15 Self-Evaluation and Stratification Beliefs
Matthew O. Hunt

It is my thesis that attitudes toward equality rest in the first instance upon one's attitude towards one's own status. Like a large number of social beliefs, attitudes towards equality take their direction from beliefs about the self, the status of the self, one's self-esteem or lack thereof.

(Lane, 1959, p. 37)

INTRODUCTION

This study explores relationships between self-evaluation (i.e., self-esteem and mastery) and ideological beliefs about the causes of poverty (i.e., "stratification beliefs" or "stratification ideology"). While there has been a good deal of research into the antecedents and consequences of self-concept variables (Gecas & Burke, 1995; Rosenberg, 1979, 1981) and stratification beliefs (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), scant theoretical or empirical research has focused on relationships between these two phenomena.¹ This study addresses this gap in the social psychological literature by examining relationships between self-evaluation and "individualistic" and "structuralist" beliefs about the causes of poverty (Feagin, 1972, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In addition, self-evaluation/stratification beliefs relationships are examined separately for African Americans, Latinos, and whites, in an effort to critically examine an

¹ One justification and motivation for this study can be found by merely substituting the word "inequality" for "equality" in Lane's passage quoted at the outset.

The author wishes to thank Sheldon Stryker and Richard Serpe for the opportunity to participate in the survey producing the data used in this study. Thanks are also due to Larry Hunt, Brian Powell, and Timothy J. Owens for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this manuscript.
“assumption of race/ethnic similarity” regarding social psychological processes (Hunt et al., 2000).

Three basic research questions guide this study: (1) Are there relationships between self-evaluation and stratification beliefs? (2) Do any such relationships exist net of the effects of race and other sociodemographic variables? (3) Do African Americans, Latinos, and whites differ in relationships between self-evaluation and stratification beliefs? I answer these questions using a sample of southern Californians (n = 2,628) collected in 1993. Before doing so, however, some general background on stratification beliefs and self-evaluation is offered.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Stratification Beliefs
The study of “stratification beliefs,” according to Kluegel and Smith (1986), involves an attempt to understand “what people believe about who gets what and why.” Past research suggests that beliefs about poverty are of two basic types: “individualistic” and “structuralist.” Individualistic beliefs locate the causes of poverty within poor persons themselves (e.g., lack of ability, lack of effort), and are understood to reflect the dominant ideology of individualism in the United States (Huber & Form, 1973). In contrast, structuralist beliefs locate the causes of poverty in the social and economic system (e.g., lack of jobs, discrimination) in which poor persons live. As such, they represent a “system challenging” belief, existing alongside the ideology of individualism in American culture (Bobo, 1991; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Virtually all past research on stratification beliefs in the United States has found that individualistic beliefs predominate (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Nilson, 1981). This fact is generally attributed to the strength of individualism as a broad, pervasive ideology that is thought to shape the beliefs of Americans from all groups and social locations. In contrast, adherence to structuralist beliefs has been found to be more variable – depending on prevailing social and historical conditions, persons’ social group memberships, and personal experiences. As such, structuralist beliefs are generally thought to be “layered on” to, rather than replacing of, individualistic beliefs (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Structuralist beliefs have been found to be especially popular among relatively disadvantaged strata – a pattern consistent with an “underdog thesis”

2 Although past research has looked at beliefs about poverty, wealth, race, gender, opportunity, and other inequality-related issues, beliefs about poverty represent the most commonly used measure of “stratification ideology.”

3 For an exception, see Hunt (1996). Some caution should be exercised in generalizing from this study, however, as the database was limited to southern Californians.
(Robinson & Bell, 1978) holding that groups with relatively low status and power are more likely to embrace system-challenging ideologies and to reject system-legitimating ideologies. For example, past research has found blacks to support structuralist beliefs at greater rates than whites. Although this "underdog" logic may seem obvious, there are also studies showing that relatively disadvantaged groups do not always protest their subordination, and in some cases support the status quo at equal or higher rates than the better off (Hochschild, 1981; Lane, 1962; Sennett & Cobb, 1972) – a scenario indicating equal or greater "legitimation" of inequalities among the disadvantaged.

There are two basic routes to the legitimation of inequalities among the disadvantaged: consensus and domination. "Consensus" involves roughly equal support for various ideologies across strata of unequal status and/or power. For example, studies suggest that blacks often do not differ from whites on support for the dominant ideology in the United States (e.g., "individualistic" explanations of inequality) (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). "Domination" refers to the situation in which lower status groups support ideologies that justify the status quo (or reject system-challenging ideas) at greater rates than their more advantaged counterparts. For example, Hunt (2000) finds that persons with low SES (education and income) are more likely to believe in a "just world" than are persons with higher SES.

**Self-Evaluation**

The causes and consequences of variation in the self-concept (e.g., self-esteem and mastery) have been widely researched (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Rosenberg, 1965, 1979, 1981; Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972), yet there exists no scholarly consensus regarding the relationship between self-evaluation and ideological beliefs concerning the legitimacy of inequality. There are, however, some theoretical speculations on this issue.

Della Fave's (1980) "self-evaluation theory" of the legitimation process suggests that, in stable stratification systems (i.e., legitimated ones), a basic normative consensus on "who gets what and why" cuts across major structural lines of inequality. According to Della Fave, this normative consensus on distributive justice (or "equity" principles) produces an unequal distribution of self-evaluations that mirrors the unequal distribution of power and resources in the broader society. Thus, the key to the legitimation of inequality lies in the fact that self-evaluations are distributed in the same way as "primary resources" (e.g., wealth, power). Following this logic, because of the internalization of basic "equity" principles, low-status persons do not protest their subordination because they think little of themselves (from the standpoint of their ability to control the larger sociopolitical environment), internalize responsibility for their plight, and are impressed by their "betters" who are more positively evaluated and seen as deserving of their greater share of
esteem and primary resources given the widespread perception of their "greater contributions" to society. In short, because of consensus regarding the justice of the processes producing inequality, as well as the norms governing these processes (e.g., agreement on the idea of individual responsibility for personal positions), a basic across-strata consensus exists supporting the assertion that existing inequalities in control over primary resources (and in self-evaluations) are basically right and reasonable.

Following these arguments, what I term a "subjective legitimation" perspective predicts no relationship between self-evaluation and perceived legitimacy—that is, those who think little of themselves, and who perceive little personal control over their lives, should not differ significantly from their high self-evaluation counterparts regarding the perceived legitimacy of the status quo.

Della Fave's theory posits an isomorphism between objective rank and self-evaluation owing to a general ideological consensus in society. In contrast to this view, much scholarship suggests that both system-legitimizing and system-challenging ideologies exist in the cultures of industrial societies (Bobo, 1991; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Mann, 1970). For example, in a recent study of justice beliefs in twelve nations, Kluegel, Mason, and Wegener (1995) report that all the societies studied have a "primary" (i.e., "dominant") ideology that is widely adhered to across classes and groups (e.g., "individualism" in the United States), as well as a "secondary" ideology that is especially popular among strata not favored by the "primary" ideology (e.g., the role played by "structuralist" beliefs among the disadvantaged in the United States). Della Fave's theory relies heavily on the assumption of a normative consensus on a "primary ideology" (i.e., an ideology of individualism and personal responsibility), and downplays the possibility of dual ideologies, operating in a differentiated system, offering challenges to the status quo. Two additional perspectives on the relationship between self-evaluation and legitimacy arise from a consideration of the possibility that a normative consensus is not the primary feature of society.

One alternative to the "subjective legitimation" perspective suggests that there is a subjective component to the "underdog thesis" in the sense that "individuals who feel that they are deprived, even if they are not objectively deprived, will perceive more inequality than individuals who do not feel so deprived" (Robinson, 1983, p. 352). Translated to the issue of self-evaluation, a "subjective underdog" thesis holds that persons with low self-evaluations will be less likely to support basic tenets of the dominant ideology (and will be more likely to support system-challenging ideologies), while persons with high self-evaluations will be more likely to judge the status quo and its inequalities (e.g., poverty) to be legitimate. Following this logic, lower self-evaluations should increase the likelihood of rejecting the dominant ideology and of accepting system-challenging ideas. Thus, observation of a positive
relationship between self-evaluation and perceived legitimacy supports this “subjective underdog” perspective.

A second alternative to the “subjective legitimation” perspective expects an inverse relationship between self-evaluation and perceived legitimacy – a view I term a “subjective domination” perspective – that is, persons with low self-evaluations will support dominant ideologies (and reject system-challenging ideas) at greater rates than persons with higher self-evaluations. Why might we expect such a pattern? One possibility is a need for ontological security or order among persons with low senses of self-worth and/or perceived control over their lives. That is, having low self-esteem and/or mastery may correspond with a need to see the world as a just and fair place where the poor deserve their fate – a theme reminiscent of Lerner’s “just world” hypothesis (1980). Following this logic, higher self-evaluations are conducive to a more critical view of the status quo and its inequalities (e.g., a more compassionate view of the poor) that validates the moral claims of the underdog, while low self-evaluations increase the likelihood of seeing the status quo as legitimate (e.g., “blaming the individual” for poverty).

Table 15.1 summarizes the predictions of the three perspectives on the relationship between self-evaluation and stratification ideology.

The Assumption of Race/Ethnic Similarity
The third main research question of this study concerns whether African-Americans, Latinos, and whites differ in self-evaluation/stratification beliefs relationships. 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). I test this implied null hypothesis, 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, 1959). The historical

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4 Lerner (1980) argues for the existence of a “belief in a just world” whose logic holds that people “get what they deserve, and deserve what they get.” One consequence of such a viewpoint is that people in unfortunate circumstances (e.g., the poor) are derogated and held personally responsible for their plight. Regarding low self-esteem, Swann (1996) and Rosenberg and Owens (2001) argue that low self-esteem people tend to internalize their problems more than higher-self esteem people.

5 Several studies examining the beliefs and attitudes of nonwhite race/ethnic groups have appeared in recent years, most of which focus on various race/ethnic group differences in adherence to particular beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Booth-Kewley, Rosenfeld, & Edward, 1993; Guarnaccia, Angel, & Worobey, 1991; Smith, 1990; Welch & Sigelman, 1993). Despite these developments, studies that compare race/ethnic groups on the determinants of beliefs and attitudes are still a rarity. It is the dearth of studies examining group differences in the determinants of beliefs and attitudes that underlies the “assumption of race/ethnic similarity.”
oppression and continued segregation of blacks is an obvious source of
group distinction (Massey & Denton, 1993). At a more social psychological
level, Steele (1994), Cose (1993), and others argue that even relatively success-
ful blacks – who are on par with middle-class whites from the standpoint of
socioeconomic status – still must cope with the reality of race-based discrimi-
nation 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
ethnic group from Mexico and Central America (Donato, 1994) differentiates
them from most blacks and non-Hispanic whites in the region. Thus, blacks
and Latinos have distinct histories and experiences that likely carry implica-
tions for how members of these groups perceive themselves, others, and
inequalities in American society.

Another factor contributing to the origin and perpetuation of the
“assumption of race/ethnic similarity” 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 database I employ contains sizeable subsamples of blacks and Latinos, allowing for statistical subgroup comparisons that directly examine the validity of the assumption of race/ethnic simi-
arity.

A final factor motivating critical examination of the “assumption of race/ethnic similarity” is evidence from recent studies documenting

6 See Kluegel and Smith (1986) for a discussion of blacks’ lower levels of support for the belief
in the availability of equal opportunity in American society.
race/ethnic differences in social psychological processes. For example, Hunt (1996) finds differences between whites and both blacks 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 blacks’ 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 blacks, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans as they do to non-Hispanic whites. In light of these examples, along with the general neglect of race/ethnicity in social psychology (Hunt et al., 2000), examination of possible race/ethnic differences in the relationship between self-evaluation and stratification ideology is clearly warranted.

DATA

The data used in this investigation were gathered between January and March 1993 at the Social Science Research Center at the California State University at Fullerton through random-digit-dialing and telephone interviews of persons 18 years or older residing in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego. The overall response rate was just above 70%. Of the 2,854 interviews completed, 1,245 were with whites, 737 with Latinos, 646 with African Americans, 148 with Asians, and 62 with “others” (16 people refused to answer the race self-identification question).7 Given the extreme cultural heterogeneity of the Asian category, I elected to exclude Asians from this study in order to focus on a comparison of the three other major race/ethnic groups in the region (n = 2,628). The survey purposely oversampled blacks, resulting in a sample in which whites represent 47.4%, blacks represent 24.6%, and Latinos 28% of respondents. This race/ethnic mix was achieved by oversampling telephone exchanges in 1990 census tracts in which the black population was greater than 30%.

7 “Race/ethnicity” is based on respondents’ self-reports. The survey item read: “What race do you consider yourself to be?” Response options included: White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Other. In the southern California region where the data for this study were collected, Latinos are approximately 85% Mexican American (or “Chicano”). Thus, criticisms of the use of the term “Latino” or “Hispanic” that point to the diversity of groups making up this category in the United States (e.g., Chicanos, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans), are largely avoided in this research.
Comparisons with 1990 census data confirm the representativeness of the current sample in terms of basic sociodemographic characteristics, and a weighting correction adjusts the sample to mirror existing race/ethnicity and gender population proportions according to census information. This weighting procedure changes the race/ethnic percentages to: whites = 60.2%, blacks = 8.7%, and Latinos = 31.1%. The weighted sample is used to calculate means and standard deviations for the total sample, but the correlation and regression models use the unweighted sample following Winship and Radbill (1994). Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish according to the respondent's wishes. Back-translation was used to maximize the equivalence of the two versions of the survey.

MEASURES

Beliefs About Poverty
The two dependent variables examined in this study measure the importance attributed to individualistic and structuralist reasons for poverty. The items used in these measures were taken, with slight modification, from Feagin's (1972) and Kluegel and Smith's (1986) surveys of stratification beliefs. A principal components factor analysis (varimax rotation) performed on these items reveals two underlying dimensions that are interpreted as individualistic and structuralist reasons for poverty. Identical factor analyses performed within each race/ethnic subgroup revealed the same two underlying dimensions.

Individualistic beliefs about poverty are measured with a scale (alpha = .67) composed of the following items: "Personal irresponsibility, lack of discipline among those who are poor," "Lack of effort by those who are poor," "Lack of thrift and personal money management," and "Lack of ability and talent among those who are poor." Structuralist beliefs about poverty are measured with a scale (alpha = .70) composed of the following items: "Low wages in some businesses and industries," "Failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans," "Prejudice and discrimination," and "Failure of private industry to provide enough good jobs." Respondents were asked whether they thought that each reason was "very important" (coded 4), "somewhat important" (coded 3), "not very important" (coded 2), or "not at all important" (coded 1), as a reason for poverty. Thus, higher values indicate greater perceived importance as a cause of poverty.

8 The precise wording of these items, and all other variables in these analyses, appear in the Appendix.
Self-Evaluation
I use two constructs to measure "self-evaluation" – self-esteem and mastery. Self-esteem is measured with a scale (alpha = .63) composed of four items drawn from Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale. Mastery is measured with a scale (alpha = .80) using seven items from Pearlin and Schooler (1978). Scales are coded such that higher values indicate higher self-esteem and perceived mastery.9

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Table 15.2 shows means and standard deviations of variables for the whole sample and by race/ethnic subgroup. First, the southern Californians in our sample see both individualistic (mean = 3.19) and structuralist (mean = 3.35) beliefs as important. This is consistent with research on stratification beliefs that finds that these beliefs are not opposite ends of a single continuum and may in fact be combined in peoples' thinking about inequality (Hunt, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986, Lee, Jones, & Lewis, 1990). The means of the race subgroups show that all three race/ethnic groups differ significantly on individualistic beliefs, with Latinos being the most individualistic, followed by blacks, and whites the least. Regarding structuralist beliefs, blacks and Latinos are quite similar to each other, but are significantly more structuralist than whites.

Although the self-evaluations of the overall sample are moderately high, blacks and whites report significantly higher self-esteem than Latinos (though blacks and whites do not differ from one another). Regarding mastery, all three groups differ significantly, with whites having the highest sense of mastery, followed by blacks, and then Latinos. The pattern of blacks having roughly equal self-esteem, but lower mastery, compared with whites is consistent with past research (Porter & Washington, 1991). The Latino findings are new, and demonstrate that members of this race/ethnic group have significantly lower self-evaluations than both their African-American and white counterparts in southern California. Regarding income and education, whites have the highest levels, and Latinos the lowest; the black subsample is significantly more female than the white or Latino subsamples; and whites are oldest on average (42.54), followed by blacks (40.67), with Latinos averaging a full nine years younger than blacks (31.65).

9 Della Fave (1986) has criticized the use of self-esteem scales to operationalize "self-evaluation" (as he conceptualizes it). This criticism is acknowledged; however, I maintain that the use of "mastery" in combination with self-esteem represents an improvement over previous attempts to empirically study the role of self-evaluation in legitimation processes.
### Table 15.2. Selected Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables for the Total Sample (Weighted), and by Race/Ethnic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Latinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
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<td>Individualism</td>
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<td>3.07</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<td>Structuralism</td>
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<td>.58</td>
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<td>.59</td>
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<td>Self-Esteem</td>
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<td>.46</td>
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<td>Mastery</td>
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<td>.44</td>
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<td>Latino</td>
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<td>.46</td>
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Note: a, white vs. black means significantly different (p < .05); b, white vs. Latino means significantly different (p < .05); c, black vs. Latino means significantly different (p < .05).

Question 1: Are There Relationships Between Self-Evaluation and Stratification Beliefs?

Table 15.3 provides an answer to the first research question: self-esteem and mastery are both negatively related to individualistic and structuralist beliefs about poverty. Models 1 and 2 show the impact of self-esteem and mastery entered separately, while Model 3 shows that, net of the effect of the other component of self-evaluation, both self-esteem and mastery are inversely related to support for both beliefs about poverty.

These patterns suggest support for both the “subjective domination” and “subjective underdog” perspectives on the relationship between self-evaluation and stratification ideology. First, the fact that people with low self-esteem and mastery tend to endorse the dominant ideology of poverty lends support for the subjective domination perspective (Table 15.1C). That is, persons with the lowest self-evaluations (i.e., persons with the least “subjective resources”) are most likely to “blame the individual” for poverty. On the
Table 15.3. OLS Regression of Individualistic and Structuralist Beliefs about Poverty on Self-Concept Variable without (Models 1–3) and with (Models 4–6) Sociodemographic Controls (N = 2333)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported. Standard errors in parentheses. + = p < .10, * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001.
other hand, the fact that low self-evaluations are conducive to greater support for the system-challenging, structuralist view of poverty, supports the "subjective underdog" viewpoint (Table 15.1B). Seen another way, people with higher self-evaluations appear to reject blaming either the individual or the system for poverty. Thus, on first examination, there appears to be little support for the "subjective legitimation" prediction (Table 15.1A) of no relationship between self-evaluation and stratification ideology.

**Question 2: Do Any Self-Evaluation/Stratification Beliefs Relationships Exist Net of the Effects of Race and Other Sociodemographic Variables?**

Models 4 through 6 in Table 15.3 repeat the prior analyses (Models 1 through 3), with the addition of race and other sociodemographic variables as controls. Model 4 shows that, even when controlling for these other variables, self-esteem is inversely related to both beliefs about poverty. The magnitude of the coefficients, however, is reduced: in the case of individualistic beliefs by approximately 75%, while for structuralist beliefs, the coefficient is reduced by over one-half. Model 5 demonstrates that when race and other sociodemographics are controlled, the effect of mastery on individualistic beliefs becomes nonsignificant, while the effect of mastery on structuralist beliefs remains significant, though it is reduced by over 50%.

Model 6 shows that, when both components of self-evaluation are entered simultaneously, only the effect of self-esteem on individualistic beliefs remains significant ($p < .10$), while only mastery's relationship to structuralist beliefs remains significant ($p < .10$). The self-esteem pattern demonstrates that low self-esteem (net of the effect of mastery and other variables) increases the tendency to see poverty in dominant ideology terms, while higher self-esteem fosters a more compassionate view of the poor. This greater tendency to blame the individual for poverty among persons with lower self-esteem could serve a "scapegoating" function in the service of maintaining or enhancing one's own self-identity under threatening circumstances (Lewis, 1978). In contrast, low mastery (net of the effect of self-esteem and other variables) increases the tendency to blame the system for poverty – a finding that could be due to persons with low levels of perceived control over their own lives having had more experience with structural barriers in society (thus making such barriers more salient in general, and as a reason for poverty).

In sum, Table 15.3 suggests that low self-esteem is the best predictor of the dominant ideology view of poverty, while low mastery is the best predictor of the structuralist explanation of why people are poor. Although the subjective domination and subjective underdog perspectives are still supported in Models 4 through 6, the nonsignificant effects of self-esteem and mastery in these models suggest some support for the "subjective legitimation" prediction of consensus on stratification ideology across levels of self-evaluation.
Next the race/ethnic subgroup analyses are explored to see if whites, blacks, and Latinos differ regarding the patterns documented in Table 15.3.

**Question 3: Do African Americans, Latinos, and Whites Differ in Any Relationships Between Self-Evaluation and Stratification Beliefs?**

Table 15.4 reports the results of the race/ethnic subgroup analyses (essentially Model 6 without the race/ethnicity dummy variables). The significance of race/ethnic group differences in the impact of self-esteem and mastery on poverty beliefs is assessed using a “difference of slope” formula, comparable to testing the interaction of self-esteem and mastery with race/ethnicity (Kmenta, 1971, pp. 419–23).

Looking first at individualistic beliefs about poverty, only Latinos’ perceptions of mastery significantly correspond with individualistic beliefs. Specifically, mastery shows the significant inverse relationship with individualistic beliefs seen among the whole sample in Model 2 of Table 15.3. Thus, regarding support for the dominant ideology view of the poor, it is only Latinos for whom mastery is a significant predictor – an effect that is significantly stronger than among whites and blacks. One possible explanation is the immigration experience. Although only 6% of whites and African Americans in our sample are “first generation” (i.e., foreign born) Americans, fully 69% of Latinos are. Entering a linear control for generational status (first through fifth generation) in the regression models suggests that, for Latinos, the more recent the arrival to southern California, the more individualistic the thinking on poverty, but entering this variable does not significantly alter the results reported in the tables. Future research should further explore whether issues of generational status, assimilation, and/or acculturation, affect self-evaluation, stratification ideology, and/or relationships between the two.

Whereas Latinos are distinctive regarding individualistic beliefs, African Americans are the locus of unique effects regarding structuralist beliefs about poverty. First, to summarize the significant effects of self-esteem and mastery, only blacks evidence the previously observed inverse effect of self-esteem, while only whites and Latinos show the previously observed inverse effect of mastery. Further, African Americans show a previously unobserved positive correspondence between mastery and structuralist beliefs. Regarding slope differences by race/ethnicity, blacks are significantly different from both whites and Latinos in the impact of both self-esteem and mastery on structuralist beliefs.

From the standpoint of the perspectives summarized in Table 15.1, blacks show a unique “subjective underdog” (Table 15.1B) effect of self-esteem – that is, blacks with the lowest self-esteem are the most likely to adopt the system-challenging, structuralist view of poverty. Further, blacks show a unique “subjective domination” (Table 15.1C) effect for mastery – that is, blacks with
Table 15.4. OLS Regression of Beliefs about Poverty on Self-Concept and Sociodemographic Variables (Model 6) by Race/Ethnic Group

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Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported. Standard errors in parentheses. <sup>+</sup> = p < .10, <sup>*</sup> = p < .05, <sup>**</sup> = p < .01, <sup>***</sup> = p < .001. For self-esteem and mastery:

<sup>a</sup> White versus black slopes different at p < .05.

<sup>b</sup> White versus Latino slopes different at p < .05.

<sup>c</sup> Black versus Latino slopes different at p < .05.
the lowest mastery are least likely to blame the system for poverty. Seen another way, among blacks, those persons with the highest self-esteem are least likely to system-blame, while those with the highest mastery are most likely to system-blame.

The unique self-esteem/structuralism link among blacks suggests that African Americans are especially likely to system-blame when they have low self-esteem (an ideological orientation produced by low mastery for whites and Latinos). This pattern conflicts with speculation in the literature that “system-blaming” may enhance (or help maintain) self-esteem for African Americans (Porter & Washington, 1979). This may be because previous researchers were focusing on “system-blaming” for racial inequality and discrimination, and/or on the issue of “self versus system-blaming” for personal outcomes, rather than ideological beliefs about poverty (Porter & Washington, 1979). Nonetheless, no support is found in these data for the hypothesis that a system-blaming orientation is positively associated with self-esteem among race/ethnic minorities.

Such evidence is seen with regard to mastery, however. One explanation for the positive mastery/structuralism connection among African Americans may be found in the ideas of Cose (1996). Cose argues that higher-status African Americans (i.e., the “middle class”) are more alienated, more distrustful of “the system,” and more critical of current social arrangements than lower-status blacks (and other Americans). He suggests that this is because higher-status African Americans have personally experienced the structural blockages, “glass ceilings,” and other barriers to reaching the top ranks of various social and organizational hierarchies, despite going through the same preparations as their white counterparts. Thus, according to Cose, while lower-status persons certainly have cause to be angry and alienated, it is members of the relatively successful portion of the African-American community who are most frustrated by the structural sources (e.g., racial discrimination) of their failure to advance as far as members of other groups.

CONCLUSIONS
This chapter has examined the connection between self-evaluation and ideological beliefs about poverty. Several conclusions may be drawn. First, self-esteem and mastery both significantly correspond with individualistic and structuralist beliefs about poverty. Once the other self-evaluation variable, race/ethnicity, and other sociodemographics are controlled, it is self-esteem that significantly corresponds with individualistic beliefs, and mastery that significantly corresponds with structuralist beliefs. The inverse relationship observed between self-esteem and individualistic beliefs supports a “subjective domination” perspective, while the inverse correspondence between mastery and structuralist beliefs supports a “subjective underdog” perspec-
tive. The nonsignificant relationships between self-evaluation and stratification beliefs represent support for the “subjective legitimation” prediction of a rough consensus on ideological beliefs about inequality across levels of self-evaluation.

The fact that low self-esteem predicts support for the dominant ideology view of poverty (for the total sample only) may reflect the need for order, ontological security, and/or a “scapegoat” among persons with low self-worth. That is, owing to the “self-esteem motive” (Rosenberg, 1981), persons with few “subjective resources” in the form of self-worth may point to the poor as a convenient reference group whom they may feel superior to by highlighting individual or characterological reasons for poverty. Lewis (1978) and others (Anderson, 1990; Lane, 1959, 1962) document the tendency of certain “vulnerable strata” to scapegoat the poor to highlight their own limited successes and “salvage the self” (Lewis, 1978). Correspondingly, higher self-esteem is associated with a lessened tendency to “blame the poor” as those persons with more subjective resources (i.e., more global self-worth in this case) may have less of a need to feel superior to another group and thus are more supportive of the moral claims of the underdog.

That low mastery is the predictor of structuralist beliefs about poverty (among the whole sample, as well as for whites and Latinos) follows from the “subjective underdog” logic outlined above. Thus, persons with few “subjective resources” (in this case, in the form of perceived control over their lives) are more sympathetic to the poor, perhaps because of personal experience with structural barriers in society.

I also find several race/ethnic differences in self-evaluation/stratification beliefs relationships – differences that require some elaboration and specification of the effects documented for the total sample. First, the inverse correspondence between self-esteem and individualistic beliefs seen among the total sample does not appear for any of the race/ethnic subgroups. What does appear is a significant inverse relationship between self-esteem and structuralist beliefs for African Americans – who are unique in this effect.

Further, the inverse relationship between mastery and structuralist beliefs seen for the total sample holds only for whites and Latinos in Table 15.4 (who are significantly different from blacks in this regard). Thus, we again see a unique relationship between self-evaluation and structuralist beliefs for blacks. In this case it is higher mastery that is predictive of structuralist beliefs among African Americans. Apparently those blacks with greatest perceived control over their own lives are most sympathetic to the structuralist explanation of poverty. This could reflect the fact that blacks who have “made it” from the standpoint of objective and subjective resources (i.e., those who sense that “I control my destiny”) feel this way precisely because structural barriers had to be overcome – a conclusion that fits with my earlier (Hunt, 1996) finding that “internal self-explanations” (attributions to ability and
effort for personal outcomes) correspond with structuralist beliefs among nonwhites (whereas internal self-explanations correspond with individualistic beliefs among whites). I speculated that for race/ethnic minorities, having a sense that “I made it because of me” is not incompatible with a structuralist consciousness. Rather, such a consciousness may be enhanced by having struggled against structural barriers.

Another conclusion that may be drawn from this study is that across the three race/ethnic groups examined – mastery is more closely connected to stratification ideology (particularly structuralist beliefs) than is self-esteem. This is consistent with the general theme from past research suggesting that self-concept variables such as personal mastery or self-efficacy are more strongly shaped by stratification-based experiences in public institutions such as work, whereas self-esteem is more likely to be rooted in the less hierarchically organized, more private worlds of family and community (Hughes & Demo, 1989). What the current findings show is that stratification beliefs (in addition to stratification-based experiences) may also be more closely connected to mastery than to self-esteem.

Future research should focus on the relationship between self-evaluation and a wider variety of stratification beliefs, such as beliefs about wealth (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), different types of poverty (Wilson, 1996), gender inequality (Kane, 1995), and racial inequality (Robinson, 1983). Further, future research should focus on the migration experiences of Latinos as a possible explanation for their distinctive self-evaluations and ideological beliefs. Such research will be helpful in our effort to understand the fastest growing minority population in the United States; and, knowledge of differences based on generational status within an ethnic group could provide further evidence challenging an “assumption of similarity” regarding basic social psychological processes.

REFERENCES

Self-Evaluation and Stratification Beliefs


Kohn, M. L. Social class and parental values. American Journal of Sociology, 64, 337–51.


APPENDIX: ITEMS AND CODING USED IN VARIABLE CONSTRUCTION

Dependent Variables

Interviewer statement: The following statements refer to possible reasons for poverty in America. For each of the reasons, please tell me whether you think it is very important (coded 4), somewhat important (3), not very important (2), or not at all important (1) as a reason for poverty.

Individualistic Beliefs about Poverty (alpha = .67)
1. Personal irresponsibility, lack of discipline among those who are poor.
2. Lack of effort by those who are poor.
3. Lack of thrift and personal money management.
4. Lack of ability and talent among those who are poor.

Structuralist Beliefs about Poverty (alpha = .70)
1. Low wages in some businesses and industries.
2. Failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans.
3. Prejudice and discrimination.
4. Failure of private industry to provide enough jobs.

Self-Concept Variables

Self-Esteem (alpha = .63)
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. (item reverse coded)
2. I certainly feel useless at times.
3. I feel I have a number of good qualities. (item reverse coded)
4. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

Mastery (alpha = .80)
1. I have little control over the things that happen to me.
2. There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have.
3. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.
4. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems in my life.
5. Sometimes I feel that I am being pushed around in my life.
6. What happens to me mostly depends on me. (item reverse coded)
7. I can do just about anything I set my mind to. (item reverse coded)

Coded: (4) strongly disagree (3) disagree (2) agree (1) strongly agree.
Other Control Variables

*Race/Ethnicity:* Black = 1, Other = 0  
Latino = 1, Other = 0

*Gender:* Female = 1, Male = 0

*Personal Income*
1. less than $9,999  
2. between $10,000 and $14,999  
3. between $15,000 and $19,999  
4. between $20,000 and $24,999  
5. between $25,000 and $29,999  
6. between $30,000 and $34,999  
7. between $35,000 and $39,999  
8. between $40,000 and $49,999  
9. between $50,000 and $59,999  
10. between $60,000 and $74,999  
11. above $75,000

*Education:* measured in years.

*Age:* measured in years.