

System Justification and the Meaning of Life: Are the Existential Benefits of Ideology Distributed Unequally Across Racial Groups?

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Abstract In this research, we investigated the relations among system justification, religiosity, and subjective well-being in a sample of nationally representative low-income respondents in the United States. We hypothesized that ideological endorsement of the status quo would be associated with certain existential and other psychological benefits, but these would not necessarily be evenly distributed across racial groups. Results revealed that religiosity was positively associated with subjective well-being in general, but the relationship between system justification and well-being varied considerably as a function of racial group membership. For low-income European Americans, stronger endorsement of system justification as an ideology was associated with increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and a wide range of existential benefits, including life satisfaction and a subjective sense of security, meaning, and mastery. These findings are consistent with the notion that system justification satisfies psychological needs for personal control and serves a *palliative* function for its adherents. However, many of these effects were considerably weakened or even reversed for African American respondents. Thus, the psychological benefits associated with religiosity existed for both racial groups, whereas the benefits of system justification were distributed unequally across racial groups.

Keywords Ideology · System justification · Religiosity · Well-being · Existential motivation

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What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up
 Like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 —Langston Hughes, “Harlem” (1951)

“I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them!”

—Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949/1999, p. 102)

In the classic drama *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is a relentless drummer of support for the myth of the American Dream, despite the personal and financial setbacks that characterize his life struggle. When the evidence challenges his idealized memories, unrealistic expectations of success, or the assumption that hard work always pays off, he lapses into rose-tinted delusions concerning the past, present, and future. These delusions leave him happier, more optimistic, and more convinced about the possibility of future success. “What’d you have to start that for?” remarks his wife as she scolds their son for trying to challenge one of Willy’s delusional beliefs (Miller, 1949/1999, p. 46). “You see how sweet he was as soon as you talked hopefully?” She recognizes the effects that such beliefs have for Willy’s subjective well-being.

Today the “American Dream” remains elusive for many citizens. For example, in its World Fact Book the CIA notes that since 1975 the top 20% have accounted for nearly all of the gains in household income, and since World War II the U.S. economy has developed into a two-tiered labor market with those at the bottom lacking the education and job skills to receive benefits such as adequate pay raises and health insurance (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). There are also other group-based inequalities, including persistent disparities between European and African Americans in terms of income, education, and other resources. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2007 the median income for a White household was just over \$52,000 (and only 8.2% of Whites were below the official poverty line), while median income for a Black household was just under \$34,000 and poverty rates were approximately three times higher at 24.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2008).

For better or worse, Willy Loman is not alone in professing an unshakeable faith in the system, despite his own repeated failures in the context of that system. Amidst vast economic disparities and apparently in conflict with their individual and collective interests, many low-income respondents endorse the belief that the social systems that affect them are fair and legitimate, that equal opportunities characterize our society, and that everyone (or nearly everyone) receives what they deserve (e.g., Frank, 2004; Hochschild, 1981; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lerner, 1980; McCoy & Major, 2007). In some cases at least, these beliefs may be said to reflect *system justification*, defined as the general motivation to (consciously or unconsciously) defend, bolster, and justify current institutions and societal arrangements (see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

System Justification Theory

The general motivation to justify the status quo is theorized to manifest itself in terms of several cognitive and ideological mechanisms. For example, one can defend or justify current systems through cognitive mechanisms such as stereotyping (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kay & Jost, 2003), rationalization (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002), and reconstructive memory (Haines & Jost, 2000). System justification tendencies can also be expressed through the endorsement of various belief systems such as the belief in a just world, the Protestant work ethic, opposition to equality, fair market ideology, and political conservatism (e.g., Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Thompson, 2000). The motivation to justify the system results in a number of consequences for one's attitudes and beliefs. For example, it is associated with a stronger preference for high over low status group members (Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002), decreased support for programs aimed at helping the disadvantaged (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007), and a depressed sense of entitlement among members of disadvantaged groups (Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001).

Hegemonic and Palliative Functions of System-Justifying Beliefs

An important question arises as to *why* people (like Willy Loman) would justify the status quo, that is, the question of what function system justification might serve for the individual. For those in a dominant or high status group in society, both the mechanisms and consequences of justifying the system are consistent with individual and collective self-interest. From a hegemonic perspective, members of dominant groups could use their power and control to spread (to subordinates) those ideas that justify and maintain the dominants' power in society (e.g., Gramsci, 1971; Jackman, 1994; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). That is, system-justifying ideologies could be devised and disseminated by dominant group members to legitimize their own power.

However, purely hegemonic, strategic explanations of the views of dominant group members are incomplete for two main reasons (see also Jost, Wakslak, & Tyler, 2008). First, much research shows that people do care about fairness and are often bothered by inequality (e.g., Lerner, 1977, 2003; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997; Tyler & Smith, 1998). Second, rather than actively and deliberately trying to preserve power, system justification as a motivation may be driven by the psychological benefits it offers the individual (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005). That is, believing in the fairness of existing arrangements seems to be associated with increased subjective well-being in a number of different ways. For instance, the "belief in a just world" allows people to perceive the world as orderly and controllable (Lerner, 1980), and such beliefs can reduce anger and maintain self-esteem in anger-eliciting situations (Dalbert, 2002), in addition to providing other psychological benefits (e.g., Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Dalbert, 1998; Hafer & Olson, 1989; Lipkus & Bissonnette, 1996; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994).

Research conducted from the perspective of system justification theory suggests that certain ideologies also serve the *palliative function* of increasing satisfaction

with the status quo while maintaining positive affect and reducing negative affect (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). For example, the endorsement of meritocratic ideology is associated with contentment concerning one's economic standing, whether rich or poor (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). Adherents of politically conservative (vs. liberal) ideology report less concern about economic inequality and, relatedly, greater happiness and life satisfaction (Napier & Jost, 2008) as well as decreased negative affect (Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2009). The ideological justification of inequality is associated with a reduction in moral outrage and other forms of emotional distress along with a reluctance to engage in behaviors aimed at helping the disadvantaged (Wakslak et al., 2007). Furthermore, placing one's faith in the legitimacy of governmental or religious systems and authorities allows one to compensate for a lack of control experienced in other domains of life (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008).

Taken in conjunction, these findings suggest that in addition to serving the hegemonic function of preserving control and power for members of advantaged groups, system-justifying ideologies fulfill a palliative function for nearly everyone by allowing people to "make peace" with the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Jost et al., 2008). As in the case of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, believing in the American Dream may make one feel optimistic, reassured, and "in control" (whether one is or not). But, for at least some members of disadvantaged groups, there are also psychological costs that may be expected to come from buying into a system in which they find it difficult if not impossible to succeed, despite their best efforts (see also Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Lane, 1959; Sennett & Cobb, 1972).

System Justification among the Disadvantaged

The observation that members of *disadvantaged* groups sometimes engage in a seemingly motivated defense (or rationalization) of the status quo has triggered the attention of several social and behavioral scientists over the years (e.g., Hochschild, 1981; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lane, 1959). Such a phenomenon strikes many as counterintuitive because when the disadvantaged endorse the system, they are supporting and legitimizing a system that appears to trap them and their fellow group members in an inferior position (e.g., Jost et al., 2001, 2004). Members of disadvantaged groups may well experience cognitive (or ideological) dissonance because of conflicting desires to see the system in favorable terms and also to feel good about themselves and the social groups to which they belong. Under some circumstances at least, they may become even more committed than others to the system that deprives them (Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003), much as hazing and abuse can increase psychological commitment through processes of rationalization and dissonance reduction (Aronson & Mills, 1959). The point is not that self-interest has no effect on social and political attitudes, but what is surprising (and requires explanation) is that substantial proportions of people in disadvantaged positions come to believe in the fairness and legitimacy of existing arrangements (e.g., Frank, 2004; Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Lane, 1959). Thus, it is especially important to determine whether and when system

justification is associated with increased (vs. decreased) subjective well-being for those who are disadvantaged within society, because they are the ones for whom system justification motives and objective self-interest most clearly conflict.

A handful of empirical studies have investigated the extent to which the psychological benefits of system justification (in terms of subjective well-being) are extended to members of disadvantaged groups. Quinn and Crocker (1999) found that for average weight woman, endorsing system-justifying beliefs was associated with increased subjective well-being (a combined index including self-esteem, depression, and anxiety measures), but for very overweight women, system-justifying beliefs were associated with decreased well-being. Jost and Thompson (2000) observed parallel differences between the historically dominant group of European Americans and the disadvantaged group of African Americans. For European Americans, increased system justification and opposition to equality were associated with decreased neuroticism and increased self-esteem, but for African Americans increased system justification and opposition to equality were associated with increased neuroticism and decreased self-esteem, respectively.

In a study that was designed specifically to examine when system justification will and will not be associated with psychological benefits for members of disadvantaged groups, O'Brien and Major (2005) found that for individuals who identified strongly with their disadvantaged racial or ethnic group (African American and Latino), system justification was associated with decreased self-esteem and depressed affect, as in the earlier study by Jost and Thompson (2000). However, for those who were weakly identified with their ingroup, system justification was positively related to self-esteem and subjective well-being, as it was for European American participants. These findings are consistent with system justification theory, insofar as the greatest conflict (or dissonance) should arise for members of disadvantaged groups who are simultaneously attached to their own group and to the status quo.

Thus, it appears that system justification is associated with palliative benefits in many different situations and for members of several different groups; at the same time, such benefits are not universal. For some measures of well-being or for some disadvantaged groups, system justification is not associated with improved subjective well-being. However, in most prior studies, members of disadvantaged groups are themselves university students, so they are by no means occupying the lowest rungs of the social ladder (but see Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986, for notable exceptions). In the present study, we investigated a nationally representative sample of low-income Americans and compared the responses of poor Whites and poor Blacks. By disentangling two distinctive sources of societal disadvantage (low-income and minority race), we are in a better position to clarify when system justification is and is not associated with increased subjective well-being and a sense of meaning, mastery, and security.

Operational Definitions of Subjective Well-Being

While prior studies have addressed important considerations regarding the palliative function of ideology, they have generally considered only a relatively small subset

of variables pertaining to self-esteem, affect, and overall life satisfaction. In this study, we investigate a broader range of subjective well-being measures, including positive and negative affect, happiness, frustration, anger, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance (cf. Elliot & Devine, 1994). In addition, we would expect system justification to be associated with a host of existential benefits, including a sense of stability, order, control, meaning, and justice (cf. Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005; Kay et al., 2008). However, to the extent that system-justifying beliefs have negative self-related implications for those who are disadvantaged, system justification may be associated with existential costs as well as benefits. Therefore, we also included measures of performance and social self-esteem, a sense of personal mastery, a sense of security, a sense of meaning, and life satisfaction in general. Few of these variables have been investigated in previous studies of system justification; taken in conjunction, they capture a wide range of existential motives that may help to explain the psychological appeal of system-justifying ideologies (Jost & Hunyady, 2005).

We also measured financial optimism, namely the belief that the individual will become rich one day, because such optimism has been cited explicitly by liberal and conservative political commentators to explain why the poor would (contrary to their own apparent self-interest) support conservative, system-justifying social and economic policies. For instance, liberal author Michael Moore (2003) has written that, “We bought into the drug, the lie that we, too, could some day be rich. So we don’t want to do anything that could harm us on that day *we end up millionaires*” (p. 140). The conservative commentator David Brooks (2003) has offered a surprisingly similar argument that Americans “always had a sense that great opportunities lie just over the horizon, in the next valley, with the next job or the next big thing. None of us is really poor; we’re just pre-rich.” Brooks suggested that financial optimism explains why so many Americans (including people of modest means) have embraced conservative economic causes, such as opposition to raising taxes on even the richest 1% of the population. While the present study does not directly assess whether financial optimism *causes* people to support the status quo, we do test whether the belief in future wealth accounts for the palliative benefits associated with system justification; if not, it seems likely that financial optimism alone cannot explain the prevalence of system-justifying beliefs.

Existential Benefits of Religious Belief

Multinational surveys reveal that people who hold religious beliefs—specifically those who identify with a specific religious denomination and those who view religion as important in their daily lives—are more likely to view their life as having purpose or meaning (Gallup, 2008). Consistent with system-justification theory, underlying needs for order, stability, meaning, and justice could help to explain the appeal of religious belief systems. Noting the widespread endorsement of both governmental and religious systems and authorities, Kay et al. (2008) proposed that both types of systems help individuals to compensate for the perceived lack of personal control (see also Hathaway & Pargament, 1991). Specifically, when people are deprived of a sense of control, they rely more heavily on external systems

(including institutionalized images of a “controlling” God) that make the world seem less random and chaotic and more orderly and structured (see also Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008).

While governmental and religious systems are capable of inspiring trust and confidence and may fulfill similar (or the same) psychological needs, there are some important differences between them. From a coping perspective, it has been suggested that religion is especially beneficial for members of socially disadvantaged groups (Pargament, 2002), including African Americans (West, 1993). Presumably, this is because religion offers the poor and disenfranchised the comforting idea that everyone, whether rich or poor, is valued by God and that they will be rewarded in the afterlife for their devotion. In the African American community, religion has often been linked (at least rhetorically) to subjective well-being, that is, “a sense of pride arising from past struggles during slavery, the hope and conviction that racial injustices will be overcome, and the belief that all races are equal in the eyes of God” (Krause, 2004, p. 110). Thus, we considered the possibility that religiosity would be associated with various existential and other psychological benefits in our low-income sample, regardless of racial group membership.

The Present Research

Prior research has shown that members of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups accept and justify aspects of the societal status quo. Here, we address the question of whether the disadvantaged experience increased subjective well-being and other psychological benefits that are proportionate to their degree of system justification. In the present study, we build upon past work in four important ways. First, in contrast to studies involving college student samples, we investigated system-justifying beliefs and subjective well-being in a nationally representative sample of low-income Americans (i.e., those in households earning less than \$30,000/year). Second, given past findings that system justification is associated with detrimental outcomes for members of some disadvantaged groups (including African Americans), we address the question of whether existential and other psychological benefits of system justification are unevenly distributed across racial groups, holding (low) income constant.

Third, we examined a more extensive constellation of variables tapping subjective well-being than in past studies, including a broader range of affective variables, different dimensions of self-esteem, and several existential variables pertaining to the sense that life is meaningful and purposive. We also assess whether financial optimism explains why system justification is associated with palliative benefits, as some commentators have suggested. Fourth, we compared the benefits associated with religious ideology and general system justification. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Krause, 2003; Napier & Jost, 2008), we expected that religiosity would be positively associated with subjective well-being in general and that for African Americans in particular it might not be associated with the same detrimental effects that have been found to accompany the endorsement of other system-justifying ideologies (e.g., see Jost & Thompson, 2000; O’Brien & Major, 2005).

Method

Participants

Study participants were drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN). Panel members are recruited by KN using random-digit-dialing telephone selection networks, yielding a panel with characteristics closely matching those of the U.S. Census (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com> for more information about recruitment methodology and panel characteristics). Panel members are given a free interactive device to access the World Wide Web (e.g., a Web TV) as well as free Internet access in exchange for participation in regular surveys. Because panelists are recruited using high-quality probability sampling techniques, and because the panel is not limited to current web-users or computer owners, the KN panel is the first Web-enabled household panel that is truly representative of the American public.

Data for the current study were collected in late 2005. Participants were randomly selected from the population of KN panel members with yearly family incomes less than \$30,000 and whose primary spoken language was English. Participants received a notification e-mail alerting them to the fact that a survey had been prepared for them, along with a link to the survey. Participants took an average of 17.2 min to complete the survey.

There were 184 participants, and our sampling methodology did not target particular racial groups; we did not oversample minority respondents beyond KN's standard procedure. Our initial sample was largely White (67.9%), with smaller numbers indicating Black (14.7%), Latino (9.2%), or Other (8.2%) racial/ethnic group membership. Because we screened for English as a primary language, we had some concerns that the Latino respondents might not have been representative of the U.S. Latino population. Because of this and concerns about the small sizes of the Latino and "Other" samples, we report statistical analyses based solely on European American and African American respondents. However, we note that Latinos exhibited response patterns that were generally quite similar to (but slightly weaker than) those exhibited by European Americans, with a few responses that more closely resembled those exhibited by African Americans. One (European American) participant was excluded for refusing to answer most items. Demographic characteristics of the 124 European American and 27 African American participants who comprised our final sample are provided in Table 1.

Measures

System Justification

General system justification was assessed with the use of an 8-item scale developed by Kay and Jost (2003). This scale has been administered to many student samples but never before to a nationally representative sample in the U.S. Sample items include: "In general, I find society to be fair"; "American society needs to be radically restructured (reverse-scored)"; "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and

Table 1 Demographic profile of the total sample and racial subgroups

	European Americans <i>n</i> = 124	African Americans <i>n</i> = 27	Total sample <i>N</i> = 151
Sample size			
Gender (%)			
Men	45.2	33.3	43.0
Women	54.8	66.7	57.0
Age (%)			
18–24	10.5	3.7	9.3
25–34	11.3	22.2	13.2
35–44	13.7	25.9	15.9
45–54	14.5	7.4	13.2
55–64	18.5	18.5	18.5
65–74	20.2	14.8	19.2
75 and over	11.3	7.4	10.6
Highest level of education (%)			
No high school diploma	25.8	22.2	25.2
High school graduate or equivalent (GED)	39.5	33.3	38.4
Some college	24.2	37.0	26.5
Bachelor's degree or higher	10.5	7.4	9.9
Household annual income (%)			
Less than \$5,000	5.6	11.1	6.6
\$5,000 to 9,999	9.7	29.6	13.2
\$10,000 to 14,999	22.6	22.2	22.5
\$15,000 to 19,999	16.9	14.8	16.6
\$20,000 to 25,000	21.0	11.1	19.2
\$25,000 to 29,000	24.2	11.1	21.9
Marital status (%)			
Married	41.9	14.8	37.1
Single (never married)	25.0	40.7	27.8
Divorced	17.7	25.9	19.2
Separated	1.6	11.1	3.3
Widowed	13.7	7.4	12.6
Household head (%)			
Yes	85.5	70.4	82.8
No	14.5	29.6	17.2
Geographical context (%)			
Urban	76.6	81.5	77.5
Rural	23.4	18.5	22.5
Region (%)			
Northeast	15.3	22.2	16.6
Midwest	26.6	14.8	24.5
South	39.5	63.0	43.7
West	18.5	0	15.2

Note: Those locations that had a census Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) code were classified as urban areas. For the sake of brevity, we report statistics based on ranges for some study variables, even if they were measured at more precise levels (e.g. age in years, more precise income categories)

happiness”; and “Our society is getting worse every year (reverse-scored).” Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .77$).

Religiosity

Religiosity was assessed with a single item, which participants answered using a 7-point scale: “I consider myself to be: 1 = *not at all religious*; 7 = *very religious*.”

Affect and Cognitive Dissonance

General affective valence was assessed by asking participants, “In general how do you feel right now?” Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*generally negative*) to 5 (*generally positive*). Participants also indicated the degree to which they felt happy, frustrated, angry, and anxious on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*applies very much*). Following Elliot and Devine’s (1994) conceptualization of cognitive dissonance as psychological discomfort, we also computed a dissonance score for each participant based on the mean of three (self-report) items, namely uncomfortable, bothered, and uneasy ($\alpha = .84$).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was measured using six items drawn from Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) state self-esteem scale. The complete scale consists of three subscales measuring (a) performance self-esteem, (b) social self-esteem, and (c) appearance self-esteem. Of the six items selected for the present study, two items tapped the construct of performance self-esteem (“I feel confident about my abilities”; “I feel as smart as others”; $\alpha = .66$), and four items tapped the construct of social self-esteem (“I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or a failure”; “I feel self-conscious”; “I am worried about what other people think of me”; and “I feel inferior to others at this moment”; all reverse-scored; $\alpha = .83$). For each statement, participants characterized the way they were feeling “right now” on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Sense of Mastery

The sense of mastery was measured with two items selected from a scale developed by Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan (1981): “What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me”; and “I can do just about anything I really set my mind to.” Participants indicated their degree of agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .77$).

Sense of Security

Two items were adapted from Melender and Lauri (2002) to measure the subjective sense of security: “My life is in order” and “I feel protected from potential

dangers.” Participants indicated their degree of agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .76$).

Sense of Meaning

Five items were selected from Crumbaugh’s (1968) purpose in life test to measure participants’ sense of meaning: “My personal existence is: 1 = *utterly meaningless, without purpose*; 7 = *very purposeful and meaningful*”; “In thinking of my life, I: 1 = *often wonder why I exist*; 7 = *always see a reason for my being here*”; “As I view the world in relation to my life: 1 = *the world completely confuses me*; 7 = *fits meaningfully with my life*”; “With regard to suicide, I have: 1 = *thought of it seriously as a way out*; 7 = *never given it a second thought*”; “Facing my daily tasks is: 1 = *a source of pleasure and satisfaction*; 7 = *a painful and boring experience*” (reverse-scored; $\alpha = .79$).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured with the use of a single item (e.g., Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976): “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?” Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*completely dissatisfied*) to 7 (*completely satisfied*).

Financial Optimism

Participants responded to the item “I believe that one day I may become rich” on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the measures of ideology and subjective well-being are displayed in Table 2 (for European Americans, African Americans, and the sample as a whole). Respondents endorsed the system justification items to a moderate degree, and their endorsement did not differ as a function of racial group membership, $F(1, 149) = 1.06, p > .30$. African Americans were significantly more religious, but European Americans were also above the midpoint on religiosity, $F(1, 149) = 3.92, p = .05$. While system justification and religiosity were significantly correlated for European Americans, $r = .20, p = .02$, the two were uncorrelated for African Americans, $r = -.16, p = .43$. In terms of existential variables, the sense of security and life satisfaction were significantly higher for European Americans, $F(1, 149) = 4.61, p = .03$ and $F(1, 149) = 5.98, p = .02$, respectively, but the two groups did not differ on any of the other psychological variables.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for ideological, affective, and existential variables

	European Americans		African Americans		Total Sample	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ideological variables						
System justification (9-point)	4.64	1.27	4.38	1.00	4.60	1.22
Religiosity (7-point)	4.62	1.97	5.41	1.31	4.76	1.89
Affective variables						
Positive affect (5-point)	3.81	1.06	3.74	1.20	3.80	1.08
Happiness (7-point)	4.82	1.64	4.70	1.72	4.80	1.65
Frustration (7-point)	3.67	1.80	3.89	2.06	3.71	1.84
Anger (7-point)	2.98	1.63	3.08	2.04	2.99	1.70
Anxiety (7-point)	3.46	1.72	3.52	2.03	3.47	1.77
Cognitive dissonance (7-point)	3.24	1.44	3.75	1.67	3.33	1.49
Existential variables						
Performance self-esteem (5-point)	3.50	.81	3.33	.91	3.47	.83
Social self-esteem (5-point)	4.09	.85	3.82	1.03	4.04	.89
Mastery (7-point)	5.22	1.12	5.02	1.45	5.19	1.19
Sense of security (7-point)	4.44	1.31	3.83	1.46	4.33	1.35
Sense of meaning (7-point)	5.35	1.11	5.22	1.24	5.33	1.13
Life satisfaction (7-point)	5.03	1.31	4.30	1.81	4.90	1.44
Financial optimism (7-point)	3.32	1.60	3.52	1.42	3.35	1.57

Note: The only racial group differences that were observed at the $p < .05$ level were for three variables: religiosity (higher for African Americans), sense of security (higher for European Americans), and life satisfaction (higher for European Americans)

Details of Model Specification and Data Presentation

We conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses to examine the simultaneous effects of system justification and religiosity on each of the various measures of subjective well-being, adjusting for demographic variables (described below).¹ Outcome variables included six different affective states—positive (vs. negative) affect, happiness, frustration, anger, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance—and seven existential variables, namely performance self-esteem, social self-esteem, sense of mastery, sense of security, sense of meaning, life satisfaction, and financial optimism.

We adjusted for demographic variables in the first step of each model; variables were mean-centered, and categorical variables were dummy-coded. Education and income were initially categorical variables but were treated as linear approximations and centered at their respective means. Demographic variables included in the analyses were age (mean-centered), gender (0 = female; 1 = male), highest education level attained (mean-centered), income category (mean-centered, given

¹ Influence statistics were calculated for each analysis to ascertain whether single cases disproportionately influenced the results. In a subset of analyses, two cases were identified as possible influence points. Dropping these two cases from those analyses did not change the pattern of results reported here.

the constraint that all respondents' households earned less than \$30,000/year), geographical region (set of three dummy codes indicating Northeastern, Midwestern, or Western location as compared to the reference category of Southern location), marital status (set of three dummy codes indicating single, divorced/separated, or widowed status relative to the reference group of married people), urban/rural context (0 = urban; 1 = rural), head of household status (0 = yes; 1 = no), and race (0 = European American; 1 = African American).

The main predictors of theoretical interest were entered in the second step for each model: System justification (mean-centered), the system justification by race interaction term, religiosity (mean-centered), and the religiosity by race interaction term. For brevity's sake, we have omitted the coefficients for adjustment variables, but the unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors for the main effects of system justification and religiosity and their interactions with race of respondent are listed in Table 3. In addition, the final column of Table 3 lists the change in R^2 that results from adding the ideological measures (and their interactions with race) in Step 2, reflecting the percentage of variance these variables explain after adjusting for demographic factors. The incorporation of ideological factors significantly increased the amount of variance explained for all of the psychological variables except social self-esteem. The system justification and religiosity main effect coefficients indicate the effects for the reference group of European Americans, whereas the interaction terms indicate how those effects differ for African Americans. These results make clear that race significantly interacted with system justification endorsement to predict a wide range of psychological variables, including frustration, anxiety, cognitive dissonance, performance self-esteem, sense of mastery, sense of security, and financial optimism. Race significantly interacted with religiosity to predict a sense of mastery and (marginally) performance self-esteem.

These interaction effects indicate that a different relationship holds between ideological variables and several measures of well-being for African (vs. European) Americans. To clarify this relationship we reversed the race coding so that African Americans were the reference group (0 = African American; 1 = European American), recomputed the interaction terms, and ran a new series of regression analyses that otherwise followed the previous specifications. That is, in the first step we entered all the demographic adjustment variables, including the new race coding, and in the second step we entered the ideological main effects and the ideology by race interactions. These new models yielded main effects for system justification and religiosity for African Americans that are summarized in Table 4.

Effects of System Justification on Subjective Well-Being

As shown in Table 3, low-income European Americans who scored higher on system justification were significantly more likely to report increased positive (vs. negative) affect and decreased frustration, anger, and cognitive dissonance. They were also marginally less likely to report feeling anxiety. These findings are generally consistent with the notion that system justification serves a palliative function for poor Whites (see Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

Table 3 Subjective well-being as a function of ideological endorsement

	European Americans				Ideology by race interactions				ΔR^2
	System justification		Religiosity		System justification by race		Religiosity by race		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	
Affective variables									
Positive affect	.20*	.08	.15**	.05	-.21	.22	.06	.17	.11**
Happiness	.19	.13	.23**	.09	-.37	.36	.04	.27	.08*
Frustration	-.32*	.14	-.09	.10	.87*	.39	-.20	.29	.07*
Anger	-.35**	.13	-.11	.09	.51	.37	.01	.28	.07*
Anxiety	-.26 [†]	.14	-.03	.10	1.06**	.39	-.16	.29	.07*
Cognitive dissonance	-.33**	.11	-.13	.08	.78*	.32	-.10	.24	.11**
Existential variables									
Performance self-esteem	.08	.06	.03	.04	-.46**	.17	.21 [†]	.12	.08**
Social self-esteem	.02	.07	-.05	.05	-.09	.19	-.01	.14	.01 (ns)
Sense of mastery	.20*	.08	-.03	.06	-.63**	.24	.70***	.18	.15***
Sense of security	.34***	.09	.05	.06	-.61*	.26	.03	.19	.09**
Sense of meaning	.19*	.08	.13*	.06	-.34	.22	.18	.17	.10**
Life satisfaction	.21*	.10	.16*	.07	-.14	.29	.22	.21	.08**
Financial optimism	.28*	.11	-.03	.08	-1.31***	.32	<.01	.24	.11**

Note: Dependent variables for separate regression models are listed in rows. For each analysis the first step adjusted for age, education, income, gender, marital status, geographical region, whether or not the respondent was the household head, and race (see “Details of Model Specification and Data Presentation”). The second step entered system justification, religiosity, and the race interaction for each of these ideological variables. For this analysis, European Americans were coded as the reference group for race, and therefore the main effects for the ideological variables capture the effects for European Americans and are labeled as such in the first four columns. The interaction effect captures the extent to which these effects differed for African Americans. The ΔR^2 column summarizes the increased variance explained by the second step for each model (i.e., the addition of both ideological variables and each ideology by race interaction)

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

With respect to the various existential variables, low-income European Americans who scored higher on system justification were significantly more likely to report being satisfied with their lives overall and to possess a stronger subjective sense of mastery, security, and meaning. They were also more likely to believe that they would one day become wealthy, but there were no effects of system justification on either type of self-esteem. Although it is not possible to draw causal conclusions on the basis of this study, the endorsement of system justification was indeed associated with a fairly wide range of existential and other psychological benefits.

By contrast, low-income African Americans who embraced system justification exhibited none of these same benefits. Rather, the only statistically reliable effects of system justification were in the opposite direction, as shown in Table 4. That is,

Table 4 Subjective well-being among African Americans as a function of ideological endorsement

	African Americans			
	System justification		Religiosity	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Affective variables				
Positive affect	−.01	.21	.21	.16
Happiness	−.18	.34	.27	.26
Frustration	.55	.36	−.29	.28
Anger	.16	.35	−.10	.27
Anxiety	.80*	.37	−.20	.28
Cognitive dissonance	.45	.30	−.22	.23
Existential variables				
Performance self-esteem	−.38*	.16	.24*	.12
Social self-esteem	−.07	.17	−.06	.13
Sense of mastery	−.42 [†]	.22	.67***	.17
Sense of security	−.26	.25	.08	.19
Sense of meaning	−.15	.21	.31 [†]	.16
Life satisfaction	.07	.27	.39 [†]	.20
Financial optimism	−1.03***	.30	−.03	.23

Note: Dependent variables for separate regression models are listed in rows. For each analysis, in the first step we adjusted for age, education, income, gender, marital status, geographical region, whether or not the respondent was the household head, and race (see “Details of Model Specification and Data Presentation”). The second step entered system justification, religiosity, and the race interaction for each of these ideological variables (see Table 3). For this analysis, African Americans were coded as the reference group for race, and therefore the main effects of the ideological variables indicate the effects for African Americans and are labeled as such in the four columns above

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

system justification was significantly associated with increased anxiety and decreased performance-related self-esteem as well as *decreased* financial optimism among African Americans. To a marginal extent, it was also associated with a diminished sense of mastery. Thus, not only did low-income African Americans fail to reap the psychological benefits associated with system justification, to the extent that they endorsed system-justifying attitudes they actually exhibited poorer subjective well-being, as Jost and Thompson (2000) found with respect to African American college students.

Effects of Religiosity on Subjective Well-Being

Religiosity was associated with increased subjective well-being for low-income European Americans and African Americans alike, although the specific types of well-being differed for the two groups in several cases. For European Americans (but not for African Americans), religiosity was significantly associated with increased positive affect and self-reported happiness (see Table 3). For African

Americans (but not for European Americans), religiosity was significantly associated with a stronger sense of mastery and higher performance-related self-esteem (see Table 4). Religiosity was positively associated with the subjective sense of meaning and life satisfaction for European Americans and (to a marginal extent) for African Americans. The two significant interaction terms for performance self-esteem and sense of mastery reveal that in both cases religiosity was even more beneficial for African Americans than European Americans. It is clear that the correlates of religiosity were uniformly favorable for both groups, which was not the case for general system justification.

All of the above findings come from models in which system justification and religiosity were entered simultaneously, so the effects of each were estimated while adjusting for the other. We also conducted separate models in which the effects of each ideological variable were estimated without adjusting for the other. In general, the results were quite similar to those reported here. The only notable differences were that (a) system justification was marginally associated with happiness for European Americans and with increased frustration for African Americans when religiosity was omitted from the model, and (b) religiosity was associated with decreased cognitive dissonance and marginally less anger for European Americans when system justification was omitted from the model. Thus, the general pattern of results was robust with respect to model specification.

Are the Benefits of System Justification Due to Financial Optimism?

To investigate the hypothesis offered independently by Michael Moore and David Brooks, we conducted one final analysis in which the psychological benefits of system justification were estimated after adjusting for financial optimism (i.e., the belief that the respondent would become rich one day; all demographic adjustment variables from prior analyses were also included). Results revealed that while the belief in future wealth was indeed associated with some psychological benefits for both European and African Americans, including it in the statistical model did not appreciably change the patterns of associations involving system justification reported above for either European or African Americans. Thus, we conclude that financial optimism does not fully account for the psychological benefits low-income respondents apparently receive when they “buy into” the legitimacy of the social system.

General Discussion

Prior research has demonstrated that people in disadvantaged positions sometimes accept and justify the social system that is responsible for their disadvantaged status (e.g., Henry & Saul, 2006; Hochschild, 1981; Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lane, 1959). Such counterintuitive findings prompt the question of *why* people would support a system that conflicts with their own objective self-interest. In this study, we addressed this question by examining the palliative function that system justification appears to serve for

low-income European and African Americans (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). We also considered whether another type of ideology, namely religious ideology, would exhibit similar palliative benefits (see also Kay et al., 2008; Laurin et al., 2008). Across a wide range of measures of subjective well-being a consistent pattern emerged: Whereas religiosity was associated with psychological benefits for low-income respondents in general, system justification was associated with such benefits only for European Americans and may even be detrimental to the well-being of low-income African Americans.

The racial difference observed with respect to psychological correlates of system justification largely replicates earlier findings based on college student samples (Jost & Thompson, 2000; see also O'Brien & Major, 2005). Because the present study made use of a nationally representative sample of low-income Americans, it provides a more definitive answer to the question of when system justification will (and will not) serve a palliative function for members of disadvantaged groups. Other advantages of the present study include the fact that we were able to consider the psychological benefits of religious belief systems and to investigate a wider range of affective and especially existential variables, including the subjective sense of mastery, meaning, and security. Our results corroborate past suggestions that religiosity is associated with increased subjective well-being (Hathaway & Pargament, 1991), and we have found this to be true for low-income European and African Americans, especially when it comes to existential variables. Although we know from previous research that religiosity is correlated with certain system-justifying ideologies, including political conservatism and right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Mehrabian, 1996), by including both religiosity and system justification in the same statistical models we were able to disentangle their effects on subjective well-being.

It is somewhat surprising that African Americans in our low-income sample endorsed system-justifying beliefs to the same extent as European Americans, despite the fact that they did not appear to derive the usual psychological comforts from doing so (see Jost et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2007). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the palliative aspects or *consequences* of system justification do not necessarily explain its prevalence or even why people would be motivated to engage in system justification in the first place (cf. Elster, 1982). Prior work on “sour grapes” and “sweet lemons” forms of rationalization suggests that people come to see more likely (or inevitable) social and political outcomes that affect them as increasingly desirable, even if those outcomes are initially defined as unattractive (Kay et al., 2002). Thus, it may simply be the lack of realistic alternatives to the status quo that led low-income African Americans (as well as European Americans) in our study to try to make peace with a situation that they could not change. Although we cannot speak to the direction of causality, it is conceivable that low-income African Americans endorsed the legitimacy of the social system (at least to a moderate degree) despite its possible costs to their personal well-being.

As we noted above, prominent liberal and conservative commentators (i.e., Michael Moore and David Brooks, respectively) have both argued that poor people support conservative, system-justifying economic policies because of

optimism (presumably unrealistic optimism, in most cases) that they will one day become rich and therefore will ultimately benefit from tax policies benefiting the wealthy. While this study does not allow us to test this specific causal argument, we did explore some relations between system justification and financial optimism. Interestingly, we found that system justification was associated with increased financial optimism for European Americans but *decreased* financial optimism for African Americans. Furthermore, believing (however unrealistically) that one will become wealthy in the future was associated with some affective and existential benefits, but statistically adjusting for financial optimism did not diminish the palliative effects of system justification for European Americans. Thus, the psychological benefits associated with supporting the social system are not solely reducible to the belief that one will eventually become rich. Rather, simply believing that the system is good, fair, and legitimate seems to provide psychological comfort to many people, as system justification theory would predict (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005).

Although Knowledge Networks enabled us to sample from a nationally representative pool of low-income individuals, the small sample size for the African American group is an obvious limitation of the present study. In general, this should have made it harder to observe statistically significant interaction effects between racial group membership and our ideological variables, so it seems telling that the analysis yielded many such effects anyway. Nevertheless, it would be prudent to replicate these results with a larger sample before drawing any strong conclusions about differences between European and African Americans (or about other minority groups, such as Latinos or Asians).

In interpreting the results of this study we have generally assumed that subjective well-being (measured in terms of various affective and existential variables) is an outcome rather than an antecedent (or cause) of the endorsement of system-justifying ideology. Based on past research, however, it is also reasonable to suggest that the reverse could be true. That is, negative affect or existential suffering could lead one to bolster their faith in the system. An obvious limitation of the present research is that we could not investigate causal relationships (in either direction), given the cross-sectional design of the study. Furthermore, although we statistically adjusted for a number of demographic variables, we are unable to rule out the potentially confounding influence of additional (unmeasured) variables. For all of these reasons, future studies using longitudinal or panel designs are needed to investigate these associations as they fluctuate over time for those in disadvantaged life circumstances. It is encouraging that—according to experimental studies in which research participants are randomly assigned to engage in system justification (or not)—the opportunity to engage in system justification does appear to reduce negative affect and to increase positive affect (e.g., Jost et al., 2008; Wakslak et al., 2007). Furthermore, control deprivation leads people to increase their commitment to and faith in external systems of control, including governmental and religious institutions (e.g., Kay et al., 2008). Along these lines, future research would do well to isolate specific causal relationships concerning the existential antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies in the laboratory.

Concluding Remarks

The *New York Times* reviewed a recent production of *Death of a Salesman* at the Yale Repertory Theater that featured an all-Black cast (Isherwood, 2009). This casting decision might not have sat well with the late African American playwright, August Wilson, who had often worked with the theater company. As the reviewer notes, in an address more than a decade earlier Wilson argued that, “To mount an all-black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our humanity, our own history.” Although our research has no obvious dramaturgical implications, our findings suggest that Wilson’s intuition was correct that European Americans and African Americans (on average) would not necessarily respond the same way to the economically threatening situations faced by Willy Loman. Specifically, we found that although low-income African Americans exhibited levels of system justification that were comparable to those exhibited by their low-income European Americans counterparts, they did not appear to benefit from the same ideological illusions that appeared to comfort European Americans. To pursue the literary analogy just a bit further, African Americans who buy into the myth of the American Dream may suffer more as a result of its pursuit, along the lines of Walter Lee Younger, the beleaguered protagonist of *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hanesberry, 1959). Willy Loman, it should be remembered, kept his rose-tinted glasses on until the very end, inspired by the thought that his family could finally cash in on his life insurance policy and then, of course, everything would be fine.

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