many output units are the just share for family A (please write a number between 0 and 100)"

Participants had to answer by typing a number – I refer to this variable as to Power Justification Score (PJS). In the vignette, the two families are equal in terms of input, wealth, and status, and have no previous agreement – all aspects encouraging a fifty-fifty split. The only difference concerns power as defined in this paper: family A can grab the entire pie if the families end up fighting over the resources. On this basis, the hypothesis that a substantial number of participants manifest power justification can be tested by assessing whether the median PJS across participants is larger than 50. If this is the case, it means that a substantial number of participants believe that it is just to grant more resources to family A because the latter is more powerful.

To assess the relationship between PJS and the psychological dimensions outlined above, the following questionnaires were administered:

- The $SDO_{7(S)}$ (Ho et al., 2012), quantifying SDO based on 8 items such as "It is unjust to try to make groups equal", with 7 options available ranging from "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly favour" (high $SDO_{7(S)}$ scores reflect high SDO).
- The System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003), quantifying system justification and including 8 items such as "In general, you find society to be fair", with seven options ranging from "I Completely disagree" to "I Completely agree" (high total scores indicate high system justification).
- The TwIVI (Sandy et al., 2016), a questionnaire assessing human values according to the theory of Basic Human values. Here participants are presented with 20 short portraits of individuals (e.g., "S/he likes to take risks. S/he is always looking for adventures."), and for each they rate on a scale from 1 ("not at all like me") to 6 ("very much like me") how similar or dissimilar they are to the person being portrayed. For scoring, items where mean-centered and were used to derive a Self-enhancement index (equal to items 7 + 8 + 9 + 17 + 18 + 19-3-4-13-14) and a Conservation index (equal to items 1 + 2 + 10 + 11 + 12 + 20-5-6-7-15-16-17).
- Ideology, quantified with an item asking "Generally, do you prefer more left-wing or right-wing opinions?", with options being"Left-wing", "Moderately left-wing", "Equal", "Moderately right-wing", "Right-wing".

The scenario and the questionnaires were filled online using Qualtrics. This took approximately 7 minutes and was rewarded with £.7.

2.3. Results

Descriptive statistics for interval variables are reported in Table 1 (regarding gender, the sample included 100 males, 93 females, and 7 non-binary participants). For statistical analyses, I first asked whether a substantial number of

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Study 1 (U.S.A.).

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	37.06	12.61	.895	.094
PJS	52.13	9.71	3.299	18.408
Ideology	2.35	1.22	.598	−.553
SDO	19.88	9.88	.654	−.151
System justification score	25.47	8.36	.151	−.286
Self-enhancement	−5.78	5.80	.384	.313
Conservation	−4.73	8.18	−.051	−.431
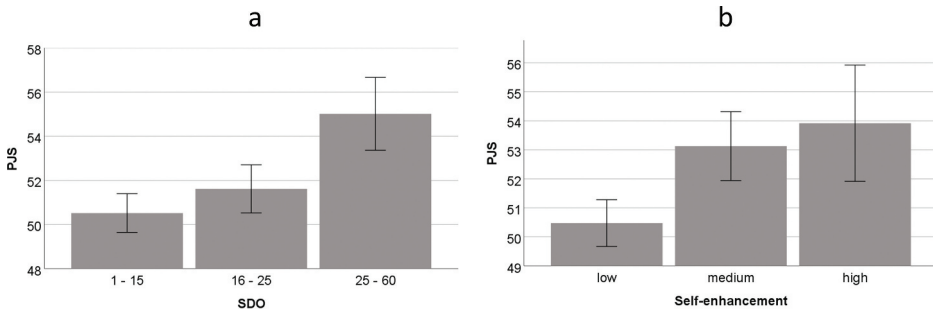
Figure 1. Study 1 (U.S.A.).

participants manifested power justification, that is, whether they reported a PJS higher than 50. Because PJS was not normally distributed, a one-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test was adopted, which was significant (mean = 52.14, 95% CI [50.78, 53.49]; $t = 256.5$, $z = 3.647$, $p < .001$; $r = .26$; two-tailed $\alpha = .05$ is adopted for all tests in the paper). This shows that a statistically significant portion of participants (21 out of 200, corresponding to 12% of the total) opted for granting higher reward to the most powerful family.

Next, adopting again a non-parametric approach (in this case, Spearman correlation), I probed the relationship between PJS and other psychological dimensions. A positive relationship emerged for SDO (Figure 1a; $r(198) = .218$, $p = .002$; 95%CI [.080, .348]) and Self-enhancement (Figure 1b; $r(198) = .143$, $p = .043$; 95%CI [.004, .277]), but no correlation emerged for ideology ($r(198) = .114$, $p = .109$; 95%CI [−.026, .249]), System Justification scale ($r(198) = .072$, $p = .308$; 95%CI [−.068, .209]), and Conservation ($r(198) = .076$, $p = .287$; 95%CI [−.064, .213]).

How general are these findings? To address this question, I aimed at replicating the study in a different country. Ideally, the more different the new country is from the U.S.A., the more insight can be gained about whether the findings are general. This however needs to be balanced out with the fact that Prolific, the platform employed for recruitment, covers only a minority of countries (primarily in the West) with a sufficient pool of participants. Based on this reasoning, Mexico was chosen as being the focus of Study 2. Mexico is well represented in Prolific and, despite the geographical proximity to the U.S.A., differs greatly from its northern neighbor in terms of wealth, society, and culture.

3. Study 2

3.1. Participants

Two-hundred participants were recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established adopting the same

criteria as in Study 1 (see above). The pre-screening procedure employed by Prolific ensured that all participants were from Mexico. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the UK University to which the author is affiliated. All data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/gjh86/.

3.2. Materials and procedure

The same vignette and questionnaires adopted in Study 1 were employed here too, and the same procedure was also followed (see above).

3.3. Results

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for interval variables (regarding gender, the sample included 96 males, 97 females, and 7 non-binary participants). With 20 out of 200 participants (10% of the total) choosing to grant higher reward to the most powerful family, the one-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test was once again significant (mean = 51.48, 95% CI [50.48, 52.47], $t = 250.5$, $z = 2.898$, $p = .004$; $r = .20$). Also in line with Study 1, Spearman correlation analyses showed that PJS was positively correlated with SDO (Figure 2a; r(198) = .188, $p = .008$; 95%CI [.049, .320]) and Self-enhancement (Figure 2b; r(198) = .168, $p = .017$; 95%CI [.029, .301]), but not correlated with ideology (r(198) = .119, $p = .093$; 95%CI [−.021, .254]), System Justification scale (r(198) = .065, $p = .360$; 95%CI [−.075, .202]), and Conservation (r(198) = .016, $p = .823$; 95%CI [−.123, .154]).

Altogether, Study 2 fully replicates Study 1. To probe further the generality of the results, I examined a third country in yet another study. In an attempt to maximize the difference from the previous countries (U.S.A. and Mexico) and, simultaneously, maximize coverage on Prolific, I chose to focus on South Africa.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for Study 2 (Mexico).

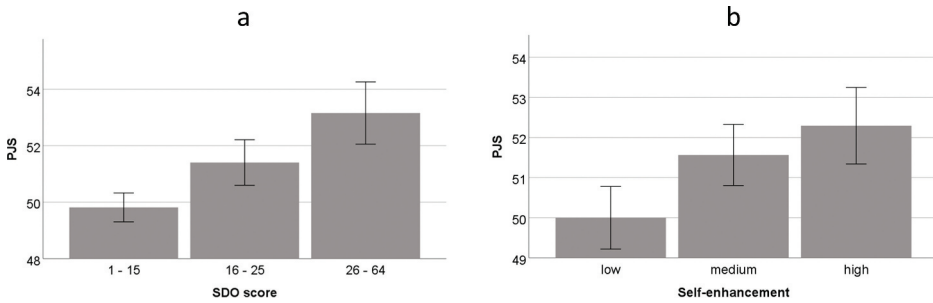|	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	27.23	6.80	1.902	.4297
PJS	51.48	7.10	3.875	23.890
Ideology	2.55	.99	.241	−.41
SDO	20.97	7.51	.243	−.744
System justification score	20.40	5.70	.287	−.075
Self-enhancement	−2.56	5.02	−.058	−.440
Conservation	−6.76	6.68	−.073	−.415

Figure 2. Study 2 (Mexico).

4. Study 3

4.1. Participants

Two-hundred participants were recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established adopting the same criteria as in Study 1 (see above). The pre-screening procedure employed by Prolific ensured that all participants were from South Africa. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the UK University to which the author is affiliated. All data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/gjh86/.

4.2. Materials and procedure

The same vignette and questionnaires adopted in Study 1 were employed here too, and the same procedure was also followed (see above).

5. Results

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics for interval variables (regarding gender, the sample included 100 males, 98 females, and 2 non-binary participants). Now, as many as 31 out of 200 participants (16% of the total) granted higher reward to the most powerful family, resulting in a significant one-sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test (mean = 53.67; 95%

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for Study 3 (South Africa).

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	27.63	7.49	2.197	7.075
PJS	53.67	14.86	1.434	5.903
Ideology	3.10	1.02	−.231	−.094
SDO	20.83	8.38	.391	−.316
System justification score	20.05	7.05	.651	.041
Self-enhancement	−5.09	5.67	.143	1.409
Conservation	−2.39	6.45	−.249	.418

CI [51.59, 55.74]; $t = 647$, z = 3.617, $p < .001$; $r = .26$). Spearman correlation analyses revealed once again a positive relationship between PJS and SDO (Figure 3a; r(198) = .248, $p < .001$; 95%CI [.111, .376]), but now no correlation between PJS and Self-enhancement emerged (Figure 3b; r (198) = .113, $p = .111$; 95%CI [−.027, .248]). PJS was not correlated with ideology (r(198) = .129, $p = .069$; 95%CI [−.011, .264]), System Justification scale (r(198) = .013, $p = .859$; 95%CI [−.126, .151]), and Conservation (r(198) = .005, $p = .940$; 95%CI [−.134, .144]).

At this point, I merged the data from Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3 for further investigation, obtaining a total sample of 600 participants (200 for each country). This allowed me to run additional analyses that clarified the effects at play. First, I ran Spearman correlations for the aggregated sample. These showed that PJS was positively related with SDO (Figure 4a; r(598) = .219, $p < .001$; 95%CI [.140, .295]), Self-enhancement (Figure 4b; r(598) = .120, $p = .003$; 95%CI [.040, .198]), and with ideology (Figure 4c; r(598) = .126, $p = .002$; 95%CI [.046, .204]). Note that, now that the countries are pooled together, a correlation concerning ideology emerges, suggesting that the lack of correlation observed when countries were considered one by one was due to insufficient statistical power. No correlation emerged when considering the relationship with System justification scale (r(598) = .043, $p = .297$; 95%CI [−.037, .123]) nor with Conservation r(598) = .043, $p = .292$; 95%CI [−.037, .123]).

Altogether, when countries are combined, PJS appears to be linked with SDO, Self-enhancement, and with ideology. To what extent do these variables contribute independently to predict PJS? To address this question, I dichotomized PJS and thus obtained PJS_D, which is equal to one when PJS > 50 and equal to zero otherwise. Next, I fitted a logistic regression model of PJS_D having SDO, Self-enhancement, and ideology as predictors. SDO alone was associated with a significant regression weight (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 17.15$, $p < .001$; exp(b) = 1.076, 95%CI [1.039, 1.114]), while Self-enhancement (Wald $\chi^2(1) = .52$, $p = .470$; exp(b) = 1.018, 95%CI [.970, 1.067]) and ideology (Wald $\chi^2(1) = .241$, $p = .624$; exp(b) = 1.067, 95%CI [.824, 1.380]) were
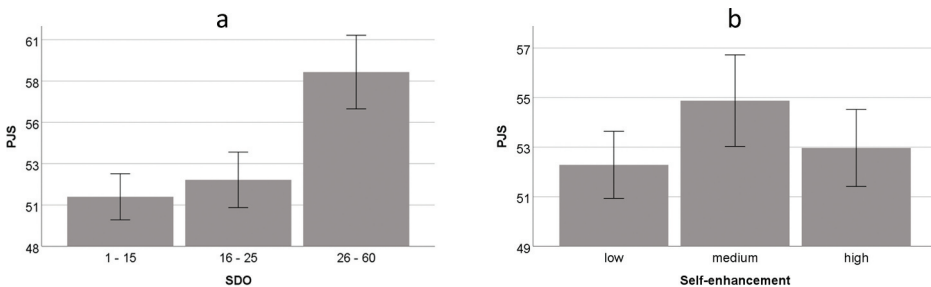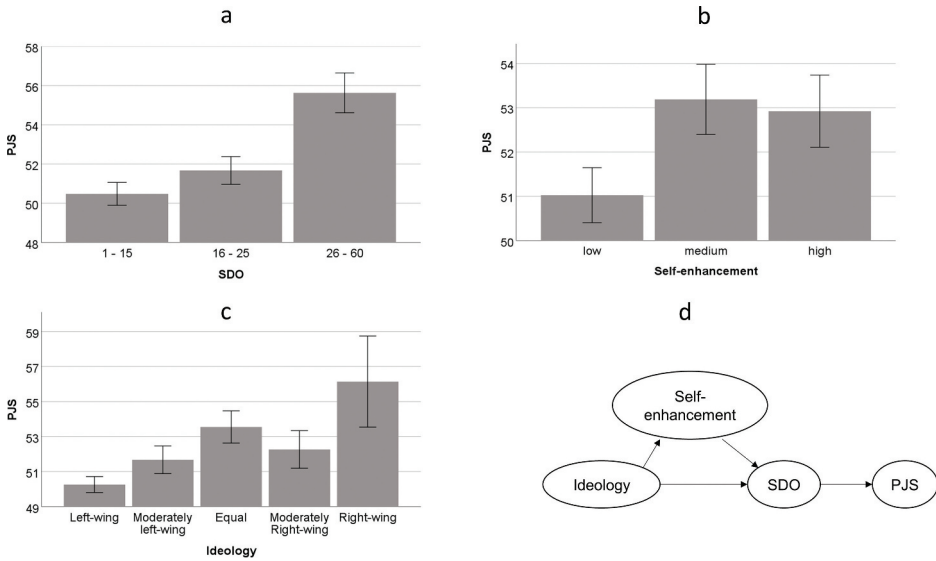

Figure 3. Study 3 (South Africa).

Figure 4. Pooled dataset.

not. This raises the possibility that SDO may mediate the effect of Self-enhancement and ideology upon PJS_D. I tested this running two mediation analyses (adopting non-parametric bootstrapping as required with binary dependent variables; Hayes, 2017). The first included PJS_D, Self-enhancement, and SDO as dependent variable, independent variable, and mediator, respectively. The path from Self-enhancement to SDO was significant (t(598) = 11.13, p < .001; b = .631, 95%CI [.520, .743]), the path from SDO to PJS_D was significant (z = 4.87, p < .001; b = .077, 95%CI [.046, .109]), the direct path from Self-enhancement to PJS_D was not significant (z = .69, p = .490; b = .017, 95%CI [−.031, .064]), and the indirect pathway from Self-enhancement to PJS_D via SDO was significant (Effect = .05, 95%CI [.0299, .0732]). The second mediation analysis included PJS_D, ideology, and SDO as dependent variable, independent variable, and mediator, respectively. The path from ideology to SDO was significant (t(598) = 12.98, p < .001; b = .3606, 95%CI [3.059, 4.152]), the path from SDO to PJS_D was significant (z = 4.69, p < .001; b = .078, 95%CI [.045, .111]), the direct path from ideology to PJS_D was not significant (z = .44, p = .659; b = .058, 95%CI [−.199, .314]), and the indirect pathway from ideology to PJS_D via SDO was significant (Effect = .2810, 95%CI [.1588, .4328]).

Overall, these mediation analyses indicate that the effect of Self-enhancement and ideology upon PJS_D is fully mediated by SDO. But do Self-enhancement and ideology contribute to predict SDO independently? To address this, I performed one last mediation analysis, comprising SDO, ideology, and Self-enhancement as dependent variable, independent

variable, and mediator, respectively. The path from ideology to Self-enhancement was significant (t(598) = 3.67, $p < .001$; b = .750, 95%CI [.349, 1.151]), the path from Self-enhancement to SDO was significant (t = 10.49, $p < .001$; b = .537, 95%CI [.437, .638]), the direct path from ideology to SDO was significant (z = 12.39, $p < .001$; b = 3.203, 95%CI [2.695, 3.711]), and the indirect pathway from ideology to SDO via Self-enhancement was significant (Effect = .4027, 95% CI [.1798 .6529]).

Altogether, the effects highlighted by the mediation analyses are summarized in Figure 4d. Here ideology influences Self-enhancement, both ideology and Self-enhancement impact upon SDO, and the latter, in turn, affects PJS_D.

I employed the pooled sample also for one last analysis that aimed at assessing whether PJS_D varies across countries independent of the effect of SDO. To test this, I coded the three countries by creating two dummy variables and included these together with SDO in a logistic regression model of PJS_D. While SDO had a significant effect (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 29.94$, $p < .001$; exp(b) = 1.085, 95%CI [1.054, 1.118]), the dummy variables did not (dummy 1: Wald $\chi^2(1) = 2.60$, $p = .107$; exp(b) = .603, 95%CI [.326, 1.116] dummy 2: Wald $\chi^2(1) = .01$, $p = .924$; exp(b) = 1.033, 95%CI [.530, 2.014]).

6. Discussion

Various anecdotes, some as old as the time of Plato and Thucydides, tell of people believing that it is just to advantage the powerful over the weak. Can these anecdotes be confirmed empirically? And if yes, how common is such power justification today? This paper addresses these questions showing that, for a substantial number of people across different countries, judgments about justice are sometimes grounded on power justification. The paper indicates that the propensity to justify power is more frequent in people reporting high levels of SDO, that is, in people expressing the opinion that equality is unwarranted and that society should be organized hierarchically. Although the data also indicate that power justification is more frequent in right-wing supporters and in people characterized by elevated self-enhancement, these effects ultimately appear to be mediated by the impact of SDO upon power justification. This picture emerges in countries as diverse as the U.S.A., Mexico, and South Africa, suggesting that, although cultural differences are possibly important, in most societies power justification might be a criterion advocated by some people in certain occasions.

In many conceptions of justice, the idea that power can be justified appears as a paradox (Johnston, 2011). After all, within these views, justice represents the very attempt to override power asymmetries and adopt

radically different criteria to distribute goods. Yet the idea that acknowledging the balance of power is just has been endorsed by some of the most influential thinkers in Western philosophy and scholarship. In the Renaissance, Machiavelli (1993) offered a disenchanted depiction of politics as being a realm driven by power dynamics, with rhetorical considerations about justice representing a pretext employed by rulers to increase their power. Along these lines, the early modern philosopher Hobbes (2008) posited that in a state of nature, that is, when no central authority capable of enforcing rules exists, human exchanges are justly regulated by considerations of relative power. At the end of the 19th Century, the German philosopher Nietzsche (1998) maintained that the prevailing justice systems of the age such as Judaism and Christianity were false principles advocated by the weak to restrain the strong; unveiling this truth was viewed by the philosopher as an important step toward endowing the strong with the natural right of exerting their will to power. The philosophical positions of Machiavelli, Hobbs, and Nietzsche raise interesting questions regarding the findings reported here. Do people manifesting power justification perceive themselves as living in a Hobbesian state of nature, where no higher authority exists who can enforce rules? Do these people believe, like Machiavelli did, that justice principles ultimately reflect the balance of power, and thus that justifying power is no different from advocating any other criterion? And, following Nietzsche, do they believe that other justice principles are an attempt made by the weak to curtail the true justice principle, the principle of power? Answering these questions represents an interesting research avenue.

Empirical evidence suggests that SDO is a central dimension in social psychology (Ho et al., 2012; Pratto et al., 1994, 2000). At the center of this construct is the idea that equality is unjustified and that social hierarchies are welcome. However, research on this construct has not fully clarified which criteria are advocated by high-SDO individuals to justify a hierarchical organization of society. For example, is hierarchy praised because it respects differences in status, input, or differences in prior ownership? This study suggests that differences in power are one of the factors adopted by high-SDO individuals to justify asymmetries in society. An interesting question for future research is how much, for high-SDO individuals, power is important relative to other criteria such as status, input, or prior ownership in establishing which hierarchical social structure is just.

The findings presented here also indicate that power justification is more common among right- compared to left-wing supporters, and among people reporting high self-enhancement (Schwartz, 1994, 2012). However, mediation analyses show that these factors do not exert a direct effect on power justification, but act via SDO. In as much as other factors influence

(or are influenced by) power justification via SDO, the role of SDO vis-à-vis power justification appears to be akin to that of a gateway.

At the outset, a link between system justification (Jost, 2019; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004) and power justification was predicted too. The construct of system justification is inspired by the literature on just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980), according to which people tend to view themselves and others as deserving the outcomes they have collected – implying that benefited people are viewed as meritorious while victims are appraised as blameworthy. Extending this idea to the social system at large, the construct of system justification describes people who view the current social arrangement as being just for the very reason that it is the one that actually exists. I initially hypothesized a positive correlation between system justification and power justification, based on the reasoning that, in their everyday experience, many people might often witness the powerful being advantaged over the weak. For high system justifier, this would imply an inclination toward justifying power. However, this prediction was disconfirmed by data showing no link between system justification and power justification. A possible explanation for a lack of relationship might be that, in the everyday life of the participants tested here, witnessing powerful individuals triumphing over the weak is not as common after all. However, another explanation might be that system justification is not much about justifying what really happens, but more about praising justice standards advocated by the dominant narrative. For instance, although episodes where the powerful take advantage of the weak might in fact be frequent, these might be framed within a narrative where the more meritorious, and not the more powerful, are justly rewarded. An example is when, in a dispute between managers and workers, the former secure a disproportionally large share of the profit because of their higher power (e.g., they are those who ultimately decide how to distribute the resources) but frame this as being due to their superior contribution. According to this possibility, people scoring high in system justification praise the justice standards prevailing in the system's narrative, independent of whether these standards are applied or not to real life.

The present findings are relevant to Relational Model Theory, a prominent framework examining the mental processes guiding human interactions (Fiske, 1992; Rai & Fiske, 2011). According to this view, four fundamental types of human interaction exist, each activating a specific mental model; these include communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing. When it is applied to explain distributive justice, Relational Model Theory implicates that each mental model evokes a specific set of distributive justice rules: for instance, market pricing would entail the prescription to distribute resources proportionally to merit (Rai & Fiske, 2011). Does the notion of power justification have any place within

this framework? It is evident that power justification is potentially relevant during contexts of authority ranking. Yet, power justification is only one among the possible responses elicited by authority ranking: this context may evoke different principles, such as the rule that high-status people should receive more even if they are less powerful, or even the rule of noblesse oblige, which endows lower-status people with the right to obtain larger shares. Thus, within Relational Model Theory, power justification can be viewed as being one among multiple distributive justice principles that can be triggered by authority ranking.

The findings emerged here are relevant for several societal domains. Take the domain of law. In the law courts of many countries, people from the general public participate to the jury. The rationale behind this procedure is that the community should have a say in legal deliberations by sorting some of its members as part of the jury. However, one potential problem is that each jury member has, at least to some degree, an idiosyncratic notion of what justice is (Bornstein & Greene, 2011). The observation that power justification drives judgment of some, but not all, people, highlights further risks of the problem. For example, by chance one jury might include a larger number of members inclined toward justifying power. Will this jury come up with a different sentence in comparison with juries where all members oppose power justification? If this is the case, the reliability of court sentences is in jeopardy. Shedding light on the implications of power justification within the legal domain appears to be an important research avenue.

Another domain to which the findings are relevant is the context of international relations. Here, some scholars embrace the view that, because in the international system a high order authority capable of enforcing rules is absent, state relationships are driven primarily by the balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2018; Morgenthau, 1967; Waltz, 1979). In other words, this view advocates power as the main criterion of justice in the international arena. Is this perspective shared by people within the general public? And by how many? Addressing this question is important to understand how public opinion reacts to disputes among countries or, even more dramatically, when one country wages war against another.

The studies conducted here are not without limitations. First, participants were recruited online, implying that certain segments of society are likely to be under-represented in the sample. Second, the approach developed to assess power justification, based on asking participants to make judgments about a vignette, might not be ideal: the scenario might appear remote, abstract, and inconsequential. Assessing power justification in more realistic situations might provide a better understanding of the magnitude of the phenomenon. Third, despite the effort to encompass different countries, a full picture of how culture affects power justification remains to be drawn. For example, is reliance on power

justification among hunter-gatherers the same as in agricultural or industrial societies? And is it similar in different social classes or ethnic groups? Besides SDO, is any other variable directly linked with power justification? Finally, the paper focuses on individual differences and not on which contexts might encourage the same person to rely on power justification rather than on other criteria. For example, considerations about power may become more salient when high order authorities are perceived to be absent, violence among actors is frequent, when the issues at stake are vital (e.g., when dealing with survival), and when the dilemma is framed in competitive rather than cooperative terms.

In short, the paper offers a formalization of the concept of power justification and an empirical investigation thereof. It reveals that, in many societies, there are people who sometimes believe that it is just to reward the powerful simply because they are stronger, irrespective of their contribution, status, or need. These people tend also to be hostile to equality and prefer hierarchically organized societies. Understanding how power justification works can shed new light on important domains such as on how the public reacts to international conflicts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

All data and research materials are available at https://osf.io/gjh86/.

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