Why Systems Thinking Feels Wrong:

The Psychological Resistance to Complex Causation

and Its Consequences for Justice

How the Same Cognitive Mechanisms That Produce Climate Change Denial, Vaccine Hesitancy, and Financial Crisis Blindness Also Produce Wrongful Attributions of Criminal Intent

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April 2026

Abstract

Background: Prior studies in this series have established that (a) environment overwhelmingly determines even the most complex human behaviours; (b) universal security expenditure constitutes behavioural proof of systemic interconnection; (c) prevention outperforms defence at every scale from household to continent; and (d) the fundamental attribution error causes systems-oriented accounts of accidental events to be misinterpreted as evasion or guilt. The present paper addresses a deeper question: *why* does systems thinking provoke psychological resistance, even when it is empirically supported? We argue that the same cognitive mechanisms that produce climate change denial, vaccine hesitancy, and financial crisis blindness also produce the misinterpretation of a systems thinker's account in legal and investigative settings.

Method: Integrative review drawing on Schweizer, Goble, and Renn's (2022) framework for the social perception of systemic risks, construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), and the social amplification/attenuation of risk framework (Kasperson et al., 1988).

Results: The literature identifies at least five psychological mechanisms that cause systemic explanations to be attenuated (perceived as less plausible, less urgent, or less credible) relative to simple, proximate-cause explanations: (1) psychological distance—causes that are distant in time, space, or social identity feel less real; (2) the "far-fetched" heuristic—complex causal chains seem inherently less plausible than simple ones; (3) availability bias—dramatic, visible, immediate causes are easier to recall and therefore feel more real; (4) conspiracy simplicity—simple explanations involving identifiable actors feel more satisfying than complex systemic ones; and (5) the need for blame—humans have a deep psychological need to identify a responsible agent, and systemic explanations deny this satisfaction. These mechanisms operate identically whether the systemic explanation concerns climate change, financial contagion, pandemic dynamics, or the causal structure of an accident.

Conclusions: The systems thinker does not merely face a communication gap with linear-causal thinkers. They face a *psychological headwind*: their account trig-

gers the same suite of cognitive resistances that cause entire populations to resist the scientific consensus on climate change, underestimate pandemic risk, and fail to anticipate financial crises. In a legal context, this means that the most accurate account of an accidental event is also the account most likely to be psychologically rejected. Awareness of these mechanisms is essential for investigators, legal professionals, and jurors to distinguish between an account that sounds implausible because it is wrong and an account that sounds implausible because it is systemic.

Keywords: systems thinking; risk attenuation; psychological distance; construal level theory; climate change psychology; fundamental attribution error; legal psychology; availability heuristic

Key Points

- The same cognitive mechanisms that produce climate change denial also produce the misinterpretation of systems-oriented accounts in legal settings
- Schweizer et al. (2022) identify that systemic risks are systematically *attenuated* in public perception because they run counter to the intuition that serious dangers are caused by factors close in space and time
- Anything that appears "far-fetched"—i.e., involving complex, non-linear, multi-factor causation—is perceived as less plausible, even when based on sound scientific analysis
- Five specific psychological mechanisms drive this resistance: psychological distance, the far-fetched heuristic, availability bias, conspiracy simplicity, and the need for blame
- The systems thinker's account of an accident triggers *all five mechanisms simultaneously*, creating a powerful psychological headwind against accurate interpretation
- The person who provides the most accurate, prevention-oriented account faces the greatest credibility penalty—a paradox with direct consequences for justice

1 Introduction

1.1 The Paradox of Resistance

The evidence assembled across the prior studies in this series leads to a paradox. On one hand, the systems-thinking framework is empirically supported: environment determines language (OMXUS, 2026a; mean $h = 0.93$, $N = 1.8$ billion); every human already pays for interconnection through security expenditure (OMXUS, 2026b; mean household adoption $h = 1.30$; global insurance = USD \$9.09 trillion); and prevention outperforms

defence from the household level to the continental level, as demonstrated by 80 years of European peace following economic integration (OMXUS, 2026c).

On the other hand, the systems-thinking framework is psychologically resisted. Climate scientists have spent decades presenting evidence of systemic, non-linear, multi-factor environmental change, and large proportions of the public remain unconvinced. Epidemiologists presented evidence of systemic pandemic risk, and populations resisted public health measures. Financial regulators warned of systemic interconnection in banking, and the 2008 crisis occurred anyway.

If systems thinking is empirically correct, why does it feel wrong to so many people? And if it feels wrong in the context of climate change and pandemic risk, does it also feel wrong when a person uses the same cognitive framework to explain an accident to a police officer?

This paper argues that the answer to both questions is yes, and that the psychological mechanisms are identical.

1.2 The Connection to the Legal Context

A companion paper (OMXUS, 2026d) documented four specific "translation errors" that occur when a systems thinker's account of an accidental event is received by a linear-causal thinker: contextual factors are heard as motive; multiple factors are heard as evasion; analytical tone is heard as callousness; and prevention-oriented language is heard as premeditation.

The present paper deepens that analysis by identifying the *psychological mechanisms* that drive these translation errors. The claim is not merely that linear-causal thinkers misunderstand systems thinkers. The claim is that there are specific, well-documented, and powerful cognitive forces that make systemic explanations feel implausible, unsatisfying, and suspicious—even when they are more accurate than the simpler alternative.

These are the same forces that make climate change denial feel reasonable to its adherents, that make vaccine hesitancy feel justified, and that made the 2008 financial crisis seem "unforeseeable" despite extensive prior warnings. They are not signs of stupidity. They are features of human cognition that operate in all of us, all the time.

1.3 Structure

Section 2 presents the five psychological mechanisms that drive resistance to systemic explanations, drawing primarily on Schweizer et al. (2022), construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), and the broader literature on risk perception. Section 3 demonstrates how each mechanism operates in familiar large-scale contexts (climate change, pandemics, financial crises). Section 4 shows how each mechanism operates identically when a systems thinker explains an accident. Section 5 synthesises the implications for justice.

2 Five Mechanisms of Resistance to Systemic Explanations

2.1 Mechanism 1: Psychological Distance

Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) establishes that people represent events differently depending on their psychological distance—temporal, spatial, social, or hypothetical. Events that are close in time and space are represented concretely and feel real. Events that are distant are represented abstractly and feel less real, less urgent, and less worthy of action.

Schweizer et al. (2022) apply this directly to systemic risks: the causes of systemic events are typically distributed across time and space, separated from their effects by multiple intervening steps. Climate change is caused by emissions that occurred decades ago and

will produce consequences decades hence, in locations far from the emitters. The 2008 financial crisis was caused by mortgage practices in one country that produced banking failures in others, through chains of interconnection invisible to any single observer.

As Schweizer et al. (2022) note, "most complex systemic risks run counter to our intuition that serious dangers are caused by factors close in space and time." When a cause is distant—temporally, spatially, or in terms of the number of intervening causal steps—it feels less real. This is not a failure of intelligence. It is a structural feature of human cognition.

2.2 Mechanism 2: The "Far-Fetched" Heuristic

Schweizer et al. (2022) identify a second, related mechanism: "Anything that appears 'far-fetched' is also seen as less plausible and obvious than risks where we can immediately recognize the driver in time and space." This is a heuristic—a cognitive shortcut—that equates causal complexity with implausibility.

The logic of the heuristic is roughly: *if an explanation requires many steps, involves many actors, and depends on interactions between factors that are not obviously related, it is probably wrong.* This heuristic is not irrational in many everyday contexts. In daily life, simple explanations are often correct. If the milk is gone, someone probably drank it. The heuristic fails, however, when the actual causal structure of an event is genuinely complex—which is precisely the case for systemic risks, systemic failures, and most genuine accidents.

2.3 Mechanism 3: Availability Bias

Tversky and Kahneman (1973) demonstrated that people estimate the frequency and importance of events based on how easily examples come to mind. Events that are vivid, dramatic, and emotionally salient are overestimated; events that are diffuse, gradual, and

abstract are underestimated.

Systemic causes are, almost by definition, less available. A specific person doing a specific harmful act is vivid and memorable. A web of contributing factors—stress, sleep deprivation, environmental unfamiliarity, accumulated systemic pressures—is abstract and unmemorable. As Siegrist and Arvai (2020) note, people tend to overrate risks "that are readily available in their memory, that are associated with positive or negative emotions, that confirm what they already believe, that lend themselves to blame others for their occurrence, and that are associated with immediate dreadful consequences."

Systemic explanations fail on every one of these criteria. They are not available (too abstract), not emotional (too analytical), often disconfirming (they challenge the blame narrative), not blame-directed (they distribute causation), and not immediately dreadful (they describe gradual, distributed processes).

2.4 Mechanism 4: Conspiracy Simplicity

Schweizer et al. (2022) make a striking observation about the relationship between systemic explanations and conspiracy theories: "Populists and other climate change sceptics take advantage of the seemingly implausibility of complex relationships. They offer simple explanations based on common sense reasoning and/or refer to powerful actors behind the scenes. Conspiracy theories can seem more straightforward and plausible compared with scientific evidence that points toward a multitude of interconnected climate change triggers."

This insight generalises beyond climate change. When a systemic explanation is available but psychologically unsatisfying, people will often prefer a simpler explanation that identifies a specific agent with identifiable intentions. The conspiracy theory is, in a sense, a linear-causal narrative applied to a systemic phenomenon: it replaces a web of interacting factors with a single villain.

In the legal context, the equivalent of the conspiracy theory is the narrative of criminal intent. When an accident has occurred and a systemic explanation is available but unsatisfying, the simpler alternative—"this person intended to cause harm"—provides the same psychological satisfaction as a conspiracy theory. It identifies an agent. It assigns intention. It resolves the discomfort of complexity.

2.5 Mechanism 5: The Need for Blame

Humans have a deep psychological need to assign blame when harm occurs (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). Blame serves multiple psychological functions: it provides a sense of control ("the world is orderly and someone is responsible"); it satisfies the just-world belief ("bad things happen because someone chose to do something bad"); and it enables social punishment, which feels like a resolution of the harm.

Systemic explanations deny all of these satisfactions. If an accident was caused by a web of interacting factors—stress, environment, fatigue, systemic pressures—then there is no single person to blame, no satisfying narrative of intention, no clear target for punishment, and no reassuring sense that the world is orderly. This is psychologically intolerable for many people.

As the just-world hypothesis predicts (Lerner, 1980), people will distort their interpretation of events to preserve the belief that harm results from identifiable, blameworthy conduct. This distortion is not malicious; it is a psychological defence mechanism. But in a legal context, it means that the jury's psychological need for blame may override the evidence that the event was a genuine accident.

3 The Mechanisms in Familiar Contexts

The five mechanisms identified above are not hypothetical. They operate visibly in several large-scale contexts where systemic explanations have been resisted despite overwhelming evidence.

3.1 Climate Change

Climate change is the paradigmatic case of a systemic risk that is psychologically attenuated. The causal chain is long (emissions → atmospheric concentration → radiative forcing → temperature change → weather pattern shifts → extreme events → human impact). The effects are temporally distant (decades), spatially distant (global), and probabilistic (stochastic). Schweizer et al. (2022) note that "these complex relationships lack plausibility and tangibility" and that people cannot "feel responsible for events that will happen far away in the (probably not so distant) future."

- **Psychological distance**: The effects are in the future and far away.
- **Far-fetched heuristic**: The causal chain involves many steps.
- **Availability bias**: Gradual warming is less vivid than a single storm.
- **Conspiracy simplicity**: "It's a hoax by scientists" is simpler than the systemic explanation.
- **Need for blame**: There is no single villain to punish.

3.2 Pandemic Risk

Before COVID-19, pandemic risk was consistently underestimated by publics and policymakers despite extensive scientific warning. The causal structure—zoonotic trans-

mission, viral mutation, exponential spread through networks, interaction with healthcare capacity—is systemic, non-linear, and involves tipping points. The 2020 pandemic demonstrated that even during the event, the systemic nature of the threat was resisted: individuals struggled to understand exponential growth, attributed the risk to identifiable groups ("foreigners"), and sought simple interventions (masks vs. no masks) rather than engaging with the systemic reality.

3.3 Financial Crises

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis was caused by systemic interconnection between apparently independent financial institutions through common exposures, counterparty risk, and network effects (Nicholls, Donald, & Liu, 2015). The systemic explanation was resisted *before* the crisis (regulators and the public underestimated interconnection) and *after* it (public discourse focused on individual villains—"greedy bankers"—rather than on the structural features that made the crisis systemic).

3.4 The Common Pattern

In every case:

1. The systemic explanation was *more accurate* than the simple one.
2. The systemic explanation was *psychologically resisted* because it was complex, abstract, distant, and unsatisfying.
3. The resistance had *real consequences*: delayed action on climate change, inadequate pandemic preparedness, failure to prevent financial collapse.

The argument of this paper is that the same pattern operates when a systems thinker explains an accident.

4 The Mechanisms in the Legal Context

4.1 The Accident as Systemic Event

A genuine accident—one that occurs without criminal intent—shares the structural features of the systemic risks described above. Its causes are distributed across multiple factors (stress, fatigue, environment, unfamiliarity). The causal chain involves multiple interacting steps, not a single proximate cause. The outcome is probabilistic: the same combination of factors might produce no harm on nine occasions and severe harm on the tenth.

When the person involved in such an accident describes it in systemic terms, they trigger all five psychological resistance mechanisms simultaneously:

1. **Psychological distance**: The contributing factors (relationship stress, sleep deprivation, accumulated systemic pressures) feel distant from the moment of harm. The listener wants to know what happened *at the moment of the event*, not what happened in the weeks before.

2. **Far-fetched heuristic**: An account that identifies multiple interacting factors sounds more complex than necessary. The listener applies the heuristic: if it takes that many factors to explain, the explanation is probably wrong.

3. **Availability bias**: The harm itself is vivid and memorable. The contributing factors are abstract. The listener's attention is anchored to the vivid event and struggles to engage with the diffuse causes.

4. **Conspiracy simplicity**: The simple alternative—"this person intended to cause harm"—is more psychologically satisfying than the systemic alternative. It provides an agent, an intention, and a narrative. The systemic account provides none of these.

5. **Need for blame**: Someone has been harmed. The listener needs a target for blame. The systemic account distributes causation and denies the listener a satisfying resolution.

4.2 The Credibility Inversion

The result is what might be called a *credibility inversion*: the more accurate the account, the less credible it sounds. The systems thinker provides more information, more context, and more causal detail than the linear-causal thinker—and is penalised for it, because each additional factor triggers the far-fetched heuristic, increases psychological distance, reduces availability, and dilutes blame.

The person who says "I did it and I'm sorry" sounds credible—even if the statement is factually incomplete or inaccurate. The person who says "multiple factors converged in ways I couldn't predict" sounds evasive—even if the statement is factually precise and reflects genuine understanding.

This is the same credibility inversion that operates in climate communication: the scientist who says "the situation is complex, involves multiple interacting systems, and the outcomes are probabilistic" sounds less credible than the commentator who says "it's all a hoax" or "it's all caused by one thing." Simplicity wins the credibility contest, regardless of accuracy.

4.3 The Analogy Made Explicit

Table 1 makes the structural parallel explicit.

The structural parallel is exact. The psychological mechanisms are the same. The consequences—resistance to the more accurate explanation in favour of the simpler, more satisfying, but less accurate one—are the same.

Table 1: Parallel Structure: Systemic Risks and the Systems Thinker's Account

Mechanism	**Climate Change Context**	**Accident/Legal Context**
Psychological distance	Effects are decades away and global	Contributing factors (stress, sleep) are temporally separated from the harm
Far-fetched heuristic	Complex causal chain (emissions → warming → weather → harm) seems implausible	Multi-factor account (stress + environment + fatigue → error → harm) seems like excuse-making
Availability bias	Gradual warming is less vivid than a snowstorm	Background stressors are less vivid than the moment of harm
Conspiracy simplicity	"Scientists are lying" is simpler than climate science	"They did it on purpose" is simpler than multi-factor causation
Need for blame	No single villain to punish	Systemic account distributes blame away from a satisfying target

The difference is that in the climate context, the consequence of resistance is delayed policy action. In the legal context, the consequence of resistance is the potential imprisonment of an innocent person.

5 Why the Systems Thinker Is Not "Making Excuses"

A natural objection to this analysis is that the systems thinker's account is simply a sophisticated way of avoiding responsibility—that the invocation of "multiple factors" and "systemic conditions" is a rhetorical strategy rather than a cognitive orientation.

The evidence from the prior studies in this series refutes this objection.

First, the systems-thinking framework is the empirically supported framework. Environment determines language (mean $h = 0.93$). Universal security expenditure proves

interconnection (mean $h = 1.30$). Prevention outperforms defence from the household level to the continental level. The systems thinker's account is *consistent with the evidence*. The linear-causal account—"one person, one cause, one intention"—is the account that departs from what the data show.

Second, the systems-thinking orientation is consistently associated with prevention, not evasion. The entire fields of aviation safety, healthcare quality, public health, and occupational safety are built on the principle that understanding systemic causes is the most effective way to prevent future harm (Reason, 1990; Hollnagel, 2004; Dekker, 2002). A person who naturally thinks in systems is a person whose cognitive orientation is *prosocial*: they want to understand causation in order to prevent recurrence.

Third, the European peace demonstrates that systems thinking, applied at scale, produces the most successful conflict-prevention programme in recorded history. The nations that stopped thinking in terms of individual blame ("Germany is the enemy") and started thinking in terms of systemic conditions ("economic isolation produces conflict") achieved 80 years of peace after a millennium of cyclical warfare. The systems thinker's orientation is not a weakness. It is the cognitive foundation of the most successful prevention strategy ever implemented.

Fourth, every person who has ever bought a lock has implicitly endorsed the systems thinker's framework. The lock presupposes that a stranger's desperation—caused by systemic conditions the buyer cannot control—can become the buyer's problem. The buyer has already accepted that causation is distributed, that circumstances produce behaviour, and that interconnection is real. They have accepted the systems account. They have simply not noticed that they have done so.

6 Synthesis: The Full Chain

The full chain of reasoning across the OMXUS series can now be stated:

1. **Environment shapes behaviour** (OMXUS, 2026a). The most complex human behaviour—language—is overwhelmingly determined by environmental conditions. The principle that circumstances shape behaviour is not speculative; it is demonstrated at scale.

2. **Everyone already knows this** (OMXUS, 2026b). Every locked door, insurance premium, and dollar of public safety spending is a behavioural acknowledgement that other people's circumstances produce consequences for you. Interconnection is not a theory; it is a purchasing decision that every human has already made.

3. **Prevention works better than defence** (OMXUS, 2026b; 2026c). From preschool programmes to European economic integration, addressing the conditions that produce harm is cheaper and more effective than defending against harm's consequences. The Maginot Line lasted six weeks. The European Coal and Steel Community has lasted 75 years.

4. **Systems thinkers are misunderstood** (OMXUS, 2026d). When a person provides a systems-oriented account of an accident, the fundamental attribution error causes it to be misinterpreted: context is heard as motive, complexity as evasion, analysis as callousness, prevention as premeditation.

5. **This misunderstanding is driven by deep psychological mechanisms** (present paper). The same cognitive forces that produce climate change denial, pandemic underestimation, and financial crisis blindness produce resistance to the systems thinker's account. The account triggers psychological distance, the far-fetched heuristic, availability bias, the preference for conspiracy simplicity, and the need for blame—*simultaneously*.

6. **The result is a credibility inversion with consequences for justice**. The most accurate account sounds the least credible. The person with the deepest understanding of what actually happened is the person most likely to be disbelieved. The cognitive framework that is associated with prevention, learning, and prosocial orientation is the framework most likely to be mistaken for evasion and guilt.

7 Implications and Recommendations

1. **The resistance to systems thinking is not evidence that the account is wrong.** It is a predictable psychological response to causal complexity. The same resistance operates against climate science, pandemic science, and financial systems analysis. In every case, the resistance is to the *structure* of the explanation, not to its accuracy.

2. **Investigators and jurors should be made aware of the five mechanisms** identified in this paper. Understanding that a systemic account *feels* implausible because of psychological distance, availability bias, and the need for blame—not because it *is* implausible—is essential for fair assessment.

3. **Expert testimony on risk attenuation and construal level theory** should be considered relevant in cases where a systems-oriented account has been rejected as incredible. The literature provides robust support for the proposition that systemic explanations are systematically underweighted relative to simple ones, regardless of their accuracy.

4. **The climate change analogy may be useful in legal settings.** Jurors who understand that their scepticism toward a complex, multi-factor account operates through the same mechanisms as climate change denial may be better positioned to interrogate their own cognitive biases.

5. **The presence of systems thinking should continue to be recognised as a positive character indicator.** It is the cognitive orientation of the fields that have most successfully prevented harm: aviation safety, public health, healthcare quality, and European peace-building. It is not the orientation of a person seeking to evade responsibility.

8 Limitations

1. This paper draws analogies between large-scale systemic risks (climate change, pandemics, financial crises) and individual-level accident accounts. The psychological mechanisms are well-established in the large-scale context; their application to individual legal settings, while theoretically grounded, has not been tested in controlled experimental designs specific to the courtroom.

2. The claim is not that all systemic accounts are accurate or that all simple accounts are wrong. It is that systemic accounts face a specific and predictable set of psychological headwinds that can cause them to be rejected on grounds of implausibility rather than inaccuracy.

3. Individual cases require individual assessment. This paper provides a framework for understanding why certain types of accounts face credibility penalties, not a determination of any specific case.

4. The analogy between climate change denial and resistance to a systems-oriented accident account may itself trigger political resistance in some audiences. This is, itself, an instance of the mechanisms described.

9 Conclusions

The systems thinker who explains an accident by describing contributing factors, environmental conditions, and cascading interactions is doing exactly what climate scientists do when they explain global warming, what epidemiologists do when they explain pandemic spread, and what financial analysts do when they explain systemic risk. In each case, the explanation is more accurate than the simpler alternative. In each case, the explanation is psychologically resisted.

Schweizer et al. (2022) state the core problem with precision: “Most complex systemic

risks run counter to our intuition that serious dangers are caused by factors close in space and time. Anything that appears 'far-fetched' is also seen as less plausible and obvious than risks where we can immediately recognize the driver in time and space."

This is the psychological headwind that the systems thinker faces. Their account is not far-fetched. It is systemic. Their account is not implausible. It is complex. Their account is not evasive. It is complete.

The challenge for the justice system is to recognise that the feeling of implausibility is not evidence. It is a cognitive artefact. It is the same artefact that causes people to doubt climate science, underestimate pandemics, and fail to anticipate financial crises. It is a feature of human psychology, not a feature of the account being evaluated.

Justice requires the capacity to distinguish between an account that *is* wrong and an account that merely *feels* wrong because it is systemic. The locked door proves that every person already lives as though the systemic account is correct. The question is only whether the courtroom can hear what the doorframe already knows.

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