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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, and justifiable (Jost & Banaji, 1994). 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 four U.S. 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 U.S. government officials and to believe that “the government is run for the benefit of all” than were high income Latinos, (c) Southerners in the U.S. 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, (d) low income respondents and African Americans were more likely than others to believe that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary, and (e) stronger endorsement of meritocratic ideology was associated with greater satisfaction with one’s own economic situation. Taken together, these findings provide support for 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.

Cognitive dissonance theory is one of the very few psychological theories that genuinely aims to integrate social, cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral aspects of human functioning (Festinger, 1957). The core assumption of dissonance theory is that people are motivated to resolve inconsistencies among their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and thus to provide justifications or rationalizations for their experiences. Cognitive dissonance theory is a much-cherished theory in social psychology for a good many reasons (see Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999 for a recent tribute), but chief among these is that it often contradicts the seemingly unassailable assumptions of reinforcement theory, self-interest, rational choice economics, and common sense. In social psychology, perhaps more than in other scientific endeavors, the ability to predict and account for paradoxical effects is a reliable predictor of active research interest and theoretical longevity. Because of the counter-intuitive nature of cognitive 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 cognitive dissonance theory include counter-intuitive 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). Summarizing some of the more surprising motivational effects of dissonance arousal, Wicklund and Brehm (1976) conclude that:

“It has been shown that the course of events surrounding hunger, thirst, avoidance of pain, and avoidance of failure is not as simple as might be imagined from the viewpoint of a simplistic approach based on specific drives. When a person takes it upon himself to

suffer from hunger, the manifest need for food thereby diminishes in proportion to the amount of dissonance involved in his decision. An analogous process takes place in the case of committing oneself to thirst, pain, and conditions conducive to failure” (p. 159).

A paradoxical consequence of suffering, according to cognitive 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. In this respect, 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 cognitive 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.

System justification theory builds on dissonance theory and other sociological and psychological theories of justification (such as attribution theory, social identity theory, and just world theory, as well as Marxist and neo-institutionalist theories of ideological legitimation) to analyze the observed tendency to rationalize social and political systems and to explain and justify the existence of inequality and disadvantage in such systems (e.g., Jost, in press; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Like cognitive dissonance theory, system justification theory addresses the holding of attitudes that are contrary to one’s own self-interest and therefore contrary to what one would expect on the basis of psychological theories of self-enhancement or economic theories of rational self-interest. Thus, research on system justification focuses on counter-intuitive outcomes, such as the internalization of negative stereotypes about one’s own group

(Jost & Banaji, 1994), attitudinal ambivalence directed at fellow ingroup members who challenge the system (Jost & Burgess, 2000), opposition to equality (and its psychological consequences) among members of disadvantaged groups (Jost & Thompson, 2000), and tendencies among members of powerless groups to subjectively enhance the legitimacy of their powerlessness (Haines & Jost, 2000). The strongest form of the system justification hypothesis, which we investigate here, is that *members of disadvantaged groups are even more likely than members of advantaged groups to hold attitudes that are supportive of the very social system that creates the disadvantages from which they suffer*. Our research goal, therefore, is 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.

Although strongly influenced by work on justification and rationalization processes, system justification theory differs from cognitive dissonance theory in at least three significant ways. First, cognitive 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; Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997; Cooper, 1999; Steele & Liu, 1983; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). Thus, Greenwald and Ronis (1978) concluded that, "The theory seems now to be focused on cognitive changes occurring in the service of ego defense, or self-esteem maintenance, rather than in the interest of preserving psychological consistency" (p. 55). If this formulation is right, then cognitive dissonance theory should be classified as an "ego-justification" theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which means that for members of disadvantaged groups its fundamental motivation is at odds with the system justification motive to preserve the legitimacy and stability of the social system (see Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000). 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 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; Habermas, 1976; Marx & Engels, 1844/1970; Powell & DiMaggio, 1990). As Berger and Luckmann (1966) put it, “the institutional world requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be ‘explained’ and ‘justified’” (p. 61). 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 indeed 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. Cognition, in this view, is deployed in the service of the social system, even at the expense of the self-concept. In this sense, system justification effects are more like biases in favor of the status quo than self-serving efforts to rationalize one’s own behavior.

A second difference between cognitive dissonance theory and system justification theory 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., Brehm, 1959; 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, even when they personally played no role in bringing about these effects (Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). We are not suggesting that people are uninvolved in the goings-on of the status quo. Rather, it is because the status quo causes real psychological discomfort that it needs to be justified. 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, George, & Crocker, in press), 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 cognitive dissonance theory that stresses not ego-defense but cognitive consistency (e.g., Abelson, Aronson, McGuire, Newcomb, Rosenberg, & Tannenbaum, 1968). System justification theory does not merely predict consistency and stability, as cognitive dissonance and other self-consistency theories propose (e.g., Lecky, 1945; 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 (Haines & Jost, 2000), even if such beliefs actually create dissonance, ambivalence, or feelings of personal inadequacy (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Jost & Burgess, 2000). Thus, although cognitive 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.

In the research that follows, we present 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, we argue that the results are highly consistent with the strong form of the system justification hypothesis that people who are worst off (and therefore have the greatest need to reduce ideological dissonance) engage in the greatest amount of dissonance reduction on behalf of the social system. The presumed result of such a process is that the system is granted legitimacy and stability by those who benefit the least from it.

Evidence consistent with this formulation comes from qualitative sociological sources such as Lane (1962), Liebow (1967), and Sennett and Cobb (1972). In each of these cases, the persistence of social inequality is explained partially in terms of rationalization processes that are akin to attempts at dissonance reduction. For instance, Lane (1962) argues that blue-collar workers are so psychologically threatened by their state of economic disadvantage that they develop defensive attitudes that are used to deny the possibility of greater equality in society. Similarly, Liebow (1967) recounts events in a low-income African American neighborhood, arguing that Black men develop anti-family attitudes that serve to justify and make sense of the dissonance-producing fact that they cannot support their families financially. Sennett and Cobb (1972) propose that because of ideologies of meritocracy and individual self-reliance, poor people develop a diminished sense of their own self-worth. This theme is echoed in sociological theories of self-evaluation, according to which people make attributions about their own capacities and characteristics based upon their positions in society (e.g., Della Fave, 1980, 1986; Shepelak, 1987; Stolte, 1983). Experimental and quasi-experimental studies summarized by Major (1994) and Martin (1982, 1986, 1993) similarly reveal that members of disadvantaged groups are surprisingly content with their situation, especially to the extent that they accept meritocratic belief systems that success is earned and deserved. Ruggiero and Major (1998) have argued that, contrary to self-interest and to social reality, members of disadvantaged groups (women, Blacks) are significantly less likely than members of advantaged groups (men, Whites) to recognize or admit that they are discriminated against, but this conclusion was confined to achievement-related contexts in which disadvantaged group members presumably had prior failure experiences. Although all of these

perspectives assume that disadvantaged group members share the same meritocratic belief systems of society as a whole and therefore internalize self-defeating attitudes, in general they do not go so far as to advance the dissonance-based, system justification argument that disadvantaged group members will be more likely than advantaged group members to defend and justify the system.

Demonstrating that members of disadvantaged groups at least sometimes endorse system justifying beliefs to a greater extent than do members of more advantaged groups would call into question the widespread assumption that ideological positions are grounded in individual or collective self-interest (see Green & Shapiro, 1994). Many theories in sociology, psychology, and political science assume that political attitudes reflect group interests and class position, so that the most support for social systems and authorities should come from the groups that benefit the most from those systems. These theories include orthodox Marxist accounts stressing the inevitability of class conflict (e.g., Dahrendorf, 1959) as well as other perspectives stressing the role of ingroup identification (or class consciousness) and the desire for ingroup dominance or superiority, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). We do not argue that there are no effects of individual or group self-interest, only that these may be counter-balanced (or even overpowered in some situations) by motivated attempts to reduce ideological dissonance on behalf of the system. In a cultural context such as the United States, where strong values for achievement and socio-economic 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), it is especially likely that there will be strong motivational pressures for disadvantaged group members to provide attitudinal support for the system, even at the expense of a positive self-image.

The prediction that we pursue here is thus that members of disadvantaged groups sometimes justify the system to an even greater degree than do members of more advantaged groups. Presumably, this is because of the ideological equivalent of increased cognitive dissonance and because of the success of societal and cultural socialization attempts to induce what Marxists often refer to as “false consciousness” -- ideological illusions or “legitimizing myths” that are contrary to self-interest and that

serve to preserve the existing social system (see Jost, 1995; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Because of theoretical differences between cognitive dissonance theory and system justification theory, 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, cognitive dissonance theory and system justification theory are in agreement that it should be those who suffer the most who have the most to explain, justify, and rationalize.

As in cognitive dissonance experiments, members of disadvantaged groups in society face a bad situation that they cannot usually change and from which they cannot usually withdraw (at least completely). As a result, we propose, people are forced to adopt beliefs that allow them to make peace with the way things are (see also Lane, 1962). In this sense, endorsement of system-serving ideologies (such as meritocratic belief systems and unconditional support for authorities) may be regarded as a form of coping with an unjust fate. Paradoxically, the outcome of this process is that the system is defended and justified most strongly by those who stand to benefit the least from its continued existence.

#### Overview of Research

In this paper, we present data from four 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 U.S. government is run for the benefit of all. In the third 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 fourth study, we examined the effects of 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 1,345 members of the U.S. 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.

The survey was administered as part of a nationwide random-digit telephone survey of the social and political attitudes of U.S. 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 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 ( $B = -.22, p < .005$ ) and to limit the right of people to speak against the government ( $B = -.31, p < .005$ ). Mean levels of support for limiting criticism of the system as a function of respondents' income levels are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 for each of the two items. This 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.

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Insert Figures 1 and 2 here

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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 ( $B = -.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and on free speech against the government ( $B = -1.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). 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 ( $B = -.30$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $B = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , 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  $< .10$ ). 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 U.S. government.

### Study 2

In Study 2, we explored the possibility that relatively disadvantaged members of the U.S. 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 2,817 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, 1,546 (55%) were Mexican, 589 (21%) were Puerto Rican, and 682 (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" or run "for the benefit of all". 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

To investigate whether poorer Latinos were more likely to trust and support the U.S., 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 highly reliable linear effect of income ( $B = -.12, p < .001$ ). Poorer Latinos were significantly more trusting of government officials than were more affluent Latinos (see Figure 3), although this pattern of support seems to run counter to individual and group self-interest.

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Insert Figures 3 and 4 here

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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 variable. This analysis also revealed a significant negative relation between income and mean level of trust in the

government ( $B = -.12, p < .001$ ). 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 4).

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 ( $B = -.09, p < .001$  and  $B = -.05, p < .05$ , respectively), even after controlling for the effects of education, which also attained significance ( $B = -.09, p < .001$  and  $B = -.08, p < .001$ , respectively). Thus, poorer and less educated Latinos were indeed more likely to report feeling trust in and support for the U.S. government than were wealthier and better educated Latinos.

We acknowledge that there is a viable alternative to our 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 system of government. 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 and 4.

### Study 3

In Study 3, 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. We tested three hypotheses that are contrary to what self-interest perspectives

would predict. First, because of the different opportunities and socialization experiences of African Americans in the South versus the North, we hypothesized that Southern Blacks would be more likely than Northern Blacks to endorse system justifying ideologies. Second, in keeping with the notion that members of disadvantaged groups often justify their own outcomes, 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, 1993). Third, in keeping with the idea that 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 3 were drawn from the 1991 Race and Politics Survey conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley and made publicly available by principle investigators Paul Sniderman, Philip Tetlock, and Thomas Piazza. This large-scale telephone survey sampled Americans from the 48 contiguous U.S states by means of a random-digit dialing procedure. The overall response rate was 65.3% (2,223 out of 3,403 eligible persons contacted). About 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, 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 from 2,042 to 1,103.

Survey respondents were 55 African Americans (26 men and 29 women) and 1,048 European Americans (441 men and 607 women) who took part in both phases of the telephone interview and the follow-up mail survey. 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 ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

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, D.C.). 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,  $F(1, 1897) = 40.57, p < .001$ , and a main effect of region indicated that Southerners earned marginally less than did Northerners,  $F(1, 1897) = 3.68, p < .06$ . 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 as a function of race and geographical region are graphed in Figure 5.

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Insert Figures 5 and 6 here

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Respondents in general endorsed meritocratic ideology to a relatively strong extent (see Figure 6). 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,  $t(23) = 2.38, p < .03$ . Their mean score of 2.96 corresponded to the label of “agree somewhat.”

Respondents' levels of endorsement of meritocratic ideology were submitted to a 2 (Race/ethnicity: African American vs. European American) x 2 (Region: North vs. 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,  $F(1, 1099) = 3.42, p < .07$ , and a significant main effect of region,  $F(1, 1099) = 8.56, p < .005$ . 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 x Region interaction,  $F(1, 1099) = 5.73, p < .02$ . Simple effects tests revealed that among Northerners, African Americans scored

significantly lower than European Americans in terms of endorsement of meritocratic beliefs,  $F(1, 757) = 7.88, p < .005$ . Among Southerners, however, African Americans were just as likely as European Americans to endorse the myth of meritocracy,  $F(1, 344) = 0.18, p = .67$ .

As a further test of our hypotheses, African American respondents' levels of support for meritocracy were submitted to a 2 (Region: North vs. South) x 2 (Income: low vs. 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,  $F(1, 48) = 7.06, p < .02$ , and Income,  $F(1, 48) = 4.76, p < .04$ . 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 x Income interaction,  $F(1, 48) = 4.35, p < .05$ . Among African Americans in the North, there was no association between income and endorsement of meritocratic beliefs,  $r(20) = .15, p = .52$ . Among African Americans in the South, however, a negative relation was obtained between income and ideological support for meritocracy,  $r(20) = -.46, p = .01$ . 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 x 2 analysis, no evidence was observed of a Region x Income interaction,  $F(1, 1020) = 0.06, p = .82$ . 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 2-way Region x Education interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 48) = 0.49, p = .49$ .

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 the myth of meritocracy. 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 4

The goal of the fourth 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 legitimation 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 4 were taken from the 1987 General Social Survey (GSS), which is a nearly annual personal interview survey of U.S. households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) affiliated with the University of Chicago. A sub-sample of 788 respondents (443 men, 345 women) completed the measures of interest to us. This sub-sample was comprised of 81% European Americans ( $n = 638$ ) and 19% African Americans ( $n = 150$ ).

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hearn, 1984; Lee, 1985), socio-economic status was measured in terms of each respondent's reported level 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 another (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Both father's and mother's education levels were measured in terms of total years in school. Family income at age 16 was measured on a five-point scale ranging from "far below average" to "far above average". The three indicators formed a suitably reliable index of socio-economic status ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

"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 five-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 justified (see also Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Meritocratic ideology refers to beliefs about the causes of prosperity and upward mobility (e.g., Martin, 1993). Specifically, strong believers in meritocratic ideology tend to legitimize economic inequality among individuals and groups (Major, 1994). 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). An index of meritocratic ideology was computed by averaging across the three items ( $\alpha = .46$ ).

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). An economic satisfaction scale was constructed with the use of these three items ( $\alpha = .56$ ).

### Results and Discussion

Relations among the variables of socio-economic status, legitimization of inequality, belief in meritocratic ideology, and economic satisfaction were estimated using regression analyses, controlling for race and sex. As hypothesized, socio-economic status was negatively related to the legitimization 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 ( $B = -.34, p < .01$ ). There were no significant effects of socio-economic status on meritocratic ideology in Study 4. This is somewhat surprising, especially in light of the fact that the legitimization of inequality and endorsement of meritocratic ideology were indeed correlated with one another ( $B = .54, p < .05$ ). 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 legitimization of inequality) was associated with stronger (self-reported) economic satisfaction ( $B = .28, p < .01$ ). Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the relations among variables, as indicated by significant path coefficients in the structural equation model.

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Insert Figure 7 here

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Race was found to have significant effects on the legitimization of inequality and on economic satisfaction but not on meritocratic ideology. African Americans were less contented with their economic situation than were European Americans ( $B = .29, p < .01$ ), but, somewhat paradoxically, they were also more likely to perceive economic inequality as legitimate and just ( $B = -.25, p < .01$ ), which is reminiscent of findings from Studies 1 and 3. 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 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). Our research, by contrast, 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. Even more strongly, the pattern of system justifying beliefs appears to be exactly *opposite* from what one would expect on the basis of self-interest, so that those who are most disadvantaged by the status quo sometimes provide the most ringing endorsements of the system that places them at social and economic disadvantage.

In Study 1, for instance, 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 U.S. government officials and to believe that “the government is run for the benefit of all” than were high income Latinos. Study 3 indicated that Southerners in the U.S. 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 4 indicated that African Americans and people who were lower in socio-economic status were more likely than European Americans and those who are higher in socio-economic status to believe that economic inequality is legitimate and necessary. In addition, Study 4 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 4, 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 four 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 (see Jost, in press; Jost & Banaji, 1994). This hypothesis is that members of disadvantaged groups 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, cognitive 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, 1967, 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.

Despite the similarities between system justification theory and cognitive dissonance theory, system justification theory differs from cognitive dissonance theory by departing from three interrelated assumptions: (1) that attitudinal responses are driven by intrapsychic motivations for ego defense or self-justification (e.g., Aronson, 1992; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978; Steele & Liu, 1983), (2) that people must feel personally responsible for the aversive consequences of their own behavior in order to engage in justification processes (e.g., Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976), and (3) that justification is driven solely by the need to resolve inconsistency among cognitions (e.g., Abelson et al., 1968) rather than the need to perceive outcomes and social arrangements as fair, legitimate, and justifiable (e.g., Lane, 1962; Lerner, 1980). Thus, system justification theory holds that people reduce ideological dissonance on behalf of the system (in ways that may be personally dis-serving), that people justify the status quo even when they are not personally responsible for it, and that people generally enhance the subjective legitimacy and stability of existing social arrangements (see also Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Thompson, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is certainly true 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 neo-institutionalist 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 (see also Haines & Jost, 2000).

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 the increased commitment to a meritocratic ideology, as in Study 3. 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 Study 4 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, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Waxmonsky, & Arndt, 1999).

Although future research is needed to determine whether people do rationalize social and political systems in ways that are similar to the ways in which they rationalize their own counter-attitudinal behavior, all of these examples suggest that system justification theory would benefit from further extensions and applications of concepts from dissonance theory. More generally, the research reported here lends credence to recent efforts to integrate and expand upon the connections between system justification theory and epistemic or existential theories such as cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2000; Jost, in press), lay epistemic theory (Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon,

1999), terror management theory (Jost, Glaser, & Kruglanski, 2000; Schimel et al., 1999), and models of uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Mullin, 1999). This body of work, in conjunction with the studies reported here, suggests that the motive to defend and justify the status quo is related to epistemic as well as ideological needs to resolve inconsistency, reduce dissonance and uncertainty, acquire secure and permanent knowledge, and to find meaning in the randomness and capriciousness of life, while at the same time preserving an image of the system as fair, legitimate, and justifiable.

A pressing 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 safely conclude that, contrary to a wide variety of influential theories in social science, people are at least sometimes willing to forego feelings of personal adequacy, group esteem, and rational 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 suffering of those who are worst off and, at the same time, least likely to complain.

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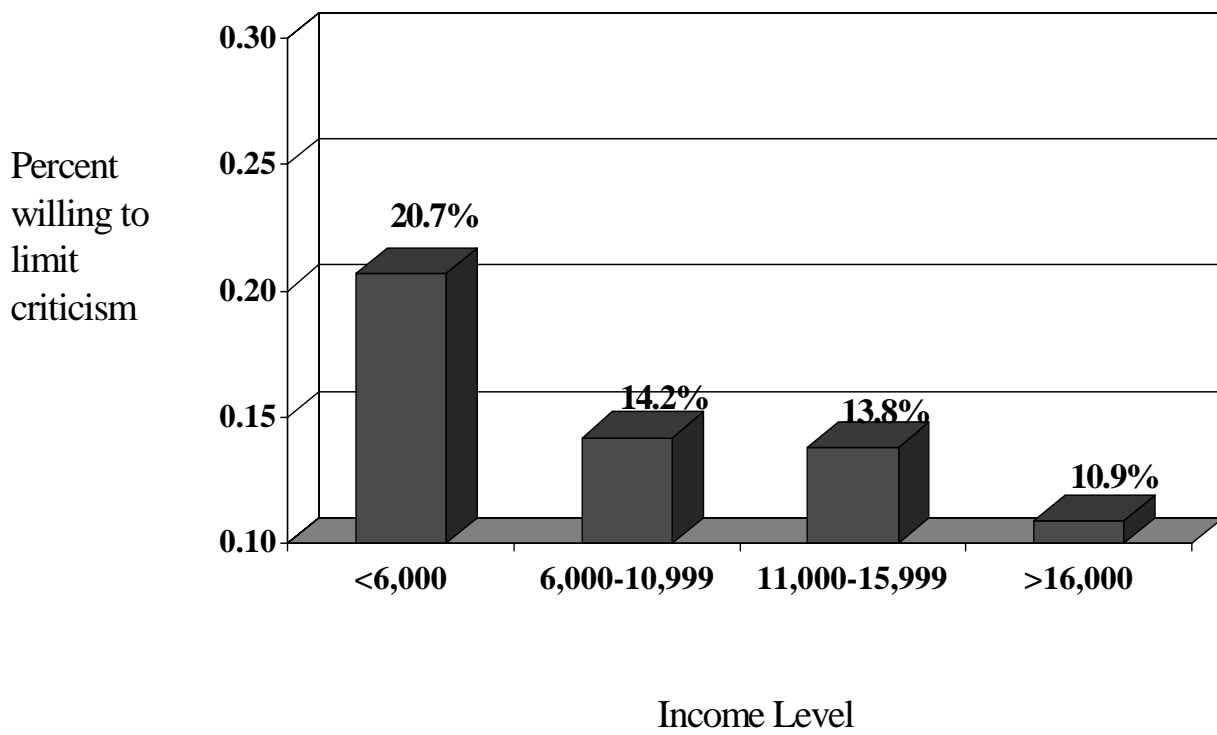
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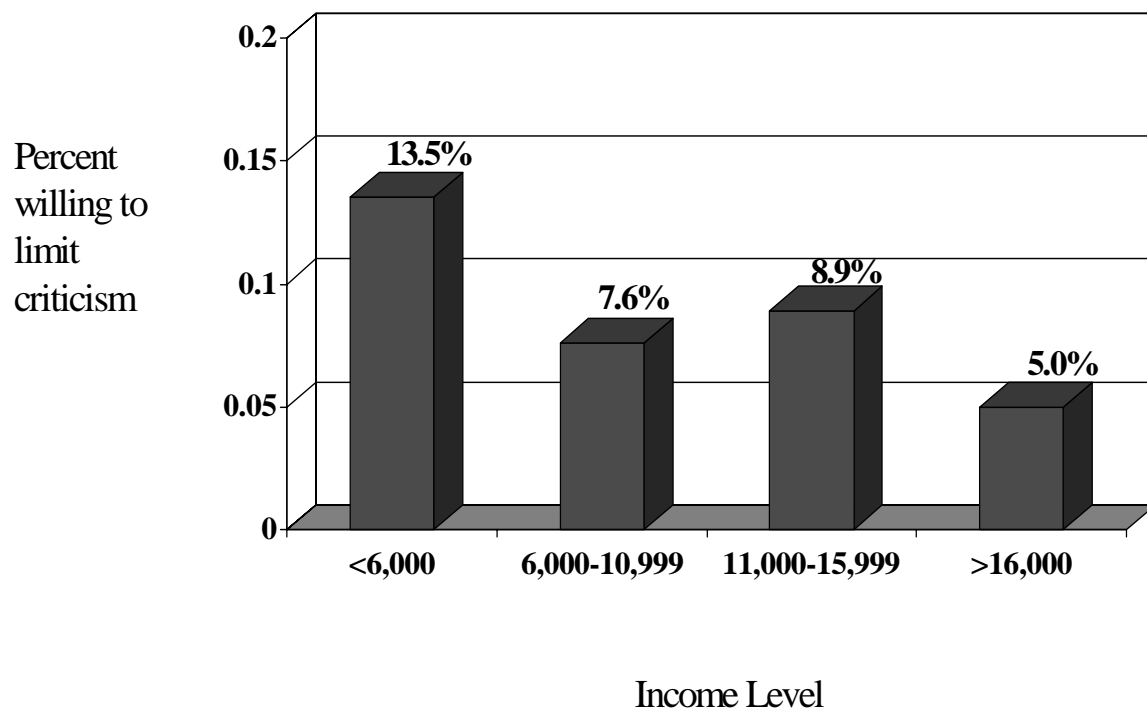
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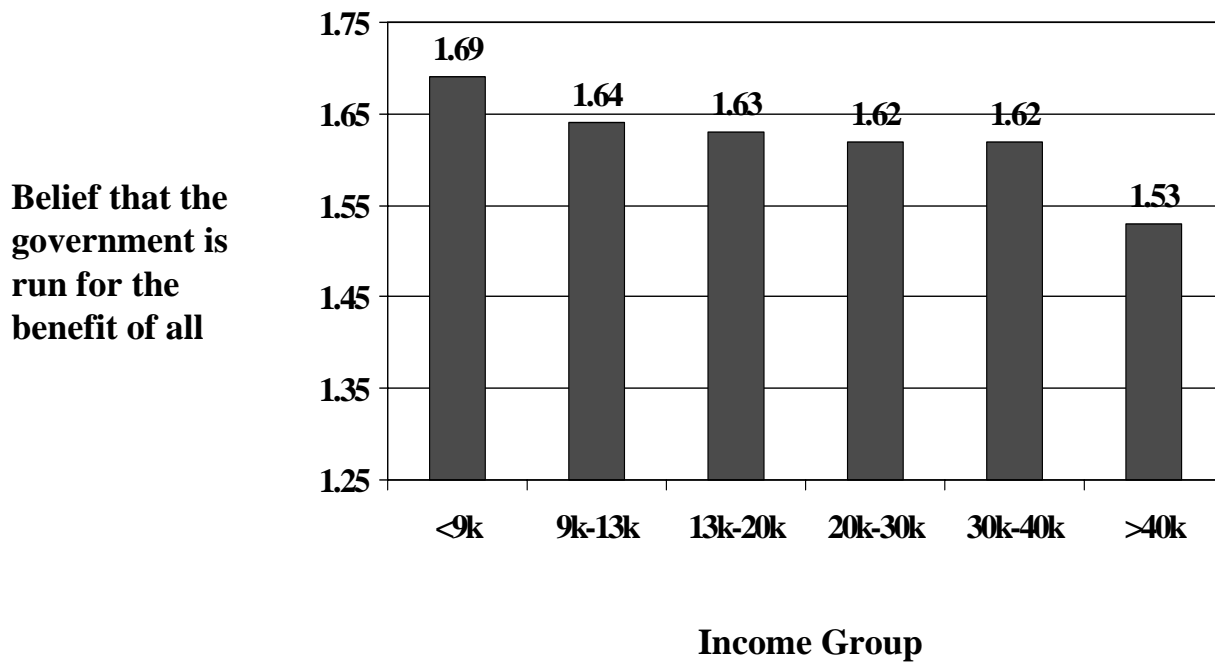
**Figure 1: Willingness to limit criticisms of the government in the press as a function of income level**



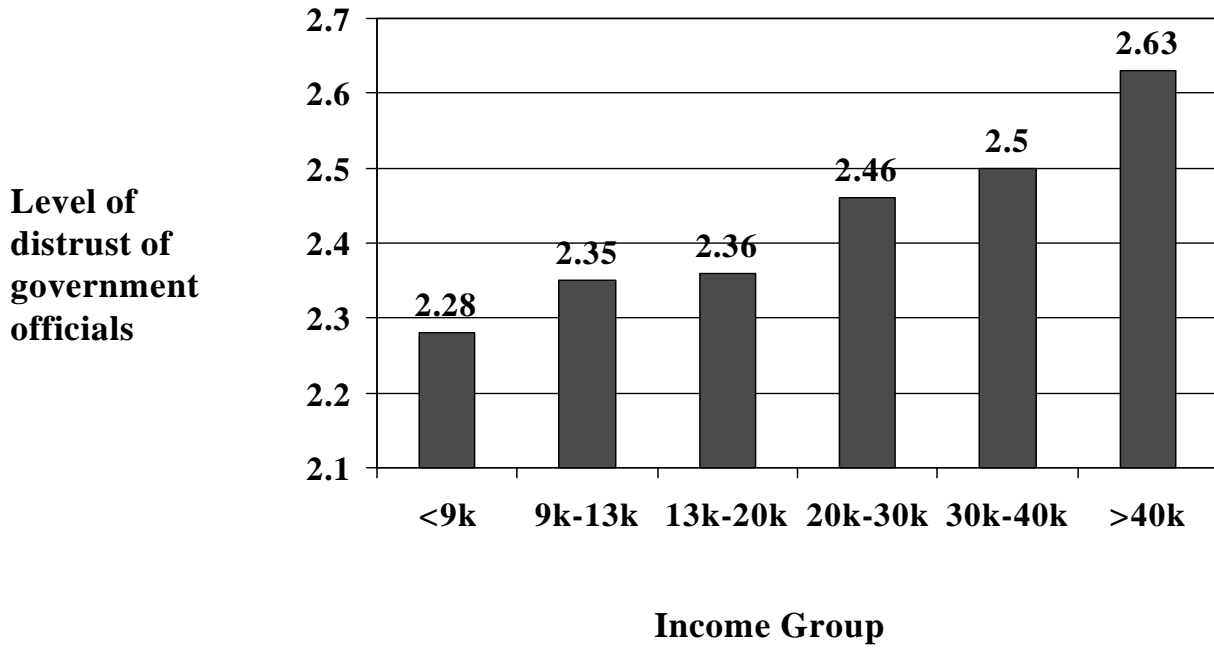
**Figure 2: Willingness to limit the right of citizens to speak against the government as a function of income level**



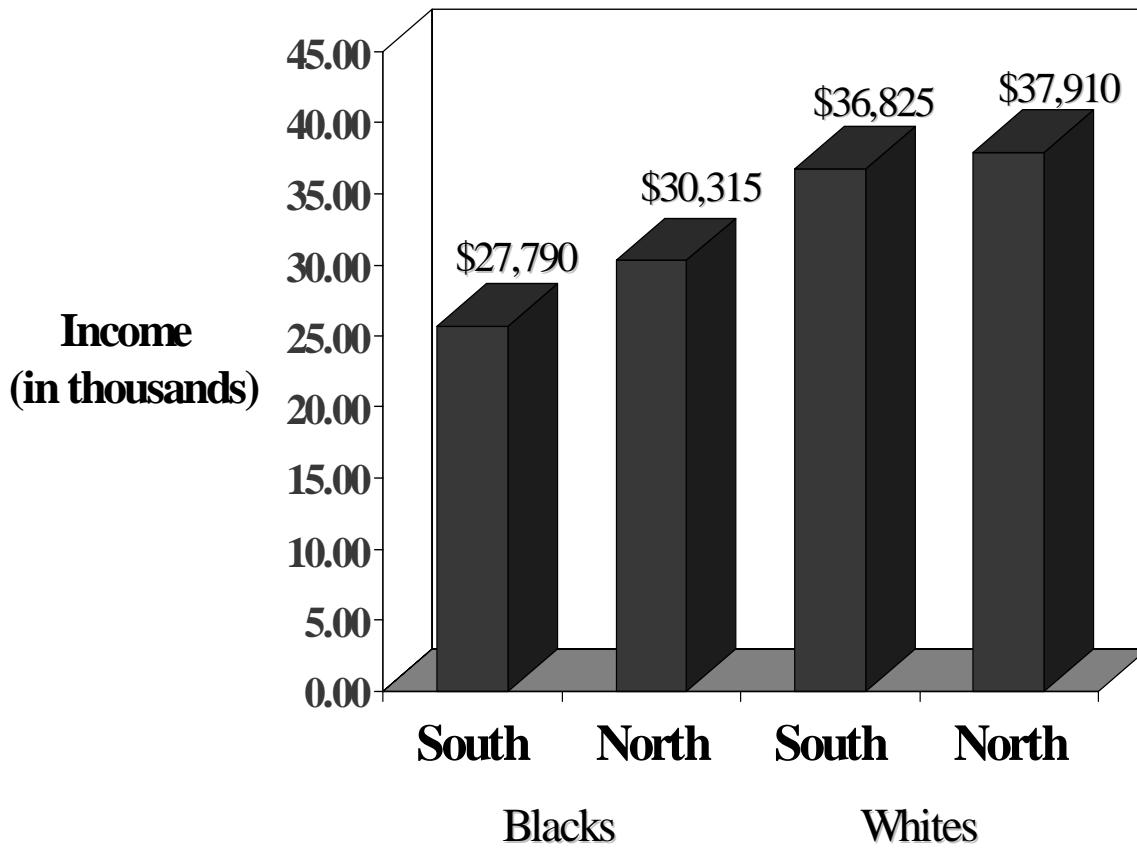
**Figure 3: Belief that the Government is Run for the Benefit of All as a Function of Income**



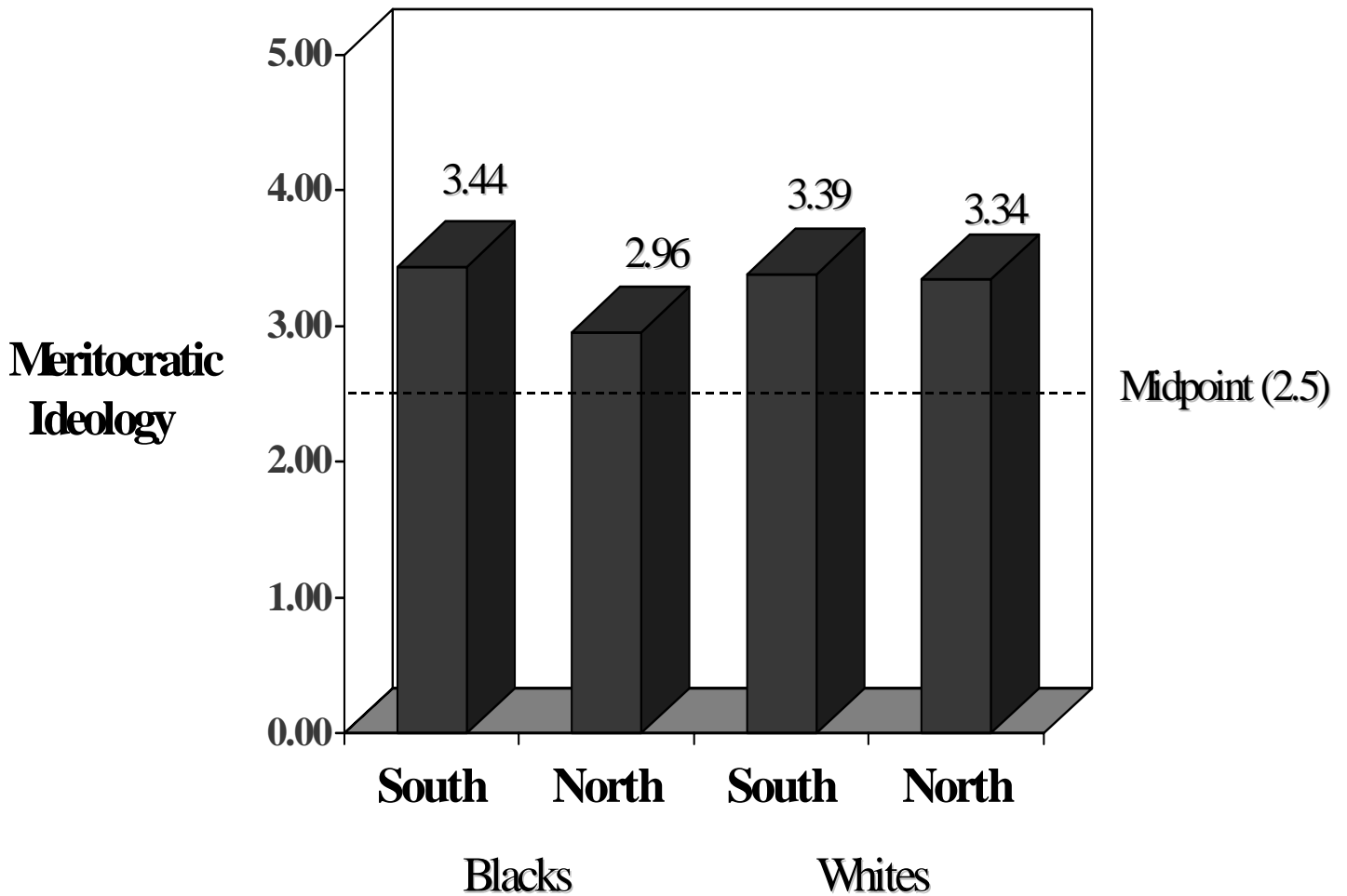
**Figure 4: Distrust of Government as a Function of Income**



**Figure 5: Income as a function of race and geographical region**



**Figure 6: Endorsement of meritocratic ideology as a function of race and geographical region**



**Figure 7: Significant Coefficients of the Structural Equation Model**

