

Race/Ethnicity and Beliefs about Wealth and Poverty*

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Objective. Lay explanations for “wealth” have been neglected in research on beliefs about social stratification. This study compares the nature and determinants of beliefs about the causes of both wealth and poverty, with special focus on race/ethnic differences. *Methods.* Using survey data collected from Los Angeles County residents in 2000, descriptive and multivariate procedures are used to analyze “individualistic” and “structuralist” beliefs about wealth and poverty. In addition, one “fatalistic” belief, asking about the role of “God’s will” in shaping wealth and poverty, is examined. Analyses test (1) whether race/ethnicity and other social and political characteristics variables shape these stratification beliefs, and (2) whether African Americans, Latinos, and whites differ in the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty. *Results.* Respondents favor individualistic over structuralist reasons for wealth, but favor structuralist over individualistic beliefs in explaining poverty. Fatalistic beliefs are least popular. On beliefs about wealth, African Americans, Latinos, and whites show similar levels of support for individualistic explanations; however, the race/ethnic minorities are both more structuralist than whites on this issue. On beliefs about poverty, the race/ethnic minorities are simultaneously more structuralist and more individualistic than are whites. Social-class identification and self-reported conservatism both significantly impact beliefs about wealth and poverty, and do so differently across race/ethnic lines. *Conclusions.* Findings support the separate treatment and examination of beliefs about wealth and poverty, and reinforce recent calls for greater attention to “nonwhites” in studies of sociopolitical attitudes.

That the United States is the wealthiest nation on earth and exhibits among the highest levels of economic inequality of any advanced industrial nation is well known in social scientific circles (Bradshaw and Wallace, 1996; Braun, 1991; Kerbo, 1996). What is less well understood is the nature of public opinion about the *causes* of the substantial economic disparities in the United States. Do people in the United States believe that the wealthy enjoy their privileged positions because of great talent and individual initiative? Alternatively, do they believe that some persons are able to amass

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great wealth due to systemic biases, such as political and business connections? Or, do people believe *both* these “types” of explanations for the existence of the rich? Similar questions can be asked regarding poverty: Do people believe that “personal,” “structural,” or both types of factors explain why the poor are present in the United States?

There has never been a shortage of “expert” commentary on these questions from both apologists (Gilder, 1981; Murray, 1984) and critics of the current political economy (Bluestone and Harrison, 1988; Harrington, 1984), but we have surprisingly little empirically-based knowledge of what lay persons believe about issues as basic as why the rich and poor exist in the United States. This relative empirical void is curious, considering the importance of these issues. As Kluegel and Smith note, “individuals’ own strivings for economic advancement, as well as aspects of their views on public policy, may be influenced by beliefs about the causes and potential availability of wealth” (1986:75). That is, depending on whether people view wealth accumulation as due to individual effort and ability, or limited to a privileged few by virtue of structural barriers, has important consequences (as do the corresponding views of poverty, see Hughes and Tuch, 1999). Stratification beliefs researchers have attempted to document the causes and consequences of such patterns in public opinion, typically documenting the determinants (e.g., social location) and outcomes (e.g., policy views) of such ideological currents in an attempt to understand “what people believe about who gets what and why” (Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

There is a fairly extensive literature on the determinants and consequences of class consciousness and identification (Centers, 1949; Jackman and Jackman, 1983; Vanneman and Cannon, 1987), but comparatively little is known about the determinants of other “stratification beliefs,” such as why some people are poor and others are wealthy. Further, to the extent that research into these issues does exist, most has examined beliefs about poverty (Feagin, 1975; Hughes and Tuch, 1999; Hunt, 1996, 2002; Kluegel and Smith, 1986), homelessness (Lee, Jones, and Lewis, 1990), or welfare recipients (Gilens, 1999). Considerably less is known about beliefs about wealth—a curious omission by stratification beliefs researchers given the explosion of research in recent years into the cultural, historical, and social-structural aspects of wealth inequality (Conley, 1999; Keister, 2003; Keister and Moller, 2000; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995).

Alongside the neglect of beliefs about the rich, the larger domain of sociopolitical attitude research (Schuman et al., 1997), and the field of social psychology generally, have been criticized recently for their neglect of the beliefs and attitudes of nonwhites (Bobo, 1999; Hunt et al., 2000). Bobo argues that racial attitudes research “has thoroughly marginalized the opinions of African Americans and other racial minorities” having “unfortunate consequences for theory development and for the capacity of public opinion analysis to make useful contributions to the larger public discourse” (1999:138–39). In a similar vein, Hunt et al. (2000) criticize social

psychology for being “color-blind” in its neglect of issues of race and ethnicity in light of (1) the central attention paid to race by other subfields of sociology, (2) increasing attention to the relevance of other structural features of societies for social psychological processes (e.g., gender and cross-national differences), and (3) trends toward increasing race/ethnic diversity in the United States generally.

This study seeks to advance our knowledge of beliefs about inequality in several ways. First, rather than focusing solely on beliefs about why some people are poor, I examine lay beliefs about both poverty *and* wealth, allowing for a comparison of the nature and determinants of beliefs about these two important aspects of economic inequality. Second, this research responds to recent race-based criticisms (Bobo, 1999; Hunt et al., 2000) and moves beyond the “black/white” dichotomy by also incorporating Latinos’ beliefs into our understanding of lay perceptions of the stratification order.¹ Third, rather than focusing solely on sociodemographic influences, I consider how sociodemographic *and* two relevant social psychological factors—political ideology and social-class identification—shape beliefs about inequality. Finally, in response to the “color-blind” critique (Hunt et al., 2000), and to some recent research documenting race differences in social-psychological processes (Jackson, 1997; Schnittker, Freese, and Powell, 2000; Steelman and Powell, 1993), I explore whether the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty differ by race/ethnicity.

Background

Stratification Beliefs

Most stratification beliefs research has focused on beliefs about the poor. In his seminal study on the issue, Feagin (1975) argued that beliefs about poverty are of three possible types: individualistic, structuralist, and fatalistic. “Individualistic” beliefs locate the causes of poverty in poor persons themselves (e.g., lack of ability, lack of effort) and are thought to reflect and reinforce a “dominant ideology” of individualism in American society (Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). In contrast, “structuralist” beliefs locate the causes of poverty in the social and economic system in which poor persons live (e.g., low wages, poor schools, discrimination) and are thus thought of as a “system-challenging” belief, and an ideological alternative to individualism. Finally, “fatalistic” beliefs locate the causes of poverty in supra-individual, but non-social-structural forces such as bad luck, sickness, and physical handicaps. Much less is known about

¹“Race/ethnicity” is based on respondents’ self-reports. Respondents were asked to choose *one* of the following: white, African American or black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, other (specify). The terms race/ethnicity and race, African American and black, and Latino and Hispanic, are used interchangeably in this study.

fatalistic beliefs than about the other two types, perhaps in part because past studies have failed to include sufficient numbers of survey items tapping the "fatalism" dimension to produce statistically reliable measures (Hunt, 1996).² Thus, past empirical research has focused almost exclusively on individualistic and structuralist beliefs (also the *primary* foci of this study, though one fatalistic belief concerning the role of "God's will" is analyzed below).

Kluegel and Smith's (1986) research represents the most systematic study of beliefs about wealth. These authors document the existence of two *primary* types of belief: individualistic (e.g., personal drive) and structuralist (e.g., money inherited from families), though these are analyzed in considerably less detail than are beliefs about poverty. A literature search revealed two other studies (Smith, 1985; Smith and Stone, 1989), both of which use samples of Texans. Smith (1985) used a similar set of items as Kluegel and Smith (1986) and observed the same two types of belief. Smith and Stone (1989) factor analyzed a set of 38 "often-mentioned causes of wealth and poverty," which included survey items tapping individualistic, structuralist, and fatalistic dimensions (though the first two types of belief dominate the views of those surveyed). Consistent with Kluegel and Smith (1986), both of these studies find individualistic beliefs to be more popular than structuralist beliefs. In light of this relative paucity of research into beliefs about wealth, more work is needed to better round out our knowledge of lay perceptions of the stratification order.

Determinants of Stratification Beliefs

Research into the antecedents of beliefs about poverty has generally found that persons of higher status (e.g., those with higher incomes, whites, and older people) favor individualistic explanations. Lower status has been found to increase use of structuralist explanations, "but not necessarily with greatly diminished support for individualism" (Kluegel and Smith, 1986:93). The adherence to individualism among lower-status people is explained as evidence of the strength of a dominant ideology (Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986), which is viewed as a general *cultural* trait, having broad, "universalistic" effects on all Americans. In contrast to the effects of individualism, structuralist beliefs are more variable, more responsive to group memberships, personal experiences, and the prevailing social climate, and "layered" onto, instead of replacing, the existing individualistic base.³

² Hunt (2002) reports findings for a "just bad luck" item in a study on religious affiliation, race/ethnicity, and beliefs about the causes of poverty.

³ Kluegel and Smith (1986) suggest that during times of extreme social or economic strain, structuralist beliefs may actually predominate in public opinion. Supporting this position is Piven and Cloward's (1971) observation that during the Great Depression, structuralist beliefs, in the form of support for the redistribution of wealth and other social-welfare

To the extent that we have knowledge of the role of race/ethnicity in shaping stratification beliefs, studies have virtually all focused on whites, blacks, or the issue of black/white differences. Thus, the beliefs of the rapidly growing Latino population—recently surpassing African Americans as the numerically largest race/ethnic minority in the United States according to 2000 Census figures—have been relatively neglected. Most research on race has shown that African Americans are generally equal to or slightly less individualistic than whites, but much more likely to view structural factors as contributing to the existence of poverty (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). African Americans' greater structuralism, along with levels of individualism similar to that of whites, supports the argument that structuralist beliefs may be combined with, or "layered onto," an existing individualistic base.⁴ Some more recent research also suggests that racial minorities may be simultaneously more structuralist *and* more individualistic than whites on the issue of poverty (Hughes and Tuch, 1999; Hunt, 1996).

Finally, social-psychological factors shaping beliefs about inequalities have generally gone unanalyzed and, to the extent that researchers have examined this issue, findings are mixed across race/ethnic lines, underscoring the need for more work analyzing (1) a greater range of social-psychological factors shaping perceptions, and (2) how these factors may vary in their effects across race/ethnic lines (Hunt et al., 2000). This study focuses on the effects of political ideology (liberalism/conservatism) and social-class identification (SCI)—two factors that are particularly relevant given the politically- and inequality-focused nature of the beliefs under examination.

Research Questions

In this study, I ask three main questions.

First, what is believed about the causes of wealth and poverty? Of interest here is (1) what lay persons believe about why the rich and poor exist, (2) whether the underlying structure of beliefs is similar for the issues of wealth and poverty (i.e., are beliefs patterned similarly), and (3) whether the relative popularity of different "types" of belief is similar across these two issues.

Second, are there race/ethnic differences in beliefs about wealth or poverty? Past research focusing on the issues of poverty and homelessness suggests that "race" is the single strongest determinant of beliefs about inequalities.

initiatives, dominated Americans' beliefs about the causes of unemployment, inequality, and other social ills.

⁴The argument that individualistic and structuralist beliefs may be combined contrasts with the assumption of earlier research that people take an "either-or" approach to thinking about inequality. Recent research shows that these dichotomies are not always warranted as seemingly inconsistent or contradictory beliefs can be combined into "compromise" explanations (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Lee, Jones, and Lewis, 1990).

Of primary interest here is (1) whether this finding generalizes to the issue of beliefs about wealth, and (2) whether any race/ethnic differences (for beliefs about wealth or poverty) exist net of the effects of sociodemographic and social-psychological factors that may shape these beliefs. Also of interest here is how the examined sociodemographic and social-psychological factors shape these beliefs.

Third, are there race/ethnic differences in the determinants of wealth or poverty beliefs? This issue is motivated by the fact that most social-psychological research has neglected the issue of race/ethnic differences in social-psychological processes—generally assuming that no compelling evidence exists to suggest that the determinants of beliefs and attitudes should vary across race/ethnic lines (Hunt et al., 2000). This implied “null hypothesis” is directly tested here, guided by the assumption that groups with different historical experiences and material conditions of existence may vary in how beliefs and values are shaped (Kohn, 1969).⁵ A second factor contributing to the lack of studies directly examining race and social-psychological processes is the lack of sufficient numbers of minority respondents in past sample surveys to carry out the type of statistical analyses necessary for comparing the determinants of beliefs and attitudes. In contrast to past research, the survey data employed in this study contain sufficiently large subsamples of African Americans and Latinos, allowing for statistical subgroup comparisons that directly examine the null hypothesis of “no race differences” in the determinants of stratification beliefs. A final factor motivating the analysis of possible race/ethnic differences in the determinants of stratification beliefs is evidence from recent studies documenting such differences in related and/or similar social-psychological processes. For example, Hunt (1996) finds differences between whites and both African Americans and Latinos regarding the relationship between “self-explanations” and beliefs about the causes of poverty; Steelman and Powell (1993) show that minority parents are more likely than their white counterparts to simultaneously balance collectivist attitudes with individualist ones; Schnittker, Freese, and Powell (2000) demonstrate that African Americans’ and whites’ beliefs about the causes of mental illness do not cluster in a similar fashion; and Jackson (1997) shows that several commonly held views about the mental health implications of role accumulation, role status, and role combinations do not apply as well to African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans as they do to non-Hispanic whites. In light of the growing evidence

⁵The historical oppression and continued segregation of African Americans is an obvious source of group distinction (Massey and Denton, 1993). At a more social-psychological level, Steele (1994), Cose (1993), and others argue that even relatively successful minorities—who are on par with middle-class whites from the standpoint of socioeconomic status—still must cope with the reality of race-based discrimination as a force influencing self and fellow group members, in forming an ideological orientation toward American society. Among Latinos in southern California, the relatively recent migration of many members of this population from Mexico and Central America (Donato, 1994) differentiates them from most African Americans and non-Hispanic whites in the region.

of such variation across a number of topic areas, examination of possible race/ethnic differences in the determinants of the stratification beliefs under examination here is important.

Data and Measures

This study uses data from the “Legitimation, Attribution, and Self-Verification” survey (LAS), collected between May and December 2000 at the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at the California State University at San Marcos through random-digit dialing and telephone interviews of persons 18 years or older residing in Los Angeles County. Because a central goal of this study was to produce a racially diverse sample allowing for statistically reliable race/ethnic comparisons and subgroup analyses, the study oversampled telephone exchanges in census tracts where the African-American population is 30 percent or greater. Of the 1,107 interviews completed, 308 were with whites, 329 were with Latinos, 370 were with African Americans, 49 were with Asians, 14 were with American Indians, and 16 were with “others” (21 people either chose “don’t know” or refused to answer the race self-identification question).⁶ The response rate was 64 percent. Given the small number of American Indians and “others,” along with the extreme cultural heterogeneity of the Asian category (which includes Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and several other ethnic groups), these respondents are excluded from the current analysis in order to focus on comparison of the three largest race/ethnic groups in the region.⁷ This decision results in a working sample of 1,007 respondents. Finally, interviews were conducted in English or Spanish according to the respondent’s wishes; a back-translation technique was used to maximize equivalence of the survey instrument in English and Spanish.

⁶The LAS survey’s measure of self-reported “race/ethnicity” is mutually exclusive (see note 1) and not directly comparable with the 2000 Census classification, which allows respondents to self-identify with multiple “races” and that measures Hispanic ethnicity separately. If we assume that all persons who self-identify as “Hispanic” chose the “Hispanic” category in the LAS survey, comparisons with census data for L.A. County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003) suggest that the LAS survey approximately represents *non-Hispanic* whites (census = 31.1 percent), underrepresents Hispanics (census = 44.6 percent), and overrepresents African Americans (census = 9.8 percent). Both the LAS sample and census data (L.A. County) show similar profiles on income and age, but the LAS data may slightly overrepresent the more educated. Compared with the LAS sample, the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS) reveals a similar profile on income, age, and education. Relative to the census data and the GSS, the LAS sample slightly overrepresents females. A comparison of the LAS with two other random samples of L.A. County from the past decade (the 1998 Los Angeles County Social Survey and the 1993 Commitment, Identity, Legitimation, and Futures Survey) shows largely similar profiles on age, income, education, and gender. A table summarizing these comparisons is available on request.

⁷Compared with Asians, Latinos are much more ethnically homogenous in the region sampled for this study (approximately 85 percent are Mexican American or “Chicano”).

Independent Variables

Several sociodemographic and social-psychological variables are used as predictors of beliefs about wealth and poverty. Race/ethnicity is measured with two dummy variables coded: black = 1, otherwise = 0; and, Latino = 1, otherwise = 0 (thus, whites represent the reference category in the multivariate analyses). Personal income is measured with a 12-category variable, ranging from “under \$10,000” to “\$75,000 or over.”⁸ Education and age are measured in years. Gender is coded female = 1, male = 0. A dummy variable coded foreign born = 1, U.S. born = 0 is included as a control given the large percentage of Latinos born outside of the United States.⁹ The social-psychological predictors are: self-reported political ideology, a seven-point scale ranging from “extremely liberal” (1) to “extremely conservative” (7); and social-class identification (SCI), coded “lower” = 1, “working” = 2, “middle” = 3, and “upper” = 4.¹⁰

Dependent Variables

Construction of the dependent variables was informed by the results of several factor analyses (principal components, varimax rotation) of the survey items measuring beliefs about wealth and poverty (listed in Tables 1 and 2). Past research using these items revealed two primary underlying factors (for each issue) representing “individualistic” and “structuralist” beliefs (Kluegel and Smith, 1986). However, since past research efforts may have underestimated the role of fatalistic beliefs by including only two “fatalistic” items for beliefs about poverty (“sickness and physical handicaps,” “bad luck”), and one for beliefs about wealth (“good luck”), an extra fatalism

⁸Personal income categories are: (1) less than \$10,000, (2) \$10,000–14,999, (3) \$15,000–19,999, (4) \$20,000–24,999, (5) \$25,000–29,999, (6) \$30,000–34,999, (7) \$35,000–39,999, (8) \$40,000–44,999, (9) \$45,000–49,999, (10) \$50,000–59,999, (11) \$60,000–74,999, (12) \$75,000 and above. I also explored the effect of recoding income to thousands of dollars, using the midpoint of the original income categories. For the top-most category that has no upper bound, I assigned a value of 1.5 times the lower bound of that category, that is, “75,000 or above” became \$112,500. This recoded measure of personal income is very highly correlated ($r = 0.94$) with the measure used in the reported analyses (Tables 4 and 5). Further, using the recoded income variable in the regression analyses showed no appreciable change in the effect of income or of any of the other independent variables.

⁹The LAS data also allow for a “language of interview” control, though this variable was highly correlated with the “foreign-born” measure. To avoid the problem of collinearity, a decision was made to include only the latter variable in the analysis. The variables exhibited similar effects.

¹⁰Questions of causality between self-perceptions and stratification beliefs do exist; however, I argue that it is reasonable to ask whether the way that people think about themselves affects how they think about other peoples’ positions (e.g., the poor). As a safeguard, models were run each way (i.e., with self-perceptions as independent variables and stratification beliefs as dependent variables, and vice versa) to ensure that the patterns of effects are similar each way (they were).

TABLE 1
Reasons for Wealth: Marginals and Factor Analysis

Reason	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Factor Loadings		
				Individualistic	Structuralist	Fatalistic
Hard work and initiative	73.4	21.9	4.7	0.78		
Personal drive, willingness to take risks	70.3	24.7	5.1	0.76		
Great ability or talent	57.4	33.1	9.6	0.73		
Money inherited from families	44.6	38.3	17.2		0.54	
Political influence or pull	40.8	39.1	20.0		0.69	
The American economic system allows them to take unfair advantage of the poor	37.8	33.4	28.8		0.70	
Dishonesty and willingness to take what they can get	30.8	35.4	33.9		0.71	
Good luck, being in the right place	24.6	43.6	31.8			0.78
It is God's will that some people are rich	14.0	17.8	68.1			0.71

NOTE: Items appear in descending order according to percentage of respondents saying "Very Important." "Not Very Important" and "Not at All Important" response categories have been collapsed into "Not Important." Factor loadings greater than 0.4 are reported.

TABLE 2
Reasons for Poverty: Marginals and Factor Analysis

Reason	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Factor Loadings		
				Individualistic	Structuralist	Fatalistic
Failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans	70.3	21.2	8.5		0.63	
Low wages in some businesses and industries	59.7	32.2	8.1		0.72	
Lack of thrift and proper money management	55.3	33.8	10.9	0.74		
Prejudice and discrimination	55.0	30.4	14.5		0.63	
Failure of private industry to provide enough good jobs	53.4	29.7	17.1		0.74	
Personal irresponsibility, lack of discipline among those who are poor	50.7	33.7	15.5	0.76		
Sickness and physical handicaps	48.7	34.2	17.2			
Lack of effort by the poor themselves	45.4	36.4	18.1	0.75		
Lack of ability and talent	38.7	32.5	28.8	0.50		
It is God's will that some people are poor	15.6	12.2	72.1			0.62
Just bad luck	10.2	21.7	68.1			0.83

NOTE: Items appear in descending order according to percentage of respondents saying "Very important." "Not Very Important" and "Not at All Important" response categories have been collapsed into "Not important." Factor loadings greater than 0.4 are reported.

item referring to “God’s will” for each issue was included in the LAS survey.¹¹ Although the fatalistic beliefs items failed to produce adequate reliability levels to support construction of *separate* “fatalism” scales for the issues of wealth and poverty, a single “fatalism” dimension was available for analysis. Specifically, the two “God’s will” items were combined into an index that produces adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.64$).

In addition to this *God’s Will* measure, four standard “stratification beliefs” dependent variables were constructed based on the results of the factor analyses. *Individualistic Beliefs about Wealth* are measured with three items asking about the importance of: “personal drive,” “hard work and initiative,” and “great ability or talent” ($\alpha = 0.62$). *Structuralist Beliefs about Wealth* are measured with four items asking about the importance of: “money inherited from families,” “political influence or pull,” “the American economic system,” and “dishonesty” ($\alpha = 0.59$).¹² *Individualistic Beliefs about Poverty* are measured with four items asking about the importance of: “personal irresponsibility,” “lack of effort,” “lack of thrift,” and “lack of ability and talent” ($\alpha = 0.67$). *Structuralist Beliefs about Poverty* are measured with four items asking about the importance of: “low wages,” “failure of private industry to provide enough good jobs,” “prejudice and discrimination,” and “failure of society to offer good schools for many Americans” ($\alpha = 0.65$). For all dependent variables, higher values indicate greater importance attributed to a reason for wealth or poverty. Each dependent variable was created by summing the relevant items and dividing by the number of items in the scale to preserve a consistent metric (i.e., 4 = very important, 1 = not at all important).¹³

¹¹Analysis of the dependent variable items proceeded in several steps. First, all the wealth and poverty items were entered into an exploratory factor analysis. This analysis revealed six factors (with eigenvalues greater than 1.0), listed in order by eigenvalue: structuralist beliefs about poverty, individualistic beliefs about poverty, individualistic beliefs about wealth, structuralist beliefs about wealth, a two-item “God’s will” factor (comprised of the God’s will items for wealth and poverty), and a two-item “Luck” factor (comprised of the luck items for wealth and poverty). Next, the two sets of items representing beliefs about wealth and poverty were analyzed separately. As anticipated, given the inclusion of the God’s will items, these factor analyses revealed three factors for each issue: individualistic beliefs, structuralist beliefs, and fatalistic beliefs. However, the fatalistic beliefs items did not produce a scale with adequate reliability for either wealth or poverty separately (Chronbach’s alphas were in the 0.3 to 0.4 range).

¹²The “dishonesty and willingness to take what they can get” item was originally developed by Kluegel and Smith as an example of “a negatively evaluated personal characteristic,” included because “it is occasionally part of popular beliefs about the wealthy as portrayed in the media” (1986:76). This item loaded on the structuralist factor, and was analyzed as part of that scale by Kluegel and Smith (1986). For consistency’s sake, and owing to the identical factor analysis results, the same approach is used in this study.

¹³Factor and reliability analyses were run within each race/ethnic group to test for consistency. The only significant deviation from the total sample patterns described above is for Latinos’ structuralist beliefs about wealth. Here, two factors emerged, representing an “inheritance and political influence” issue, and a “dishonesty and unfair economic system” issue. Correspondingly, the reliability for the constructed “structuralist beliefs about wealth” scale is lower for Latinos (0.46) than for whites and African Americans. In the interest of

Research Expectations

Following the results of most past research (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel and Smith, 1986), respondents are expected to favor “individualistic” explanations of both poverty and wealth over “structuralist” (and “fatalistic”) ones. Further, “structuralist” beliefs are expected to be more prevalent than “fatalistic” beliefs, in line with the few findings available from past work (Feagin, 1975; Hunt, 2002). Regarding the relative popularity of the two primary types of belief about poverty, Hunt (1996) reports an exception to the general pattern from past research in observing the greater popularity of structuralist beliefs among a 1993 sample of southern Californians. Whether or not structuralist beliefs predominate in the data from Los Angeles County used in this study is an important question in light of past research, and the 1993 southern California findings.

For the sociodemographic variables, predictions follow an “underdog thesis” (Robinson and Bell, 1978), holding that persons with lower status (e.g., nonwhites, women, persons with lower SES) will be less likely than their relatively advantaged counterparts to favor system-legitimizing beliefs (i.e., individualism) and more likely to support system-challenging beliefs (i.e., structuralist) and other ideological alternatives to individualism (i.e., fatalism). One exception to this “underdog” pattern is anticipated based on two recent studies of race and beliefs about poverty documenting that nonwhites may favor both structuralist *and* individualistic beliefs at greater rates than whites. Hunt (1996) finds this for African Americans’ and Latinos’ poverty beliefs. Hughes and Tuch (1999) observe similar results for African Americans and Latinos, and extend the finding to Asians.

This “dual-consciousness” pattern observed for racial minorities’ beliefs about poverty is consistent with the argument that individualistic and structuralist beliefs are not alternatives (Kluegel and Smith, 1986), and may be combined in people’s consciousness of inequality in what Lee, Jones, and Lewis (1990) term “compromise” explanations. What the Hunt (1996) and Hughes and Tuch (1999) studies suggest is that such compromise explanations may be especially prevalent among racial minorities—a pattern resonating with the thinking of Bobo (1991), Mann (1970), and Hochschild (1995) that ideological “ambivalence” involving the combination of seemingly inconsistent beliefs may be particularly evident among relatively disadvantaged groups. Whether a similar “dual consciousness” is observed for racial minorities’ beliefs about wealth or poverty in the current study is an important question.

In line with past research, older respondents are expected to be more individualistic and less structuralist than their younger counterparts (Kluegel and Smith, 1986). For the social-psychological variables, a “subjective

parsimony and simplicity of interpretation (Hughes and Tuch, 1999), all analyses use the scales as constructed and described above.

underdog” thesis (Robinson, 1983) guides the prediction that persons with lower SCI will be less “individualistic” and more “structuralist” and “fatalistic” than will persons with higher SCI, net of the effects of actual social position. That is, persons who *perceive* that they are relatively disadvantaged in social-class terms will be less likely to adopt system-legitimizing beliefs and more likely to support system-challenging ones (and other ideological alternatives to individualism). Finally, given that individualistic beliefs represent a historically dominant ideology that is, by definition, conservative (Huber and Form, 1973), while structuralist beliefs represent a “system-challenging” belief, self-described conservatives are expected to be more individualistic and less structuralist than their more liberal counterparts. No formal prediction is made concerning the relationship between political ideology and fatalism, though it seems reasonable to expect that conservatives may be more likely than liberals to interpret inequalities as resulting from God’s will (Hunter, 1991).

Finally, in order to address the “color-blind” critique outlined earlier, the null hypothesis of “no race difference” in the determinants of the dependent variables is tested by including interaction terms for race and each predictor in the multiple regression models run. As this aspect of the current study is primarily exploratory, no specific predictions regarding race differences in the impact of any of the independent variables are made.

Findings and Discussion

Question 1: What is Believed about the Causes of Wealth and Poverty?

Tables 1 and 2 provide a look at the marginals and factor loadings for the sets of items measuring beliefs about wealth and poverty, respectively. First, in Table 1, the eight reasons for wealth originally developed by Kluegel and Smith (1986), along with the new “God’s will” item, are listed by order of popularity. Consistent with past research and with expectations, the most popular views are the three individualistic attributions to “hard work and initiative,” “personal drive,” and “great ability and talent.” On average, these items are rated as “very important” by 67 percent of respondents. Next most popular are the structuralist items representing attributions to “inheritance,” “political influence,” the “economic system,” and “dishonesty.” On average, these items are rated as very important by 39 percent of respondents (representing a substantial 28 percentage point difference from individualistic beliefs). Least popular are the fatalistic items asking about “good luck” and “God’s will,” which 25 percent and 14 percent of respondents, respectively, rate as very important. This table also lists the factor loadings informing construction of the dependent variable scales described above. The factor analysis results are remarkably similar to those observed by Kluegel and Smith (1986)—indeed, all the individualistic and structuralist items load on the same two factors as in Kluegel and Smith’s 1980 data.

To summarize, the marginals for beliefs about wealth suggest that respondents prefer individualistic to structuralist reasons for why the rich exist.¹⁴ This suggests that the economic system is perceived to be relatively open at the top for persons with talent and initiative to accumulate wealth. The factor loadings suggest the existence of three types of belief about wealth, though only individualistic and structuralist beliefs produce scales with adequate reliability *within* the domain of wealth beliefs.

Table 2 presents results of an identical analysis of the 11 beliefs about poverty items. Ten of these, originally developed by Feagin (1975), and included by Kluegel and Smith (1986) in their 1980 stratification beliefs survey, were included in the 2000 LAS survey, with the addition of the "God's will" item. Contrary to Feagin (1975) and Kluegel and Smith (1986), but consistent with Hunt (1996), there is a predominance of support for the structuralist items in the current data. Indeed, four of the five most popular items are structuralist, including the top two. On average, 60 percent of respondents rate these items as very important. The individualistic items are next most popular, ranking third, sixth, eighth, and ninth, and are rated as very important by an average of 48 percent of respondents. The three fatalistic items are the least popular, ranking seventh, tenth, and eleventh, and averaging 25 percent of respondents saying very important. Thus, in contrast to beliefs about wealth, for the issue of poverty, respondents favor structuralist over individualistic explanations.¹⁵ The factor loadings for the individualistic and structuralist items are the same as observed by Kluegel and Smith (1986).

To summarize, results from Tables 1 and 2 suggest similar factor structures for beliefs about wealth and poverty, but different relative levels of popularity for the two main "types" of belief across the issues. The marginals for beliefs about poverty suggest that respondents perceive the "system" to be primarily at fault for poverty. Thus, in contrast to the perception of relative openness at the "top" of the system, respondents believe that systemic biases, rather than personal characteristics, are primarily responsible for why the poor exist. These findings suggest that, while the underlying structures of beliefs are the same across the issues of wealth and poverty, people do not necessarily generalize, in rigid ideological fashion, across the issues. Indeed, respondents' beliefs about economic inequalities seem to reflect the idea that the system is generally open for persons to pursue wealth, but with some important qualifications since important subgroups such as the poor are held back by structural barriers.

¹⁴Separate analyses of whites, African Americans, and Latinos confirm that this pattern (individualistic beliefs about wealth are more popular than structuralist beliefs about wealth) holds *within* each of the three race/ethnic groups.

¹⁵Separate analyses of whites, African Americans, and Latinos confirm that this pattern (structuralist beliefs about poverty are more popular than individualistic beliefs about poverty) holds *within* each of the three race/ethnic groups.

Question 2: Are There Race/Ethnic Differences in Beliefs about Wealth or Poverty?

Past research suggests that “race” is the most powerful variable shaping stratification beliefs (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). To examine whether respondents are divided along race/ethnic lines regarding beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty, additional analyses were performed. Table 3 provides the first glimpse of this issue, and also provides descriptive statistics for variables used in the multiple regression analyses that follow.

First, the relative popularity of individualistic over structuralist beliefs about wealth is reproduced in the reported means (3.59 and 3.06, respectively), and this pattern holds for each race/ethnic group. The only hint of a significant across-race difference for individualistic beliefs about wealth is that Latinos score slightly higher on this scale than African Americans. Thus, based on this preliminary look at the data, a remarkable consensus appears to exist on the issue of individualistic beliefs about wealth. Regarding structuralist beliefs about wealth, African Americans and Latinos are identical to one another, and both groups are significantly more structuralist than whites, a pattern consistent with past findings of greater structuralism among racial minorities.

Table 3 also reveals that the relative popularity of structuralist over individualistic beliefs about poverty from Table 2 is replicated when means are calculated (3.44 and 3.23, respectively), and this pattern holds for all three race/ethnic groups.¹⁶ Regarding significant across-race differences, Latinos, African Americans, and whites rank in that order on importance attributed to individualistic reasons for poverty. African Americans and Latinos are both more structuralist than whites. Thus both racial minorities are simultaneously more individualistic and more structuralist than whites on the subject of poverty—a pattern consistent with other recent research on the subject (Hughes and Tuch, 1999; Hunt, 1996).

The “God’s will” measure of fatalistic beliefs for wealth and poverty is considerably less popular than the other two types of belief (mean = 1.98). However, significant across-race differences do exist, with African Americans and Latinos both being more likely than whites to make attributions to God’s will for the economic outcomes under study. Given the paucity of research on fatalistic stratification beliefs, future work—ideally including additional items tapping this dimension—should seek to produce separate, statistically reliable “fatalistic beliefs” scales for the issues of wealth and poverty.

¹⁶This “greater popularity of structuralism” finding, in combination with a similar pattern observed by Hunt (1996) in a sample of southern Californians, suggests a possible “liberalizing” trend in beliefs about the poor. If so, this finding fits with recent research documenting liberal turns in other areas of public opinion, such as civil liberties (Brooks, 2000). Of course, whether southern California is truly a harbinger of wider trends on the issue of beliefs about poverty is an empirical question requiring new national data to answer.

TABLE 3
**Means and Standard Deviations for the Total Sample
 and Race/Ethnic Subgroups**

Variable	Total Sample	White	Black	Latino
Individualistic beliefs about wealth	3.59 (0.50)	3.60 (0.44) ^{a,b}	3.53 ^c (0.55)	3.64 ^c (0.47)
Structuralist beliefs about wealth	3.06 (0.61)	2.83 ^{a,b} (0.62)	3.16 ^a (0.61)	3.16 ^b (0.56)
Individualistic beliefs about poverty	3.23 (0.62)	3.03 ^{a,b} (0.63)	3.23 ^{a,c} (0.61)	3.42 ^{b,c} (0.55)
Structuralist beliefs about poverty	3.44 (0.55)	3.12 ^{a,b} (0.62)	3.57 ^a (0.46)	3.59 ^b (0.45)
God's will (for wealth <i>and</i> poverty)	1.98 (0.94)	1.58 ^{a,b} (0.77)	2.12 ^a (0.95)	2.19 ^b (0.96)
Personal income	4.83 (3.47)	6.09 ^{a,b} (3.66)	5.06 ^{a,c} (3.48)	3.42 ^{b,c} (2.74)
Education	13.47 (3.50)	14.90 ^{a,b} (2.72)	14.21 ^{a,c} (2.51)	11.32 ^{b,c} (4.06)
Age	42.40 (16.66)	48.70 ^{a,b} (17.06)	43.60 ^{a,c} (16.57)	35.15 ^{b,c} (13.37)
Female	0.61 (0.49)	0.61 (0.49)	0.65 ^c (0.48)	0.56 ^c (0.50)
Foreign born	0.26 (0.44)	0.08 ^b (0.27)	0.05 ^c (0.21)	0.66 ^{b,c} (0.47)
Social-class identification	2.60 (0.66)	2.87 ^{a,b} (0.59)	2.52 ^a (0.67)	2.43 ^b (0.64)
Conservatism	3.92 (1.66)	3.81 ^b (1.70)	3.83 ^c (1.65)	4.12 ^{b,c} (1.62)

^aWhite and black means are significantly different ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests).

^bWhite and Latino means are significantly different ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests).

^cBlack and Latino means are significantly different ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests).

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Before turning to the question of whether the observed race differences persist when controlling for other ways respondents differ, some of these differences warrant brief comment. As can be seen in Table 3, significant race/ethnic differences exist for all study variables. All three race/ethnic groups differ significantly from one another on both personal income¹⁷ and education, with whites the highest and Latinos the lowest; all three groups differ significantly on age, with whites the oldest and Latinos the youngest; the African-American subsample is significantly more “female” than the Latino subsample; Latinos are, not surprisingly, significantly more likely to be “for-

¹⁷When I recoded income to the midpoint of the existing income categories and assigned a value of “\$112,500” to the top-most category (1.5 times the lower bound of the top-most category), estimates for mean personal income were: \$29,580 (total sample), \$38,510 (white), \$30,820 (African American), and \$20,240 (Latino).

eign born” than both other groups; whites have significantly higher SCI than the other two groups; and Latinos are significantly more conservative than whites and African Americans. These differences set the stage for a multivariate analysis of wealth and poverty beliefs designed to (1) assess whether the observed race/ethnic differences persist when controlling for sociodemographic and social-psychological variables, (2) examine the effects of these other variables, and (3) determine whether any such effects differ by race/ethnicity.

Table 4 presents the results of the separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of each dependent variable on a set of predictors. Regarding individualistic beliefs about wealth, neither African Americans nor Latinos differ from whites on this issue, when controlling for other variables in the model (a separate regression confirms that the significant black/Latino difference seen in Table 3 is *not* sustained in a multivariate model, indicating that other variables account for the formerly observed zero-order difference). Thus, in contrast to past research that found “nonwhites” to be less individualistic than whites (Kluegel and Smith, 1986), the current data suggest a rough consensus on the importance of individual-level qualities determining wealth accumulation.

Regarding structuralist beliefs about wealth, consistent with expectations, both racial minorities are more likely than whites to see systemic biases at work in explaining why there are rich people in the United States. Further, the fact that these race differences exist net of the other included variables such as income and education suggests that African Americans’ and Latinos’ identification with their respective race/ethnic groups, rather than their individual socioeconomic status, best explains these respondents’ greater structuralism (Hunt, 1996).

Regarding the sociodemographic variables, as expected and consistent with an “underdog” thesis, lower income levels reduce support for individualistic reasons and increase support for structuralist reasons for wealth accumulation. Also, as expected, older respondents are more individualistic than younger ones on the issue of wealth; however, they are also somewhat more structuralist ($p < 0.10$), an unexpected finding. Finally, it is for structuralist beliefs that we see the first significant effects of the included social-psychological variables. As predicted, and consistent with a “subjective underdog” thesis, lower SCI increases system blaming for wealth. Also as expected, conservatives are less likely to system blame than their more liberal counterparts.

Regarding the beliefs about poverty, the pattern of African Americans and Latinos being more likely than whites to endorse both types of belief is maintained when controlling for other sociodemographic and social-psychological factors.¹⁸ This is consistent with two other recent studies (Hughes and Tuch, 1999; Hunt, 1996), and adds further support to the views that

¹⁸For the total sample, the correlation between individualistic and structuralist beliefs about poverty is 0.21 ($p < 0.001$). For whites, it is -0.08 (ns); for African Americans, it is 0.25 ($p < 0.001$); for Latinos it is 0.31 ($p < 0.001$). The correlation between individualistic and structuralist beliefs about wealth is -0.03 (ns) for the total sample. For whites it is -0.30 ($p < 0.001$); for African Americans it is 0.06 (ns); for Latinos it is 0.12 ($p < 0.05$).

TABLE 4
OLS Estimates of Beliefs about Wealth and Poverty

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Individualistic Beliefs about Wealth	Structuralist Beliefs about Wealth	Individualistic Beliefs about Poverty	Structuralist Beliefs about Poverty	God's Will (for Wealth and Poverty)
Black	0.005 (0.045)	0.230*** (0.052)	0.181*** (0.054)	0.353*** (0.045)	0.416*** (0.082)
Latino	0.084 (0.058)	0.212** (0.067)	0.138* (0.069)	0.320*** (0.057)	0.269* (0.104)
Personal income	0.020*** (0.006)	-0.014* (0.007)	-0.013+ (0.007)	-0.018** (0.006)	-0.027** (0.011)
Education	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.022** (0.007)	-0.010+ (0.006)	-0.052*** (0.011)
Age	0.003** (0.001)	0.003+ (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)
Female	0.031 (0.037)	-0.034 (0.043)	-0.072 (0.044)	0.085* (0.037)	-0.031 (0.067)
Foreign born	0.074 (0.053)	-0.041 (0.062)	0.196** (0.064)	0.028 (0.053)	0.057 (0.097)
SCI	-0.001 (0.029)	-0.068* (0.034)	-0.040 (0.034)	-0.085** (0.029)	0.008 (0.053)
Conservatism	0.005 (0.011)	-0.037** (0.013)	0.044*** (0.013)	-0.039*** (0.011)	0.031 (0.020)
Constant	3.354*** (0.137)	3.288*** (0.160)	3.207*** (0.164)	3.668*** (0.137)	2.370*** (0.249)
R ²	0.04	0.06	0.12	0.18	0.12

+ = $p < 0.10$; * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).
NOTE: Unstandardized coefficients reported. Standard errors in parentheses. "White" is the omitted race/ethnic category.

(1) individualistic and structuralist beliefs may be combined, and (2) racial minorities may be especially likely to exhibit such a “dual consciousness.”¹⁹

Higher levels of income reduce the likelihood of endorsing either type of poverty belief. This pattern for structuralist beliefs is consistent with past research and an underdog prediction (i.e., lower incomes increase system blaming). However, the marginally significant ($p < 0.10$) inverse effect of income on individualistic beliefs also suggests that higher income levels may increase a sympathetic outlook on the poor. Education also has an inverse effect on both types of poverty belief—a pattern documented previously (Hunt, 1996). This is likely a function of the countervailing effects of higher levels of education on sociopolitical attitudes. On one hand, education is a component of social status; thus, based on the logic of the underdog thesis we should expect system blaming to decrease with higher levels of education. On the other hand, much research suggests support for an “enlightenment” thesis (Hyman and Wright, 1979; Robinson and Bell, 1978) wherein the more educated, because of greater exposure to humanistic values and information on the facts of inequality and sociocultural diversity, view disadvantaged groups more sympathetically, thus decreasing the likelihood of blaming the poor for their plight. Regarding the other sociodemographic variables: as expected, older respondents are more individualistic on poverty. Consistent with an underdog thesis and past research, women are more likely than men to blame the system for poverty. Being foreign born increases individualistic beliefs about poverty—a new finding that warrants more research. Regarding the social-psychological predictors, as with beliefs about wealth, a “subjective underdog” prediction is supported in the form of lower levels of SCI increasing system blaming for poverty. Regarding political ideology, as expected, self-described conservatives are more likely to hold the individual responsible and are less likely to system blame for poverty than are their more liberal counterparts.

¹⁹To explore the possibility that the “dual-consciousness” pattern for African Americans’ and Latinos’ beliefs about poverty might be due to acquiescence bias (i.e., the tendency of some respondents to agree with, or to systematically endorse, survey items despite “true” item content), two approaches were taken. First, I ran a model including individualistic beliefs about poverty as an additional *predictor* of structuralist beliefs about poverty. Individualistic beliefs had a significant, positive effect on structuralist beliefs, but its inclusion in the model did not significantly alter the coefficients of the race/ethnicity dummy variables. Second, I created a new variable that directly measures the tendency to strongly agree despite item content. This variable was created with 10 items from the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale, which includes items coded in different directions. This new variable assigned a score to respondents based on the sum of the difference between the mean for an item and any “strongly agree” response by a particular respondent. Thus, if a respondent strongly agreed with multiple items, despite their substantive meaning regarding self-esteem, they received a higher score on the new variable. Entering this variable into the models reported here did not alter any of the data patterns or levels of statistical significance. Although other “method effects” could have influenced the results of this study, the above approaches discount the most likely possible source of bias.

Compared with the wealth beliefs, explained variance is considerably higher for both beliefs about poverty. Given this evidence that the mechanisms shaping beliefs about wealth are less well explained by current models of stratification beliefs, future research should seek to better specify the *differing* factors shaping beliefs about wealth and poverty. Further, that structuralist beliefs have noticeably higher explained variance than individualistic beliefs within the poverty beliefs domain is consistent with Kluegel and Smith's (1986) contention that system-challenging beliefs are more variable than the ideology of individualism across the social structure.

The final set of results concern the "God's will" fatalistic explanation for wealth and poverty. This belief is most strongly adhered to by racial minorities and persons with lower SES. More research is needed on this type of belief; however, these results suggest support for an "underdog" interpretation of the sources of support for this component of a fatalistic beliefs construct. That is, racial minorities, compared with the majority group, and persons with lower levels of income and education, are particularly likely to attribute the existence of wealth and poverty to God's will.²⁰

Question 3: Are There Race/Ethnic Differences in the Determinants of Wealth or Poverty Beliefs?

Motivated by recent research findings and the "color-blind" critique of social psychology (Hunt et al., 2000), along with calls for greater incorporation of nonwhites into studies of sociopolitical attitudes (Bobo, 1999), I explore whether whites, African Americans, and Latinos differ in the determinants of the stratification beliefs under examination. To test for possible differences, the multiple regression models from Table 4 were run including interaction terms for race and each predictor (with the exception of the "foreign-born" variable on which there is insufficient variation across the three race/ethnic groups). These analyses suggest that the social-psychological predictors are the consistent locus of race differences in the determinants of the stratification beliefs under examination. Thus, Table 5 focuses on these results (though these models do control for the other predictors from Table 4).

Regarding the effects of SCI, Table 5 shows that, among whites, SCI has a significant negative effect on structuralist beliefs about wealth ($b = -0.192$, $p < 0.01$). However, the interaction terms indicate that the effect of SCI on this outcome is significantly weaker (i.e., closer to zero) among both African

²⁰Other analyses, not reported here, show that these differences remain when controlling for church attendance and a self-described "importance of religion" measure.

TABLE 5
OLS Estimates of Beliefs about Wealth and Poverty with “Race by Covariate” Interactions

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Individualistic Beliefs about Wealth	Structuralist Beliefs about Wealth	Individualistic Beliefs about Poverty	Structuralist Beliefs about Poverty	God's Will (for Wealth and Poverty)
SCI	0.085 (0.054)	- 0.192** (0.063)	- 0.070 (0.065)	- 0.140** (0.054)	0.042 (0.099)
Conservatism	0.034 ⁺ (0.020)	- 0.061** (0.023)	0.098*** (0.023)	- 0.101*** (0.019)	0.058 (0.036)
Black*SCI	- 0.117 ⁺ (0.070)	0.195* (0.082)	0.012 (0.084)	0.063 (0.069)	- 0.070 (0.128)
Latino*SCI	- 0.107 (0.072)	0.144 ⁺ (0.084)	0.061 (0.085)	0.082 (0.071)	- 0.002 (0.131)
Black*Conservatism	- 0.049 ⁺ (0.026)	0.024 (0.031)	- 0.055 ⁺ (0.031)	0.092*** (0.026)	- 0.058 (0.048)
Latino*Conservatism	- 0.033 (0.027)	0.043 (0.031)	- 0.100** (0.032)	0.088*** (0.026)	- 0.013 (0.047)
Constant	3.031*** (0.190)	3.705*** (0.221)	3.113*** (0.226)	4.015*** (0.188)	2.196*** (0.346)
R ²	0.05	0.07	0.13	0.20	0.12

⁺ = $p < 0.10$; * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

NOTE: These models also control for race, income, education, age, female, and foreign born. Unstandardized coefficients reported. Standard errors in parentheses.

Americans and Latinos.²¹ Thus, the hypothesized “subjective underdog” inverse relation between SCI and system blaming is only seen among whites. Regarding the effects of conservatism, the most interesting interaction effects are seen for the beliefs about poverty. Specifically, among whites, we see the hypothesized effects: a positive effect of conservatism on individualistic beliefs ($b = 0.098$, $p < 0.001$), and a negative effect on structuralist beliefs ($b = -0.101$, $p < 0.001$). However, the interaction terms reveal significantly weaker effects of conservatism on both outcomes among African Americans and Latinos.²² Thus, political ideology impacts these stratification beliefs in the predicted way only among whites—a result similar to Hughes and Tuch’s (1999) observation that only among whites was self-reported conservatism significantly predictive of opposition to affirmative action. Taken together, these findings suggest that the meaning of SCI and conservatism as self-designations may differ across race/ethnic lines—findings that are in need of further exploration and empirical refinement using a wider array of sociopolitical attitudes.²³

Conclusions

This study examines ideological beliefs about wealth and poverty using a sample of white, African-American, and Latino residents of Los Angeles County, and makes several contributions to our understanding of stratification beliefs. Specifically, this study provides the first simultaneous examination of beliefs about wealth and poverty since the 1980s (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Smith and Stone, 1989), and is the first to examine race/ethnic differences in both levels of adherence to, and in the determinants of, these beliefs. It is also the first study of Latinos’ beliefs about wealth (and one of only a very few to have examined Latinos’ beliefs about poverty). Finally, this study provides a look at the impact of two (heretofore unexamined) social-psychological variables on stratification beliefs, as well as one of the first systematic looks at “fatalistic” beliefs about wealth and poverty.

At a descriptive level, the finding that individualistic beliefs about wealth are clearly more popular than structuralist beliefs suggests that the economic system in the United States is perceived to be relatively open at the top for persons with initiative and talent. However, this system-legitimizing view is qualified somewhat by the fact that structuralist beliefs are also viewed as

²¹When the regression models were repeated within race/ethnic subgroups (results not shown), the effects of SCI were small and nonsignificant among African Americans and Latinos.

²²When the regression models were repeated within race/ethnic subgroups (results not shown), the effects of conservatism were small and nonsignificant among African Americans and Latinos.

²³It is possible that whites interpret conservatism more “politically” than racial minorities, for whom this variable may be interpreted more in lifestyle (e.g., religious values) terms. Future research should address this possibility.

important by respondents—particularly racial minorities. This fits with Kluegel and Smith's argument that structuralist beliefs are most popular among disadvantaged strata and are "layered onto," but are not replacing of (in a zero-sum manner) an existing individualistic base. To use Kluegel and Smith's imagery, African Americans' support for structural challenges to individualism "stop short of denying the justice of economic inequality in principle and of dismissing the ideas that the rich and poor as individuals are deserving of their fate" (1986:290).

In contrast to the view of the "top" of the system, the current data suggest a different view of the bottom, where "system blaming" for poverty predominates (a pattern that exists within each race/ethnic group, though minorities are more structuralist than whites). Interestingly, however, minorities are also more likely than whites to hold the poor responsible for their plight. This "dual consciousness," involving the combination of different ideological beliefs about inequality, resonates with two other recent studies (Hughes and Tuch, 1999; Hunt, 1996), and supports the contentions of thinkers such as Mann (1970), Bobo (1991), and Hochschild (1995) that value "inconsistency" and ideological "ambivalence" may be especially prevalent among relatively disadvantaged strata.

We also see some limited support for an "underdog" thesis (Robinson and Bell, 1978) in the form of lower income levels decreasing support for individualistic beliefs about wealth and increasing system blaming for both wealth and poverty (though, lower income levels are also marginally predictive of support for individualistic beliefs about poverty). Also, consistent with past research, women are more likely than men to system blame for poverty. Being "foreign born" is an important control variable when dealing with the Latino population in southern California, and it registers one significant effect: those born outside the United States are more individualistic on the subject of poverty. This could be attributable to the fact that, as first-generation Americans, these respondents arrive with a sense of optimism about the availability of opportunity in the United States and thus are prone to evaluate poverty as the result of a lack of individual striving. Most significant, however, is the fact that the Latino findings reported herein are not attributable to foreign-born status, language of interview, or the other variables included in the analyses. This indicates that Latinos need to be considered as a distinct race/ethnic group in studies of public opinion. It is not sensible to exclude, or casually combine, this distinct and rapidly growing minority group with the white or nonwhite categories.

The included social-psychological variables are important in two main ways. First, because the impact of such variables on stratification beliefs has been neglected (Kluegel and Smith, 1986), they add to our knowledge. Second, they represent the locus of the race differences observed regarding the determinants of beliefs about wealth and poverty. For instance, SCI significantly impacts structuralist beliefs about wealth and poverty in a "subjective underdog" fashion, that is, lower SCI increases system blam-

ing—demonstrating that structuralist beliefs are more variable than individualism not only across the social structure, but also across important subjective categories. However, analyses specifying race-specific effects show that the “subjective underdog” pattern for structuralist beliefs about wealth only holds for whites, who differ significantly from African Americans and Latinos in this regard (the racial minorities exhibit small nonsignificant effects of SCI on this outcome). Whether SCI is differentially predictive, by race, of other sociopolitical attitudes is an empirical question deserving additional attention.

Political ideology also impacts several of the stratification beliefs under examination, though in predicted ways only for whites, among whom conservatives are more individualistic and less structuralist than liberals. Analyses specifying race-specific effects demonstrate that African Americans and Latinos differ significantly from whites in the impact of conservatism on beliefs about poverty (with conservatism showing small, nonsignificant effects among the racial minorities). Thus, self-reported political ideology—a mainstay in decades of public opinion research in the social sciences—appears to carry different meaning by race/ethnicity, having implications for its explanatory power (especially if race-specific effects are not identified). Further, in line with Hughes and Tuch’s (1999) observation that conservatism only significantly shapes attitudes toward affirmative action among whites (in a comparative study of whites, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians), the current findings support the call for a more systematic study of the relationship between self-reported conservatism and a range of sociopolitical attitudes, as well as how these relationships may vary by race/ethnicity.

Finally, while the inclusion of new survey items asking about the importance of “God’s will” (in combination with items employed in past research) failed to produce statistically reliable scales to *separately* measure “fatalistic” beliefs about wealth or poverty, our knowledge of this third type of stratification belief has been enhanced by this study. Specifically, results show that racial minorities and persons with lower SES are most likely to make attributions to God’s will in explaining economic inequalities. Future research into this third type of belief should attempt to develop more survey items tapping this dimension.

The sample used in this study is unusually strong from the standpoint of (1) allowing detailed comparisons by race/ethnicity and (2) the inclusion of Latinos (a regionally concentrated population). However, future work using national data will be helpful in determining whether the findings reported here—including possible trends toward more liberal outlooks on poverty—are observed outside Los Angeles County. Further, national data and larger samples will also allow us to refine the Latino and Asian categories to examine more specific ethnic groups within these populations. Although the inclusion of SCI and political ideology represent improvements in our models of stratification beliefs (particularly since these variables represent the

locus of the significant race interactions), researchers should explore the role of other social-psychological variables (e.g., social identities) in studies of stratification ideology. Finally, because most examinations of the impact of stratification ideology on policy attitudes have employed measures of beliefs about poverty (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993), future survey investigations of stratification beliefs should include measures of relevant policy attitudes (e.g., support for affirmative action and other race- and income-targeted programs) to facilitate examination of whether beliefs about *wealth* shape such outcomes (Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo, 1999), as well as whether the stratification ideology/policy attitudes relationship varies for whites, African Americans, and Latinos.

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