Dimensions of Black Identity Predict System Justification

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Abstract

What explains variability in African Americans' sociopolitical attitudes? System justification theory implicates both high- and low-status groups in the maintenance of the socioeconomic and political system, postulating that individuals are motivated to justify the system. Self-interest offers a simple explanation for system justification among high-status groups. However, system justification among African Americans is less well-understood. Using a socioeconomically diverse sample of 275 Black undergraduates, including traditional as well as older students, the current survey and quantitative analyses further understanding of attitudes toward the system and institutions by linking attitudes with Black identity. Findings revealed that highly identifying as Black negatively predicted system justification but not if one rejects a Black nationalist ideology. Endorsing an assimilation ideology positively predicted system justification. An oppressed minority ideology did not predict system justification but positively predicted trust across institutions (police and local and national government). Finally, the Black nationalist ideology negatively predicted trust in police. These findings reveal the utility of a multidimensional model of Black identity in shedding light on attitudes toward the system and institutions.

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When it comes to African Americans' identities and sociopolitical attitudes, certain generalizations are supported. They overwhelming identify with the Democratic Party (Tate, 1993) and often believe their fate is linked to other African Americans, in turn leading to group-interested policy preferences (Dawson, 1994). However, they also vary considerably in their beliefs about society, Black people's place in it, and the desirability of the status quo (Cross, 1991; Dawson, 2001; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Indeed, we see such variability among political and intellectual figures and elites such as Melissa Harris-Perry, Clarence Thomas, Barack Obama, Condoleezza Rice, Alan Keyes, Jesse Jackson, Herman Cain, Al Sharpton, and ideologically opposed twins Claude and Shelby Steele. One way to better understand such variability in sociopolitical attitudes may be through connecting theory on system justification and on Black identity. Connections may exist between broad attitudes toward social, political, and economic institutions and dimensions of racial identity. We describe these theoretical frameworks, investigate their connections, and discuss our findings' contribution toward understanding variability in African Americans' sociopolitical attitudes.

System Justification Theory

System justification theory (SJT) proposes that individuals are motivated to justify the "system"—the social, economic, and political status quo. This motivation is driven by goals to reduce uncertainty, manage existential threat, and coordinate social relationships (Jost & Van der Toorn, 2012). If one justifies the system, one has a readily available framework for explaining outcomes such as group inequalities. Importantly, SJT implicates high- *and* low-status individuals in the maintenance of socioeconomic and political arrangements. For a high-status individual, such as a successful man, system justification can meet these goals without interfering with goals of seeing oneself or one's group positively (*ego* and *group justification*; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). However, for a woman watching male coworkers advance beyond her, it is not easy to view herself, her gender group, *and* society in high regard. It is ambiguous whether she is unqualified, women are poorly suited for such work, or she is experiencing discrimination (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). SJT predicts she would experience *ideological dissonance* between her motives for ego, group, and system justification (Jost,

Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). To reduce such dissonance, individuals may sometimes justify the system in place of self/group-enhancement.

SJT predicts African Americans are driven to reduce ideological dissonance. Evidence suggests some African Americans justify the system; Neville, Coleman, Falconer, and Homes (2005) found that among African Americans, denying the existence of racial privilege and institutional discrimination was related to greater blame of African Americans for socioeconomic disparities, greater justification of a group-based hierarchy, and more internalization of racist stereotypes. More relevant to ideological dissonance, Jost et al. (2003) found poorer African Americans were more likely than affluent Blacks to believe hard work pays off. Jost and Thompson (2000) found Black college students' system justification predicted lower self-esteem, lower explicit in-group favoritism, and greater neuroticism. Rankin, Jost, and Wakslak (2009) found that among low-income African Americans, believing arrangements in society are fair predicted greater anxiety, lower self-esteem, and lower mastery/efficacy. Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, and Federico (1998) found Black identity strength predicted interest in helping the disadvantaged, perceiving discrimination, and believing group status differences are unfair and not easily changed. Finally, system-justifying beliefs have been negatively associated with Black identity strength, with lower self-esteem for those strongly identified as Black, and with more positive self-esteem (O'Brien & Major, 2005) and attitudes toward school at a predominantly White institution (Ashburn-Nardo & Smith, 2008) for those who are weakly identified.

This literature reveals the promise of within-group analyses in understanding sociopolitical attitudes and Black identity. Importantly, African Americans vary not only in the degree to which their race is central to their self-concept but also in their beliefs about what it means to be Black and how African Americans should behave (Sellers et al., 1998). African Americans may endorse ideologies to make meaning of their unique status. Thus, not only do they manage ego, group, and system justification motives, but they also have beliefs about how their group should interact with society. Such ideologies may seldom reject that African Americans have a unique and low status, but some may nevertheless predict system justification.

Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity

The multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI; Sellers et al., 1998) synthesizes theory on general (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and Black-specific (Cross, 1991) properties of racial identity. MMRI dimensions are measured by the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Two dimensions fall within the scope of the

current research. *Centrality* reflects the extent to which one defines oneself in terms of race. Racial *ideologies* entail prescriptions for how African Americans should interact with society. A Black *nationalist* ideology stresses the unique- ness of the Black experience and posits Black people should control their des- tiny and preserve their culture. An oppressed *minority* ideology emphasizes that racism toward Black people is not unlike the oppression of other groups and that minorities should be allies. An *assimilation* ideology emphasizes similarities between Blacks and broader American society, prescribing participation in mainstream culture. Finally, a *humanist* ideology emphasizes similarities among people and discourages attending to categories. Past studies illustrate the utility of the MMRI in predicting attitudes, experiences, behaviors, and distress. For example, implicit in-group favoritism is negatively predicted by the humanist ideology but positively predicted by the nationalist ideology (Olson, Crawford, & Devlin, 2009). The nationalist ideology also predicts less distress following perceived discrimination (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), perhaps because of world- view consistency (Townsend, Major, Sawyer, & Mendes, 2010). Though diffi- cult to compare with African Americans, among Black Germans, cultural mistrust negatively associated with assimilation, humanist, and minority ideolo- gies and positively with centrality, which in turn positively associated with per- ceived racism and acculturative stress. Such stress also correlated positively with the nationalist ideology and negatively with humanist and minority ideolo- gies. Perceived racism was further positively correlated with the nationalist ide- ology and negatively with the minority ideology (Wandert et al., 2009).

Current Study

Does variation in centrality and racial ideology predict system justification broadly and/or trust in specific institutions? We predicted a negative associa- tion between centrality and system justification. Those who incorporate their Black identity into their core self may be less likely to resolve any aforemen- tioned dissonance through system justification. Because of an emphasis on oppression evident within the minority and nationalist ideologies, we also predicted these would negatively predict system justification. We predicted the humanist ideology would positively relate to system justification because of its negative association with implicit in-group favoritism (Olson et al., 2009). In other words, through discouraging attending to race, this ideology may serve a system-justifying function by obscuring racial inequity. Finally, the assimilation ideology also seemed likely to positively predict system jus- tification. An ideology that prescribes working within the system is most coherent in concert with perceiving some degree of system fairness and legit- imacy. We conducted a survey to test these hypotheses.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 275 Black undergraduates (79% female, 14% multiracial) from 29 different public and private colleges and universities of varying type, size, and selectivity. Participants were diverse in age ($M = 26.08$, $SD = 8.76$, range = 18-57) and in socioeconomic status in terms of mean parental education (1 = *less than junior high/middle school*, 2 = *junior high/middle school*, 3 = *partial high school*, 4 = *high school*, 5 = *partial college/specialized training/associate degree*, 6 = *standard college/bachelor's degree*, and 7 = *graduate/professional degree; M = 4.79, SD = 1.20*, range = 1-7). This sample has also been used in research on academic engagement (Wynn, Shockley, Visser, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2014).

Measures

Dimensions of Black identity were measured via MIBI items (Sellers et al., 1997). Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. An example item from the 8-item centrality scale (α = .79, $M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.19$) is, "In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image." For the 9-item nationalist ideology scale (α = .74, $M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.94$), an example item is, "Blacks and Whites can never live in true harmony because of racial differences." An example item from the 9-item minority ideology scale (α = .72, $M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.97$) is, "There are other people who experience racial injustice and indignities similar to Black Americans." For the 9-item assimilation scale (α = .70, $M = 5.19$, $SD = 0.94$), an example item is, "Blacks should strive to integrate all institutions which are segregated." Last, an example item from the 9-item humanist scale (α = .71, $M = 5.58$, $SD = 0.95$) is, "Blacks would be better off if they were more concerned with the problems facing all people than just focusing on Black issues."

System justification was measured with four items from the system justification scale because of space limitations (α = .77, $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.23$; Kay & Jost, 2003). Scale items allowed responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The selected items were "In general, I find society to be fair," "Most policies serve the greater good," "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness," and "Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve." We also measured trust in three institutions. Using the same response scale, trust in the *police* ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.71$) was measured with the item, "Generally, the police can be trusted to do the right thing." Trust that one has voice in *local government* (two items, α = .66, $M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.66$) and in *national government* (two items, α =.72, $M = 2.06$,

SD = 0.69) were measured with the political efficacy scale (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). A sample item is, "If you had some complaint about a local [national] government activity and took that complaint to a member of the local government council [national government], do you think he or she would pay," followed by responses ranging from 1 = *no attention at all* to 4 = *a lot of attention*.

Procedure

We conducted the survey in 2009. Our measures of interest were a part of a larger questionnaire on academics, politics, and race. Recruitment efforts involved no references to race, so participants were not self-selected based on race consciousness and did not expect the study to be about race. Thirty-six percent of participants from diverse schools were recruited via a lab in downtown Chicago, Illinois. Though this lab is not on a campus, it is run by a group of university social and behavioral scientists. The Chicago participants had previously registered with this lab as interested in participating in research. They learned about the lab from flyers, periodic recruitment efforts around downtown and at local universities and colleges, information on the web, or word of mouth. When registering with the lab, participants indicated their ethnicities and academic status. Using this information, Black students were selectively exposed—via emails, when logging into the lab's website, and/or when visiting the lab in person—to an invitation to complete an "academics and politics" survey. Our participants were those who opted into the study online (for raffle cash prizes) or in person (for cash). Altogether, 28 different schools were represented in the Chicago sample. The remaining 64% of participants—those attending a public university in Indianapolis, Indiana—also completed the survey online. With the help of the registrar, a mass email invitation to participate in the study was sent to all Black students, but this selection criterion was not highlighted for these participants. Participants were those who opted into the study online and entered into a raffle for cash prizes.

Results

To examine how Black identity dimensions predicted system justification and institutional trust, we tested models in steps. Effects-coded control variables included survey mode (paper and pencil in Chicago, online in Chicago, or online in Indianapolis), sex, multiracial identity, and employment (none, part-, or full-time). Age, socioeconomic status, MIBI scales, and outcome variables were *z* scored. Because of missing data, the most complex, final

models had $N = 263$ of the 275 participants. As a brief report, we show only significant results. Humanism correlated with nationalist ($r = -.42$), minority (.25), and assimilation (.43) ideologies and centrality ($-.20$), which in turn correlated with nationalist (.52) and minority (.17) ideologies. Assimilation also correlated with the minority ideology (.47) and system justification (.18); all *p*s < .01.

Main Analyses

First, we analyzed system justification using hierarchical regression. In Step 1, we regressed system justification on our controls, $R^2 = .03$, $F(8, 254) = .97$, *ns*. In Step 2, we added centrality and the ideologies to the model, $R^2 = .09$, $F(13, 249) = 1.83$, $p < .05$. System justification was negatively predicted by centrality ($\beta = -.158$, $SE = .075$), $t = -2.10$, $p < .05$, and positively by the assimilation ideology ($\beta = .220$, $SE = .07$), $t = 2.86$, $p < .01$. In Step 3, we entered the centrality × ideology interactions, $R^2 = .12$, $F(17, 245) = 1.83$, $p = .01$. The centrality × nationalist ideology interaction was significant ($\beta = -.167$, $SE = .061$), $t = -2.72$, $p < .01$. Simple slopes analyses conducted at ±1 *SD* on the nationalist scale revealed the negative association between centrality and system justification held true only for those strongly endorsing the nationalist ideology ($\beta = -.386$), $t = -3.54$, $p < .001$. Thus, system justification was attenuated among individuals centrally identified as Black who believed Black people should remain a distinct cultural/political group.

We also began our analysis of overall mean trust across institutions with hierarchical regression. In Step 1, we entered control variables, $R^2 = .01$, $F(8, 254) = .39$, *ns*. In Step 2, we entered main effects of centrality and the ideologies, $R^2 = .05$, $F(13, 249) = .99$, *ns.* The minority ideology emerged as a positive predictor of overall institutional trust ($\beta = .131$, $SE = .052$), $t = 2.54$, $p < .05$. In Step 3, we entered the centrality × ideology interactions, $R^2 = .06$, $F(17, 245) = .87$, *ns*. No interactions were significant. See Table 1 for the coefficients of variables added in Step 2 and in Step 3 for both system justification and institutional trust models.

After examining these findings, institutional trust was analyzed with a mixed-effects linear model using R to determine whether dimensions of Black identity differentially predicted trust across institutions (trust in police and that one has voice in local government and national government). We used packages for multilevel modeling (Bates & Maechler, 2009) and tests of significance (Tremblay & Ransijn, 2013). If these omnibus tests indicated identity dimension(s) differentially predicted trust across institutions, then trust variables were submitted to individual analyses. We found only the nationalist ideology interacted with trust measure, $F(2, 752) = 11.54$,

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Coefficients for Black Identity Variables Predicting System Justification and Institutional Trust.

	System justification scale			Overall institutional trust		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Step 2: Main Effects Model						
Black Identity Centrality	−0.158	0.075	−2.10*	−0.027	0.054	−0.51
Black Nationalist Ideology	−0.004	0.079	−0.06	−0.051	0.056	−0.90†
Oppressed Minority Ideology	−0.005	0.072	−0.07	0.131	0.052	2.54*
Assimilation Ideology	0.220	0.077	2.86**	−0.061	0.055	−1.10
Humanist Ideology	−0.048	0.075	−0.64	0.035	0.054	0.65
Step 3: Ideology × Centrality						
Black Nationalist × Centrality	−0.167	0.061	−2.72**	−0.026	0.045	−0.58
Oppressed Minority × Centrality	0.013	0.066	0.20	0.005	0.048	0.10
Assimilation × Centrality	−0.052	0.064	−0.80	−0.057	0.047	−1.22
Humanist × Centrality	0.005	0.060	0.09	0.006	0.043	0.15

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. †Nationalist ideology negatively predicted specifically trust in police (β = −.223, SE = .077), $t = −2.89$.

$p < .001$. Analyzing trust in police and that one has voice in local and national government separately, the nationalist ideology predicted trust in police (β = −.223, SE = .077), $t = −2.89$, $p < .005$. This finding is compatible with our prediction that the nationalist ideology would negatively predict system justification, but specifically it is the police who are less trusted.

Discussion

The MMRI provided leverage in predicting system justification and institutional trust. A less nuanced approach to Black identity would fail to capture how racial ideology and centrality relate to attitudes toward the system and institutions. We found that centrality—the degree to which race defines the self—predicted less system justification, consistent with predictions. In other words, individuals highly identified as Black may be less likely to reduce ideological dissonance through system justification. This finding was qualified such that individuals who reject the Black nationalist ideology—which emphasizes the distinctiveness of Black people—did not demonstrate this negative association between centrality and system justification. The nationalist ideology itself negatively predicted trust in police. Thus, while this ideology did not relate broadly to system justification, its negative association with trust in police is compatible with predictions that endorsers of this ideology would be less likely to support the system. Somewhat surprisingly, the

minority ideology positively predicted trust in institutions. This suggests that the minority ideology may relate to optimism with regard to institutions' capacity for reducing rather than exacerbating inequity. Consistent with predictions, the assimilation ideology positively predicted system justification. Thus, this ideology prescribes working within the system and predicts more positive attitudes toward said system. Finally, the humanist ideology was the only identity variable that did not predict system justification or institutional trust. Therefore, we found no evidence that this ideology discouraging attending to race is associated with reducing ideological dissonance via system justification. No identity variable related to system justification and trust in institutions in a parallel fashion. This precluded any meaningful investigation of mediation in which system justification might explain institutional trust, or vice versa. It appears centrality and the assimilation ideology relate more to general system attitudes while the nationalist and minority ideologies relate more to attitudes toward institutions.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Future samples not composed exclusively of students would allow greater generalizability overall and in terms of gender. For instance, in Cohen's (2005) survey data of participants aged 15 to 25 involving a standard nationally representative sample plus a minority oversample, 45% of African Americans in the sample were male. In terms of future theoretical directions, researchers could investigate the role of racial regard (collective self-esteem/group justification) in accounting for system justification. SJT suggests that high private regard—the valence of individuals' attitudes toward being Black (Sellers et al., 1998)—may indicate group over system justification. Altogether, there exist connections between dimensions of Black identity and attitudes toward the broader system, as well as toward specific institutions. This points to one significant account of variability in African Americans' sociopolitical attitudes. Heterogeneity in the attitudes of prominent Black intellectual figures and elites (e.g., Barack Obama, Condoleezza Rice) and ordinary citizens alike may be explicable through considering the multidimensionality of their racial identities. Quite importantly, this understanding may be leveraged toward optimizing social movements in bettering the conditions of African Americans.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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