

The Problem Is the Answer:

Why the Illusion of Separation Feels Like

Control

and Why Seeing the System Gives You the

Real Thing

OMXUS Research Initiative

research@omxus.com

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Abstract

Background: This paper synthesises a series of companion studies demonstrating that human lives are systemically interconnected, that environment determines behaviour at every scale and income level, and that prevention consistently outperforms defence. Despite the strength of this evidence, resistance to the framework persists. This paper examines why.

Argument: The primary barrier to accepting systemic interconnection is not intellectual but psychological. The belief in individual separability—that one’s outcomes are determined primarily by one’s own choices, and that others’ circumstances need not affect you—functions as a control mechanism. This belief is maintained through well-documented cognitive biases, including the just-world fallacy, the fundamental attribution error, and the illusion of control. Accepting interconnection appears to threaten personal agency: if the system shapes outcomes, then I am not in charge.

This paper argues that this fear is backwards. The belief in separation was never providing real control—it was providing the *feeling* of control while the system operated on the individual without their awareness or consent. Every lock purchased, every insurance premium paid, every tax dollar spent on policing constituted implicit proof that the individual already knew they were not separate. They were simply paying to maintain the illusion.

Resolution: Seeing the system does not remove control. It relocates it. The person who understands that 20 entities produce 35% of emissions has more control than the person who recycles and hopes for the best. The society that understands early intervention returns \$12.90 per dollar has more control than the society that builds more prisons. The nation that invests in its neighbours’ prosperity has more control than the nation that builds a bigger army. In every case documented across this series, systemic understanding produces better outcomes, at lower cost, with greater agency—not less.

The problem and the solution are the same thing: interconnection. Seen through fear, it is the problem. Seen with clarity, it is the answer.

Keywords: just-world fallacy; illusion of control; fundamental attribution er-

ror; systemic interconnection; prevention; agency; cognitive bias

Key Points

- The primary barrier to accepting systemic interconnection is psychological, not intellectual
- The just-world fallacy, fundamental attribution error, and illusion of control work together to maintain the belief that individuals are separable from the system
- This belief provides the *feeling* of control, not actual control—as evidenced by the universal purchase of locks, insurance, and security
- Accepting interconnection does not reduce personal agency; it increases it by revealing where the actual levers of change are located
- Every intervention documented in this series—Perry Preschool, Housing First, European integration, climate accountability—delivered more control, not less, through systemic understanding
- The problem (interconnection seen with fear) and the solution (interconnection seen with clarity) are the same phenomenon viewed from different psychological positions

1 Introduction: The Resistance

This series of companion studies has presented the following evidence:

1. Environment determines behaviour, demonstrated across 1.8 billion people and 8 nations through the universal environmental determination of language (OMXUS, 2026a).
2. All human lives are systemically interconnected, demonstrated through universal security expenditure exceeding 9% of global GDP (OMXUS, 2026b).

3. Prevention outperforms defence at every scale, demonstrated through 80 years of peace among economically integrated European states (OMXUS, 2026c).
4. The environmental framework applies at every income level, demonstrated through the U-shaped distribution of dysfunction across socioeconomic strata (OMXUS, 2026d).
5. There is no opt-out from the system’s consequences, demonstrated through concentrated industrial emissions and planetary environmental degradation (OMXUS, 2026e, 2026f).

The evidence is robust. The data are publicly available. The logic is straightforward. And yet, the framework encounters persistent resistance.

This paper asks: why?

And it argues that the answer to “why do people resist this?” is also the answer to “what do we do about it?”—because the resistance and the solution share the same root.

2 The Illusion: Why Separation Feels Like Safety

2.1 The Just-World Hypothesis

The just-world hypothesis, first described by Lerner (1980), is the belief that the world is fundamentally fair—that people generally get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. If someone is suffering, there must be a reason rooted in their own actions or character.

This belief is not merely a philosophical position. It is a *psychological survival mechanism*. Lerner demonstrated that the just-world belief serves a crucial function: it makes the world feel predictable and controllable. If outcomes are determined by personal choices,

then I can protect myself by making good choices. If the poor are poor because of their decisions, then I will not become poor because I will make better decisions. If the crime victim was in the wrong place at the wrong time because of their own negligence, then I will not be victimised because I will be more careful.

The just-world belief converts a terrifying truth—that bad things can happen to anyone, including me, regardless of my choices—into a manageable fiction: bad things happen to people who earn them.

2.2 The Fundamental Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), described in detail in a companion study (OMXUS, 2026g), reinforces the just-world belief by providing its operating mechanism. When observing another person’s misfortune, the default human tendency is to attribute the cause to the person’s character or choices (dispositional factors) rather than to their circumstances (situational factors).

“They’re homeless because they’re lazy.” “They committed a crime because they’re bad.” “They’re addicted because they’re weak.” Each of these attributions performs the same psychological function: it locates the cause of the outcome inside the individual, thereby preserving the observer’s belief that the same outcome cannot happen to them.

If homelessness is caused by laziness, and I am not lazy, then I am safe. If crime is caused by bad character, and I have good character, then I am safe. The attribution error is not a minor cognitive quirk. It is the mechanism by which the just-world belief is maintained in the face of daily contradictory evidence.

2.3 The Illusion of Control

The illusion of control, described by Langer (1975), is the tendency for people to believe they have more influence over outcomes than they actually do. Combined with the just-world belief and the fundamental attribution error, it produces a powerful psychological triad:

1. The world is fair (just-world hypothesis)
2. Bad outcomes are caused by bad choices (fundamental attribution error)
3. I can prevent bad outcomes by making good choices (illusion of control)

This triad is psychologically comforting. It is also empirically false. The data presented throughout this series demonstrate that outcomes are substantially determined by environmental conditions—conditions that the individual did not choose and often cannot control.

But here is the critical insight: **the triad's comfort is precisely what makes it resistant to evidence.** Accepting the systemic framework means accepting that:

- The world is not inherently fair
- Bad outcomes can happen to good people because of conditions beyond their control
- Individual choices, while meaningful, operate within constraints set by the system

This feels like losing control. It feels like vulnerability. It feels like there is nothing you can do.

And that feeling is the barrier.

3 The Truth: You Never Had the Control You Think You're Losing

The central argument of this paper is that the feeling of control provided by the separation illusion is not, and has never been, actual control.

The evidence is in your home.

3.1 The Lock

You have a lock on your door. You purchased it because you know—at the level of action, if not belief—that another person's desperation can become your problem. The lock is proof that you do not actually believe in separation. You *behave* as though you are connected to the system, even while you *believe* you are not.

The lock does not give you control over the conditions that produce crime. It gives you the feeling of safety while those conditions continue to operate. The person whose desperation you are locking out tonight will try another door, or another night, or another neighbourhood. The system has not changed. You have merely redirected one instance of its output.

3.2 The Insurance Premium

You pay insurance premiums—approximately USD \$9 trillion globally per year—because events affecting strangers produce financial consequences for you. Your premium is priced by actuaries who have mathematically proven that you cannot separate your costs from everyone else's health behaviours, driving patterns, and life circumstances.

Insurance is the financial system's formal admission that you are not separate. You pay for it every month. It does not feel like losing control. It feels like being responsible. But

it is, in fact, a monthly payment for the privilege of being entangled with everyone else's outcomes.

3.3 The Atmosphere

You breathe the atmosphere. It does not check your postcode, your net worth, or your recycling habits. The CO₂ emitted by twenty entities (OMXUS, 2026f) reaches your lungs regardless of your choices. There is no lock. There is no premium. There is no opt-out.

The illusion of control says: "If I recycle, I am doing my part." The data say: 62 million tonnes of e-waste are generated annually, growing five times faster than recycling. Your recycling is not meaningless, but it is the equivalent of bailing a teaspoon of water from a boat with a hole in the hull.

The feeling of control is not the same as control.

4 The Reversal: How Seeing the System Gives You Real Control

The fear that drives resistance to the systemic framework is the fear of powerlessness: "If the system determines outcomes, then I can't do anything."

This fear rests on a false equation: *individual causation = agency*. If I caused my outcomes, I have agency. If the system caused my outcomes, I am helpless.

But the evidence from this series demonstrates the opposite. In every domain examined, systemic understanding produced *more* agency, not less.

4.1 Crime: From Helplessness to \$12.90 per Dollar

The person who believes crime is caused by bad character has no lever to pull except punishment. Build more prisons. Hire more police. Buy a bigger lock. These are expensive, inefficient, and—as the data show—largely ineffective at reducing crime rates.

The person who understands that crime is substantially caused by environmental conditions—poverty, untreated mental illness, lack of early intervention—has multiple levers: fund preschool programmes (\$12.90 return per dollar), implement Housing First (\$31,545 saved per person in two years), invest in community mental health services. Each of these interventions produces measurable, documented reductions in crime at a fraction of the cost of incarceration.

The systemic understanding doesn't take away control. It gives you better levers.

4.2 War: From 27-Year Cycles to 80 Years of Peace

For centuries, European nations responded to the threat of war with defence: alliances, armies, fortifications. The average interval between Franco-German wars was 27 years. Each generation invested in better locks. Each generation went to war anyway.

The systemic understanding—that war is produced by economic isolation, resource competition, and zero-sum incentive structures—provided a different lever: economic integration. The result was not 27 more years of nervous peace. It was 80 years and counting of structural peace, during which the former “hereditary enemies” built EUR 4.1 trillion in annual trade and exchanged over 9 million young people through cultural programmes.

The systemic understanding didn't make European nations helpless. It gave them the most effective peace mechanism in two thousand years.

4.3 Climate: From Recycling to Twenty Names

The person who believes the climate crisis is caused by individual consumption choices has one lever: their own behaviour. They recycle, they reduce, they feel guilty, and the emissions go up anyway because 57 entities produce 80% of fossil fuel and cement CO₂.

The person who understands the systemic structure of the problem has a different lever: the twenty names on the list. Regulate those twenty entities. Change the incentive structure. Price the externalities. Mandate the transition. This is not a fantasy—it is precisely what the European Coal and Steel Community did for war, what the Perry Preschool did for crime, and what Housing First did for homelessness.

The systemic understanding doesn't leave you staring helplessly at an impossible problem. It shows you that the problem has twenty addresses.

4.4 The Pattern

Table 1: Illusion of Control vs. Systemic Control: A Comparison

Domain	Illusion of Control	Systemic Control
Crime	Buy a lock (\$100)	Fund preschool (\$12.90 return/\$1)
Homelessness	Step over them	House them (\$31,545 saved/person)
War	Build an army	Integrate economies (80 years peace)
Climate	Recycle a bottle	Regulate 20 entities (35% of emissions)
Health	Blame the patient	Address social determinants (30–50%)

In every domain, the systemic intervention is cheaper, more effective, and provides more actual control over outcomes. The individual intervention provides the feeling of control at higher cost and lower efficacy.

In every domain, the pattern is the same. The illusion of control is expensive and ineffective. The systemic understanding is cheaper and works.

The person who sees the system has *more* power, not less. They have identified the levers that actually move. The person who insists on individual causation is pulling levers that are not connected to anything.

5 The Problem Is the Answer

The series began with a simple observation: everything is connected.

That observation, seen through the lens of fear, produces the resistance documented throughout this paper:

- “If everything is connected, I can’t protect myself” → buy a lock
- “If environment determines behaviour, then people aren’t responsible” → blame the individual
- “If the system shapes outcomes, then I have no control” → cling to the illusion

The same observation, seen through the lens of clarity, produces the solutions documented throughout this series:

- “If everything is connected, then investing in others’ wellbeing protects me too” → prevention
- “If environment determines behaviour, then changing environments changes behaviour” → intervention
- “If the system shapes outcomes, then changing the system changes outcomes” → structural reform

The problem and the solution are the same thing. Interconnection is not something to fear and defend against. It is something to understand and use.

The lock on your door is the fearful version. The European Union is the clear-eyed version. Both acknowledge the same reality. One costs you money every month and changes nothing. The other ended a thousand years of war.

6 Conclusion

You were never separate. The lock proves it. The insurance premium proves it. The atmosphere proves it.

The belief that you were separate was not giving you control. It was giving you comfort. And that comfort was expensive: USD \$10 trillion per year in global security spending, 80 million deaths in European wars, 480 billion tonnes of CO₂ emitted by twenty entities while you sorted your recycling.

The systemic framework does not take your control away. It gives you control for the first time—real control, over the actual levers that determine outcomes.

The Perry Preschool returns \$12.90 per dollar. Housing First saves \$31,545 per person. European integration produced 80 years of peace. Twenty entities account for 35% of emissions and they have names and addresses.

These are not abstractions. These are levers. They work. They are cheaper than locks. And they are available right now, to anyone willing to stop defending against the system and start changing it.

The problem is the answer. The connection you were afraid of is the tool you were looking for.

You were always in the system. The only question was whether you would see it clearly enough to use it.

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