Perceiving fairness in an unfair world: System justification and the mental health of girls in detention facilities

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Abstract
Psychologists in the helping professions have long accepted the idea that cognitions have implications for mental health and wellbeing. Community psychologists have further established the importance of context and systems in the etiology of mental health problems. In this paper, we argue that as a discipline that prioritizes social justice, community psychology should consider associations between cognitions about structural and systemic inequality and individual mental health, particularly in marginalized populations. As one illustration of this argument and its complexities, we asked if and to what degree mental health was concurrently associated with adolescents’ beliefs in societal fairness (i.e., system-justifying beliefs), attending to gender differences. Our findings were informed by a sample of 196 adolescents residing in detention facilities (49.50% girls; 51.75% Black/Caribbean, 21.68% multiracial; 15.38% Hispanic/Latine; 27.98% LGBTQ+). These youth represent an understudied group in the research literature addressing fairness beliefs and their influence on wellness. Results suggested that boys were more likely to endorse societal fairness compared to girls, but these beliefs were unrelated to their mental health. However, we found a significant gender moderation such that girls who perceived society to be fair reported lower levels of internalizing and externalizing mental health problems. We discuss implications for theory, research, and intervention.

KEYWORDS
criminal/juvenile justice, liberation and oppression, mental health, social justice, sociopolitical development, system justification

INTRODUCTION
Youth involved in the legal system1 constitute a uniquely disadvantaged, marginalized, and underserved population in the United States, and the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority youth, gender-expansive youth, and those from intergenerationally low-socioeconomic backgrounds in this group is well-documented (Dawson-Edwards et al., 2020; Puzzanchera, 2009; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015). Youth involved in the legal system carry a disproportionate burden of adverse childhood experiences, and have higher rates of behavioral health problems, the majority of which go unaddressed (Elkington, Lee, et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2008; Wasserman et al., 2009).

1We use the term “legal system” to refer to the juvenile justice system as an acknowledgment that the policies practices of the system to which we refer are frequently inequitable and discriminatory, often resulting in outcomes that are unjust (Shaw et al., 2021).
Moreover, these youth are likely to have had more experiences with different systems than other youth: In addition to the school and justice systems, youth involved in the legal system have higher rates of contact with the child welfare and healthcare systems. Youth involved in the legal system are therefore simultaneously more likely to be exposed to, and negatively affected by, biased institutional policies and practices. The inequitable practices of social systems such as schools and the legal system can also carry important messages. Like parents who convey information, values, and perspectives about race and ethnicity through processes of racial socialization, biased institutions have the potential to transmit information to youth about who they are and how they should expect to be treated (Hughes et al., 2006). Indeed, youths' cognitions about themselves vis-à-vis society and social systems may also have important implications for their long-term wellbeing and mental health (Banales et al., 2021; Pheterson, 1986; Spencer et al., 1997).

The construct of system justification, from system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) provides a practical means through which to begin to operationalize youths' perceptions of inequitable and unequal societal systems, so as to understand the associations between these perceptions and youth wellbeing. System justification is a psychological process through which individuals justify the status quo, accepting and supporting the existing social order even at the cost of individual and group interests. Consequently, investigating associations between the system-justifying beliefs of youth involved in the legal system and their mental health provides a means for understanding the ways in which youths' beliefs about societal structures and contextual processes are linked to their individual mental health. In other words, studying the system justification of youth involved in the legal system provides a window into how these youth understand society and make attributions about fairness, inequality, and inequity, with potential links to their mental health and wellbeing.

In the present paper, we draw on system justification theory to suggest that community psychology researchers, and those interested in the mental health of individuals from marginalized groups, should further consider cognitions about structural and systemic inequality and their associations with mental health outcomes. In doing so, we contribute to scholarship in community psychology on sociopolitical development and critical consciousness (i.e., awareness of, and action against, social, and political inequities) in marginalized groups, by addressing a critical gap. Community psychologists have previously called for “transforming how people think about the world” (Watts, 2004, p. 860) to address internalized oppression among marginalized groups and promote mental health. However, before we endeavor to change how people think, we first need to know what they think, and how it relates to clinically meaningful outcomes, particularly in vulnerable populations. For example, system justification theory suggests that system-justifying beliefs may be “palliative” for some groups, by helping to quell anxiety (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Therefore, before system-justifying beliefs are dismantled, it is important, ethical, and consistent with the responsible conduct of research, to understand if, and how, such beliefs are linked to individual mental health. To begin to address this gap, the current study provides a cross-sectional examination of associations between system justification, and internalizing and externalizing mental health outcomes, in a population of adolescents involved in the juvenile legal system.

The contributions of this study are twofold. First, we examined associations between specific mental health outcomes (i.e., internalizing and externalizing symptomatology) and system justification in a sample of youth involved in the legal system, who were detained in 12 short-term detention facilities at the time of the study, attending to gender. This is important because, with a few exceptions (e.g., Godfrey et al., 2017), previous studies on system justification have used nonspecific and general measures as a proxy for mental health (e.g., wellbeing; life satisfaction; Harding & Sibley, 2013) in community samples. Moreover, girls and boys involved in the legal system are likely to have different pathways in to, and experiences within, the juvenile legal system, suggesting that girls and boys may have different experiences in, and perceptions of, societal systems (Javdani et al., 2011a). Second, building off of our first contribution, we suggest that system justification theory is of interest to, and relevant for study by, community psychologists interested in social change and promotion of mental health and critical consciousness. Community psychologists have used system justification theory previously, for example, to better understand associations between racial colorblindness and inaction to address prejudice (Yi et al., 2020), and as a barrier to social justice (Christens, 2020). However, few studies have attended to potential connections between specific attributions about systemic inequity and fairness, and personal mental health. By using system justification theory as a measure of individual-level attributions about systemic inequality, our study begins to address this gap and demonstrates how marginalized youths' understandings of societal inequality are associated with their mental health. We present previous scholarship on youth involved in the legal system and system justification theory to contextualize the importance of examining associations between mental health outcomes and system-justifying beliefs in our study population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth involved in the juvenile legal system

Youths' very involvement in the legal system—including surveillance, arrest, detention, and incarceration—constitutes an experience of marginalization, accompanied by myriad risks. As a formal system of control, the juvenile legal system operates much like the adult justice system, and the
Believing that society is fair: System justification theory

System justification is a psychological process through which individuals justify the existing social system even when they themselves are harmed by it (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Through system justification, individuals accept and support social structures and institutions even at the cost of individual and group interests. For example, individuals from historically disenfranchised socioeconomic groups, themselves living in poverty, may believe in economic meritocracy and oppose policies that promote the redistribution of resources, embracing the existing status quo (Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost, Peltz, & Bynum, 1994). For marginalized individuals, system justification entails outgroup favoritism, whereas for privileged individuals engaging in system justification involves ingroup favoritism (Rudman & others, 2002). Members of many privileged groups such as men and White Americans, tend to report higher average levels of legitimizing ideologies compared to women and minoritized racial groups (Dirilen-Gumus, 2011; Jost & Thompson, 2000). As implicit and contextually influenced, system justification requires little cognitive investment (Jost et al., 2004; Rudman et al., 2002). Individuals may embrace the prevailing hierarchical system motivated by needs for certainty and stability (epistemic needs), feelings of safety (existential needs), and/or formation of relationships (relational need). When these needs are met by justifying the system, anxiety and uncertainty diminish in the short term, and system justification is said to serve a “palliative” or “protective” function (Choma & Prusaczyk, 2018; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Jost et al., 2017, 2008).

Of particular interest to mental health researchers and community psychologists interested in social justice, in a theory paper Jost and Hunyady (2003) posited that system-justifying beliefs are associated with different outcomes for members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups, in the long term. Specifically, they theorized that system-justifying beliefs would: (1) correlate with increased self-esteem for members of advantaged groups and decreased self-esteem for members of disadvantaged groups; and (2) be associated with decreased depression and neuroticism (linked with internalizing mental health problems; Zimbarg et al., 2016) among members of advantaged groups, and increased depression and neuroticism among members of disadvantaged groups. While system-justifying beliefs are consistent with positive self-image for privileged individuals, such as men, White people, and those in higher socioeconomic brackets, they are discordant with such beliefs for those who are disadvantaged. This may have negative implications for how individuals think about themselves. For example, Godfrey and Wolf (2016) found that low-income Latine and African American women in the United States attributed poverty to, “character deficiencies of the poor” (p. 7). Holding these beliefs, the women located the cause of their economic hardship within themselves. While on the one hand, such beliefs might give a semblance of control (e.g., “If the problem is me, then I...

...experiences of detention and incarceration are frequently traumatic (National Research Council, 2013). As the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 2017) noted, “entry into the juvenile court system may exacerbate youths’ existing... problems for many reasons” (p. 4). Youth held in short-term detention facilities (such as the youth in our sample) frequently do not have sufficient access to services, and involvement in the juvenile legal system is associated with increased odds of recidivating (OJJDP, 2017).

Compared to community samples, youth involved in the legal system experience different levels of internalizing and externalizing problems. Although there are more boys involved in the legal system than girls (Hockenberry, 2018), girls are more likely to have histories of victimization (Ford et al., 2008), report more symptoms of internalizing disorders (Wasserman et al., 2005, 2010), and have higher rates of psychiatric disorders (Van Damme et al., 2014). These trends are consistent with community samples, in which girls are at greater risk for mental health problems (Patil et al., 2018). However, pre-existing gender disparities are likely further exacerbated by the juvenile legal system. For example, as a result of biased institutional processes girls are more likely than boys to have their charges relabeled, thus resulting in arrest for more severe crimes (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Chesney-Lindo & Okamoto, 2001; Feld, 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2005). Indeed, in response to theories of female antisocial behavior and crime focusing on individual characteristics, community psychologists construing gender as a contextual variable have suggested that the rise in arrest rates for girls is likely, at least in part, due to gendered institutional processes (Javdani et al., 2011; Wasco & Bond, 2010). Moreover, girls and boys involved in the legal system have different needs (Gavazzi et al., 2016), and different trajectories, both before arrest, as well as after (Conrad et al., 2014; DeHart & Moran, 2015). For example, boys are more likely to have committed prior offenses, while girls report higher levels of need associated with health risks, such as histories of sexual abuse (Conrad et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2008). Despite these differences, and potentially because there have been historically more boys than girls involved in the legal system, existing systems are frequently not geared toward, or effective at meeting, girls’ needs (Granski et al., 2019; Zahn et al., 2009).
can fix it”), these beliefs necessarily conflict with positive self-cognitions.

The supposition that system justifying-beliefs are associated with worse mental health outcomes for low-status groups in the long term is partially predicated on the assumption that believing in societal fairness requires low-status individuals to internalize stigma. As such, the women in Godfrey and Wolf’s (2016) study may have believed that poverty experienced by others was the result of character deficiencies. They additionally may have believed that their own poverty was directly linked to their own deficiencies. Such self-stigma is associated with internalizing (but not externalizing) mental health problems in diverse populations such as adolescents with mental health problems (Moses, 2009). However, the association between system-justifying beliefs and self-stigmatization does not always occur. For example, as Suppes et al. (2019) noted, some marginalized individuals are able to perceive the system as fair, possibly by simply ignoring evidence to the contrary, while simultaneously avoiding the internalization of negative self-perceptions. These individuals experience mental health benefits associated with system justification, including less depression, fewer mental health diagnoses, and better self-esteem (Suppes et al., 2019).

Extant research does provide some support for Jost and Hunyady’s (2003) theorized associations. This study suggests that system justification is be associated with short-term increased wellbeing and long-term decreased wellbeing. For example, Godfrey et al. (2017) found that system-justifying beliefs were associated with higher self-esteem, less delinquent behavior, and better classroom conduct among a diverse sample of low-income, early adolescent youth, cross-sectionally. However, long term, the effect reversed (Godfrey et al., 2017). Thus, based on the research cited above, which indicated that system-justifying beliefs have different implications for individuals depending on their social status and group identification, there is a need for further empirical work that explicitly examines associations between system-justifying beliefs and mental health, attending to different aspects of identity, particularly in disenfranchised, marginalized youth, such as those involved in the juvenile legal system.

Current study

In this study, we concentrated on the experiences of a unique sample of youth confined within the juvenile legal system; a group for whom the “system” and its fairness are particularly salient. The current study is the first to specifically examine associations between system justification and clinically relevant measures of both the internalizing and externalizing mental health problems of youth involved in the legal system. In the present paper, we posit that system justification (i.e., the tendency to view society as fair) is an important consideration for psychologists interested in understanding the implications of beliefs about social inequality and adversity on mental health experiences (Prilleltensky, 2003, 2012; Watts, 2004; Watts et al., 1999). Reflecting this, our first research question was: Are there gender differences in girls’ and boys’ endorsement of system-justifying beliefs? We hypothesized that boys would demonstrate higher levels of system justification than girls, based on the empirical evidence suggesting that masculinity is associated with system-justifying attitudes. Our second research question was: What are the associations between system justification and mental health for adolescents in general and girls and boys separately? We hypothesized that the association between system justification and better mental health would be stronger for girls than boys, given the persistence of patriarchy in the United States, which privileges boys compared to girls (Cooke, 2006) and evidence, cited above, that social location influences the association between wellbeing and system justification (e.g., Harding & Sibley, 2013).

To answer our first research question, we compared levels of system justification between girls and boys. Then, to answer our second research question and focusing on short-term associations only, we examined gender as a moderator of the relation between system-justifying beliefs and mental health. We believe that this study constitutes an important contribution to community psychology’s understanding of mental health problems and beliefs about systemic inequality, particularly among youth from marginalized groups. By investigating the association between youths’ system-justifying tendencies and mental health, we have the opportunity to demonstrate that marginalized youths’ perceptions of societal fairness may be related to their mental health.

METHODS

Participants

Data for this paper came from the baseline assessments of 97 girls and 99 boys residing in short-term detention facilities, who were recruited for voluntary participation in the pilot of a therapeutic intervention (age: 12–18, M = 15.07, SD = 0.94). While socioeconomic information was not available for the study sample, elsewhere it is documented that youth involved in the juvenile legal system disproportionately come from low-income communities (Birckhead, 2012). In the present sample, 51.75% of youth identified as Black/Caribbean, 21.68% as multiracial (e.g., Black and Latine; Black and White), 15.38% as Hispanic/Latine, 3.50% as Asian/Asian American, and 2.80% percent as White. A total of 27.98% identified as sexual minorities. Table 1 details descriptive statistics and demographics for the participants who were assessed for mental health and system justification, in aggregate and by gender.

Procedure

The current study is a cross-sectional, deidentified, secondary analysis of baseline data collected between 2014 and
2015 to track youths’ progress in a pilot group therapy treatment (Gordon, 2018). The research team was granted permission to work with 12 short-term detention facilities (six boys’ and six girls’ facilities) serving youth across the large metropolitan area encompassed by the study. The relationship between the research team and the sites was based on a multiyear collaborative research–practice partnership that involved supporting facilities with research, training, and intervention using evidence-based, gender-responsive models of care. Before any data collection, the research team principal investigator visited facilities to speak with staff, youth, and administrators on a number of occasions, engaged in needs assessments and reconnaissance across stakeholder groups, presented data on the pathways of the youth of color, and girls of color, in the local juvenile legal system, and obtained informal feedback through group and community forums, individual site visits, and group activities with youth. Thus, an established research–practice partnership was in place before the start of the present study, and the research team had exclusive research access to the facilities in which the study took place.

The short-term detention facilities allowed youth to attend school outside of the facility, and engage in community and group activities during their stay in the facility (e.g., cooking, movie nights, field trips). However, youth were never allowed to leave their rooms or the group-home-type setting without explicit permission. Youth in these facilities were typically awaiting court sentencing and were deemed a safety risk in need of detainment. No information on individual youth charges was available, however, administrative data, shared by the facilities and over 95% provided consent and completed assessments (vs. alternative activities). These 12 sites represented all girls’ short-term detention facilities and boy’ facilities matched geographically and by size.

Data were collected by trained, master’s-level research assistants, via paper survey. The measures used in this study were included in a packet of surveys which were counterbalanced to prevent order effects and response fatigue. Youth were informed that participation was voluntary, would not affect their relationship with facility staff, and that they could stop or resume participation at any time. All youth who responded and gave consent for their data to be used for research purposes were included in the analytic sample. Surveys were completed in group spaces, however, research assistants ensured that youth sat far apart, so as to ensure...
confidentiality. Assessment sessions took 30–90 min, depending on the number of participants and their sustained attention. Snacks were provided to all youth present (whether or not they took the surveys) and alternative materials (e.g., word searches) were offered to those who declined participation. The Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved both the original study and these secondary analyses.

**Measures**

Youth self-reported gender, age, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Youths’ system-justifying attitudes were operationalized and assessed with six items from the Diffuse System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) which together achieved a Flesch–Kincaid readability at the sixth-grade level. The scale correlates with Lipkus’s (1991) Global Belief in a Just World Scale, Quinn and Crocker’s (1999) Protestant Work Ethic Scale, and a measure of general beliefs concerning needs for “balance” and “complementarity” in the social world (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). Youth received the following prompt: “how much do you agree or disagree with each statement,” and items included: “In general you find society to be fair,” and “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.” Participants were prompted to use a 9-point scale to respond, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 9 (strongly disagree). Items were recoded for purposes of analyses so that higher scores indicated greater endorsement of system-justifying beliefs. In Godfrey et al.’s (2017) study of system justification among disadvantaged youth, youth had moderate levels of system-justifying beliefs, with a rescaled mean of 0.51 in 34 samples from capitalist countries for justifying beliefs, with a rescaled mean 0.65, compared to a more advantaged youth, youth had moderate levels of system justifying beliefs. Consistent with our first hypothesis, boys’ endorsement of system-justifying beliefs with a t-test (to answer Research Question 1), and then analyzed gender as a moderator of the association between system justification and mental health (to answer Research Question 2). To do so we used multigroup structural equation modeling, and to assess model fit we examined the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI). RMSEA values below 0.05 and CFI values above 0.90 are generally accepted as approximate indicators of model fit (Bentler, 1990; Kline, 2011; Steiger & Lind, 1980). However, as suggested by Kenny et al. (2015), RMSEA with small degrees of freedom and small sample size can incorrectly indicate a poor-fitting model. We performed χ² difference tests (utilizing DIFFTEST, the χ² difference testing mechanism appropriate for use with WLSMV in MPlus; Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to determine if the more constrained models resulted in a significant worsening of fit. In preliminary models we adjusted for site and participant age as covariates, however, these models were not meaningfully different from the models presented below and we, therefore, set them aside for parsimony and due to concerns about power. To compare our sample to previous samples who reported system justification via the Diffuse System Justification Scale (Jost & Kay, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003) we rescaled each mean, dividing it by the scale range to create an index of system justification (Cichocka & Jost, 2014).

**RESULTS**

In Table 1 we provide an overview of the sample demographics and compare girls’ and boys’ levels of system-justifying beliefs. Consistent with our first hypothesis, boys’ reports suggested higher levels of system justification, compared to girls, r(194) = 2.48, p = .01. Although boys reported higher system justification, and the difference was significant, it was not large (Table 1). To address our second research question, we modeled the relation between system justification and mental health for our multigroup (i.e., girls and boys) sample by regressing our internalizing and externalizing mental health factors onto system justification (see Figure 1). The model indicated good fit,
\( \chi^2(704) = 790.424, p = .013, \) RMSEA = 0.035, TLI = 0.967, CFI = 0.969. Internalizing and externalizing mental health problems were strongly correlated for girls (\( r = .857, p < .001 \)) and boys (\( r = .788, p < .001 \)). To confirm gender moderation, we constrained the paths between system justification and internalizing and externalizing mental health problems to equality across genders. This multi-group structural equation model allowed us to compare the relation between system justification and mental health problems by gender. Model fit was acceptable, \( \chi^2(706) = 823.996, p = .0014, \) RMSEA = 0.040, CFI = 0.958, but significantly worse than the baseline, unconstrained model, \( \chi^2_{\text{diff}}(2) = 11.008, p < .01, \) supporting gender moderation. Therefore, we moved forward with the gender-specific paths. We found partial support for our hypothesis that the association between system-justifying beliefs and better mental health would be stronger for girls than boys. Specifically, system justification was related to fewer internalizing (\( B = -0.557, SE = 0.116, p = .000 \)) and externalizing (\( B = -0.419, SE = 0.120, p = .001 \)) mental health problems for girls. However, there was no significant association between boy's mental health problems and their endorsement of system-justifying beliefs for internalizing (\( B = -0.049, SE = 0.102, p = .632 \)) or externalizing problems (\( B = -0.186, SE = 0.124, p = .133 \); Figure 1). Therefore, girls who were lower on system justification had more acute mental health symptomatology; girls who were higher on system justification had fewer mental health problems.

**DISCUSSION**

In the present study, we examined associations between system-justifying beliefs and mental health in a sample of youth involved in the juvenile legal system. We found that girls in our sample reported system-justifying beliefs at levels similar to those in Cichocka and Jost's (2014) study of 34 samples in global capitalist societies. Boys reported significantly higher levels of system justification compared to girls, at rates similar to Godfrey et al.'s (2017) sample of disadvantaged youth in the United States. Additionally, we found support for gender moderation of the cross-sectional (i.e., not causal) associations between system justification and internalizing and externalizing mental health problems. Endorsement of system-justifying beliefs was related to better mental health for girls, but not boys, across both internalizing and externalizing problems.

Scholars and mental health clinicians widely accept the notion that individuals' thoughts and attitudes are associated with mental health outcomes (Gaab et al., 2003; Hammerfald et al., 2006). Earlier we asserted that community psychologists and researchers interested in mental health should also consider system-justifying tendencies as cognitive processes that go beyond the individual-level to address structural, and systemic inequality. We believe this is an area particularly well suited for research in community psychology because it entails a crossing of ecological levels; that is, investigating associations between individuals' specific understandings of macrosystemic processes, and personal mental health (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Furthermore, investigating how individuals' understandings of subjucation may shape mental health outcomes is consistent with community psychology values of promoting wellness and social justice (Prilleltensky, 2003, 2012). By demonstrating gender moderation of the association between believing in societal fairness (i.e., system justification), and internalizing and externalizing mental health outcomes in a population of adolescents in detention, our work suggests that it is not only how an individual understands the world that matters, but also who that individual is, in society. Indeed, youths' social location with respect to gender is a key aspect of their social identity (Gilbert & Rader, 2002; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Our findings suggest that system justification is an important consideration for psychologists who are interested in understanding...
associations between perceptions about inequity and mental health.

Community psychologists have long acknowledged the importance of context and systems in the etiology of mental health problems (Campbell, 1998; Cuartas & Roy, 2019; Fowler et al., 2011). These approaches underscore the role of unequal and inequitable institutional policies and practices in negative individual and community outcomes (Li et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 1999). For example, structural understandings of youth mental health problems focus on the ways in which social and institutional processes contribute to mental health. Whereas structural approaches construe the mental health of youth involved in the legal system as the downstream implications of upstream systemic, processes (Ali & Sichel, 2014), conventional clinical approaches focus on youths' individual-level cognitive processes. Indeed, the clinical mental health treatments most commonly available for youth involved in the legal system are grounded in an assumption that mental health problems are linked to youths' attributions about themselves and past events, and are designed to address youths' universal, stable, and internal attributional styles (e.g., Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2017).

Some scholarly work suggests that the promotion of critical consciousness is associated with positive outcomes (e.g., vocational engagement, human immunodeficiency virus risk prevention; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Elkington, O'Grady, et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2019). And, community psychologists have long called for increasing critical consciousness as a means of addressing internalized oppression and thereby promoting positive outcomes such as mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Watts, 2004; Watts et al., 1999). However, it is possible that, while well-intentioned, community psychologists and others have overlooked and failed to attend to the potential costs of engaging in processes that increase critical consciousness. Developing critical consciousness may entail learning about one's own oppression and atrocities committed against oneself and others, including loved ones, community members, and ancestors, and is therefore likely to be at times painful. That is not to say that it is not important. However, to promote critical consciousness responsibly and ethically necessitates first understanding associations between processes such as system justification and personal mental health, so as to minimize potential harm.

Gender moderation of internalizing and externalizing behaviors

Demonstrating that system-justifying beliefs may be associated with better mental health for girls, but not boys, the current study reflects the complexity of understanding mental health as a downstream result of systemic, institutionalized disparities manifested at the individual level (Ali & Sichel, 2014). These results are partially consistent with the only other published work utilizing items from the Diffuse System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) with youth (Godfrey et al., 2017). In a sample of younger youth, Godfrey et al. (2017) found that system justification may be associated with better outcomes in the short-term but did not show gender differences. This could, at least in part, be attributable to differences in sample characteristics. First, our sample was older than the one described by Godfrey et al. (2017). Second, although both samples were drawn from youth from disenfranchised groups, previous research indicates that the gender differences in mental health symptomatology are more extreme among youth involved in the legal system. In comparisons of youth involved in the legal system and community-based samples, Cauffman et al. (2007) found that girls in detention had more acute symptomatology than would have been predicted based on gender or detention status alone. It is also possible that girls' experiences in the legal system further exacerbated their mental health problems, since historically it has disregarded and failed to address the needs of girls, even more so than those of boys' (Javdani et al., 2011b).

Previous community psychology research and theory construed gender as a sociostructural/contextual variable (e.g., Wasco & Bond, 2010). Building on this study, and extending previous scholarship establishing the existence of gendered institutional factors in the legal system that influence institutional outcomes (e.g., processing, and sentencing decisions; pro and dual arrests; the relabeling of offenses; Javdani et al., 2011b) our finding that system justification mattered for girls' but not boys' mental health may be understood as an example of gendered institutional processes affecting individual-level outcomes, such as personal mental health and behavior (Sichel et al., 2020).

Future research should examine the role of settings in associations between system-justifying attitudes and mental health; it is possible that system justification is associated with better mental health for girls in our sample, but not significantly related to mental health outcomes for boys, because of important differences in how girls and boys are treated by the legal system. For example, policies and practices in the juvenile legal system treat girls and boys differently; therefore, girls and boys have qualitatively different experiences of that system. Girls who view the system as unfair and voice these beliefs or act in dissenting ways may be more likely to be met with impunity, compared to boys (Acoca, 1998). Moreover, being justice-system-involved may have different social implications for girls and boys. For example, it may be more socially acceptable for boys to be seen as delinquent, compared to girls (Burson et al., 2019; Giordano, 1978). As such, for girls who are low on system justification, detention may function as a context that highlights inequality and inequity. Contrastingly, inequality and inequity may be masked for those who see the world as fair, corresponding to better mental health and supporting girls' ability to better survive detention (Sengupta et al., 2017). Perhaps then, the same relation between system justification and mental health would not hold in a community (e.g., school) sample. This could explain the discrepancy between our findings of gender moderation, and those of Godfrey et al. (2017).
Our findings are also consistent with the work of other scholars who have found support for the short-term associations between system-justifying beliefs and better outcomes for disadvantaged adults and those who report traumatic events (e.g., Harding & Sibley, 2013). For example, McCoy et al. (2013) found that system-justifying beliefs that imbue a sense of control over future outcomes may be beneficial for members of low-status groups. Similarly, O’Brien and Major (2003) found that system-justifying beliefs were associated with higher levels of wellbeing for members of low-status racial/ethnic groups who endorsed low levels of group identity. Therefore, perhaps the gender moderation of the association between mental health and system justification is related to girls' relatively lower status and bleaker prospects, in the legal system. As the current study examined the association between system justification and mental health cross-sectionally, future research should also investigate longitudinal associations between system-justifying beliefs and psychological and life-course outcomes. This is particularly important since it is possible that system-justifying beliefs may be correlated with negative outcomes for disadvantaged groups in the long term (Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Rankin et al., 2009).

Given the findings of the present study, future research addressing youths' system justification should further incorporate an intersectional lens attending to gender as a nonbinary variable, as well as race/ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. Although the life experiences of the youth in our study are undoubtedly affected by their system involvement in addition to their various intersectional identities, we did not examine the role of identity markers, including racial/ethnic variability, due to lack of statistical power. Regarding race/ethnicity specifically, even if we did have adequate power, there was a lack of racial/ethnic variability in our sample, which was comprised of primarily Black and Latine youth. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that poor youth and youth from racial/ethnic minority groups who have mental health problems are more likely to enter the child welfare and juvenile legal systems, while their White peers from higher socioeconomic groups tend to be funneled into the mental health care system (Jonson-Reid et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2017). Future work addressing youths' system justification and mental health should also consider protective factors that have been shown to be relevant to youth wellbeing, such as resilience. Based on the present findings, future research should begin to untangle these complexities by further exploring the correlates, mechanisms, and contexts through which individuals develop system-justifying beliefs, with a particular focus on gender, social determinants, and life experiences.

Implications for intervention

The importance of social determinants in mental health is broadly understood, however, our findings indicate that what individuals believe about society may also matter, in addition to who they are (Spencer et al., 1997). This is consistent with structural understandings of the etiology of mental health and suggests novel avenues for intervention. For example, should system justification be related to better mental health in both the short and long term for girls, interventions could target girls who report low levels of system justification. Such gender-responsive interventions could entail acknowledging inequity, validating feelings of unfairness, promoting sociopolitical development, and providing opportunities for action and connection. Rather than targeting girls' cognitions about themselves or society, the goal of this approach would be to provide them with alternative experiences of themselves and their worlds, to build resiliency (previously shown to be associated with sociopolitical control; Zimmerman et al., 1999), and to decrease discrepancies such that there would be no significant difference in reported mental health problems between girls who endorsed high versus low levels of system justification. Such an approach would acknowledge the significance not only of social determinants but also of individuals' cognitions regarding those social determinants, to advance wellness and combat oppression (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003).

Limitations

Among the limitations of the current study is the fact that the associations described are correlational, not causal. Indeed, future work should attend to directionality and causality. It is possible, for example, that youths' mental health and cognitive tendencies predict their system justification. Although we found that the measure of system justification was sufficiently reliable in our overall sample, and for the boys in our study, Cronbach's α for girls was relatively low. Additionally, we attended only to the short-term associations between system justification and mental health, neglecting possible long-term implications. Future research should address the developmental trajectory of system-justifying attitudes to determine potential causal relations between system justification, mental health, and youths' life experiences, for youth who are members of marginalized as well as privileged groups in society. Other limitations come from our relatively small sample size, which may have contributed to the poor reliability of the scale for girls in our study. While the girls in our sample were more likely to report sexual minority status, there was a lack of power to examine differences based on sexual orientation. Similarly, as noted above, we did not have sufficient variability or power to examine the possible moderating role of racial/ethnic identity on the association between system justification and mental health for youth. Nor did we have a way of understanding how youths' previous experiences in settings, such as the juvenile legal system, may have affected their system-justifying beliefs and/or mental health. Additionally, the generalizability of our findings may be limited, as participating youth had
volunteered to take part in a program, and we had no way of establishing differences between those youth and other youth who declined to participate.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we asserted that, as a discipline that values social justice, health, and equity, community psychology should specifically consider links between individuals' understandings about structural and systemic inequality and inequity, and their mental health, particularly among members of marginalized and underserved populations. Our finding, that system justification was associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems for girls involved in the juvenile legal system but not boys, supports the importance of considering the social location and individual identity in examinations of the potentially complex connections between system justification and mental health. And, our work paves the way for future innovative research and intervention efforts. If processes like system justification may be associated with superior outcomes for some groups, we must do a better job understanding, acknowledging, and addressing the potential pain that may come when we endeavor to promote understandings of unfairness and inequity, thereby potentially transforming how individuals understand themselves and the world in which we all live.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

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