

BRIEF REPORT

Mere Exposure to Money Increases Endorsement of Free-Market Systems and Social Inequality

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The present research tested whether incidental exposure to money affects people's endorsement of social systems that legitimize social inequality. We found that subtle reminders of the concept of money, relative to nonmoney concepts, led participants to endorse more strongly the existing social system in the United States in general (Experiment 1) and free-market capitalism in particular (Experiment 4), to assert more strongly that victims deserve their fate (Experiment 2), and to believe more strongly that socially advantaged groups should dominate socially disadvantaged groups (Experiment 3). We further found that reminders of money increased preference for a free-market system of organ transplants that benefited the wealthy at the expense of the poor even though this was not the prevailing system (Experiment 5) and that this effect was moderated by participants' nationality. These results demonstrate how merely thinking about money can influence beliefs about the social order and the extent to which people deserve their station in life.

Keywords: money, free market, social inequality, system justification

Money has far-reaching effects on individuals, groups, and societies. There are well-documented relationships between economic factors and consequential outcomes such as health and happiness (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2004). For instance, people report being happier when national income inequality is low, as opposed to high (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011). Yet, even though most Americans claim they would prefer less wealth inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011), they often oppose policies (such as redistributive taxes) that would reduce such inequality (Bartels, 2005). In the present research, we used experimental methods to

systematically test whether merely activating the concept of money could affect people's beliefs about the appropriate structure of the social world. We predicted that making salient the concept of money would strengthen support for free-market systems, thereby bolstering endorsement of existing social hierarchies and inequality. Prior work has found that the mere presence of money produces behaviors that would likely bring rewards to individuals, such as persistent and dedicated pursuit of personal goals (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006, 2008). In the present work, we addressed the novel question of whether reminders of money could have a more far-reaching influence on beliefs about the social order and the extent to which people deserve their station in life.

In many ways, money serves as a symbol of the free-market system (Deflem, 2003), so exposure to money should therefore increase endorsement of this system. This hypothesis is in line with nearly two decades of work on system justification theory that has delineated the ways in which people are motivated to believe that existing political, social, and economic structures are legitimate and fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). An underlying principle of system justification as it pertains to economic institutions is the belief that outcomes generated by market forces are inherently fair (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003). In the United States, paper currency not only embodies political (e.g., images of presidents) and religious (e.g., "In God We Trust") institutions but also serves more generally as a symbol of and vehicle for the functioning of its economic institution of free-market capitalism. Even implicit activation of the American system—such as brief exposure to the American flag—is sufficient to

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increase explicit endorsement of that system (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011).

Because money is a symbol of the American system of free-market capitalism, we predicted that exposure to money would increase system justification in general and the related constructs of belief in a just world (BJW), social dominance orientation (SDO), and fair market ideology (FMI). These constructs differ in descriptive content—BJW focuses on the justness of social outcomes, SDO focuses on the benefits of group-based hierarchy, and FMI focuses on the legitimacy of market-based procedures (Jost & Hunyady, 2005)—yet all reflect an implicit endorsement of an economic status quo that legitimizes socioeconomic differences (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Burgess, 2000). In Experiments 1–4, we explored the link between exposure to money and system justification, BJW, SDO, and FMI. In Experiment 5, we tested the hypothesis that the link between money and FMI would be so strong that it would bolster support for a free market for organ donations—even when it is not the prevailing system.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we tested whether reminders of money would increase system justification relative to reminders of a nonmoney construct.

Method

Thirty adults from a university study pool (17 women; ages = 19–62, $M = 31.97$, $SD = 11.54$) participated online for a chance to win \$25. Participants assigned to the money condition saw a faint image of \$100 bills in the background of the instruction screen, whereas participants assigned to the control condition saw a blurred version of this image such that the bills were unrecognizable (see Figure 1). Following the instructions screen, participants indicated their age, gender, and ethnicity. They then completed the eight-item System Justification scale that measures perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of the prevailing social system in the United States (Kay & Jost, 2003; e.g., “Most policies serve the greater good”; $\alpha = .88$). Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). On the basis of previous research (e.g., Lambert & Raichle, 2000), we suspected that numerous demographic variables could relate to system justification. Therefore, participants were also asked to report their political ideology, religiosity, and wealth.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the money condition more strongly endorsed system justification than did participants in the control condition, $t(28) = 2.12$, $p = .043$, $d = 0.80$ (see Table 1).¹

Experiment 2

Whereas we measured support for existing systems in general in Experiment 1, in Experiment 2 we assessed beliefs about individuals within those systems. Participants reported their BJW, a construct that captures the motivation to rationalize social injustice through strategies such as blaming the poor and unfortunate for their fate (Lerner, 1980).

Method

One hundred sixty-eight adults from the same study pool as in Experiment 1 (79 women; ages = 18–52, $M = 21.34$, $SD = 5.19$) participated in exchange for a candy bar. Participants first reported their age, gender, political ideology, religiosity, and wealth.

Next, participants completed a phrase descrambling task in which they formed grammatically correct phrases using four of five listed words. The control condition included 30 phrases conceptually unrelated to money. The money condition included 15 control phrases and 15 phrases related to money (e.g., “he has the capital”; Vohs et al., 2006). Then, participants completed the 20-item Belief in a Just World scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975; e.g., “Many people suffer through absolutely no fault of their own,” reverse scored; $\alpha = .68$) by rating each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the money condition reported stronger just-world beliefs than did participants in the control condition, $t(166) = 2.81$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.44$ (see Table 1).

Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we tested whether money would affect attitudes about the plight of poor and unfortunate groups. The Social Dominance Orientation scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) measures preferences for hierarchy and group-based discrimination in social systems. This concept differs from BJW in that it represents endorsement of the active domination and persecution of inferior groups (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Method

Eighty participants in a university dining hall (40 women; ages = 18–28, $M = 19.79$, $SD = 1.70$) completed a questionnaire in exchange for a candy bar. Participants completed the same demographic questions and descrambling task as in Experiment 2. Next, participants completed the 16-item Social Dominance Orientation scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to others”; $\alpha = .92$) by rating each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *very negative*; 7 = *very positive*).

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants in the money condition reported greater SDO than did participants in the control condition, $t(78) = 2.24$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.51$ (see Table 1).

Experiment 4

In Experiment 4, we sought to replicate and extend Experiments 1–3 by testing whether reminders of money would affect another

¹ Controlling for age, gender, political ideology, religiosity, and wealth did not alter the significance of the results of any of the experiments, and the money prime manipulation did not significantly interact with any of these variables.

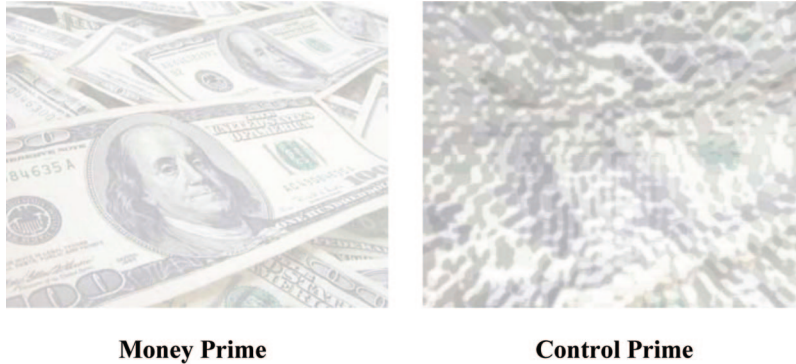


Figure 1. Images used for the money prime condition and control condition (Experiments 1, 4, and 5).

key component of system justification—belief in the fairness of free markets. Not only does money symbolize the free-market system for Americans, but reminders of money tend to activate concepts central to free-market principles more generally. For example, reminders of money increase feelings of self-sufficiency (e.g., Vohs et al., 2006), consistent with the idea that free markets grant people the outcomes that they work for and earn (Jost et al., 2003). In addition, when people allocate a *monetary* resource, they tend to do so using market pricing norms, whereas when people distribute a nonmonetary resource (e.g., food), they tend to do so in a more egalitarian fashion (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2010). Furthermore, workers who are paid hourly and are therefore constantly reminded of money (compared with nonhourly workers) are more likely to construe time as a resource in terms of supply and demand, a central free-market tenet (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007a, 2007b). Because thinking about money can lead people to act in accordance with free-market principles, we predicted that reminders of money would increase their stated endorsement of free-market economic systems.

In addition, we tested a possible moderator variable: participants' nationality. Compared with citizens of other countries, American citizens more frequently encounter U.S. dollar bills and have a stronger motivation to justify the U.S. economic system. Hence, we predicted that whereas Americans would endorse free-market capitalism more following U.S. currency primes than following nonmoney primes, non-Americans would not.

Method

Two hundred seventy-five participants from Amazon.com's mTurk marketplace (105 women; ages = 18–71, $M = 31.53$, $SD = 11.06$) completed a survey in exchange for \$0.25. Participants were exposed to the same image manipulation as in Exper-

iment 1. Next, participants indicated their age, gender, and nationality. They then completed the Fair Market Ideology scale (Jost et al., 2003), which measures the extent to which people endorse free-market economic systems (e.g., "The most fair economic system is a market system in which everyone is allowed to independently pursue their own economic interests"; $\alpha = .78$).

Results and Discussion

Participants in the money prime condition reported significantly higher FMI ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.98$) than did those in the control condition ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 271) = 14.63$, $p < .001$. In addition, we observed a significant interaction between money condition and nationality, $F(1, 271) = 10.22$, $p = .002$. Among Americans, those in the money prime condition reported significantly higher FMI ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 1.74$) than did those in the control condition ($M = -0.02$, $SD = 1.43$), $F(1, 271) = 14.85$, $p < .001$. Among non-Americans, there was no significant difference in FMI between those in the money prime condition ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.72$) and those in the control condition ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.91$), $F(1, 271) = 0.58$, $p = .447$.

Experiment 5

Experiment 4 demonstrates that activating the concept of U.S. dollars increases the belief in the fairness and efficiency of free-economic markets. In addition, it establishes an important moderator of this effect, nationality. In Experiment 5, we sought to extend these findings further by testing whether reminders of money increase support for existing systems in general or for free-market systems in particular. Because of the strong conceptual link between money and free-market principles, we predicted the latter.

Table 1
Means (and Standard Deviations) as a Function of Experimental Condition (Experiments 1–3)

Condition	Experiment 1: System justification	Experiment 2: Belief in a just world	Experiment 3: Social dominance orientation
Control	3.99 (1.19)	2.32 (0.44)	2.56 (1.24)
Money	4.96 (1.27)	2.53 (0.52)	3.20 (1.32)

Note. For each measure, means for the control and money conditions are different from each other at $p < .05$.

Method

Ninety-two adult visitors (48 women; ages = 19–75, $M = 38.20$, $SD = 14.19$) to a Chicago museum completed a computer-based questionnaire in exchange for candy. Participants were randomly assigned to the money or control condition and completed the demographic questions as in Experiment 4, and then completed two items from the System Justification scale (Kay & Jost, 2003: “Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve”; “American society needs to be radically restructured” reverse coded; $r[92] = .24$, $p = .021$) and two items from the FMI scale (Jost et al., 2003: “The free market economic system is a fair system”; “The free market economic system is an efficient system”; $r[92] = .70$, $p < .001$). Participants indicated their agreement on separate 11-point scales ($-5 = \text{completely disagree}$; $5 = \text{completely agree}$). The two items for each construct were averaged to form a measure of system justification and a measure of FMI.

Next, participants read about the current organ transplant system in the United States. They were told that because organs such as kidneys are in short supply, the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) uses a systematic formula to determine which patients get priority. In addition to assessing the likelihood that the transplant will work, this formula aims to ensure that the socially disadvantaged get preferential access to kidneys because they tend to lack other alternatives (such as dialysis) and therefore are most in need.

Participants then learned that although this is the existing system in the United States, in other countries there is a free market for organs. Just as wealthier and more successful people can afford to purchase relatively better medical care if they choose, in a free-market system anyone can buy or sell organs. Accordingly, priority does not necessarily go to those who are the most needy or disadvantaged, but to whoever can most afford to pay.

Participants read that UNOS occasionally consults with the public to evaluate existing policies. Using separate 10-point scales ($1 = \text{strongly oppose}$; $10 = \text{strongly support}$), participants evaluated the current American system as well as the alternative free-market system. These items served as our first measures of support for free-market versus nonfree-market systems. As an additional measure, participants then indicated which system they would choose as the prevailing system in the United States by choosing “The existing American system,” “The free market system,” or “Neither/No preference.” Last, participants reported their relative wealth, political ideology, and religiosity.

Results and Discussion

For system justification scores, we observed a marginally significant interaction between nationality and money condition, $F(1, 88) = 3.60$, $p = .061$. For FMI scores, we observed a significant interaction between nationality and money condition, $F(1, 88) = 6.93$, $p = .010$.² The money prime (compared with the control prime) increased both system justification and FMI among Americans, but not among non-Americans (see Table 2).

Crucial to our prediction that money would increase support for a specific free-market system among Americans, we next ran a mixed-model analysis of variance that treated participants’ continuous ratings of the existing American organ transplant system and free-market organ system as within-participants variables and nationality and money prime condition as between-participants vari-

ables. The only significant effect to emerge from this model was the predicted three-way interaction, $F(1, 88) = 8.17$, $p = .005$. Analyses among those who stated a preference on the forced-choice measure produced a similar interaction, consistent with hypotheses, $F(1, 57) = 4.19$, $p = .045$. As shown in Table 2, on both the continuous and dichotomous measures, Americans in the money condition showed a relatively stronger preference for the free-market system over the existing system, whereas non-Americans did not.

Responses from non-American participants showed the opposite pattern from those of American participants on all measures (see Table 2). Because this reversal was only statistically reliable on the relative preference for the existing system over the free-market system, and because key components of the experimental design were focused on America (e.g., U.S. dollars were used as the prime; the American system of organ donation was being evaluated; the dependent measure was the America-centric version of the System Justification Scale), we hesitate to draw strong conclusions from these patterns. However, we surmise that to the extent that some non-Americans possess unfavorable attitudes toward the American system of capitalism, reminders of this system may stimulate rejection (rather than endorsement) of it. Future research that tests directly the effect of national currency primes on endorsement of country-specific economic systems—for instance, priming rupees for Indian participants or yuan for Chinese participants—would be a welcome complement to the present work. (For a demonstration of how the characteristics of social systems in different countries can affect the relationship between system justification and the perceived fairness of those economic systems, see van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010.)

A related question is whether the present findings result from exposure to U.S. currency in particular or from thinking about money more generally. The fact that some of the studies here (Experiments 2 and 3) and elsewhere (DeVoe & Iyengar, 2010; Vohs et al., 2006) show converging effects by activating the concept of money in ways other than with images of currency suggests that exposure to currency per se is not necessary to produce differences in people’s beliefs or behavior. However, because U.S. currency includes numerous symbols of the American financial, political, and religious institutions, it is possible that U.S. currency is a particularly salient reminder of free-market principles and might therefore produce more potent effects than would other, generic money primes.

Taken together, the results of Experiment 5 demonstrate that money does not necessarily increase endorsement of the existing system (among Americans); rather, money specifically increased endorsement of a system based on principles of a free-market economy. That is, although reminders of money did increase stated endorsement of both system justification and FMI, the effect of money on FMI was of relatively greater magnitude than its effect on system justification, and American participants who were primed with money showed a relative preference for changing the existing organ transplant system (which was said to favor the

² The interactive effect of nationality and money condition on FMI was marginally significant when controlling for system justification, $F(1, 87) = 3.54$, $p = .063$; the interactive effect on system justification when controlling for FMI was not significant ($F < 1$).

Table 2
Means (and Standard Deviations) as a Function of Experimental Condition and Participant Nationality (Experiment 5)

Nationality	System justification	Fair market ideology	Relative preference for free-market system (continuous measure)	% choosing free-market system (forced-choice measure)
Non-Americans				
Control condition	-0.94 (1.82)	0.47 (2.27)	-0.47 (3.64)	25% (0.45)
Money condition	-1.70 (1.88)	-0.92 (2.72)	-3.58 (3.32)	14% (0.38)
Simple effects	$F(1, 88) = 1.02, p = .316$	$F(1, 88) = 2.39, p = .126$	$F(1, 88) = 4.91, p = .029$	$F(1, 57) = 0.31, p = .581$
Americans				
Control condition	-1.50 (2.26)	-0.36 (2.41)	-2.50 (3.52)	0% (0.00)
Money condition	-0.53 (1.94)	1.10 (2.29)	-0.77 (3.89)	37% (0.49)
Simple effects	$F(1, 88) = 3.61, p = .061$	$F(1, 88) = 5.84, p = .018$	$F(1, 88) = 3.35, p = .071$	$F(1, 57) = 8.02, p = .006$

disadvantaged) to a new system based on free-market principles (which was said to favor the advantaged).

General Discussion

Money can exert powerful effects on people's behavior. The present findings suggest that merely thinking about money can also have far-reaching effects on what beliefs people endorse. Previous work on this topic has shown that activating the concept of money leads to a self-sufficient state and attendant behaviors (Vohs et al., 2006, 2008). This psychological state, in which people focus on personal inputs and outputs, often accompanies a market-pricing mindset whereby interaction partners evaluate one another in transactional terms and with cost-benefit calculations (Fiske, 1991; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005). A feeling that people are (or should be) self-sufficient might help explain the belief that the most capable individuals within a society rise to the top on the strength of their own merit and that those who are least capable fall to the bottom on the weakness of their character, work ethic, or natural ability. Accordingly, as a symbol of free-economic markets (and the related concept of trade; Lea & Webley, 2006), money might lead people to apply beliefs about the functioning of economic markets to the functioning of social markets.

One such belief system is the philosophy encapsulated by Social Darwinism, which arose from an attempt to apply the laws of Darwinian evolution to human society. Because one of Social Darwinism's main tenets is that the relative social and cultural differences observed in human societies arise through marketlike selection processes that are similar to those that account for biological differences among other organisms (Spencer, 1860), this view takes the fact that a particular social group is successful as evidence that its members are better adapted to the current social and economic circumstances. Not incidentally, Social Darwinism and SDO have been cited as examples of ideologies "that imply that some people are not as 'good' as others and therefore should be allocated less positive social value than others" (Pratto et al., 1994, p. 741).

Such reasoning is consistent with existing theory and research that examines the factors that influence concern for the socially disadvantaged. One common theme that has emerged from this work is that of distance. For instance, cultures that are high in power distance tend to view inequality between high- and low-status individuals as a natural and beneficial component of the social system (Hofstede, 1980). Because an increased desire to distance oneself from others has been shown to arise following

reminders of money (Vohs et al., 2006), power (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012), and personal agency (Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011), feelings of distance may negatively affect people's sensitivity to the plight of others (e.g., Batson, 1991).

As a test of money's effect on feelings of distance and compassion toward others, we primed participants with a money or a nonmoney concept before they completed a measure of personal values (Schwartz Value Inventory; Schwartz, 1992). We found that participants who had been primed with money placed (a) a higher value on power, operationalized as the extent to which people accept and justify status differences in social life, and (b) a lower value on universalism, operationalized as the extent to which people appreciate and protect the welfare of others and natural resources. Other findings indicated that increased distance toward and decreased concern for others was further evidenced in participants' lower levels of empathy and compassion for people who were suffering, such as a homeless person and an alleged terrorist who was being starved (Baxter, 2010).

Conclusion

Although the mere presence of money has been shown to result in benefits to individuals, such as enhanced goal pursuit (Vohs et al., 2006), the present work revealed that the concept of money also elicits more favorable attitudes toward existing systems that favor the socially advantaged and legitimize social inequality. Given the importance of money in modern social life, and the political tensions that stem partly from opposing assumptions about the underlying causes of personal success and failure, understanding the effect that money has on human beliefs about how society itself should operate may point to underlying causes of such ideological differences. Our findings indicate that merely activating the concept of money in people's minds can alter their beliefs about the fundamental nature of the social world because money causes them to think that existing social structures—particularly those that result from the functioning of free markets—are appropriate and inherently fair. In doing so, this work paints a new picture of the construct of money, revealing how it can activate a belief that social structures that keep people in their place are not only justifiable but also desirable.

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