

Social inequality and the reduction of ideological dissonance on behalf of the system: evidence of enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged

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Abstract

According to system justification theory, people are motivated to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, legitimate, justifiable, and necessary. The strongest form of this hypothesis, which draws on the logic of cognitive dissonance theory, holds that people who are most disadvantaged by the status quo would have the greatest psychological need to reduce ideological dissonance and would therefore be most likely to support, defend, and justify existing social systems, authorities, and outcomes. Variations on this hypothesis were tested in five US national survey studies. We found that (a) low-income respondents and African Americans were more likely than others to support limitations on the rights of citizens and media representatives to criticize the government; (b) low-income Latinos were more likely to trust in US government officials and to believe that 'the government is run for the benefit of all' than were high-income Latinos; (c) low-income respondents were more likely than high-income respondents to believe that large differences in pay are necessary to foster motivation and effort; (d) Southerners in the USA were more likely to endorse meritocratic belief systems than were Northerners and poor and Southern African Americans were more likely to subscribe to meritocratic ideologies than were African Americans who were more affluent and from the North; (e) low-income respondents and African Americans were more likely than others to believe that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary; and (f) stronger endorsement of meritocratic ideology was associated with greater satisfaction with one's own economic situation. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the dissonance-based argument that people who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it. Implications for theories of system justification, cognitive dissonance, and social change are also discussed. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

It is almost a truism of social science that people hold attitudes and opinions that serve their own interests and the interests of the groups to which they belong. Social psychology is replete with

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theories of egocentrism, self-enhancement, ethnocentrism, and ingroup bias. Most people, we know, believe that they are important, valued, competent, and, above all, 'better than average' (e.g. Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Similarly, most people endorse social policies that favor themselves and the groups to which they belong (Bobo, 1983; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and most people hold stereotypes and other beliefs that favor members of their own group relative to others (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, economic and other theories of material and symbolic self-interest may be said to account for the 'baseline' with regard to social and political attitudes and behaviors.

But there are some cases that pose a challenge for identity-based and interest-based theories. Why do poor people so often oppose income redistribution (e.g. Kluegel & Smith, 1986), why do women accept gender stereotypes and traditional sex roles (e.g. Glick et al., 2000), and why do members of low-status groups exhibit implicit and explicit biases that favor members of higher status groups (e.g. Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002)? Although it is notoriously difficult to 'rule out' theories of self-interest even in cases of apparently altruistic behavior (Batson, 1998), people at least sometimes hold beliefs that seem to conflict with their own self-interest and with their own needs for personal and collective self-esteem. One of the main goals of *system justification theory* is to understand these seemingly paradoxical cases, that is, to understand how and why the ideas people hold contribute to their own state of disadvantage (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

A HYBRID THEORY OF IDEOLOGICAL DISSONANCE REDUCTION

The counter-intuitive hypothesis that we address in this article is that members of disadvantaged groups sometimes support and justify the social order to an even *greater* degree than members of advantaged groups do. According to system justification theory, people are motivated to defend, justify, and uphold the *status quo*, sometimes at the expense of personal and collective interests and esteem (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Thompson, 2000). Dissonance theory goes even further to suggest that people rationalize their own suffering and that the experience of disadvantage may therefore *increase* commitment to the sources of suffering (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). By integrating system justification and cognitive dissonance perspectives, we arrive at the bipartite proposal that (a) there is a motive to justify the existing social order, and (b) this motive is sometimes strongest among those who are most disadvantaged by the social order.

System Justification Theory

The most basic assumption of system justification theory is that people tend to provide cognitive and ideological support for the existing social system (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Among other things, this means that they should often view systems and authorities as above reproach and inequality among groups and individuals as legitimate and even necessary. Such tendencies, it has been shown, conflict with other motives for self-enhancement and ingroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups. Jost and Thompson (2000) demonstrated, for example, that to the extent that African Americans oppose egalitarian reforms of the system and accept justifications for economic inequality, they exhibit decreased self-esteem and decreased ingroup favoritism. Jost and Burgess (2000) found that women and other low-status groups express attitudinal ambivalence toward fellow ingroup members, because they are torn between competing allegiances to their own group and to the social system of which they are a part. Thus, engaging in system justification entails some social and psychological costs (as well as benefits) for members of disadvantaged groups.

System justification theory builds on the assumption of social identity theory that members of low-status groups accept their inferior position in society to the degree that they perceive the system to be legitimate and/or stable (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). From a system justification perspective, however, members of disadvantaged groups are not merely passive recipients of an incontrovertible 'social reality' (Spears, Jetten, & Doosje, 2001). Rather, they *embrace* the status quo because, in some sense, they want to perceive the system as legitimate and stable. From a system justification perspective, members of disadvantaged groups should generally provide attitudinal support for the social order to a degree that (a) may conflict with group interests and motivations, and (b) is not readily predicted by other theories.

An obvious question arises here: *Why* would people engage in system justification, especially when it is contrary to their own interests and esteem? There are probably several answers to this question. Some reasons pertain to information processing factors, such as cognitive consistency and cognitive conservatism, attributional simplicity, uncertainty reduction, and epistemic needs for structure and closure (Greenwald, 1980; Tajfel, 1981; Wilson, 1973). Other reasons are more overtly motivational, including the fear of equality, illusion of control, and the belief in a just world (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lane, 1962; Lerner, 1980). On the assumption that cognitive and motivational factors interact, system justification theory emphasizes the 'palliative function of ideology', whereby individuals feel better and reduce guilt and discomfort by rationalizing the status quo (see also Chen & Tyler, 2001). Finally, there are also structural and ideological variables that contribute to system justification, including political socialization and the control that dominant groups have over rewards and punishments (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tyler & McGraw, 1986). All of these factors, we believe, contribute to system justification tendencies.

Just as there are several causes of system justification, there are also several different manifestations. Lerner (1980) focused on victim-blaming tendencies and general beliefs about deservingness and personal control. Martin (1982) looked at the role of meritocratic ideology (the belief that success is earned and deserved) in leading blue collar workers to feel contented with their financial situations. Major (1994) argued for a connection between legitimizing ideologies and a lowered sense of personal entitlement among women compared to men. Jost and Banaji (1994) analyzed the use of social stereotypes to establish consensually shared justifications for status differences among groups. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) have investigated preferences for inequality, group-based dominance, and a variety of other ideological factors, as have Jost and Thompson (2000). In this article, we focus on attitudes toward the governmental system in general as well as meritocratic and other beliefs concerning the legitimacy and necessity of economic inequality.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory assumes that people are motivated to resolve inconsistencies among their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and to provide justifications or rationalizations for their actions and experiences (Beauvois & Joule, 1996; Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). One of the appeals of dissonance theory is that it often contradicts seemingly unassailable assumptions of reinforcement theory, self-interest, rational choice, and common sense. Because of the counter-intuitive nature of dissonance theory, it has also proved more useful than most psychological theories to economists, sociologists, and political scientists seeking to understand behavioral anomalies in each of these fields (e.g. Akerlof & Dickens, 1982; Baron & Kreps, 1999; Liebow, 1967; Montgomery, 1994; Rabin, 1994).

Empirical highlights of dissonance theory include paradoxical demonstrations that people are more likely to rationalize their own hypocrisy when they are paid poorly rather than handsomely for their

transgression (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), work harder and praise a job that pays nothing rather than a job that pays something (Weick, 1964), increase rather than decrease commitment to a group or organization following abuse and maltreatment (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Gerard & Mathewson, 1966), stick longer with a failing course of action than a successful one (Staw, 1976), and profess greater than usual liking for the taste of grasshoppers following compliance with hostile orders to eat them (Zimbardo, Weisenberg, Firestone, & Levy, 1965). A surprising consequence of suffering, according to dissonance theory, is that people can become *more* committed to their own state of suffering rather than taking clear and unambiguous action to terminate their pain (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976).

Although there is nothing in dissonance theory to suggest that social inequality *per se* would arouse dissonance or the corresponding need to justify it, the research literature on cognitive dissonance parallels in interesting ways the Marxist theoretical literature on ideology, false consciousness, and the tolerance of injustice (e.g. Elster, 1982; Jost, 1995; Wood, 1988). Elster (1982), for instance, draws on dissonance theory when he writes that:

The interest of the upper class is better served by the lower classes spontaneously inventing an ideology justifying their inferior status. This ideology, while stemming from the interest of the lower classes in the sense of leading to dissonance reduction, is contrary to their interest because of a tendency to overshoot, resulting in excessive rather than in proper meekness (p. 142).

Setting aside the question of what may be considered 'excessive' and 'proper meekness', the key notion is that social inequality is maintained at least in part because members of disadvantaged groups tend to rationalize their own state of disadvantage, possibly as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance (see also Lane, 1962).

From a dissonance perspective, the notion that members of disadvantaged groups would experience psychological discomfort because of their own disadvantage implies that, either consciously or unconsciously, they would feel 'complicit' in perpetuating the status quo. Dissonance might arise from the contradictory cognitions that (a) the system is putting me (and my group) at a disadvantage, and (b) through our acquiescence, my group and I are contributing to the stability of the system. An analysis in terms of cognitive dissonance, therefore, leads one to predict that members of disadvantaged groups might—in the absence of widespread anti-systemic protest movements—show *enhanced* levels of support for the system. This does not mean that system justification is the only possible means for resolving dissonance associated with being in a disadvantaged position. In fact, it would seem to be an odd choice from the standpoint of dissonance theory alone, insofar as the theory is said to focus on 'cognitive changes occurring in the service of ego defense, or self-esteem maintenance' (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978, p. 55; see also Aronson, 1973/1989, 1992; Steele & Liu, 1983). The point we wish to make is that social inequality has the *capacity* to create ideological dissonance, and enhanced system justification may be one (paradoxical) strategy for resolving such dissonance.

Because of differences in theoretical emphasis between cognitive dissonance theory and system justification theory (see our 'General Discussion'), it is probably best to regard this work as an extension, revision, and application of dissonance-based mechanisms to ideological domains rather than a straightforward test of cognitive dissonance theory. Nevertheless, we draw an analogy between the plight of those who are victims of poverty and discrimination in society and the plight of those who are victims of experimental inductions of hunger, thirst, pain, and maltreatment administered by crafty dissonance researchers. Under such circumstances, a hybrid of dissonance theory and system justification theory would predict that those who suffer the most also have the most to explain, justify, and rationalize. Our research goal, in other words, was to investigate the psychological justification of social, economic, and political suffering (see also Jost, 1995; Jost & Banaji, 1994) in order to identify and analyze the ideological equivalent of eating grasshoppers and then justifying one's appetite.

Boundary Conditions on the Hypothesis

To be clear, we are not arguing that members of disadvantaged groups are always (or even ordinarily) the most likely ones to provide ideological support for the system. In fact, to the extent that system justification conflicts with motives for self-enhancement, self-interest, and ingroup favoritism among members of disadvantaged groups (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001), it should often be tempered by these other motives. Our goal in this research was to simply demonstrate that counter-intuitive evidence for enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged may be found in places where it might not be expected, and that such evidence runs counter to most theories of self-interest, group ideology, and public opinion.

There are three factors that seem relevant *a priori* to whether or not disadvantaged group members will exhibit system justifying patterns of response. One factor is group identification, which is a focus of theories of social identification and self-categorization (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Past research suggests that for members of low-status or disadvantaged groups a negative relation generally holds between group identification (or group justification) and system justification (e.g. Jost et al., 2001; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001; Spears et al., 2001). Thus, members of disadvantaged groups should be more likely to engage in system justification when their group interests and identities are relatively low in salience, as when system justification is measured with the use of implicit and unobtrusive behavioral measures, as Jost et al. (2002) have shown. Self-interest and group interest are also relatively low in salience when people are responding to general public opinion surveys, which involve dozens and dozens of questions, only a few of which are relevant to their group memberships and/or their support for the social system.

A second factor, which follows from dissonance theory, is that of volition. Although people sometimes do rationalize unfavorable outcomes for which they are not personally responsible (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002), dissonance research suggests that people would be *more* likely to justify outcomes that they feel they have chosen (e.g. Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). It is therefore reasonable to suppose that dissonance-related mechanisms might play a larger role in democratic societies, where political decisions are made under conditions of choice (or at least the illusion of choice), compared to societies in which authorities and systems are seen as imposed rather than chosen (see Havel, 1991). Of course, totalitarian systems also require individuals to indicate their level of support for the system in various ways, so living in a totalitarian regime does not necessarily entail that one will be free of dissonance.

In a cultural context such as the United States, where strong values for achievement and success are accompanied by a set of meritocratic ideologies that justify social and economic outcomes as fair and deserved (e.g. Della Fave, 1986; Jackman & Senter, 1983; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Major, 1994; Martin, 1982), it is especially likely that there will be strong motivational pressures for disadvantaged group members to provide attitudinal support for the system. Taking these three points together, dissonance-based forms of system justification among the disadvantaged are most likely to occur (a) when subordinate group identification is relatively low in salience, (b) under democratic conditions in which people feel that they are at least somewhat 'responsible' for participating in the status quo, and (c) in a cultural climate that particularly stresses meritocratic ideologies and belief in the Protestant work ethic.

Historical and Empirical Precedents

Although the hypothesis we investigate is a counter-intuitive one, it is not without historical precedent. Theorists of the authoritarian personality argued that aggressive parenting styles caused by economic

insecurity led people to idealize authority figures and derogate societal deviants (e.g. Adorno et al., 1950). Most research on authoritarianism has focused on the connection between low income and prejudice against minority groups, but defending the existing social system is also central to the construct of right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1981). Lane (1962) drew on Freudianism (as well as theories of authoritarianism and dissonance reduction) to suggest that blue-collar workers were so psychologically threatened by economic disadvantage that they defensively denied the possibility of greater equality in society. Wilson (1973) theorized that uncertainty and threat brought on by low socio-economic status would lead to increased political conservatism. Thus, the possibility that disadvantaged groups would provide especially strong support for the system has been suggested by various theorists, but compelling empirical demonstrations have been lacking.

As part of a dissertation study, Jost (1996) provided a pilot test of the hypothesis that a state of relative disadvantage would lead to enhanced system justification. A sample of 133 Yale University undergraduate students were randomly assigned to conditions in which they were led to believe that alumni from their university were either more or less socio-economically successful than alumni from a rival school, in this case, Stanford University. Following this manipulation of perceived SES, research participants were administered Altemeyer's (1981) right-wing authoritarianism scale, which measures (1) 'a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate', (2) 'a general aggressiveness, directed against various persons, which is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities', and (3) 'a high degree of adherence to the social conventions which are perceived to be endorsed by society' (Altemeyer, 1981, p. 148). Results were that Yale students assigned to the low socio-economic success condition exhibited significantly higher scores on the authoritarianism scale than did students assigned to the high socio-economic success condition, $F(1, 132) = 3.91$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, a situational manipulation of low perceived SES was found to increase authoritarian support for the system and its leaders.

In the research that follows, we present additional evidence that members of disadvantaged groups (on grounds of social class, race, educational level, and geographical region) sometimes show even greater ideological support for the status quo than do comparable members of advantaged groups. Although the survey data we analyze contained no direct process measures of dissonance arousal, the results are consistent with the strong form of the system justification hypothesis that people who are worst off engage in the greatest amount of dissonance reduction on behalf of the social system.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

In this article, we present data from five survey studies suggesting that members of underprivileged groups often reduce ideological dissonance on behalf of the system. In the first study, we investigated the effects of income, race, and education on willingness to limit criticism of the government in the press and in the citizenry. Our hypothesis was that disadvantaged respondents would be more willing to limit freedom in defense of the system than would more advantaged respondents. In the second study, we examined whether poorer Latinos would be more likely than wealthier Latinos to trust in government officials and believe that the US government is run for the benefit of all. In the third study, we investigated whether poorer respondents in general would be more likely than wealthier respondents to believe that large differences in income are important and necessary.

In the fourth study, we compared responses of African Americans and European Americans in the Northern and Southern United States. Our hypothesis was that disadvantaged groups (such as Southerners and African Americans, and especially poor African Americans living in the South) would be more likely than other groups to endorse the meritocratic ideological belief that if people

work hard, they will succeed. In the fifth study, we examined the effects of race and socio-economic status on the legitimation of economic inequality and the endorsement of meritocratic ideology. This last study also allowed us to investigate the possibility that people who endorse meritocratic belief systems are more likely than others to express satisfaction with their own economic situation, thereby reducing ideological dissonance.

STUDY 1

The first study addressed the effects of income, race, and education on willingness to impose limitations on those who criticize the system. The strongest form of the system justification hypothesis is that a negative relation would hold between social class and support for the system, so that those who are most disadvantaged by the system would be most likely to defend it by limiting freedom to criticize the system and its authorities. Two types of limitations on political freedom were investigated: (a) willingness to limit criticisms of the government in the press, and (b) willingness to limit the rights of citizens to speak against the government.

Method

Research participants were 1345 members of the US labor force who responded to Schlozman and Verba's (1976) telephone survey of the social and political attitudes of unemployed and employed workers. All were English-speaking adults who were 18 years of age and older. They resided in the 150 largest metropolitan areas, which ranged in size from Altoona, Pennsylvania to New York City. Membership in the labor force was defined as being presently employed or seeking employment. The retired, the disabled, those staying at home, and students (including working students whose jobs were secondary to their education) were excluded from the sample by Schlozman and Verba (1976).

We analyzed data from two survey items that were relevant to system justification. The first question was phrased as follows: 'If it were necessary to solve our nation's problems, would you be in favor of limiting criticisms of the government in the press?' The second question was: 'If it were necessary to solve our nation's problems, would you be in favor of limiting the right of citizens to speak against the government?' For each question, participants were asked to provide either a 'yes' or 'no' answer. All instances in which participants failed or refused to answer a given question were treated as missing data. For those participants who answered both items, the inter-item correlation was $r(1259) = 0.34, p < 0.001$.

The survey was administered as part of a nationwide random-digit telephone survey of the social and political attitudes of US workers. Further details on the methodology used in this survey may be found in Klecka and Tuchfarber (1978). In addition to collecting information on participants' willingness to impose limitations on those who criticize the system, telephone interviewers collected standard demographic (sex, age, race) and categorical information about individual income.

Results and Discussion

To find out whether members of economically disadvantaged groups would be more likely than members of advantaged groups to defend the system against criticism, we examined the effects of income on willingness to impose limitations on political freedoms. A logistical regression was

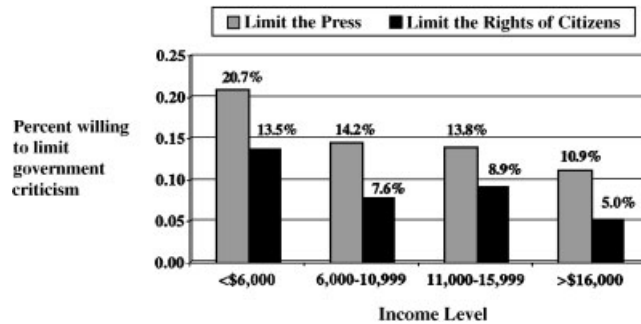


Figure 1. Willingness to limit criticisms of the government as a function of income

performed on participants' responses to each of the two system justification items, and income classification was used as the independent variable. Each analysis yielded a statistically reliable linear effect in the negative direction, indicating that low-income respondents were more likely than high-income respondents to express a willingness to limit criticism of the government in the press ($B = -0.22$, $p < 0.005$) and to limit the right of people to speak against the government ($B = -0.31$, $p < 0.005$). Mean levels of support for limiting both kinds of criticism as a function of respondents' income levels are illustrated in Figure 1. The evidence from this large survey study thus indicates that, contrary to their own self-interest, members of disadvantaged groups were more likely to provide ideological support for the system than were members of advantaged groups.

The above analyses were conducted again, this time adding variables of race, education, and sex. Consistent with the strong form of the system justification hypothesis, African Americans were more likely than European Americans to support limitations on media criticism of the government ($B = -0.73$, $p < 0.001$) and on free speech against the government ($B = -1.01$, $p < 0.001$). Significant independent effects of education also indicated that, controlling for income, less educated respondents were more defensive of the system than were more educated respondents on each of these two items ($B = -0.30$, $p < 0.001$ and $B = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). It is worth noting that when education was entered into the same regression model as income, the aforementioned effects of income on system justification were reduced somewhat, but they retained a marginal level of significance (both p 's < 0.10). There were no reliable effects of gender on the willingness to limit criticism of the government. Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence from the first study supported the notion that members of disadvantaged groups (relatively poor, less educated, and African American groups) were more likely to support policies specifically aimed to prevent criticism of the system of US government.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we explored the possibility that relatively disadvantaged members of the US Latino population would be more likely than relatively advantaged members to hold attitudes that are supportive of the social system. Specifically, we compared the political attitudes of Latinos in low-income groups to those of Latinos in high-income groups on two dimensions that were deemed relevant to system justification: believing that the government is generally run for the benefit of all and that government officials can usually be trusted to do what is right. Support for the 'strong' version of

the system justification hypothesis would mean that low income Latinos would be more likely than high income Latinos to believe that government is run for the benefit of all and to evince a greater degree of trust in government officials to do what is right.

Method

Research participants were 2485 Latino-American respondents to de la Garza, Falcon, Garcia, and Garcia's (1989/90) Latino National Political Survey, which was carried out in association with Temple University's Institute for Survey Research. All respondents were 18 years of age or older and had at least one parent or two grandparents of Latin American descent. Of those who were interviewed, 1365 (55%) were Mexican, 522 (21%) were Puerto Rican, and 598 (24%) were Cuban.

The items used to measure system justification were two questions in a face-to-face survey examining participants' satisfaction with and trust for the government. The first item required participants to indicate how much of the time they thought government officials could be trusted to do what is right on a 4-point scale (1 = 'just about always' and 4 = 'almost never'). The second item, which was dichotomous in nature, asked participants whether they believed that the government is generally run by 'a few people looking out for their own interests' (coded as '1') or run 'for the benefit of all' (coded as '2'). The two items were correlated at $r = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$. Questions were administered by bilingual interviewers either in Spanish or in English, depending upon respondent preferences. All respondents were paid \$10 for their participation. Interviewers gathered demographic information (sex, age, education, income) in addition to opinion data.

Results and Discussion

To investigate whether poorer Latinos were more likely to trust and support the US government than were more affluent Latinos, we first conducted a linear regression analysis in which we regressed family income on responses to the item measuring trust of government officials to always do what is right. The analysis yielded a reliable linear effect of income ($B = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). Poorer Latinos were significantly more trusting of government officials than were more affluent Latinos (see Figure 2).

A second analysis was performed on the item tapping respondents' beliefs that the government is generally run by a few people looking out for their own interests vs. the benefit of all. A logistic regression was performed on participants' choices, using family income again as an independent

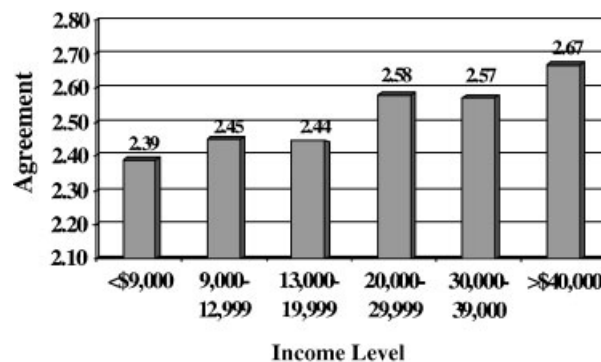


Figure 2. Belief that government officials cannot be trusted to do what is right as a function of income

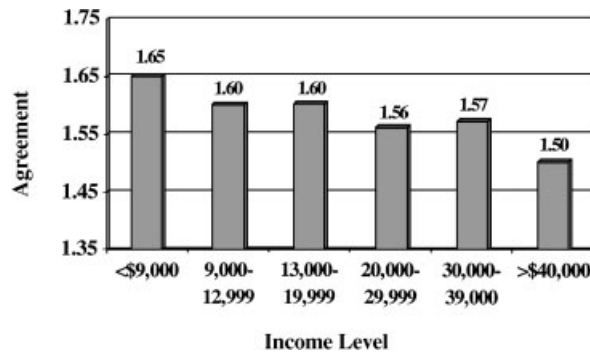


Figure 3. Belief that government is run for the benefit of all as a function of income

variable. This analysis also revealed a significant negative relation between income and mean level of trust in the government ($B = -0.11$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, we found that Latinos in low-income groups were more likely than those in high-income groups to believe that government is run for the benefit of all (see Figure 3).

On the whole, these results seem to reveal a relatively strong degree of system justification on the part of low income respondents. In order to see if these effects were entirely attributable to educational differences, the two analyses were re-run with income and education level entered simultaneously into the regression models. In both cases, the effects of income remained statistically significant ($B = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$ and $B = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$, respectively), even after controlling for the effects of education, which also attained significance ($B = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$ and $B = -0.08$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Thus, poorer and less educated Latinos were indeed more likely to report feeling trust in and support for the US government than were wealthier and better educated Latinos.

Cuban immigrants to the USA are often very politically conservative, strongly opposed to the Communist government they left behind in Cuba, and strongly supportive both of the capitalist system and the US government. Because of this, one might wonder if our results would hold after excluding Cuban respondents. Thus, we repeated the above analyses on the sub-set of 1887 non-Cuban respondents of Mexican or Puerto Rican origin. Once again, poorer respondents were more likely to agree that government officials could be trusted to do what is right ($B = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) and to believe that the government is run for the benefit of all ($B = -0.11$, $p < 0.001$). For the first item, the effect of income remained significant ($B = 0.04$, $p < 0.005$) after controlling for education, which also attained significance ($B = 0.02$, $p < 0.01$). For the second item, the effect of income was still negative but no longer significant ($B = -0.04$, $p = 0.17$) after controlling for education ($B = -0.10$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, results were nearly identical when Cuban respondents were excluded from the research sample.

Although we have eliminated the possibilities that educational deficits and Cuban conservatives account for our data, we acknowledge that there is a viable alternative to a system justification interpretation of the findings from Studies 1 and 2 that members of disadvantaged groups are more likely than others to support and justify the governmental system. The alternative account, which is consistent with economic theories of self-interest, is that poor people and minorities are in fact provided protection and a 'safety net' by governmental institutions and that many are employed by the government, and so they are more supportive of the government for instrumental and identity-based reasons. Although we cannot rule out this alternative interpretation, it seems somewhat unlikely that economic dependence on the government in and of itself would necessitate the (allegedly self-interested) belief that a lack of freedom should be imposed on others (including fellow citizens) for

the sake of preventing *any* criticism of the government. Nevertheless, it was in part to overcome the limitations of Studies 1 and 2 (and their methodological reliance on pro-government attitudes) that we explored more general system justifying beliefs concerning meritocracy and the legitimacy and necessity of economic inequality in Studies 3–5.

STUDY 3

System justification theory holds that people should be motivated to perceive inequality as not only legitimate but also necessary. In Study 3, we investigated the effects of income on the likelihood of endorsing the belief that large differences in income are necessary for motivating people to work hard and contribute effort. Data were again taken from a large-scale national survey conducted in the USA.

Method

Research participants were people who responded to the General Social Survey (GSS), which is a nearly annual personal interview survey of US households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) affiliated with the University of Chicago. A total of 1396 people (609 men and 787 women) responded to a question measuring the perceived necessity of economic inequality between 1983 and 1987. Another 1171 people (523 men and 648 women) responded to a similar question that was administered between 1988 and 1991. For both samples, income was measured in terms of self-reported pre-tax family household income.

The first survey item was phrased as follows: 'Some people earn a lot of money while others do not earn very much at all. In order to get people to work hard, do *you* think large differences in pay are . . .'. Respondents were then asked to complete the sentence with one of the following choices: 'Absolutely necessary' (coded as 1), 'Probably necessary' (2), 'Probably not necessary' (3), and 'Definitely not necessary' (4). The second item, administered in subsequent years, required people to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: 'Only if differences in income are large enough is there an incentive for individual effort.' Responses were given on a 4-point scale (1 = 'agree strongly', 2 = 'agree', 3 = 'disagree', and 4 = 'disagree strongly'). Because the two items were never administered to the same respondents, no inter-item correlations are available.

Results and Discussion

To investigate whether poorer respondents were more likely to believe that inequality is necessary, we conducted a linear regression analysis in which we regressed family income on responses to the item measuring the belief that large differences in pay are necessary to get people to work hard. The analysis yielded a linear effect of income ($B = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that poorer people tended to endorse this belief to a stronger degree than did wealthier people. The effect was diminished somewhat but remained significant ($B = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$) even after controlling for education ($B = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). The combined percentage of respondents who believed that differences in pay were either 'absolutely necessary' or 'probably necessary' are graphed in Figure 4 according to their own family income levels.

The same analysis was conducted on responses to the item measuring agreement that an incentive for individual effort exists only if income differences are large enough. The analysis yielded a significant but relatively small linear effect of income ($B = 0.02$, $p < 0.01$). This time the effect no longer retained significance ($B = 0.01$, $p = 0.18$) after controlling for education ($B = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). The combined percentage of respondents who indicated that they either agreed or agreed strongly with

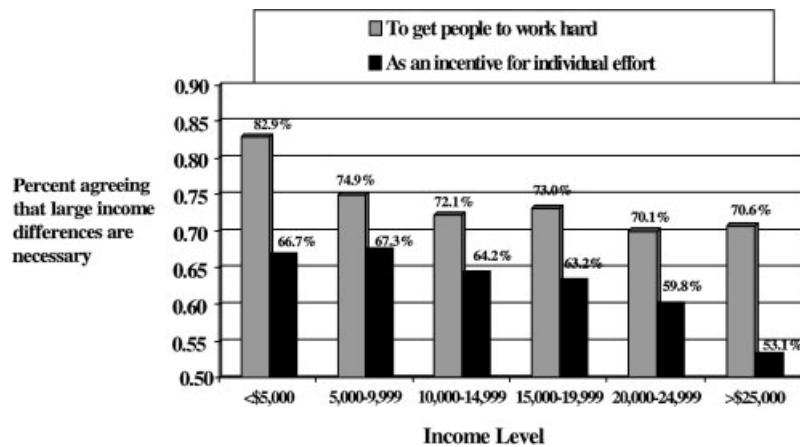


Figure 4. Agreement that large differences in income are necessary as a function of respondent income

the statement are again graphed in Figure 4 as a function of income. As can be seen, a majority of respondents at all income levels tended to agree that large income differences were necessary for motivating individual effort and hard work.

STUDY 4

In Study 4, we assessed the relations among income, race, geographical region, and system justifying beliefs regarding meritocracy in a random sample of Americans from the Northern and Southern United States. Historically, Southerners have been more socially and economically disadvantaged than Northerners, and Blacks have been more socially and economically disadvantaged than Whites. As victims of both regional and racial disadvantage, Southern Blacks are the worst off. Their plight is made even worse by a historical legacy of openly hostile racism that can be traced to the institution of slavery in the Southern states. Thus, if any social group in the USA would have a vested interest in rejecting meritocratic ideology as a justification for success in America, it would probably be Southern Blacks. From a dissonance-based, system justification perspective, however, their state of disadvantage might paradoxically lead to enhanced system justification.

We investigated three specific hypotheses. First, we predicted that Southern Blacks would be more likely than Northern Blacks to endorse system justifying ideologies. Second, in keeping with the notion that income is inversely related to system justification, we expected that poorer African Americans might be more likely than wealthier African Americans to hold meritocratic beliefs that economic outcomes are legitimate and deserved because they follow from levels of effort and hard work (see also Major, 1994; Martin, 1982, 1993). Third, insofar as system justifying beliefs are especially likely to develop in groups that are most severely disadvantaged, we hypothesized that poverty would be most strongly associated with a belief in meritocracy among African Americans *in the South*. Although support for any of these three hypotheses would be consistent with system justification theory, the most stringent test probably arises in connection with the third prediction. That is, the strongest support for the theory would come from evidence indicating that system justifying belief patterns are strongest in an area of the country in which African Americans have historically suffered the greatest disadvantages.

Method

The data from Study 4 were downloaded in 1999 from the 1991 Race and Politics Survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley and made publicly available on the internet by principal investigators Paul Sniderman, Philip Tetlock, and Thomas Piazza. This large-scale telephone survey sampled Americans from the 48 contiguous US states by means of a random-digit dialing procedure. The overall response rate was 65.3% (2223 out of 3403 eligible persons contacted). Approximately 54% of those who participated in the telephone survey (35.2% of the eligible persons originally contacted) returned a follow-up survey in the mail. The demographic variables we examined (race, family income, and state of residence) were included in the original telephone survey. The measure of meritocratic ideology was included only in the mail-out survey, thereby reducing our final sample of African Americans and European Americans to 1048.

Survey respondents were 55 African Americans (26 men and 29 women) and 1048 European Americans (441 men and 607 women) who took part in both phases of the telephone interview and the follow-up mail survey. The final sample, therefore, was composed of 5% African American respondents, which is somewhat lower than the national average of 12%, in part because the return rate for mailed surveys was higher for European Americans than for African Americans. Because the initial survey used random digit-dialing, the only systematic basis for excluding respondents from the original sample was the lack of a household telephone. For cases in which participants had recorded complete data for some analyses but were missing data required for other analyses, we included the maximum number of participants available for each separate analysis. For example, the mail survey was not required for examining group differences in income.

The mail-out survey included two questions that were used to indicate endorsement of meritocratic ideology. Specifically, research participants were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements: (a) 'Anyone who is willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding', and (b) 'If people work hard enough, they can make a good life for themselves'. Responses were made on a scale with the four points labeled as follows: 1 = 'agree strongly', 2 = 'agree somewhat', 3 = 'disagree somewhat', and 4 = 'disagree strongly'. Responses were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected stronger endorsement of meritocratic ideological beliefs. A composite measure was created by averaging responses to the two items ($\alpha = 0.83$).

We coded for the region of the country in which participants lived by pooling together sub-categories created by the original researchers. Our category for Southern states included those states the original researchers had designated as 'Southern' states (AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TX, and VA) as well as those that the original researchers had designated as 'Border' states (KY, MD, OK, TN, WV, and Washington, DC). For our purposes, all other states were categorized as Northern.

Research participants' self-reported race or ethnicity was dummy coded as either African American (Black) or European American (White). Data from other ethnic groups were excluded from these analyses. Participants reported their total, current family income (before taxes) using a scale that ranged from 1 (below \$10 000) to 13 (greater than \$70 000). For descriptive purposes, but not for statistical analyses, these income scores were converted to mean dollar equivalents.

Results and Discussion

Our first statistical analysis estimated the effects of race and geographical region on income. A main effect of race indicated that African Americans earned much less income than did European Americans, $F(1, 1897) = 40.57$, $p < 0.001$, and a main effect of region indicated that Southerners earned marginally less than did Northerners, $F(1, 1897) = 3.68$, $p < 0.06$. Although the statistical interaction between race and geographical region did not attain significance, the two main effects

entail that African Americans in the South were indeed the most disadvantaged group in this sample and therefore would have the strongest dissonance-based need to justify their own state of disadvantage in terms of meritocratic beliefs. Mean income levels were lowest for Southern Blacks (\$25 790), followed by Northern Blacks (\$30 315), then Southern Whites (\$36 825), and, finally, Northern Whites (\$37 910). It is worth noting that, in practical terms, the regional discrepancies in income between Southerners and Northerners were larger for Blacks than for Whites. Whereas Southern Whites earned an average of only about \$1100 less than Northern Whites, Southern Blacks earned an average of about \$4 500 less than Northern Blacks.

Respondents in general endorsed meritocratic ideology to a relatively strong extent. All of the groups scored significantly above the scale mid-point of 2.5 when one-sample *t*-tests were conducted. Even Northern Blacks, who seemed to recognize social inequality to a greater degree than the other participants, scored significantly above the scale midpoint (2.5) on this measure of system-justifying beliefs, $t(23) = 2.38$, $p < 0.03$. Their mean score of 2.96 corresponded to the label of 'agree somewhat'. The mean for Northern Whites was 3.34, for Southern Whites it was 3.39, and for Southern Blacks it was 3.44.

Respondents' levels of endorsement of meritocratic ideology were submitted to a 2 (Race/ethnicity: African American versus European American) \times 2 (Region: North versus South) analysis of variance, using Type III sums of squares to avoid problems arising from unequal cell sizes. This analysis revealed a marginally significant main effect of race, $F(1, 1099) = 3.42$, $p < 0.07$, and a significant main effect of region, $F(1, 1099) = 8.56$, $p < 0.005$. On average, African Americans scored marginally lower on the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs than did Whites, which is consistent with theories of self-interest. However, Southerners scored significantly *higher* on meritocratic ideology than did Northerners, which is not. Importantly, both main effects were qualified by a significant Race \times Region interaction, $F(1, 1099) = 5.73$, $p < 0.02$. Simple effects tests revealed that among Northerners, African Americans scored significantly lower than European Americans in terms of endorsement of meritocratic beliefs, $F(1, 757) = 7.88$, $p < 0.005$. Among Southerners, however, African Americans were just as likely as European Americans to endorse the ideology of meritocracy, $F(1, 342) = 0.18$, $p = 0.67$.

As a further test of our hypotheses, African American respondents' levels of support for meritocracy were submitted to a 2 (Region: North versus South) \times 2 (Income: low versus high) ANOVA, treating the last factor as a continuous variable. This method is mathematically identical to a simultaneous regression analysis that includes a combination of dummy-coded and continuous variables, and it is methodologically superior to a traditional ANOVA in which a continuous predictor is artificially dichotomized (see Aiken & West, 1991). This analysis yielded significant main effects of Region, $F(1, 48) = 7.06$, $p < 0.02$, and Income, $F(1, 48) = 4.76$, $p < 0.04$. On average, Southern African Americans and poorer African Americans were indeed more likely to endorse beliefs in meritocracy than were Northern and more affluent African Americans. These findings support a dissonance-based system justification account, but they contradict theories of self-interest.

The analysis also yielded a significant Region \times Income interaction, $F(1, 48) = 4.35$, $p < 0.05$. Among African Americans in the North, there was no association between income and endorsement of meritocratic beliefs, $r(20) = 0.15$, $p = 0.52$. Among African Americans in the South, however, a *negative* relation was obtained between income and ideological support for meritocracy, $r(28) = -0.46$, $p = 0.01$. Paradoxically, poorer Southern Blacks were *more* likely than wealthier Southern Blacks to endorse the legitimizing myth that hard work leads to success. In short, people whose self-interest would have been served the most by rejecting the myth of meritocracy clung most fervently to this system justifying belief.

This pattern of support for meritocracy appears to have been unique to relatively poor African American respondents. When we submitted European Americans' beliefs in meritocracy to the same 2 \times 2 analysis, no evidence was observed of a Region \times Income interaction, $F(1, 1020) = 0.06$,

$p = 0.82$. Regional differences in the pattern of system justifying beliefs observed among African American respondents also appear to have had more to do with income than with education. Specifically, when we repeated our primary analysis for African Americans but replaced income with a continuous measure of education, the two-way Region \times Education interaction was not significant, $F(1, 48) = 0.49$, $p = 0.49$. Nonetheless, the non-significant trend followed the same theoretical pattern observed for income: less educated Southern African Americans, but not less educated Northern African Americans, were slightly more likely to endorse meritocratic ideology. Future research would do well to further disentangle these two correlated predictors of system justifying beliefs (income and education). In any case, our results indicate that some important difference in the socialization experiences and material conditions of Southern as opposed to Northern African Americans plays a strong role in the development of system justifying beliefs such as those associated with meritocratic ideologies.

STUDY 5

The goal of the fifth study was to further explore the effects of race and socio-economic status on economic system justification and endorsement of meritocratic beliefs and to see if these ideological variables do indeed reduce dissonance by allowing people to be more satisfied with their economic situation. That is, we investigated relations among the legitimization of inequality, meritocratic ideology, and economic satisfaction in a large sample that was diverse with respect to social class and race. The first hypothesis was again that members of disadvantaged groups would engage in greater system justification, and the second hypothesis was that greater system justification would be associated with greater self-reported satisfaction.

Method

The data for Study 5 were taken from the 1987 General Social Survey (GSS), sponsored by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). A sub-sample of 788 respondents (443 men, 345 women) completed the measures of interest to us. This sub-sample was composed of 81% European Americans ($n = 638$) and 19% African Americans ($n = 150$).

The GSS included three survey items that were suitable for assessing the socio-economic background of the respondent. These were self-reported levels of (a) father's education, (b) mother's education, and (c) family income when the respondent was 16 years old. Parental education was selected because prior research has found that education is an essential mechanism by which socio-economic status is passed from one generation to the next (Blau & Duncan, 1967). As is customary, parental education levels were measured in terms of number of school years completed, including higher education. Family income at age 16 was measured on a five-point scale ranging from 'far below average' to 'far above average'. Measuring socio-economic status with the use of these indicators is common in sociological research on the effects of subjective social class (e.g. Hearn, 1984; Lee, 1985). Inter-item correlations and confirmatory factor loadings for the three items measuring socio-economic status are presented in the top panel of Table 1.

'Legitimation of economic inequality' was measured in terms of the strength of agreement or disagreement with a single item about whether or not 'large differences in income are necessary for America's prosperity'. Responses were given on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Agreement with this item indicated that the system of economic inequality was perceived as legitimate and necessary, in a manner that was similar to the items used in Study 3.

Table 1. Correlations and confirmatory factor loadings for socioeconomic status, meritocratic ideology, and economic satisfaction

	Socio-economic status			Factor loading
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
(1) Father's education	–			0.83
(2) Mother's education	0.67	–		0.75
(3) Family income	0.43	0.36	–	0.53
	Meritocratic ideology			Factor loading
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
(1) Ambition	–			0.60
(2) Hard-working	0.31	–		0.60
(3) Ability	0.15	0.20	–	0.42
	Economic satisfaction			Factor loading
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
(1) Happiness	–			0.59
(2) Financial satisfaction	0.33	–		0.56
(3) Job satisfaction	0.27	0.26	–	0.52

We measured meritocratic ideology in terms of the perceived roles of personal ambition, ability, and industriousness in explaining socio-economic success. The specific items were: (a) 'Please show how important you think one's ambition is for getting ahead in life', (b) 'Please show how important you think one's ability is for getting ahead in life', and (c) 'Please show how important you think hard-working is for getting ahead in life'. All three responses were made on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all important* (1) to *essential* (5). Inter-item correlations and confirmatory factor loadings are presented in the middle panel of Table 1.

Economic satisfaction was measured in terms of self-reported satisfaction with one's job, with one's financial situation, and with life in general. The item concerning job satisfaction was administered on a 4-point scale, ranging from *very dissatisfied* (1) to *very satisfied* (4). The data set included responses to this item only for people with a job; it included people who engaged in full-time housework, but it excluded the unemployed. The other two items, tapping satisfaction with one's financial situation and with life in general, were both administered on three-point scales, ranging from *not too happy* (1) to *very happy* (3). Inter-item correlations and confirmatory factor loadings are listed in the bottom panel of Table 1.

Results and Discussion

Relations among the variables of race, socio-economic status, legitimization of inequality, belief in meritocratic ideology, and economic satisfaction were estimated using a structural equation model, allowing for correlated measurement error among variables. Gender was entered as a control variable; no significant gender effects were obtained. Race was dummy-coded as follows: Black = 0, White = 1. The analysis was conducted using Amos structural equation modeling software. Figure 5 provides an illustration of the model ($N=788$) and shows the statistically significant unstandardized path coefficients that were obtained. Overall model fit was good, $\chi^2(44) = 117.2$, χ^2/df ratio = 2.66, RMSEA = 0.046, GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.94.

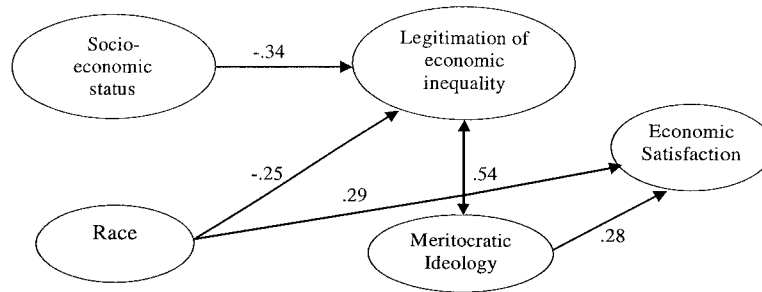


Figure 5. Significant path coefficients of the structural equation model

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients arising from a structural equation model ($N=788$) in which variables of socio-economic status and race were used to predict legitimation of inequality, endorsement of meritocratic ideology, and economic satisfaction. The model allowed for correlated measurement error among variables. Only statistically significant paths are included ($p < 0.05$). Gender was entered as a control variable; no significant gender effects were obtained. Race was dummy-coded as follows: Black = 0, White = 1. The analysis was conducted using Amos structural equation modeling software. Overall model fit was good, $\chi^2(44) = 117.2$, χ^2/df ratio = 2.66, RMSEA = 0.046, GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.94.

As hypothesized, socio-economic status was negatively related to the legitimation of inequality, such that people who were lower in socio-economic status were more likely to perceive income inequality as legitimate than were people higher in socio-economic status ($B = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$). There were no significant effects of socio-economic status on meritocratic ideology in Study 5. This is somewhat surprising, especially in light of the fact that the legitimation of inequality and endorsement of meritocratic ideology were indeed correlated with one another ($B = 0.54$, $p < 0.05$). Consistent with our hypothesis that ideology serves to reduce dissonance and increase satisfaction, results did indicate that the endorsement of meritocratic ideology (but not the legitimation of inequality) was associated with stronger (self-reported) economic satisfaction ($B = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$).

Race was found to have significant effects on the legitimation of inequality and on economic satisfaction but not on meritocratic ideology. African Americans were less contented with their economic situation than were European Americans ($B = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), but, somewhat paradoxically, they were also *more* likely to perceive economic inequality as legitimate and just ($B = -0.25$, $p < 0.01$), which is reminiscent of findings from Studies 1 and 4. African Americans and European Americans did not differ in terms of the strength of their beliefs in meritocratic ideology. Thus, in this case at least, meritocratic ideology does not help to explain differences between African Americans and European Americans in terms of perceptions of inequality and economic satisfaction.

As in the previous studies, male and female respondents did not differ with respect to endorsement of meritocratic ideology, the legitimation of economic inequality, or economic satisfaction. This is not too surprising, given that gender is not related systematically to social class in the way that income, education, and race are. Presumably, gender groups would play a larger role in determining system justifying attitudes toward patriarchal systems and other institutionalized inequalities based on sex and gender (see Glick et al., 2000).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Many social psychological theories of intergroup relations, such as realistic conflict theory (Bobo, 1988), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto,

1999), assume that attitudes generally follow from group interests, identities, and hegemonic needs. Sociological theories emphasizing class interest and class identification similarly stress that group members hold opinions that reflect the needs and interests of those who share their social position (e.g. Dahrendorf, 1959; Jackman & Jackman, 1983). Economic and political theories of rational choice also assume that attitudes and opinions reflect self-interest, broadly conceived (e.g. Green & Shapiro, 1994; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Our research indicates that ideological beliefs concerning the social system do not always reflect the interests of the group, at least in the contexts we have investigated.

In Study 1, we found that low-income respondents and African Americans were more likely than high-income respondents and European Americans to support limitations on the rights of citizens and media representatives to criticize the government. In Study 2, we found that low-income Latinos were more likely to trust in US government officials and to believe that 'the government is run for the benefit of all' than were high-income Latinos. Study 3 demonstrated that the disadvantaged not only support the government to a stronger degree, they also hold beliefs that justify inequality in the social system. Specifically, poorer respondents were more likely than wealthier respondents to feel that large differences in income are necessary in general to motivate individuals to work hard and exert effort.

Study 4 indicated that Southerners in the USA were more likely to endorse meritocratic belief systems than were Northerners and that poor and Southern African Americans were more likely to subscribe to meritocratic ideologies than were African Americans who were more affluent and from the North. Study 5 indicated that African Americans and people who were lower in socio-economic status were more likely than European Americans and those who were higher in socio-economic status to believe that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary. In addition, Study 5 showed that, for all respondent groups, stronger endorsement of meritocratic ideology was associated with greater economic satisfaction with one's own situation, suggesting that system justifying myths can help to make people feel better about inequality. Finally, with the exception of Study 5, all of the studies suggested that the tendency to endorse system-justifying ideologies was associated with low-income levels even after controlling for the significant effects of education. Independent of education, it thus appears that poor people were especially likely to endorse system justifying beliefs.

The evidence from these five studies, when taken as a whole, is consistent with a strong version of the system-justification hypothesis, which is informed by research and theory on ideological legitimation and cognitive dissonance (Jost, 1995; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Jost et al., 2001). This hypothesis is that members of disadvantaged groups are even more likely than members of more advantaged groups to provide ideological support for the very social system that is responsible for their disadvantages. In many ways, this work represents an extension and application of dissonance theory to the context of socio-economic inequality. One might now ask whether social inequality in and of itself arouses dissonance for people who participate in the social system. If so, dissonance theory is highly compatible with theories of organizational sociology, which state that 'the institutional world requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be "explained" and "justified" ' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 61). Indeed, it may be that 'micro' and 'macro' approaches to social behavior are capturing two sides of the same coin: people learn to justify social arrangements because institutional and organizational systems require legitimacy and therefore require us to provide justifications, and institutions and organizations are in need of legitimation because people feel the need to explain and justify their own actions and the actions of others. Thus, the needs of the system become the needs of the individual, and vice versa.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although we have presented some provocative and counter-intuitive findings, we readily admit that there are several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The most obvious

methodological constraint is that all of the studies, with the exception of the pilot study, are correlational in nature. Thus, causal interpretations (even those following from the structural equation model in Study 5) are tenuous at best. A related issue pertains to the challenges of controlling adequately for all third variables that could contribute to spurious correlations. Although we have made efforts to control for such variables as educational differences, gender, and ideological peculiarities of specific groups (e.g. Cuban immigrants to the USA), it is difficult to be sure that all relevant variables have been controlled for. We cannot and do not claim to have ruled out all possible effects of rational self-interest, although we have done our best to minimize them in the survey contexts we chose to investigate.

Another limitation of our studies is that in many cases effect sizes were relatively small. This, combined with the fact that most published surveys of public opinion report at least moderate effects of self-interest (e.g. Bobo, 1983; Green & Shapiro, 1994; Jost & Thompson, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), means that it would be unwarranted to conclude that the disadvantaged are in most or all cases the strongest defenders of the system. What is surprising, we submit, is that enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged happens at all. Previous theories have tended to neglect this possibility.

There were no direct measures of dissonance arousal in any of the surveys. Experimental studies with process measures are needed in the future to isolate the role of cognitive dissonance in providing ideological support for the system. Other variables that could be manipulated or measured to further address the specifics of our theoretical account include perceived choice, group identification, and the salience of self-interest norms. Now that the phenomenon of enhanced system justification among the disadvantaged has been consistently observed, future research should be directed toward understanding the boundary conditions on the effect and the social and psychological processes involved in producing it.

Differences between System Justification and Cognitive Dissonance Theories

Although strongly influenced by work on justification and rationalization processes, system-justification theory departs from cognitive dissonance theory in at least three significant ways. First, dissonance theory is widely interpreted as an egoistic theory of the self, insofar as efforts at dissonance reduction are seen as driven by the desire to preserve a sense of the self as moral and competent (Aronson, 1992; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978; Steele & Liu, 1983). In his elaboration of cognitive dissonance theory, Aronson (1973/1989) writes that 'When a person reduces his dissonance, he defends his ego, and keeps a positive self-image' (p. 135). In the present discussion of ideological dissonance, by contrast, we propose that when people reduce their dissonance, they defend the legitimacy of the *system*, and keep a positive image of that system, even at the expense of a positive self-image or a positive group image.

Along these same lines, system-justification theory draws explicitly on marxist-feminist theory and organizational sociology to stress the facts that people are socialized to respond to the needs and demands of social and cultural systems—that is, to provide normative justifications for common practices (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Marx & Engels, 1844/1970; Powell & DiMaggio, 1990). The result, as these sundry theorists would agree, is that social and cultural definitions of reality (including ideological justifications) tend to be 'taken for granted' and to be accepted as legitimate. Without denying that people are often motivated to defend the actions and integrity of the self (Greenwald, 1980) nor that people might benefit psychologically under certain circumstances from believing that social outcomes are fair and deserved (Lane, 1962; Lerner, 1980), system-justification

theory stresses that people adopt the needs of systems, organizations, and institutions to achieve legitimacy and maintain stability.

A second difference between the two theories has more direct relevance to the research program described herein. It is that cognitive dissonance theory (but not system-justification theory) assumes that people must feel personally responsible for the aversive consequences of an action in order to justify it (e.g. Cooper & Fazio, 1984). For instance, Wicklund and Brehm (1976) write that '[w]ithout personal responsibility the dissonant elements are psychologically irrelevant for the individual' (p. 7), and these authors go on to argue that the feeling of personal responsibility depends upon both foreseeability and choice. Although the notion that personal responsibility is a pre-requisite for dissonance reduction has occasionally been challenged (e.g. Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, & Nelson, 1996; Kruglanski, Alon, & Lewis, 1972), most cognitive dissonance theorists have regarded it as a *sine qua non* of dissonance reduction. According to system justification theory, by contrast, people often justify the decisions of lawmakers, administrators, bosses, and other authority figures, as well as many things that happen without any decisions being made, and even when they personally played no role in bringing about these effects (see also Kay et al., 2002). We are not suggesting that people are uninvolved in the goings-on of the status quo. Rather, the system-justification argument is that people are motivated to rationalize aspects of the existing social system because it does affect their lives (see Blanton et al., 2001), even if they were not personally responsible for bringing about that social system.

A third difference between system justification and cognitive dissonance perspectives arises from an interpretation of dissonance theory that stresses not ego-defense but cognitive consistency (e.g. Abelson et al., 1968). System-justification theory does not merely predict consistency and stability, as cognitive dissonance and other self-consistency theories propose (e.g. Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992); it assumes that there is also a motive to perceive outcomes as fair, just, and legitimate (e.g. Lerner, 1980) and not just consistent with prior beliefs or expectations. Given a hypothetical inconsistency between seeing the self as good, legitimate, worthwhile, and seeing the social system as good, legitimate, and worthwhile, cognitive dissonance theory would predict that cognitions about the system would be more malleable than would cognitions about the self, which are presumably more psychologically involving (Aronson, 1992; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). System-justification theory, by contrast, suggests that there are overarching motives to imbue the system with validity and legitimacy, even if such beliefs actually *create* dissonance, ambivalence, or feelings of personal inadequacy (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000). Thus, although dissonance theory emphasizes that there are many available options for reducing cognitive dissonance (and that people will follow the path of least resistance from the standpoint of the self-concept), system justification theory suggests that there is one main option for reducing ideological dissonance, and that is to redouble one's support for the system.

It should be clear that system-justification theory has been influenced enormously by cognitive dissonance theory and other perspectives stressing justification and rationalization processes (especially attribution theory, just world theory, social identity theory, Marxist theories of ideology, and sociological theories of legitimation). As the current research program demonstrates, system justification theory and cognitive dissonance theory are also in agreement that at least under some circumstances, people who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it. Although this analysis implies that prospects for social change are not good (e.g. Jost, 1995), this dissonance-based argument may help to explain why leaders of progressive social movements do not usually come from the lowest strata of society, despite the fact that such movements are intended to help them the most (e.g. Davies, 1962). Research on system-justification processes, in any case, should help to identify psychological barriers to social mobilization and to make clear that consciousness-raising efforts must combat individual as well as collective forms of rationalization.

To the extent that people do reduce dissonance on behalf of the system, three processes identified by cognitive dissonance theorists (e.g. Wicklund & Brehm, 1976) might help to understand, at least by way of analogy, the ways in which ideological beliefs may be used to defend and justify social and political systems. These are 'bolstering', 'denial', and 'transcendence'. Bolstering would refer to the redoubling of commitment to beliefs that are supportive of the system, such as increased commitment to the belief that inequality is fair, legitimate, and necessary. It might also refer to the generation of new reasons (or rationalizations) to support and justify the system, as when members of powerless groups attribute deserving and meritorious characteristics to the members of a more powerful outgroup in order to lend legitimacy to the proceedings (Haines & Jost, 2000). Denial would capture the belief that the system is in no way unfair and that no alternative would be better or possible. The belief that 'large differences in income are necessary for America's prosperity' which we found in Studies 3 and 5 to be endorsed most strongly by low income respondents and African American respondents, might be an example of this, as would 'the fear of equality' described by Lane (1962) and other defensive cases of 'opposition to equality' (Jost & Thompson, 2000). Transcendence in this context would refer to taking comfort from the fact that the person is part of a larger system, which will survive and carry on long after he or she is gone. This process may be at work in studies of 'terror management', in which people respond to manipulations of mortality salience by clinging to their cultural worldview, by derogating social deviants, and by expressing system justifying stereotypes about members of disadvantaged groups (e.g. Schimel et al., 1999).

A remaining task for the system-justification theorist is to reconcile prior evidence that contributing ideological support to the system entails significant social and psychological costs for members of disadvantaged groups (e.g. Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000) with the possibilities raised by the current research, namely that system justification provides epistemic and existential comfort for members of disadvantaged groups, 'helping' them to reduce ideological dissonance and to find satisfaction with their place in the system. In the meantime, we can conclude that, contrary to a wide variety of influential theories in social science, people are at least sometimes willing to forgo feelings of personal adequacy, group esteem, and self-interest in order to preserve the belief that the social system, its outcomes, and its authorities are legitimate, justifiable, and more or less beyond reproach. Reducing ideological dissonance on behalf of the system no doubt serves to inhibit substantive social change and to perpetuate the plight of those who are worst off and, at the same time, least likely to complain.

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