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Cold-hearted Cynics vs Concerned Citizens: Re-visiting the Notion of Social-Political Cynicism and Its Relationship to Citizenship

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Editor's note: this was judged the best paper presented at the Research Student Conference, 2007

Abstract

Social-political cynicism is usually defined in political psychology as a set of negativistic beliefs about the morality and/or benevolence of significant social actors. Previous studies have shown this kind of cynicism to be related to 'uncitizenlike' behaviours and phenomena, e.g. low social cohesion and absence from voting. This paper argues that a distinction should be made between at least two different kinds of social-political 'cynicism', depending on whether the 'cynic' accepts the perceived flaws in society with no emotional response or is disturbed by them. The paper presents survey data to demonstrate the existence of these two kinds of cynicism and their differential consequences to issues of citizenship mentioned above.

Introduction

The concept of social-political cynicism and its consequences in today's psychological literature

Social-political cynicism has been defined as a set of negativistic beliefs about significant actors (e.g. politicians, institutions, big companies, the media, etc.) in society, i.e. that these actors are not competent and /or are not acting honestly (Schyns et al, 2005; see also Singelis et al, 2003; Bond et al, 2004). The aim of the present paper is to reconsider this definition and show that there is indeed more to the phenomenon of cynicism than that. Social and political cynicism is an important topic in today's political psychology. It has been shown to be positively related to phenomena which are usually considered as non-desirable in modern democratic societies, like absence from voting (Fife-Schaw and Breakwell, 1990; Bynner and Ashford, 1994), loss of social cohesion (Schyns et al, 2005), and also more generally a lack of constructive problem solving regarding social issues (Moorman, 1991; Bond et al, 2004). Thus, it is important to understand why and how people can become cynical about the political, social, or economic system in their countries. If we accept the definition of cynicism prevalent in today's literature, than we find that it is conceptually very closely related to (by being the antithesis of) system justification.

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System justification

System justification theory is one of the major theories regarding intergroup perceptions and relations in today's social and political psychology (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004). The theory argues that since people are motivated to maintain the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980), they are also motivated to justify existing social, economical and political relations. This tendency of justification is also supported by social norms, ideology, and institutions. Since the first formulation of the theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994) many studies have shown that there is indeed a motivation in many people to justify the system, and a body of evidence has been accumulated about the causes, variations and consequences of this motivated social cognitive process, e.g. stereotypes of various social groups of different social status, outgroup favouritism, etc. Since system justification is not the focus of this paper, the reader is referred to Jost, Banaji and Nosek (2004) for a thorough overview. The point to be made here is that if we accept the established definition of social-political cynicism as it exists in the literature today, then it can be seen as an antithesis of system justification. One of two processes (system justification) involves positive, the other (cynicism) involves negativistic views and beliefs about existing social, political, and economic conditions as well as about significant actors creating, maintaining, and taking advantage of those conditions. Thus, system justification and social-political cynicism may be the opposite ends of the same dimension.

Revisiting the concept of cynicism

The present paper argues that such a view of cynicism is simplistic and fails to grasp important aspects of this phenomenon. Besides negativistic perceptions and beliefs, other factors may also be important, like one's prior expectations and one's reactions to his/her unfavourable experiences. Negativistic perceptions are very different if prior expectations were to the contrary than when one had no optimistic or idealistic expectations in the first place. One's reactions to these perceptions may vary a lot depending on prior expectations. Unfavourable perceptions regarding significant actors in society may be accompanied by strong emotional reactions if one had high expectations of these people, groups or institutions, while they can be regarded as the 'normal' or 'natural' way of things if one had no such expectations (and even more so if one had negative ones). It is easy to see that these hypothetical examples represent distinct sets of attitudes about as well as different emotional and perhaps even behavioural reactions to politics. One may also argue whether one or the other pattern of reactions to unfavourable perceptions fits the everyday notion of 'cynicism' better, and also if there are yet more patterns of 'cynicism' than these two. The study reported below was designed to test if the existence of different kinds of cynicism can be empirically validated.

Hypotheses

The present paper argues that there are at least two different kinds of social-political 'cynicism', based on the individual's reactions to perceived injustices and flaws in society, and that these two kinds of 'cynicism' lead to differential consequences in

citizenship-related views and behaviours such as voting and the endorsement of significant social values. Based on this argument, two hypotheses are formulated:

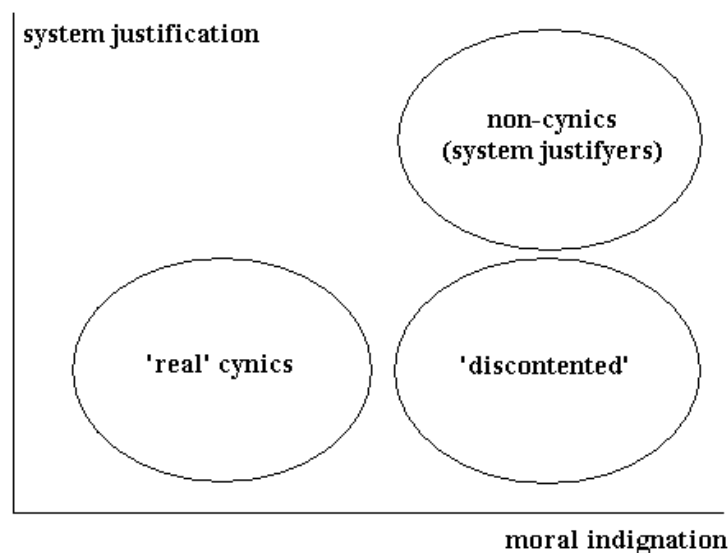
Hypothesis 1

In line with our reasoning above it was expected that three different clusters of individuals will be found based on two variables: (1) negativistic beliefs regarding significant political and social actors and (2) reactions to perceived moral infringements committed by these actors. The clusters expected were:

- a) Those who are not politically ‘cynical’ in the traditional sense of the word: they will be relatively high on system justification (having relatively positive beliefs about significant actors in society), and also high on moral indignation (having strong negative reactions when they perceive injustice);
- b) The ‘real’ cynics: low in system justification (having negativistic beliefs about significant social actors), and also low on moral indignation (not bothering much about perceived injustice);
- c) The ‘discontented’: low in system justification, but high in moral indignation – people who have negativistic beliefs about significant social actors but do care (react emotionally) when they perceive injustice.

A graphical depiction of the hypothesis and an overview of the hypothesised clusters can be seen in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. An overview of the hypothesised clusters



Hypothesis 2

It was also expected that individuals in the two clusters low in system justification (both high in 'cynicism' in the current literature's sense) would show significant differences in citizenship-related views and behaviours: the endorsement of significant social values and voting.

Method and measures

The study was part of a larger survey* conducted on a sample representative of the adult Hungarian population (N = 800). The survey package consisted of more than 20 questionnaires, of which five are of interest here.

System justification was measured with an eight-item scale developed by Kay and Jost (2003). A related measure was a shortened version of the Belief in a Just World Scale used by Dalbert (1999). This latter scale was included in the study to test the validity of the System Justification Scale: scores on the two scales should correlate positively. (See these two scales in the Appendix.) To measure reactions to perceived injustice, a Moral Indignation Scale was constructed. It consists of 20 items, all of which refer to some kind of immoral behaviour, and participants are asked to rate (from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much) how outraged they become if they perceive each behaviour. Some items were related to moral infringements committed by significant actors in society (i.e. politicians, big companies), while others were related to behaviours of 'average people' (e.g. free-riding, cheating on one's spouse, etc.). (For a complete list of the 20 items, see Table 1.) It was expected that items related to different kinds of moral infringements committed by different actors would form different factors in an orthogonal factor structure. Citizenship-related concepts were measured as voting behaviour (whether the participant voted in the last elections), and endorsement of significant social values (listed in the Results section). Values were measured with a questionnaire which asked participants to rate 12 different values as to how important each value was for them (from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Results

The reliability and validity of the System Justification Scale

The System Justification Scale by Kay and Jost (2003) proved to be a reliable measurement instrument, with an alpha coefficient of .80. The corrected item-total correlations ranged between .26 and .70. The shortened Belief in a Just World Scale (adapted from Dalbert, 1999) was also reliable, with an alpha of .88, and corrected item-total correlations ranging between .53 and .74. There was a significant positive correlation between the scores on the two instruments: $r = .55$, $p < .001$, confirming the validity of the System Justification Scale.

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The factor structure and reliability of the Moral Indignation Scale

A factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) was conducted on the Moral Indignation Scale to see if the factor structure predicted could be found. Indeed, a 3-factor solution could be interpreted that confirms the expectations. The three factors explain 46% of the total variance. Table 1 shows the factor loadings of each item.

Table 1. Factor loadings of the items in the Moral Indignation Scale

	Factor		
	1	2	3
Alpha coefficient of each factor:	.79	.77	.76
An entrepreneur makes a lot of money by cheating on taxes	.752	.252	
A company gets state subsidy illicitly	.747	.275	
A politician does not keep his/her promises to the electorate	.705		
A politician turns out to have been lying	.622		.282
A company deceives customers in their ad	.468		.295
Somebody appeals for and receives welfare benefits illicitly	.466	.297	
Somebody regularly uses the photocopy machine at his/her workplace for his/her private purposes		.782	
Somebody sneaks into a pay-to-view event (e.g. a concert), avoiding payment	.288	.731	
Somebody is cheating in a language exam		.654	.255
A private person is cheating on taxes in a small amount	.369	.619	
Somebody gets a job by pulling strings (relying on his/her connections instead of qualities)		.566	
Somebody is lying to his/her friends			.685
A shop assistant is cheating on a customer	.326		.648
Somebody does not offer his/her seat to a pregnant woman when travelling by public transport			.588
Somebody keeps a lost property without even trying to return it to the rightful owner		.280	.580
Somebody is jumping a queue			.525
Somebody is painting graffiti on renewed houses	.393		.509
Somebody is cheating on his/her partner (sexually)		.347	.451
Somebody gets the fruits from the neighbour's tree without the neighbour's permission		.419	.422
Somebody is putting his/her elderly parents into a nursing home.		.279	.390

Note: factor loadings lower than .25 are omitted.

As we can see, items loading high on the first factor referred to moral infringements committed by significant actors (e.g. politicians, entrepreneurs, big firms – with one exception of the case of unjustified welfare benefits) at the expense of the society or the community in general. The second factor consisted of items related to infringements which were committed by private individuals, and the 'targets' of which again were not specific individuals but a more general community. The third factor had high-loading items that were related to behaviour by private individuals affecting other private individuals. When treated as independent sub-scales, all factors had high reliability

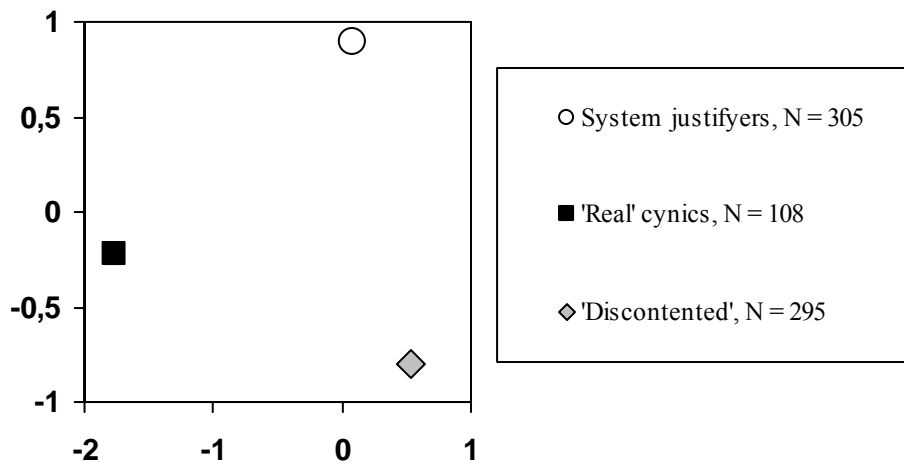
coefficients: alphas ranged between .76 and .79. Since the main topic of this paper is political cynicism, only the first factor was used in subsequent analyses, in the form of standardised factor scores of individual participants on this factor.

Different types of 'cynicism'

It was hypothesised that based on system justification (perceptions of social justice) and moral indignation (reactions to injustice) two clusters of different kinds of 'cynicism' would be found. Actually, the correlation between the scores on the System Justification Scale and the factor scores on the first factor of the Moral Indignation Scale was not far from zero, although it was significant, probably due to the large sample size: $r = -.10$, $p < .01$.

A K-means cluster analysis was conducted on the scores on the System Justification Scale and the factor scores on the first factor of the Moral Indignation Scale. In accordance with Hypothesis 1, a three-cluster solution was sought. The obtained solution confirmed the hypothesis, with the cluster centres largely replicating the predicted pattern. The only difference from the prediction was the fact that 'real' cynics scored a bit higher on system justification than the 'discontented' – perhaps they don't find society as unjust because they are less emotionally responsive to perceived injustice. The cluster centres can be seen in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Cluster centres based on system justification (vertical axis) and moral indignation related to moral infringements by significant social actors (horizontal axis).



Note: numbers on both axes represent standardized z-scores.

As it can be seen in Diagram 2, the three clusters were labelled as 'system justifiers' (relatively high on both measures – 305 participants belonged to this cluster), 'real cynics' (low to moderate on system justification, definitely low on moral indignation,

108 participants), and the 'discontented' (the lowest on system justification, but the highest on moral indignation, 295 participants). The presence of the last cluster is particularly interesting, as it represents a large group (about 42 per cent) of participants who would be labelled as 'cynics' if the now-established definition of the term were used, because they expressed negativistic views of their society. However, these participants are very different from the 'real' cynics, considering that while those in the latter cluster do not seem to care much about perceived injustice, members of the former cluster do report strong emotional reactions when they perceive moral infringements committed by significant actors in society.

Of course, an investigation of social-political cynicism cannot stop here. A K-means cluster analysis with three cluster centres to be found will of course necessarily produce three clusters of participants, and a cluster structure reminiscent of the proposed model might also be found by mere chance. Thus, in the next sections we will examine the validity of the clusters by testing Hypothesis 2 and looking for meaningful differences in voting behaviour and endorsement of social values between participants in the various clusters.

The validity of the different clusters 1. Voting

Participants were asked if they had voted in the last general parliamentary election (in 2002) prior to the survey (which was administered in early 2006). A comparison was made between participants in the three different clusters regarding the proportion of those who did vote. A 3x2 Chi-Square Test showed that there was indeed a highly significant difference between the three clusters ($X^2(2) = 21.220$, $p < .001$). Results can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Proportion of participants having voted in the last election in each of the three clusters.

			Voted in 2002?		Total
			No	Yes	
Cluster 'Discontented'	N	93	202	295	
	%	31.5%	68.5%	100.0%	
'System justifiers'	N	63	234	297	
	%	21.2%	78.8%	100.0%	
'Real cynics'	N	47	60	107	
	%	43.9%	56.1%	100.0%	
Total	N	203	496	699	
	%	29.0%	71.0%	100.0%	

The validity of the clusters 2. Social values.

Participants were also asked in the survey to rate 12 different social values (on 7-point scales) as to how important each value was for them. The list of the values to be rated encompassed a wide variety of significant social values: freedom, equality, tradition, modernity, the environment, order, democracy, tolerance, social security, the economy, authority, and religious faith. If cluster memberships reflect valid differences in social-political cynicism between participants, then we should expect 'real cynics' to score lower in generally all of these values. No such difference is expected between 'system justifiers' and the 'discontented'. As the results in Table 3 below show, precisely this was the case. Participants in this cluster gave the lowest mean rating for each of the 12 values. One-way analyses of variance showed that in 10 of these 12 comparisons the difference between clusters was significant at least at the $p < .05$ level. Post hoc tests (method: Tukey's B) were also conducted to examine pairwise differences between the clusters at the $p < .05$ level. In eight of the cases, 'real cynics' gave a significantly lower mean rating than participants in the other two clusters, while means in the latter two did not differ significantly from each other. In just one case (modernity) 'real cynics' gave significantly lower ratings than 'system justifiers' did, while the mean rating by 'discontented' participants was in-between and did not differ significantly from either of the two others.

Table 3. Differences between the clusters in the endorsement of different social values

	'System justifiers'	'Discontented'	'Real cynics'	Significance of the difference	Post hoc tests: significant differences between clusters ($p < .05$)
Freedom	6.50	6.34	6.27	$p < .05$	none
Equality	6.35	6.39	5.98	$p < .01$	R < S, D
Tradition	6.03	6.07	5.52	$p < .001$	R < S, D
Modernity	6.03	5.89	5.64	$p < .02$	R < S
Environment	6.52	6.55	6.20	$p < .01$	R < S, D
Order	6.48	6.59	6.40	n.s.	none
Democracy	6.40	6.39	5.89	$p < .001$	R < D, S
Tolerance	6.36	6.26	6.15	n.s.	none
Social security	6.58	6.69	6.38	$p < .01$	R < S, D
Economy	6.37	6.40	5.99	$p < .001$	R < S, D
Authority	5.97	6.05	5.59	$p < .01$	R < S, D
Religious faith	5.80	5.69	5.15	$p < .01$	R < D, S

Note: letters in the last column refer to the different clusters. S = 'system justifiers', D = 'discontented', R = 'real cynics'.

The validity of the clusters 3. Age.

The relationship between age and the key variables of the study (system justification and moral indignation) was also assessed, since age could be an important alternative explanation for the results (Elisabet Näsman & Alistair Ross, personal communication). If people become more cynical with age (due to e.g. more experience about society and politics, or to less idealism, or to less intensive emotional reactions, etc.), then the results may reflect an age effect instead of individual differences in views about and reactions to social and political issues.

However, age was only very weakly related – albeit significantly ($p < .01$) because of the large sample size – to both system justification and moral indignation: the correlations were .091 and .105, respectively. Moreover, as we can see, both weak relationships were positive, i.e. the *younger* participants tended to be *less* outraged when confronted with injustice and *less* in favour of the system. When the average age was compared across the three clusters found in the study by a one-way ANOVA ($F(2) = 7.372$, $p < .001$), the so-called ‘real’ cynics also tended to be somewhat *younger* ($M = 40.1$ years) than the ‘system justifiers’ ($M = 47.5$ years) and the ‘discontented’ ($M = 45.7$ years).

Conclusion and further work

In this paper, evidence was presented supporting the view that social-political cynicism cannot simply be identified as having negativistic views about significant social and political actors. There are important differences between at least two different types of ‘cynics’ – the ‘real cynics’ who don’t seem to care much about these negative perceptions, and the ‘discontented’ who do seem to care, and whom it is thus a question if we can label as ‘cynics’ at all. Further work is possible in at least four ways: a) by extending the study to cross-national comparisons; b) by investigating if there are other meaningful distinctions that can be made among socially and politically ‘cynical’ people (e.g. if ‘real cynics’ can be divided into ‘resigned’ vs ‘active’ cynics); c) by investigating the psychological dynamics of cynicism (e.g. whether it can be understood as a way of cognitive dissonance reduction); and d) by doing studies which investigate these questions with a different methodology (e.g. experiments).

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Appendix: instruments the items of which were not listed in the Results section

The System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003)

In general, you find society to be fair.
 In general, the Hungarian* political system operates as it should.
Hungarian society needs to be radically restructured.*
 Hungary** is the best country in the world to live in.
 Most policies serve the greater good.
 Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.
Our society is getting worse every year.
 Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

* = 'American' in the original version; ** = 'The United States' in the original version

Participants are asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 9-point scale.

Reverse items in *italics*

The Belief in a Just World Scale (shortened to eight items; adapted from Dalbert, 1999)

I think basically the world is a just place.
 I firmly believe that injustices in all areas of life (e.g. professional, family, politics) are the exception rather than the rule..
 I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice.
 I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve.

In my life injustice is the exception rather than the rule.
I believe that I usually get what I deserve.
I think that important decisions that are made concerning me are usually just.
I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair.

Participants are asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 6-point scale. No reverse items.