It is difficult to distinguish sharply between rational and non-rational inferences in the stream of mental experience, but it is clear that many of the half-conscious processes by which men form their political opinions are non-rational.

Graham Wallas (1908, Human Nature in Politics)

The scientific history of social psychology commenced in the late nineteenth century in the Leipzig laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt, who sought to develop a Völkerpsychologie (‘folk psychology’) that would complement physiological approaches to the study of mind and behaviour. However, it was not until 1908 that two books were published, more or less simultaneously, bearing the landmark title Social Psychology. One was written by a British psychologist, William McDougall, who proposed a theory of instinct and habit to explain human emotion, intellect, and volition. The other was written by an American sociologist, Edward A. Ross, who was concerned with tradition, imitation, and social suggestibility and their implications for public opinion, mass behaviour, and progressive social reform.

Only one year later, Graham Wallas, a Fabian socialist and co-founder of the London School of Economics, published Human Nature in Politics, which was probably the first work in a fledgling field that would come to be known as political psychology (Jost and Sidanius 2004). In this work, Wallas (1908) railed against the ‘intellectualist’ assumption that political judgement is driven largely by ‘calculations of means and ends’, anticipating criticisms of ‘rational choice theories’ in political science that would come much later (e.g. Green and Shapiro 1994). More specifically, he warned that democracies were especially vulnerable to elite manipulation through ‘the creation of opinion by the deliberate exploitation of subconscious non-rational inference’. In this respect, Wallas may
have foreseen the horrors that would result from the effective use of fascistic propaganda in the first half of the twentieth century.

Indeed, the study of social and political psychology acquired genuine urgency in the period that included the Second World War, prompting Cartwright (1979) to note that ‘the one person who has had the greatest impact upon the field . . . would have to be Adolph Hitler’ (1979: 84). The psychological investigation of political ideologies begins, in many ways, with Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford’s (1950) classic postmortem of fascistic tendencies, *The Authoritarian Personality*. Although the book has been much maligned on ideological and methodological grounds, the fact remains that it constituted a profound, multi-method synthesis of social, personality, and political psychology that has largely withstood the test of time (Jost 2006). Adorno et al. (1950) were correct that cognitive rigidity, prejudice, intolerance, status quo conservatism, and right-wing ideology frequently co-occur, seemingly for psychological as well as historical and sociological reasons (e.g. Jost et al. in press). The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* also formulated what has turned out to be an indispensable theoretical assumption in psychology, namely that specific ‘ideologies have for different individuals, different degrees of appeal, a matter that depends upon the individual’s needs and the degree to which these needs are being satisfied or frustrated’ (Adorno et al. 1950: 2). Political ideologies, in other words, often serve social psychological functions (or motives) that may or may not be entirely rational but, in any case, help to explain why people are drawn to them in the first place.

More specifically, we propose that ideologies possess both a discursive (socially constructed) superstructure and a functional (or motivational) base or substructure (see Jost et al. 2009a). The former describes a set of socially constructed ‘attitudes, values, and beliefs’ that are bound up with a specific ideological position in a given time and place (Jost et al. 2003b). Defined in this way, the discursive superstructure can be thought of as a ‘social representation’ (Moscovici 1988) that guides political judgement and is usually transmitted from political elites to mass publics (Zaller 1992). The functional substructure refers to the constellation of social and psychological needs, goals, and motives that drive the political preferences of ordinary citizens (and are therefore served by the discursive contents of ideology).

**Social Construction of the Discursive Superstructure**

We follow most political scientists in assuming that elected officials, party leaders, and media representatives impose structure on the political environment by developing and ‘bundling’ specific ideological content, which we refer to as the discursive superstructure (e.g. Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Converse 2000; Layman and Carsey 2002). Examples include prominent Northern Democratic leadership in promoting civil rights
legislation to benefit racial minorities in the United States (Sears et al. 2000) and the social influence that politicians, journalists, and public intellectuals exert over public perceptions of their nation’s participation in war (Berinsky 2007). Consistent with McGuire’s (1985) theory of persuasion, major factors governing the mass acquisition of ideological content include attention to and comprehension of information flowing from political elites (Lupia et al. 2000; Kuklinski et al. 2001; Bennett 2006).

Presumably, the specific bundling of attitudes, values, and beliefs that comprise the discursive superstructure arises through both communicative and strategic forms of interaction between partisan elites and their followers (Zaller 1992; Hinich and Munger 1994). This raises the worrisome but hardly outlandish possibility that a relatively small and unrepresentative group of political operatives wield a disproportionate amount of influence. Or, as Marx and Engels (1846/1970) put it, the ‘ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’.

Ideological bundles that are socially constructed and disseminated through elite discourse ‘anchor’ both poles of the left-right (or, in the USA and elsewhere, liberal-conservative) spectrum, arraying the options on an ideological ‘menu’ from which ordinary citizens select preferences (Sniderman and Bullock 2004). More specifically, the content associated with different ideological positions is absorbed by members of the mass public who ‘take cues’ from those elites, especially those who share their basic partisan or ideological inclinations (Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Converse 2000).

At the same time an abundance of evidence indicates that some voters (especially those who are relatively knowledgeable or sophisticated about politics) are more able and/or willing than others to ‘learn’ the contents of the discursive superstructure as defined by political elites (e.g. Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Erikson and Tedin 2003; Bennett 2006; Federico and Schneider 2007). It is well known that most citizens in the USA and elsewhere lack detailed knowledge about the specific discursive contents of liberal and conservative ideologies; are hesitant or unable to interpret political events in left-right terms, and possess fairly low levels of attitudinal consistency, stability, and constraint (e.g. Converse 2000; Kuklinski et al. 2001; Stimson 2004). Although facts such as these do suggest that the majority fails to learn the contents of various ideologies in vivid detail, they do not warrant the common conclusion that people are utterly devoid of ideological commitment or understanding (see Jost 2006, for a sustained discussion). Even those who are relatively indifferent to electoral politics exhibit some psychological understanding of core differences between ideologies of the left and right (see also Jost et al. 2009a).

**Psychological Construction of the Motivational Substructure**

It is important to point out that, in addition to the capacity to understand and absorb messages conveyed by political elites, a number of personality and individual
difference variables affect an individual’s ideological proclivities. Or, as Adorno et al. (1950) noted, an individual’s belief system ‘reflects his personality and is not merely an aggregate of opinions picked up helter-skelter from the ideological environment’ (1950: 176). Research on personality and ideological orientation fell out of favour for many years (e.g. Zaller 1992: 23), but there are clear indications that interest has revived in psychological processes contributing to ideological outcomes (e.g. Jost et al. 2003a, 2007, 2008a, 2009a; Caprara and Zimbardo 2004; Block and Block 2006; Carney et al. 2008; Gerber et al. 2010; Mondak 2010; Smith et al. 2011b). Ultimately, a psychological perspective is needed to address the vexing question raised by Sniderman and Bullock (2004: 353): ‘Why are some disposed to a liberal or broadly left political outlook while others are disposed to a conservative or broadly right orientation?’

To address this fundamental issue, Jost et al. (2003a, 2003b) offered a theory of political ideology as motivated social cognition, hypothesizing that relative preferences for liberal versus conservative ideologies are linked to basic psychological orientations toward uncertainty and threat. This idea was inspired by earlier work by Adorno et al. (1950), Allport (1954), Rokeach (1960), Tomkins (1963), Wilson (1973), Tetlock (1983), Sidanius (1985), and Altemeyer (1996), among others. A cornerstone of the theory is that ideological outcomes are the joint products of the discursive superstructure and the motivational substructure, so that—as Adorno et al. (1950) observed—individuals gravitate toward those ideologies that are present in the informational environment and that appeal to them, given their own psychological needs, motives, and desires.

Jost et al. (2003a, 2003b) argued that since at least the time of the French Revolution, two major axiological dimensions have distinguished left-wing (or liberal, progressive) ideology from right-wing (or conservative, reactionary) ideology, namely: (a) advocacy (vs. resistance) to social change, and (b) rejection (vs. justification) of inequality. This formulation was consistent with numerous denotative definitions of the left–right dimension, including one favoured by Lipset, Lazarsfeld, Barton, and Linz (1962): ‘By left we shall mean advocating social change in the direction of greater equality—political, economic or social; by right we shall mean supporting a traditional more or less hierarchical social order, and opposing change toward equality’ (Lipset et al. 1962: 1135). Presumably, the two core aspects of the left–right dimension are intertwined for historical reasons having to do with the fact that Western civilization has been drifting, over a period of many centuries, in the direction of increasing social, political, and economic equality. In some cases equality increased gradually, and in others it was implemented through radical or revolutionary means, which were initially opposed by conservatives (Burke 1790/2003; Lipset and Raab 1978). In both sets of circumstances, traditionalism has typically necessitated a defence of existing authorities and hierarchical institutions.

More than two centuries later, liberals and leftists still exhibit stronger preferences for social change and equality, in comparison with conservatives and rightists (e.g. Feldman 2003; Goren 2004; Rathbun 2007). In the realm of public policy, liberals are invariably more supportive than conservatives of initiatives that are designed to increase social and
economic equality, such as welfare, social security, affirmative action, universal health care, progressive forms of taxation, and same-sex marriage (e.g. Jacoby 1991; Evans et al. 1996; Federico and Sidanius 2002; Bartels 2008). Ideological differences in the valuation of social change and equality are observable even at the level of automatic or implicit attitudes. For example, reaction time studies reveal that self-identified liberals exhibit implicit (as well as explicit) preferences for words such as ‘flexible’, ‘progress’, and ‘feminism’, whereas conservatives prefer their opposites, namely terms such as ‘stable’, ‘tradition’, and ‘traditional values’ (Jost et al. 2008b). Liberals are also significantly less likely than conservatives to hold prejudicial attitudes—at both implicit and explicit levels of awareness—toward racial and ethnic minorities, women, gays, lesbians, and members of other groups that are disadvantaged by the hierarchical status quo (e.g. Sidanius et al. 1996; Cunningham et al. 2004; Jost et al. 2004a; Nosek et al. 2009).

Jost et al. (2003a, 2003b) hypothesized that conservative (or right-wing) ideologies, which are characterized by resistance to change and acceptance of inequality, should be more appealing to individuals who are either temporarily or chronically higher in psychological needs to reduce uncertainty and threat, whereas liberal (or left-wing) ideologies should be more appealing to individuals who are lower in these needs. To understand why this would be so, it is useful to draw on the social psychological concept of system justification, which is defined as the (conscious or unconscious) motivation to defend, bolster, and justify existing social, economic, or political institutions and arrangements (Jost et al. 2004a). Although virtually everyone is motivated, at least to some degree, to engage in system justification (e.g. Kay et al. 2009), the evidence is clear that conservatives score consistently higher than liberals on measures of economic and general or ‘diffuse’ system justification (e.g. Jost et al. 2008b). In some sense, system justification is the motivational ‘glue’ that holds the two dimensions of left–right ideology together. To vindicate and uphold traditional institutions and arrangements, conservatives are bound to defend extant inequalities as just and necessary. Conversely, to bring about a more equal state of affairs, progressives are obliged to criticize existing institutions and practices.

But, why, from a psychological perspective, would some individuals be more motivated than others by system justification goals? According to Jost et al. (2008a), the tendency to defend, bolster, and justify the status quo is motivationally compelling because it satisfies epistemic needs to attain certainty, order, and structure; existential needs to maintain safety and security and to minimize danger and threat; and relational needs to affiliate with others and to acquire a sense of belongingness and shared reality. Putting all of this together, it follows that if endorsement of conservative ideology is motivated, at least in part, by the desire to vindicate the social system (and, conversely, endorsement of progressive ideology is motivated, at least in part, by the desire to challenge the social system), it follows that heightened epistemic, existential, and relational needs should increase the psychological attractiveness of conservative ideology, whereas lowered epistemic, existential, and relational needs should increase the psychological attractiveness of liberal or progressive ideology. We turn now to a consideration of the empirical evidence bearing on these hypotheses.
To flesh out the empirical implications of this integrated model of ideology as motivated social cognition, Jost et al. (2003a, 2003b) conducted a quantitative, meta-analytic review of 88 studies involving over 22,000 research participants (or individual cases) that had been conducted in 12 different countries between 1958 and 2002. They found, among other things, that dogmatism, intolerance of ambiguity, and personal needs for order, structure, and closure were all positively associated with endorsement of conservative (vs. liberal) ideology. Conversely, openness to new experiences, cognitive complexity, and tolerance of uncertainty were positively associated with endorsement of liberal (vs. conservative) ideology.

Subsequent research has further demonstrated that heightened psychological needs to manage uncertainty predict both reliance on ideology in general and endorsement of conservative policy positions, such as support for the Iraq War (e.g. Federico et al. 2005; Jost et al. 2003a, 2003b, 2007). For example, studies conducted in several countries demonstrate consistently that individuals who score higher on the Need for Cognitive Closure scale, which measures the motivation to ‘seize and freeze’ on beliefs that offer simplicity, certainty, and clarity, are significantly more likely to hold conservative or right-wing attitudes (Jost et al. 2003a: 358–9; see also Chirumbolo et al. 2004; Sargent 2004; Leone and Chirumbolo 2008; Federico and Goren 2009; Thorisdottir and Jost 2011; van Hiel et al. 2010). These effects are especially robust for well-informed
individuals who are familiar with the discursive contents of various ideologies (e.g. Kemmelmeier 2007; Federico and Goren 2009). Research by Shook and Fazio (2009) found that individuals who are reluctant to engage in novel exploration in the context of learning tasks that involve some degree of short-term risk are more likely to embrace conservative (vs. liberal) ideology. In addition to these motivational variables, cognitive abilities to manage informational complexity are positively associated with social liberalism (Deary et al. 2008; van Hiel et al. 2010; Hodson and Busseri 2012).

Studies of political neuroscience provide further evidence of a connection between epistemic processes and ideology. For instance, liberalism is associated with better performance on tasks requiring the suppression of habitual responses in favour of novel ones, along with greater activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a brain region involved in the monitoring of conflicts between one’s immediate response tendencies and higher-level goals (Amodio et al. 2007). Consistent with these findings, studies of brain structure reveal that liberalism is also associated with greater ACC volume (Kanai et al. 2011).

Taken in conjunction, these findings indicate that epistemic needs and tendencies to reduce uncertainty are associated with an affinity for political conservatism. Given that nearly everyone wants to achieve at least some degree of certainty, is it possible that conservatism possesses a natural psychological advantage over liberalism? Although this is a complex question, several lines of research suggest that this might be the case. First, a series of experiments by Skitka et al. (2002) demonstrated that ‘the default attributional position is a conservative response’ , insofar as both liberals and conservatives are quick to draw dispositional (rather than situational) conclusions about the causes of poverty, unemployment, disease, and other negative outcomes, but only liberals ‘correct’ their initial response, taking into account extenuating circumstances. When a distraction is introduced, making it difficult for liberals to engage in secondary correction processes, they tend to blame individuals for their fate to the same degree that conservatives do. Skitka et al. therefore concluded that, ‘It is much easier to get a liberal to behave like a conservative than it is to get a conservative to behave like a liberal’ (2002: 484).

Research by Eidelman et al. (2012) takes this general line of reasoning even further, showing that several variables associated with increased cognitive load or need for closure, such as drinking alcohol, lead people to become more conservative. Both of these lines of research are consistent with the notion that conservative styles and opinions are generally simpler, more internally consistent, and less subject to ambiguity, in comparison with liberal styles and opinions (e.g. Rokeach 1960; Jost et al. 2003a, 2003b; Tetlock 2007). A third reason to suggest that conservatism enjoys a psychological advantage over liberalism comes from research on system justification, which suggests that most people (including many who do not identify themselves as conservative) are motivated to develop and maintain relatively favourable opinions about existing institutions and authorities and to resist sweeping social changes (Kay et al. 2009; Jost et al. 2010).

Nevertheless, some people are motivated by sensation-seeking, novelty, curiosity, and openness to new experiences, and they are significantly more likely than the average person to embrace liberal and leftist opinions and causes (for a review, see Jost et al. 2003a: 356–7). Of the 'Big Five' personality dimensions, Openness to New Experiences
is most strongly predictive of political orientation, with liberals scoring consistently higher than conservatives (Jost 2006; Carney et al. 2008; Rentfrow et al. 2009; Gerber et al. 2010; Mondak 2010). The other ‘Big Five’ dimension that consistently correlates with political orientation (in US and other samples) seems to be Conscientiousness (Gerber et al. 2010; Mondak 2010). Here, conservatives generally score higher than others on needs for order, structure, and discipline—even in non-political contexts. For instance, one study found that the bedrooms and offices of conservatives contain more items relating to Conscientiousness, such as postage stamps and cleaning supplies, whereas liberals’ rooms contain more items relating to Openness, such as travel books, music, and art supplies (Carney et al. 2008).

Existential Motivation: System-justifying Ideologies Offer Security

According to terror management theory (TMT), ideologies serve the existential function of allowing people to transcend symbolically the threat induced by the uniquely human awareness of one’s own mortality (e.g. Solomon et al. 2004). That is, political and other belief systems are seen as assisting people in the motivated belief that they are persons of value in a meaningful universe that transcends the finite self, thereby providing a sense of existential security. Consistent with this claim, a vast experimental literature demonstrates that making research participants aware of their own mortality leads them to hew more closely to established belief systems and identities. For example, mortality salience appears to produce greater patriotism and hostility toward critics of one’s nation, a stronger endorsement of the unique validity of one’s own religion, stronger support for traditional gender norms, increased stereotyping, and greater hostility toward individuals and groups who are perceived as threatening to a cultural worldview (e.g. Pyszczynski et al. 1999; Schimel et al. 1999; Arndt et al. 2002).

Drawing on the theory of ideology as motivated cognition, Jost et al. (2004b) proposed that a special affinity exists between psychological needs to minimize threat—including threat arising from death anxiety—and conservative ideology. Accordingly, they found that priming liberals, moderates, and conservatives with thoughts of death produced an across-the-board increase in issue-based conservatism. Such a result is consistent with the meta-analysis of Jost et al. (2003a), which revealed that fear of death, system threat, and perceptions of a dangerous world were all positively associated with the endorsement of conservative ideology (see also Jost et al. 2007). Similarly, experiments conducted before the 2004 Presidential election revealed that although college students favoured Democratic challenger John Kerry in a control condition, they showed a preference reversal following exposure to mortality salience primes, supporting Republican President George W. Bush instead (Cohen et al. 2005; Landau et al. 2004). In a similar vein, Ullrich and Cohrs (2007) demonstrated in several experiments that increasing the salience of
terrorism led participants to score higher on a measure of system justification. Lastly, a study of high-exposure survivors of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks found that Democrats as well as Republicans reported ‘conservative shifts’ in the 18 months following the attacks (Bonanno and Jost 2006; see also Nail and McGregor 2009).

Research on right-wing authoritarianism also indicates that highly threatening situations are frequently (but not always) associated with ideological shifts to the right. For example, archival research suggests that the appeal of conservative and right-wing leaders and policies is enhanced during periods of high social, economic, or political threat (Doty et al. 1991; Davis and Silver 2004; Willer 2004; McCann 2008). Presumably, this is because threat encourages individuals to embrace social and political attitudes that offer ‘relatively simple yet cognitively rigid solutions’ to questions of security (Bonanno and Jost 2006: 311). Along these lines, Thorisdottir and Jost (2011) demonstrated in several experiments that exposure to threatening stimuli (such as frightening movie clips) elicited a temporary increase in motivated closed-mindedness and that increased closed-mindedness was associated with an attraction to conservative policies and opinions (see also Nail et al. 2009).

Several other studies reinforce the notion that fairly deep links exist between threat sensitivity and conservatism. Oxley et al. (2008) found that individuals exhibiting strong physiological (i.e. startle-eyeblink) responses to threatening stimuli were more likely to endorse socially conservative positions aimed at protecting the social order. Vigil (2010) reported that conservatives are more likely than liberals to perceive emotionally neutral faces as threatening. Similarly, research using negatively valenced words as threatening stimuli reveals that conservatism is positively associated with automatic vigilance (e.g. Carraro et al. 2011; Shook and Clay 2011). Neuroscientific evidence is consistent with these behavioural observations (see Jost and Amodio 2012, for a review).

A growing body of research suggests that sensitivity to disgust—a basic emotion that presumably evolved to guard against biological contamination—is greater among conservatives than liberals (Hodson and Costello 2007; Inbar et al. 2009a; Inbar et al. 2009b; Terrizzi et al. 2010; Helzer and Pizarro 2011; Smith et al. 2011a). Given the apparent link between disgust and moral judgement (Haidt 2001), these differences help to explain why conservatives are more motivated than liberals to enforce purity standards in sexual and other domains (Skitka et al. 2002; Jarudi et al. 2008; Graham et al. 2009). If this reasoning is correct, political and other messages that elicit disgust reactions should benefit conservatives disproportionately, much as threat-related messages seem to help conservatives and hurt liberals.

**Relational Motivation: System-justifying Ideologies Offer Solidarity**

A vast research literature on political socialization, reviewed by Sears and Levy (2003), indicates that ideological beliefs are likely to be transmitted from parents to children,
especially if both parents have similar beliefs and discuss politics frequently (Jennings and Niemi 1981) and if bonds within the family are close (Davies 1965). Similarly, peers and parents exert a reasonably strong influence on ideological self-placement (Alwin et al. 1991; Jost et al. 2008a). These relational influences on ideological outcomes are strongest in late adolescence and early adulthood (Sears and Levy, 2003) and persist as long as one’s relational context does not change markedly (e.g. Alwin et al. 1991).

It seems likely that passive forms of learning are involved in the transmission of social and political attitudes from parents to offspring and from peer to peer. At the same time, more active forms of influence, which implicate relational motives for affiliation, social identification, and/or the attainment of a shared view of reality, also shape ideological preferences (e.g. Hardin and Higgins 1996; Cohen 2003). For instance, Jost et al. (2008a) found that students whose parents were ideologically divergent scored higher on a measure of system justification after writing about an interaction with their more conservative (vs. liberal) parent, suggesting that priming a close bond with others produces ideological consequences.

The study of relational motives could also shed light on the question of when the discursive superstructure developed by partisan elites is likely to become a shared social representation that penetrates public consciousness (e.g. Marx and Engels 1846/1970; Parsons 1951; Moscovici 1988; Hardin and Higgins 1996; Billig 2003). Research indicates that important reference groups—including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, social class, political party, and religious affiliation—can be used as cues for political judgement and behaviour by citizens at nearly every level of political sophistication (e.g. Conover and Feldman 1981; Hamill et al. 1985; Sniderman et al. 1991; Bartels 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Eagly et al. 2004). Supporting this idea, several studies suggest that party leaders are capable of instigating political polarization and bringing about ‘conflict extension’ in the electorate (Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002). Cohen (2003) demonstrated that people are more likely to endorse a given policy position when they believe that it was proposed by their own party than when the same policy was seen as part of the opposing party’s agenda (see also Goren et al. 2009).

Although it is abundantly clear that processes associated with social identification, partisanship, and group interest can exert political influence in both liberal and conservative directions (e.g., Bartels 2000; Green et al. 2002; Cohen 2003), Jost et al. (2008a) speculated that—as with epistemic and existential motives—some relational motives could favour conservative outcomes in general. This is broadly consistent with evidence that conservatives are especially likely to value tradition, conformity, social order, and adherence to rules, norms, and conventions (Conover and Feldman 1981; Altemeyer 1998; Feldman 2003; Jost 2006; Graham et al. 2009). It is also consistent with the notion that it may be easier to establish ‘common ground’ with respect to the status quo than with respect to its many possible alternatives (Jost et al. 2008a). In addition, it is probably easier to communicate effectively by transmitting messages that are relatively simple and unambiguous rather than reflecting the kind of complex, nuanced, and perhaps ambivalent cognitive and rhetorical styles that seem to be more common on the political left than the right (Jost et al. 2003b).
Individual differences in relational motivation—such as the Agreeableness factor of the ‘Big Five’ personality dimensions—may also be linked to ideological preferences, albeit in a somewhat complex manner. Caprara and Zimbardo (2004) observed that Italian leftists were more concerned about friendliness and agreeableness than were rightists, but other studies have yielded mixed results. For instance, Gerber et al. (2010) found that Agreeableness was positively associated with economic liberalism and social conservativism (see also Mondak 2010). Hirsh et al. (2010) determined that the *compassion* facet of Agreeableness is associated with greater liberalism (and egalitarianism), whereas the facet of *politeness* is associated with greater conservatism (and traditionalism).

**Concluding Remarks**

From a social psychological perspective, ideology is not merely an ‘organizing device’ or a shortcut for making heuristic judgements about politics; it is also a motivational device for justifying or rationalizing the way things are or, alternatively, how things should be different than they are. Thus, ideologies typically make at least tacit reference to some social system—either as an affirmation or a rejection of it (Marx & Engels 1846/1970; Parsons 1951; Lipset and Raab 1978; Freedren 2003, 2010; Jost 2006; Knight 2006). Research on system justification theory suggests that most people—to varying degrees, as a function of dispositional and situational factors—engage in both conscious and non-conscious rationalization of the status quo through the use of stereotypes, social judgements, and ideologies such as conservatism (Jost et al. 2004a; Lane 1962). These and other system-justifying mechanisms imbue social, economic, and political arrangements with perceived legitimacy (Jost et al. 2003; Jost et al. 2003c; Sidanis & Pratto 1999; Kay et al. 2009; Jost et al. 2010). From the point of view of political elites, system justification is beneficial insofar as it contributes to the stability of the social system and increases voluntary deference on the part of ordinary citizens (Tyler 2006).

The power of ideology to explain and justify discrepancies between the current social order and some alternative not only maintains support for the status quo, but also serves for its adherents the palliative function of alleviating dissonance or discomfort associated with the awareness of systemic injustice or inequality (e.g., Jost and Hunyady 2002; Wakslak et al. 2007; Napier and Jost 2008). The endorsement of system-justifying beliefs is associated with increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and self-reported satisfaction or contentment (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Jost et al. 2003c; Rankin et al. 2009). In attempting to understand why conservatives report being happier than liberals, Napier and Jost (2008) found that the association between political ideology and subjective well-being was explained to a significant degree by respondents’ differential tendencies to rationalize economic inequality in society. Furthermore, the happiness gap between conservatives and liberals in the United States was tied to the nation’s level of income inequality, such that as inequality has increased steadily over the last 30 years, the subjective well-being of liberals dropped more precipitously than that of
conservatives. Thus, system-justifying ideologies such as conservatism can ‘provide a kind of ideological buffer against the negative hedonic consequences of social and economic inequality’ (Napier and Jost 2008: 565).

In sum, ideology can play an important role as a system-serving bundle of attitudes, values, beliefs, and opinions. However, as with respect to the organizing role of ideology, it is best to conclude with a few caveats about the reach of ideology as a system justification device. Although system-justifying attitudes, values, and beliefs are widespread, they rarely diffuse or ‘work’ completely, especially in large, highly complex societies and among those who are suspicious of and/or geographically distant from centers of power (e.g., Abercrombie et al. 1980; Freeden 2010). This opens the door to at least some degree of change and flux in social relations (see also Kay and Friesen 2011). Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence indicating that when the status quo is perceived as inevitable (or nearly so), people are far more likely to rationalize than to challenge it (e.g. Kay et al. 2002; Laurin et al. 2012).

Given the apparent resurgence of ideological polarization in the current era (e.g. Layman and Carsey 2002; Stimson 2004; Jost, 2006; Abramowitz 2010), it is our hope that this summary of existing psychological research will not only help us to better understand the present but also point the way to a more constructive future. To succeed, we will need the continued engagement of the social scientific research community as a whole. For our own part, we have taken seriously the possibility first suggested by Adorno et al. (1950) that a ‘structural unity’ exists between underlying psychological needs and ideological manifestations of those needs. Although contemporary researchers are much closer to understanding the connections between the discursive superstructure of ideology and its motivational substructure, it is plain to see that we still do not know as much about these connections as one would like. We can only hope that over the next half-century researchers will continue to identify sound scientific principles that help to explain why certain individuals and groups ‘choose’ particular constellations of ideas or, to put it another way, why some ideologies find deep resonance in the minds of some social actors but not others.

**Note**

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**References**


