

The Meaning and Role of Ideology in System Justification and Resistance for High- and Low-Status People

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In this article we explore how beliefs about system ideals and the achievement of those ideals differentially predict system justification among low- and high-status groups. Our goal was to reconcile how people can promote system ideals such as equal opportunities for all and at the same time recognize that group-based disparities are, in part, due to these unfulfilled ideals. Three studies examined whether people perceived a discrepancy between a system's ideal goals and its achievement of those goals. Everyone endorsed these goal ideals more than they believed that the goals were being achieved; however, this discrepancy was larger for low-status people. The larger the perceived discrepancy, the more dissatisfied people were with the system and the more likely they were to support hierarchy-attenuating policies. Studies 2 and 3 also examined people's motivation for endorsing goal ideals. People of all statuses endorsed system ideals to promote an ideal system more than to legitimize the actual system (Study 2); however, high-status people were slightly more likely to endorse system ideals to legitimize the actual system than low-status people (Study 3). In summary, low-status people were more likely than high-status people to recognize discrepancies between system goals and system outcomes, show dissatisfaction with the American system, and prefer policies that would attenuate extant hierarchies.

Keywords: ideology, beliefs, legitimacy, system justification, status

The United States is known throughout the world as the “land of opportunity.” One of the main reasons people immigrate to the United States is to live the American dream: acquiring a better education and advancing their economic status through better employment (Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). However, in reality there are large economic, social, political, educational, and health disparities in American society based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Given these large group-based disparities, it is puzzling that America can maintain its reputation as a country that promises economic opportunities and social and political progress. What is even more perplexing is that people of low-status (e.g., immigrants) believe in these ideals and promises of the American dream despite experiencing economic hardships and discrimination firsthand (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Phalet, Andriessen, & Lens, 2004).

Political scientists describe people's ambivalence about the promise of equality in America. On the one hand, people believe that everyone has a relatively equal chance of getting ahead or improving his or her economic status, but on the other hand, they believe that our political and social systems help perpetuate inequality and that we still have a lot of work to do to eliminate discrimination against marginalized groups (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Hochschild, 1981, 1995, 2006). Several theories attempt to explain this resilience of faith in the American system. Of particular interest are theories that focus on the endorsement and perpetuation of ideologies that rationalize the status quo. For example, the belief that hard work leads to success (meritocracy; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2003, 2005; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003) can explain why some people enjoy a happy and prosperous life and others struggle and live in squalor. This notion that ideologies and beliefs can be powerful tools to maintain social systems has been referred to, for example, as false consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1846/1978), cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), and legitimizing myths (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

One prominent theory that explains why people are motivated to maintain these beliefs is system justification theory. System justification theory states that people are motivated by epistemic, existential, and relational needs to legitimize current social, cultural, economic, and political systems and perceive them as fair and just (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Thompson, 2000; for similar ideas, see also Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCoy & Major, 2007; Sidanius, Pratto, & Rabinowitz, 1994; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001). What is para-

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doxical and provocative about this research is that although high-status members tend to justify the system more than low-status members (e.g., Jost & Thompson, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007), sometimes low-status members are just as likely, or more likely than, high-status members to endorse system-justifying beliefs (Jost et al., 2003). These findings verify one of the main tenets of system justification theory: that people legitimize the system, even at the expense of personal and/or group interests.

Claiming that people of low status justify the status quo is in stark contrast to the numerous examples of low-status individuals and groups subtly and openly opposing and defying dominant systems that disadvantage them, which constitute forms of resistance that seem to challenge the legitimacy of the system (see Kelley, 1994; Lalonde & Silverman, 1994; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; Scott, 1976, 1985; Tausch et al., 2011; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Throughout the world and throughout history, low-status groups do at times risk personal freedom and safety to oppose leaders that promote a status quo that keeps them at the bottom. Recently, several powerful and entrenched North African and Middle Eastern governments collapsed as a result of disaffected citizens protesting en masse against status quo governments perceived to be despotic and out of touch with their needs (New York Times, 2011). Even in stable democracies such as the United States, those lower in status push back against a system that marginalizes them. For example, union workers, students, teachers, and the unemployed have occupied Wall Street, and other financial districts across the United States, and expressed their anger toward big business, rising unemployment, home foreclosures, and widespread inequality (New York Times, 2012).

There is an evident contradiction between people's beliefs about what society should achieve and what it actually achieves. Those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder support ideologies that can perpetuate the often imbalanced status quo that exists in America, while simultaneously being dissatisfied with how American systems lead to these unequal outcomes. These inconsistencies suggest that there might be more to the story than low-status people endorsing these beliefs as a means to legitimize current inequality. Perhaps there is a rational basis for believing in these normative ideologies that is rooted in different motives than legitimizing the system (see Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011). This article investigates the complexities of people's perceptions of society and system legitimacy and provides an additional explanation for why people endorse these ideological beliefs. In so doing, we hope to bridge the seeming contradiction between low-status people's endorsement of positive American ideologies and their dissatisfaction with the American system. To better understand these inconsistent patterns, we must first understand the definition and source of legitimacy, the function of ideology, and its divergence with support for the status quo.

The Meaning and Functions of Ideology

Definitions of the term *ideology* focus on the shared beliefs about prescriptive and descriptive social arrangements. For example, Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009; see also Denzau & North, 2000; Erikson & Tedin, 2003) defined ideology as

an endeavor to describe or interpret the world as it is—by making assertions or assumptions about human nature, historical events, present realities, and future possibilities—and to envision the world as it

should be, specifying acceptable means of attaining social, economic, and political ideals. (p. 309)

People use ideology (as defined above) to explain and make sense of society's outcomes (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Goren, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b), as well as to describe how society should be structured and operate in the future (Kay et al., 2009). Although many agree that ideology represents core beliefs that can help define one's values regarding a system and establish the legitimacy of a system, social scientists have been criticized for focusing on the "actual social relations rather than ideal ones" (Beetham, 1991, p. 6). Perhaps emphasizing only one function of ideology (i.e., to legitimize inequality) has led to an oversimplified story about why people endorse these beliefs and an inability to "understand the legitimacy of the modern state, or distinguish where it is, from where it is not, legitimate" (Beetham, 1991, p. 6).

Defining Legitimacy: Congruence of Prescriptive and Descriptive Ideological Beliefs

Baba loved the *idea* of America. It was living in America that gave him an ulcer. —Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

There are two types of beliefs that must be considered simultaneously to know whether people legitimize their systems (Beetham, 1991; Habermas, 1979; Moore, 1978). *Prescriptive* beliefs refer to the acceptability of certain ideals being pursued by a system, and *descriptive* beliefs refer to the extent that people perceive current outcomes as reflecting the actual achievement or attainment of these ideals (see also Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011). In other words, prescriptive beliefs represent the abstract values that citizens of a society want to strive for and achieve or how they believe society should work (e.g., hard work *should* lead to success). Descriptive beliefs refer to the extent to which these values are perceived as actually reflecting society and whether society actually works as intended (e.g., hard work *does* lead to success). As the quote above implies, prescriptive and descriptive beliefs about a system are often independent, if not at odds.

We suggest that only to the extent that there is a correspondence between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs is there evidence of legitimacy. Zelditch (2001) asserted that "belief in something is different from using that belief to justify that something else is 'right'" (Zelditch, 2001, p. 48). People may agree with how a system should operate but not necessarily agree that a system is operating as it should or is producing fair outcomes (see Son Hing et al., 2011) When a group goal is not achieved, this may lead to a legitimacy deficit (Beetham, 1991) or to the delegitimization of a system (Kelman, 2001; Linz, 1978). Thus, people might agree with a certain ideology because it describes how they think the system should operate, but once they see that the current system is not working the way it should, they may perceive injustice and resist the system (Moore, 1978; Scott, 1976, 1985) or possibly devalue the ideology (see Levy, Freitas, Mendoza-Denton, & Kugelmass, 2006). For example, people may endorse a criminal justice system that, in the abstract, protects all residents equally while simultaneously be dissatisfied with the reality that in our criminal justice system, people of color face systematic discrimination. The degree to which these beliefs are congruent may influence attitudes and behaviors quite differently—leading a populace into complacency or toward revolution (see Taylor & McKim, 1984).

There is some research that examines the degree to which people's prescriptive and descriptive beliefs match. This evidence indicates that when motivated to justify a system (due to system dependence, system inescapability, or system threat), people are more likely to perceive the current state of affairs as more ideal (i.e., they "injustifify" the system) than those who are less motivated (Kay et al., 2009). However, examining the mean ratings of system ideals showed that, across the board, participants favored equal over unequal systems regardless of their motivation or the way that the system was initially framed. This pattern suggests that although a system justification motive may influence evaluations of system legitimacy, people's perception of ideal systems are driven more by desires for equality than by the (often unequal) status quo. This conclusion was especially the case when the participants were members of the group that was disadvantaged by system inequality (Kay et al., 2009, Studies 3 and 4; see also Jost & Kay, 2005, Studies 1 and 2; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In short, unjustification of unequal systems might be less likely for those low than high in status. Thus, in the current article, we also examine whether the correspondence between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs is moderated by group status (e.g., income and socioeconomic status).

Using Status to Predict the Different Functions of Ideology

Although most Americans accept prescriptive beliefs about equality, meritocracy, and democracy, they may differ widely in their descriptive beliefs. Because prescriptive principles may not, or do not, come to fruition for members of low-status groups, these people in particular might not believe in the descriptive manifestations of these ideologies:

It is clear that a radical critique of *existing* arrangements may arise in virtually any subordinate class that takes the dominant ideology to heart and, at the same time, penetrates in daily life the realities that betray or ignore the implicit promises of that ideology. (Scott, 1985, p. 339)

If people of high and low status differ in their descriptive beliefs, then they may have different motivations for endorsing prescriptive beliefs. To the extent that people perceive system outcomes as reflecting ideological goals, they may use prescriptive ideological beliefs as a means to legitimize the status quo. For example, people who believe that hard work does lead to success might be more likely to use the prescriptive ideology of meritocracy to rationalize why some people are successful and others are not.

Conversely, to the extent that people recognize that outcomes are not conforming to normative ideals, they may be motivated to reinforce prescriptive beliefs, not because they want to legitimize current inequality, but because they hope that by pushing for higher ideological standards, one day those goals can be achieved. In other words, they may strategically use prescriptive beliefs in an effort to change the status quo—which suggests a different utility of ideology for those in different social strata. This distinction can only be revealed when one considers both prescriptive and descriptive beliefs. Thus, low-status people may be less likely to endorse descriptive beliefs of ideologies than high-status people (see Crocker & Major, 1989; Fox & Ferri, 1992); however, low-

status people may still endorse prescriptive beliefs (perhaps even more strongly than high-status people) in an effort to bring the system more in line with these ideals.

Not only can people's perceptions about legitimacy (as defined by the congruence between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs) determine the function of ideology, but they can also determine people's satisfaction with different systems and influence whether people support policies aimed at achieving the abstract ideological goals of a system. If people believe that a goal has already been achieved (i.e., descriptive beliefs), then they will be more satisfied with the system and less likely to support policies that promote changes to the system (Hochschild, 2006).

Overview of Studies

The purpose of Studies 1–3 was to examine people's perceptions of how society actually operates (descriptive beliefs) and whether these views are congruent with or divergent from their views of what should be occurring in society (prescriptive beliefs). We are particularly interested in investigating whether people's status influences these perceptions. We predicted that people of all statuses would endorse the abstract goals of ideologies (i.e., prescriptive beliefs) but would be less likely to endorse beliefs that this is how society actually functions (i.e., descriptive beliefs), resulting in a main effect of beliefs. We also expected that this discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs would be larger for low-status individuals than high-status individuals, resulting in an interaction between status and beliefs.

We expected that status would independently predict satisfaction with the system (arguably a more direct measure of system justification) and support for policies that maintain existing hierarchies. However, we predicted that the discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs would be the strongest predictor of dissatisfaction with the system and support for policies designed to change the system (Studies 1–3). We expected that perceived discrepancy would function similarly regardless of status, and therefore did not predict that these would interact to predict satisfaction and policy preferences.

We also expected that high- and low-status participants would endorse prescriptive ideological beliefs for different reasons. Those of high status would be more likely to endorse the prescriptive beliefs to perpetuate the existing system. Conversely, those of low status would endorse these beliefs in an effort to transform the system (Studies 2 and 3). Similarly, we expected that those who perceive less of a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs would endorse prescriptive beliefs to perpetuate the existing system, but those that perceive more of a discrepancy would endorse prescriptive ideologies in an effort to transform the system.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the extent to which people of high and low status endorse the abstract goals of American ideologies (prescriptive beliefs) and whether or not they believed that these goals were being attained (descriptive beliefs). Participants rated the extent to which they endorse the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of equality, meritocracy, and democracy. We selected ideologies that have been used in prior work on system justification and legiti-

mizing myths: equality (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), meritocracy (sometimes referred to as Protestant work ethic; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Quinn & Crocker, 1999), and democracy (Manwell, 2010). We predicted that everyone would perceive a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs (a main effect of beliefs), but that this pattern would be more pronounced for low-status than high-status individuals (a belief by status interaction). Specifically, low-status members should be just as, or more likely than, high-status members to endorse the prescriptive ideological beliefs; however, low-status members should be less likely than high-status members to endorse the descriptive beliefs.

Participants also rated the extent to which they were satisfied with America and would support federal spending to better the conditions for low-status groups. We expected that satisfaction would be lower and support for hierarchy-attenuating policies would be higher among low-status members and for those who perceived a larger discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs.

Method

Participants. Data were collected from students ($N = 221$ undergraduate and $N = 22$ graduate) and nonstudent adult participants ($N = 144$) in Illinois. Undergraduate student participants were recruited from the introductory psychology subject pool and received one half hour of research credit. Graduate student and nonstudent adult participants were recruited from a number of neighborhoods at various locations (e.g., Laundromats, coffee/tea shops) and were paid \$5 or volunteered. Because the patterns of data were the same for students and noncollege adults, these data were combined and analyzed together. The sample included 387 participants (249 women, 130 men, one other, and seven participants who did not indicate gender). On average, participants were 29 years old ($M = 29.13$, $SD = 13.94$). Participants' annual household income ranged from under \$25,000 to more than \$200,000, with the median household income of \$75,000–\$100,000. The median household income for the United States was \$52,029 and for Illinois was \$56,235 in 2008 (the year of data collection).

Materials and procedure. Participants were told that they would complete a survey that would measure their beliefs about American culture and society, specifically related to America's ideals, goals, and values and whether these ideals, goals, and values are achieved in America. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section measured whether participants endorsed prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of American ideologies. Regarding prescriptive beliefs, participants were told, "Listed below are a series of statements. These statements measure how you think our society *should be*." Regarding descriptive beliefs, participants were told, "Listed below are a series of statements. These statements measure what you think *actually* happens in our society." Because participants answered questions about both of these ideological beliefs, the order of these sets of questions was counterbalanced.¹ The second section included questions that measured satisfaction with America as well as policy items related to federal spending and assistance programs. In the third and final section of the survey, participants completed demographic information that was used to identify participants' status. Status was

examined in terms of people's annual household income. See Appendix A for a more complete list of questions.

Equality. The Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) is a 16-item scale² measuring the degree to which individuals endorse abstract social, political, and economic equality (when reverse scored)—that is, the extent to which people believe that all groups should be equal and hold equal power in society. The scale includes questions such as "All groups should be given an equal chance in life." Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Prescriptive Beliefs Scale for Equality ($\alpha = .88$).

Participants also completed a nine-item scale that measured the degree to which they believe that the goals of equality are actually achieved in the current society (e.g., "Some groups of people in our society have more opportunities than others" [reverse scored]). Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Descriptive Beliefs Scale for Equality ($\alpha = .78$).

Meritocracy. Participants completed a seven-item scale that measures the belief that people who work hard should be successful (e.g., "If one works hard enough, he or she is likely to make a good life for him/herself"; Ho & Lloyd, 1984). Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items were averaged together to form the Prescriptive Beliefs Scale for Meritocracy ($\alpha = .84$).

Participants also completed an eight-item scale that gauged whether they believe that hard work actually leads to success (e.g., "In America, people get rewarded for their effort"). Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Descriptive Beliefs Scale for Meritocracy ($\alpha = .63$).

Democracy. To measure the abstract ideals and values of democracy, participants answered a 10-item scale measuring beliefs about liberty, freedom of speech and religion, equal voting rights, separation of church and state, and equal criminal justice procedures. An example item is "Our country should be democratic." Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Prescriptive Beliefs Scale for Democracy ($\alpha = .78$).

Participants also answered a nine-item scale that measured whether the abstract ideals of democracy are actually held up in the current society (e.g., "Our country runs on the principles of de-

¹ A factor analysis was conducted on each ideological belief scale. Two-factor solutions were found for all ideology scales. Prescriptive items never loaded on the same factor as descriptive items. These analyses demonstrate that the items fall on independent dimensions and participants were considering these items under different mind-sets: how society should be versus how society actually is.

² Jost and Thompson (2000) have suggested that social dominance orientation is composed of two related factors (general opposition to equality and group-based dominance) and that opposition to equality is tied more to system justification theory than group-based dominance. Both the Opposition to Equality subscale and the full Social Dominance Orientation Scale were tested.

mocracy”). Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Descriptive Beliefs Scale for Democracy ($\alpha = .74$).

Combined ideologies. To measure prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs more generally, we created two scales of combined ideologies. The Prescriptive Combined Ideologies Scale is an average of the prescriptive beliefs of equality, meritocracy, and democracy ($\alpha = .60$). The Descriptive Combined Ideologies Scale is an average of the descriptive beliefs of equality, meritocracy, and democracy ($\alpha = .76$).

Satisfaction with America. Participants answered four items that measured their satisfaction with America: “I am satisfied with how America operates today,” “The way America works today is fair,” “The structure of American society needs to change” (reverse scored), and “I trust the government.” Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These four items were averaged to form a scale ($\alpha = .78$).

Support for hierarchy-attenuating policy. Eleven items were adapted from the General Social Survey (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2011) related to federal spending and assistance programs for low-status groups (e.g., “The government should spend more money on pre-school or other early education programs in poor neighborhoods”). Participants rated these questions on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items were combined to form a reliable scale ($\alpha = .83$).

Status. Status was determined by annual household income. Participants indicated their annual household income on a 10-point scale, ranging from *under \$25,000* to *more than \$200,000* (at increments of \$25,000). Annual household income was mean centered.

Pilot Study Results

We collected separate pilot data post hoc to verify that participants were paying attention to the instructions and responding to the prescriptive and descriptive ideological belief items in an appropriate mind-set. We collected data from 25 (17 women, eight men) undergraduate student participants. On average, participants were 23 years old ($M = 23.40$, $SD = 6.47$). They answered the same prescriptive and descriptive belief scales as the participants in Study 1. Unlike in Study 1 though, they answered the following question after each prescriptive and descriptive scale: “When answering questions in this section, to what extent did you answer in terms of your beliefs about the way the U.S. *should be*, your beliefs about the way the U.S. *actually is*, or a combination of these perspectives?” Participants rated this question on a scale from 1 (*completely in terms of my beliefs about the way the U.S. should be*) to 7 (*completely in terms of my beliefs about the way the U.S. actually is*). To determine whether participants were reading the instructions carefully and evaluating the items for the prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs in appropriate mind-sets, we conducted paired-samples *t* tests.

As intended, participants discriminated between prescriptive and descriptive mind-sets when answering these questions (see Table 1, Study 1 pilot). Across all three ideologies, when answering questions about descriptive beliefs, participants indicated that they answered in terms of their beliefs about the way the United

Table 1
Manipulation Check (Studies 1–3)

Belief	Prescriptive			Descriptive		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Study 1 (pilot)						
Equality	2.96	0.36	−2.90**	5.80	0.30	6.00***
Meritocracy	3.76	0.38	−0.63	5.68	0.24	6.91***
Democracy	2.60	0.28	−4.95***	5.28	0.35	3.62***
Study 2						
Meritocracy	2.42	0.10	−15.33***	5.21	0.11	10.74***
Democracy	2.09	0.10	−18.82***	5.70	0.11	15.94***
General system justification	1.98	0.10	−21.08***	5.68	0.11	15.93***
Study 3						
Meritocracy	2.33	0.13	−12.98***	5.52	0.13	11.99***
Democracy	2.20	0.12	−15.28***	5.64	0.14	12.17***

Note. The *t* statistics represent one-sample tests comparing each mean with the midpoint of the scale. The results of paired-sample *t* tests are reported in text.

** $p < .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

States actually is more than when they answered questions about prescriptive beliefs: equality, $t(24) = 6.21$, $p < .001$; meritocracy, $t(24) = 3.95$, $p = .001$; democracy, $t(24) = 5.33$, $p < .001$. Moreover, each of these means (except for the mean for prescriptive beliefs of meritocracy³) was found to be significantly different from the midpoint of the scale (all $ps < .01$). According to the manipulation check questions, participants were paying attention to the instructions and were in appropriate mind-sets for the prescriptive and descriptive ideology questions.

Results and Discussion

Ideological beliefs. To test the hypothesis that people hold prescriptive but not descriptive ideological beliefs (i.e., they perceive a discrepancy in their beliefs) and to test whether this discrepancy is moderated by status, we conducted regression analyses for each ideology. The predictor variable was status (income), and the criterion variable was a difference score between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs so that higher numbers indicate more endorsement of prescriptive than descriptive beliefs. When a difference score is regressed on a predictor variable, a significant *y*-intercept indicates a main effect of the within-subject variable (beliefs), and a significant slope indicates an interaction between the within-subject (beliefs) and between-subject (status) variables (see Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001). This analysis is akin to a mixed-model analysis of variance, but a mixed-model analysis of variance could not be employed because income was measured on a continuous scale. To further investigate any interaction patterns, we calculated the simple slopes at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean (see Aiken & West, 1991). See Table 2, Study 1, for the estimated means and simple slopes and Table 3, Study 1, for regression statistics.

³ Although not significant, the mean was below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting a mind-set for how society should be.

Table 2

Estimated Means and Simple Slopes of Prescriptive–Descriptive Belief Discrepancies at 1 Standard Deviation Above and Below the Mean of Status (Studies 1–3)

Status	Equality					Meritocracy					Democracy					Combined ideologies				
	Pres.	Des.	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Pres.	Des.	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Pres.	Des.	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	Pres.	Des.	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Study 1																				
Low	4.12	1.77	2.35***	0.08	28.22	4.07	2.40	1.68***	0.07	25.42	4.21	2.42	1.79***	0.08	23.03	4.13	2.20	1.93***	0.06	30.04
High	3.78	1.86	1.92***	0.08	23.16	4.02	2.62	1.40***	0.07	21.18	4.13	2.66	1.47***	0.08	19.05	3.98	2.37	1.60***	0.06	25.04
Study 2																				
	Meritocracy					Democracy					General system justification					Combined ideologies				
Low	5.17	4.01	1.16***	0.09	13.55	5.78	3.33	2.46***	0.14	18.15	5.71	3.33	2.37***	0.12	20.38	5.55	3.56	2.00***	0.10	20.85
High	5.25	4.30	0.95***	0.09	11.13	5.77	3.46	2.31***	0.14	17.06	5.82	3.66	2.15***	0.12	18.46	5.61	3.81	1.81***	0.10	18.87
Study 3																				
	Meritocracy					Democracy					Combined ideologies									
Low	6.12	3.90	2.22***	0.16	13.52	5.97	3.45	2.52***	0.17	15.20						6.04	3.67	2.37***	0.15	15.84
High	6.06	4.17	1.89***	0.16	11.53	5.83	3.88	1.95***	0.17	11.75						5.95	4.03	1.92***	0.15	12.84

Note. Estimated means for low- and high-status people are presented under prescriptive (pres.) and descriptive (des.) beliefs. The *b* values represent the prescriptive–descriptive belief difference score at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of status. The *t* values represent the significance of the different scores. Ideological beliefs in Study 1 were measured on a 5-point scale, whereas ideological beliefs in Studies 2 and 3 were measured on a 7-point scale.

*** $p < .001$.

Equality. First, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' equality beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. As predicted, there was a significant main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 3.95$, $SE = 0.04$) more strongly than descriptive beliefs of equality ($M = 1.82$, $SE = 0.03$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in their equality beliefs. We also found an interaction between equality beliefs and income. As predicted, participants of low income perceived a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive equality beliefs than participants of high income. Participants of lower income endorsed the prescriptive equality beliefs more than participants of higher income; however, contrary to predictions, participants of higher and lower income were just as likely to disagree with the descriptive equality beliefs: Both groups disagreed with the idea that the United States is egalitarian (the means are well below the midpoint of the scale).⁴ What is clear from this finding is that neither high- nor low-income participants were legitimizing the inequality of the current system.

Meritocracy. Next, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' meritocracy beliefs and if this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 4.05$, $SE = 0.04$) more strongly than descriptive beliefs of meritocracy ($M = 2.50$, $SE = 0.03$), replicating the discrepancy in beliefs. We also found an interaction between beliefs and income. As predicted, low-income participants perceived a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy beliefs than high-income participants. Like with equality, these results reveal a disconnection between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of ideology. The interaction was consistent with predictions. Participants of higher and lower income were just as likely to endorse the prescriptive meritocracy beliefs. However, participants of higher income were more likely to agree with the descriptive

meritocracy beliefs compared to participants of lower income. Participants supported the ideals of meritocracy much more than they believed that these goals are achieved in society, but participants high in income were more likely to believe that the current system is meritocratic. Lower income individuals, in contrast, were more likely than higher income individuals to see that the relationship between hard work and success is not always achieved, even though the ideals of meritocracy were still valued by this group.

Democracy. We determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' democracy beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 4.16$, $SE = 0.03$) more strongly than descriptive beliefs of democracy ($M = 2.54$, $SE = 0.03$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in their democracy beliefs. We also found an interaction between beliefs and income in line with predictions. Low-income participants perceived a greater discrepancy than high-income participants. Specifically, participants of higher and lower income were just as likely to agree with the prescriptive beliefs of democracy; however, participants of higher income were more likely to agree with the descriptive democracy beliefs compared to participants of lower income. This result is consistent with the meritocracy finding discussed above.

Combined ideologies. Finally, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' combined ideologies and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed the combined prescriptive beliefs ($M = 4.05$, $SE = 0.03$) significantly

⁴ These analyses were tested with the full Social Dominance Orientation Scale. When these analyses were rerun with the Opposition to Equality subscale only, we replicated the main effect and interaction patterns.

Table 3
Prescriptive–Descriptive Belief Discrepancy Main Effects, Interactions, and Simple Slopes (Studies 1–3)

Belief	Beliefs			Beliefs × Status			Prescriptive simple slopes			Descriptive simple slopes		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Study 1												
Equality	2.14	0.06	36.39***	−0.09	0.02	−3.69**	−0.07	0.01	−4.89***	0.02	0.01	1.40
Meritocracy	1.54	0.05	33.04***	−0.06	0.02	−2.98*	−0.01	0.02	−0.70	0.04	0.01	3.82***
Democracy	1.63	0.06	29.78***	−0.06	0.02	−2.89**	−0.02	0.01	−1.22	0.05	0.01	3.65***
Combined ideologies	1.77	0.05	38.99***	−0.07	0.02	−3.59***	−0.03	0.01	−2.76**	0.04	0.01	3.45***
Study 2												
Meritocracy	1.05	0.06	17.47***	−0.05	0.03	−1.73 [†]	0.01	0.02	0.64	0.07	0.02	2.80**
Democracy	2.38	0.10	24.91***	−0.03	0.04	−0.79	−0.00	0.03	−0.12	0.03	0.03	1.02
General system justification	2.26	0.08	27.45***	−0.05	0.04	−1.35	0.03	0.02	1.06	0.08	0.03	2.33*
Combined ideologies	1.90	0.07	28.10***	−0.04	0.03	−1.42	0.01	0.02	0.68	0.06	0.02	2.43*
Study 3												
Meritocracy	2.05	0.12	17.74***	−0.08	0.06	−1.40	−0.01	0.03	−0.34	0.07	0.05	1.34
Democracy	2.24	0.12	19.08***	−0.14	0.06	−2.43*	−0.03	0.03	−1.01	0.11	0.04	2.79**
Combined ideologies	2.15	0.11	20.30***	0.11	0.05	−2.12*	−0.02	0.03	−0.78	0.09	0.04	2.26*

Note. Beliefs represent the prescriptive–descriptive belief difference scores (main effect). The Beliefs × Status interaction represents the interaction effect between the prescriptive–descriptive belief difference score and status. The prescriptive simple slopes represent the extent to which status predicts the endorsement of prescriptive beliefs. The descriptive simple slopes represent the extent to which status predicts the endorsement of descriptive beliefs.

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

more than combined descriptive beliefs ($M = 2.29$, $SE = 0.03$). We also found a significant interaction between beliefs and income. Participants of low income perceived a greater discrepancy between the combined prescriptive and descriptive beliefs than participants of high income. More specifically, participants of higher income were significantly less likely to agree with the combined prescriptive beliefs than participants of lower income; however, participants of higher income were significantly more likely to agree with the combined descriptive beliefs than participants of lower income (although the means are below the midpoint of the scale).

Satisfaction with America. Next, we examined how status and the perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs relates to satisfaction with the system—an established measure of legitimacy (see Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). Consistent with predictions, a regression analysis revealed that participants of higher income were more satisfied with America than participants of lower income (see Table 4, Study 1). We also found that a greater perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs (using a difference score) predicted less satisfaction with America (see Table 4, Study 1). This finding suggests that system legitimization is contingent upon the congruency between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs. Perceiving that a system does not work as it should leads to disappointment and dissatisfaction among those within a system. This pattern sheds some light on how it is that participants can hold positive prescriptive beliefs of a system and simultaneously express dissatisfaction with the way that they perceive it as actually functioning. These effects were not moderated by status.

Support for hierarchy-attenuating policy. Finally, we explored whether support for policies designed to alter the system (especially as it pertains to low-status groups) might be differen-

tially determined by status and ideological beliefs. As predicted, we found that participants of higher income were less supportive of hierarchy-attenuating policy than participants of lower income (see Table 4, Study 1). We also found that perceiving a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs (using a difference score) predicted more support for hierarchy-attenuating policies (see Table 4, Study 1). This finding indicates that participants are more supportive of system-changing policies, which would help equalize conditions, when they perceive a greater discrepancy between society's ideals and its actual outcomes. Status did not moderate these effects except in one case noted in Table 4.

Summary

When looking at how participants endorse American ideologies in terms of the ideals that they promise (prescriptive beliefs), we found that individuals of lower status are just as likely as, if not more likely than, individuals of higher status to value these beliefs. However, when looking at whether participants believe that abstract American ideologies are being achieved in reality (descriptive beliefs), we found that people's faith in the system begins to falter. Across both high- and low-status groups, but particularly among the low status, people believed that the ideals or aims of these ideologies were not being achieved. These findings demonstrate that it is not enough simply to ask people what ideologies or values they cherish as evidence that one is legitimizing a system. These data suggest that people may endorse the abstract goals of a system, but that people (especially those of lower status) delegitimize the system they perceive as failing to deliver on its promises.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Analyses With Status and Prescriptive–Descriptive Belief Discrepancies Predicting Satisfaction and Support for Hierarchy-Attenuating and Hierarchy-Enhancing Policies (Studies 1–3)

Variable	Satisfaction		Hierarchy attenuating		Hierarchy enhancing	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Study 1						
Income	.18***	.10*	-.23***	-.13**		
Equality discrepancy		-.38***		.55***		
Income	.19***	.15**	-.23***	-.16***		
Meritocracy discrepancy		-.26***		.41***		
Income	.18***	.09*	-.23***	-.16***		
Democracy discrepancy		-.55***		.46***		
Income	.18***	.09†	-.23***	-.12**		
Combined ideologies discrepancy		-.48***		.57***		
Study 2						
Socioeconomic status	.15*	.10	-.14*	-.11	.16*	.11†
Meritocracy discrepancy		-.40***		.24***		-.36***
Socioeconomic status	.15*	.12*	-.14*	-.11†	.16*	.13*
Democracy discrepancy		-.49***		.44***		-.45***
Socioeconomic status	.15*	.10†	-.14*	-.10	.16*	.12†
General system justification discrepancy		-.54***		.43***		-.36***
Socioeconomic status	.15*	.09	-.14*	-.09	.16*	.11†
Combined ideologies discrepancy		-.57***		.45***		-.47***
Study 3						
Socioeconomic status	.30**	.26***	-.17*	-.14†	.22**	.16*
Meritocracy discrepancy		-.41***		.28***		-.50***
Socioeconomic status	.30***	.21***	-.17*	-.12	.22**	.12†
Democracy discrepancy		-.54***		.24***		-.54***
Socioeconomic status	.30***	.22***	-.17*	-.12	.22***	.12*
Combined ideologies discrepancy		-.53***		.29***		-.57***

Note. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients (beta). Status, belief discrepancies, and the interaction between status and belief discrepancies were added as separate steps in hierarchical regression. All interactions were nonsignificant (except for the interaction between meritocracy discrepancy and income predicting hierarchy-attenuating policy in Study 1) and therefore excluded from the table.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

This is especially evident when looking at people's satisfaction with America and whether they support federal spending to alter the system via policies that attenuate extant hierarchies. Results showed that the perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs predicted people's dissatisfaction with the system and support for hierarchy-attenuating policies, pointing to the importance of examining these two beliefs in tandem.

What was not examined in Study 1 was *why* people endorse prescriptive beliefs of equality, meritocracy, and democracy even when they recognize that the American system is not working as it should (i.e., the descriptive beliefs). The earlier interaction patterns between status and meritocracy and status and democracy suggest that high- and low-status members may endorse prescriptive ideologies for different reasons. Because high-status members were more likely than low-status members to believe that the aims of meritocracy and democracy are actually achieved in society, endorsement of these prescriptive beliefs may signal genuine system justification. The discrepancy between low-status members' endorsement of the prescriptive beliefs and their dissatisfaction with the system suggests a different function of prescriptive beliefs—to hold the system to a higher standard. Study 2 will test this notion

more directly by assessing people's motivations for endorsing prescriptive beliefs of a system.

Another aim of Study 2 was to test our predictions with cleaner measures of prescriptive versus descriptive beliefs. In Study 1, participants were instructed to evaluate the ideology statements in terms of ideal arrangements versus actual outcomes of the system. However, the wording of the prescriptive belief items was not matched to the descriptive belief items, introducing another potential source of variance in the manipulation. In Study 2, we sought to rectify this problem by using prescriptive and descriptive beliefs for all three ideologies that are perfectly matched in wording, such that the wording of each of the prescriptive items has a one-to-one correspondence with each of the descriptive items (except for the manipulation of whether or not the phrase represented an ideal or an actual arrangement). We also included the same manipulation check as the pilot study to ensure that participants were aware of the two kinds of measured beliefs (i.e., prescriptive and descriptive) and answered these questions in an appropriate mind-set. Finally, Study 2 tests people's support for hierarchy-enhancing, as well as hierarchy-attenuating (Study 1), policies.

Study 2

In Study 2, participants rated the extent to which they endorsed the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of meritocracy, democracy, and general system justification, beliefs that are often used in work on legitimizing ideologies. Our main effect and interaction effect predictions were the same as in Study 1.

More importantly, we wanted to measure the motivation for endorsing the prescriptive beliefs of these ideologies despite the fact that people (especially of low status) perceive that these ideals are not being achieved. Because Study 1 demonstrated that high-status members were more likely than low-status members to endorse the descriptive beliefs of meritocracy and democracy, they might be motivated to endorse the prescriptive beliefs as a means to legitimize the actual system. However, we predicted that low-status members would be motivated to endorse the prescriptive beliefs to motivate the greater attainment of these ideals in society.

Method

Participants. We recruited 225 undergraduate psychology students at a university in Illinois. Participants received one half hour of research credit in their Introduction to Psychology course. We excluded eight participants because they spent too little time (less than 5 min) taking the online survey, suggesting that they were not paying close enough attention to the survey.⁵ Therefore, the total number of participants used in the analyses was 217 (157 women, 60 men). On average, participants were 20 years old ($M = 19.97$, $SD = 2.52$). Participants' socioeconomic status (SES) ranged from below poverty line to higher upper class. On average, participants were lower middle class, which is similar to the average SES in the United States and Illinois in 2011 based on census data (data were collected in early 2012).

Materials and procedure. Participants were told that they would complete an online survey that would measure their beliefs about American culture and society, specifically related to America's ideals, goals, and values and whether these ideals, goals, and values are achieved in America. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section measured whether participants endorsed the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of American ideologies. Regarding prescriptive beliefs, participants were told, "Listed below are a series of statements. Please rate these statements based on how you think our society *SHOULD BE*." Then participants answered a number of follow-up questions that measured their motivation for endorsing these prescriptive ideologies. Regarding descriptive beliefs, participants were told, "Listed below are a series of statements. Please rate these statements based on how you think our society *ACTUALLY IS*." Because participants answered questions about both of these ideological beliefs, the order of these two sections was counterbalanced (see below for the questions that were included in the prescriptive and descriptive sections).⁶ The second section included questions that measured satisfaction with America, as well as hierarchy-enhancing and -attenuating federal policy items. In the third and final section of the survey, participants completed demographic information that was used to identify participants' status. Status was based on participants' perceived SES. See Appendix B for a more complete list of questions.

Manipulation check. To verify that participants were paying attention to the instructions and responding to the prescriptive and

descriptive ideological belief items in an appropriate mind-set, we asked them to answer the same manipulation check question after each prescriptive and descriptive scale as listed in the pilot study.

Meritocracy. To measure the prescriptive beliefs of meritocracy, we asked participants to complete a revised version of the 15-item Preference for the Merit Principle Scale (Davey, Bobocel, Son Hing, & Zanna, 1999; see also Son Hing et al., 2011). The scale measures the extent to which one believes that everyone ought to have equal opportunities in life and that ability and merit ought to be rewarded in life ($\alpha = .76$). Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the scale (e.g., "Success *ought* to be possible for anyone who works hard enough"). Participants rated these questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

We also asked participants to answer the 15-item Perceptions That Meritocracy Exists Scale (adapted from the Preference for the Merit Principle Scale created by Davey et al., 1999; see also Son Hing et al., 2011) to gauge their descriptive beliefs of meritocracy. The scale measures the extent to which people perceive society as fulfilling the merit principle ($\alpha = .80$). That is, the extent to which one believes that people do have equal opportunities in life and that ability and merit are actually rewarded in life. Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the scale (e.g., "Success *is* possible for anyone who works hard enough."). Participants rated these questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Democracy. To measure the prescriptive beliefs of democracy, we created an eight-item scale measuring beliefs about liberty, freedom of speech and religion, equal voting rights, separation of church and state, and equal criminal justice procedures. Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the scale ($\alpha = .77$). The scale includes items such as "Our country *should* be democratic." Participants also answered an eight-item scale that measured whether the abstract ideals of democracy are actually held up in the current society. Affirmative and reverse-worded items were averaged together to form the Descriptive Beliefs for Democracy Scale ($\alpha = .80$). An example item is "Our country *is* democratic." Participants rated these questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

General system justification. To measure the prescriptive beliefs of general system justification, we asked participants to answer a modified version of the eight-item General (or Diffuse) System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003, $\alpha = .76$). This scale measures the extent to which the American system in general is set up as it should be. The scale includes items such as "Most policies *should* serve the greater good." Participants also answered an adapted eight-item scale that measured the descriptive beliefs of general system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003, $\alpha = .86$). An example item is "Most policies *do* serve the greater good." Par-

⁵ It is not possible to complete the survey in less than 5 min.

⁶ A factor analysis was conducted on each ideological belief scale. Sometimes affirmative and reverse-worded items formed separate factors. Regardless of the number of factors (two or three), prescriptive items never loaded on the same factor as descriptive items. These analyses demonstrate that the items fall on independent dimensions and participants were considering these items under different mind-sets: how society should be versus how society actually is.

ticipants rated these questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Combined ideologies. To measure prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs more generally, we created two scales of combined ideologies. The Prescriptive Combined Ideologies Scale is an average of the prescriptive beliefs of meritocracy, democracy, and general system justification ($\alpha = .80$). The Descriptive Combined Ideologies Scale is an average of the descriptive beliefs of meritocracy, democracy, and general system justification ($\alpha = .75$).

Motivation to endorse prescriptive beliefs. In this section, we measured participants' explicit reasons for upholding prescriptive beliefs. Participants answered six questions about why they support each belief. These items were averaged into one of two scales that represent two motivations: promote an ideal system and legitimize the actual system. The following three items were averaged to create the Promote an Ideal System Scale: "I support this belief because I hope one day it will become a reality for all Americans," "I support this belief in order to push the system to become fairer," and "I support this belief because it describes the way the system *should* operate" (meritocracy, $\alpha = .81$; democracy, $\alpha = .93$; and general system justification, $\alpha = .78$). The remaining three items were averaged to create the Legitimize an Actual System Scale: "I support this belief because it explains why the system is working," "I support this belief in order to perpetuate the existing system in America," and "I support this belief because it describes the way the system *actually does* operate" (meritocracy, $\alpha = .75$; democracy, $\alpha = .82$; and general system justification, $\alpha = .78$). These items were measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Satisfaction with America. Participants answered four items that measured their satisfaction with America: "I am satisfied with how America operates today," "The way America works today is fair," "The structure of American society needs to change" (reverse scored), and "I trust the government" ($\alpha = .82$). Participants rated these questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Support for federal policy. Four items measured participants' support for hierarchy-enhancing policies (i.e., policies intended to maintain and perpetuate inequality) and four items measured their support for hierarchy-attenuating policies (i.e., policies intended to redistribute resources and reduce inequality). The Hierarchy-Enhancing Policy Scale included the following items: "The government should increase military spending," "The government should give tax breaks to large corporations," "The government should dismantle affirmative action," and "The government should cut spending on social programs for the poor" ($\alpha = .59$). The Hierarchy-Attenuating Policy Scale included the following items: "The government should increase support for people who are unemployed," "The government should spend more money on pre-school or other early education programs in poor neighborhoods," "The government should make wealthy people pay higher taxes," and "The government should create a free universal health care system" ($\alpha = .76$). Participants rated questions on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Status. Status was determined by perceived SES (see Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Jost et al., 2003). Participants indicated their SES on a 10-point scale, ranging from *below poverty line* to *higher upper class*. SES was mean centered.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. To determine whether participants were reading the instructions carefully and evaluating the items for the prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs in an appropriate mind-set, we conducted paired-samples *t* tests (see Table 1, Study 2). Across all three ideologies, when answering questions about descriptive beliefs, participants indicated that they answered in terms of their beliefs about the way the United States actually is more than when they answered questions about prescriptive beliefs: meritocracy, $t(214) = 15.71, p < .001$; democracy, $t(215) = 20.83, p < .001$; general system justification, $t(215) = 22.18, p < .001$. Moreover, each of these means was found to be significantly different from the midpoint of the scale (all $ps < .001$). According to the manipulation check questions, participants were paying attention to the instructions and were in appropriate mind-sets for the prescriptive and descriptive ideology questions.

Ideological beliefs. To test whether participants perceived a discrepancy in their prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs and whether this discrepancy is moderated by status, we conducted regression analyses for each ideology. The predictor variable was status (SES), and the criterion variable was a difference score between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs so that higher numbers indicate more endorsement of prescriptive than descriptive beliefs. An explanation of these analyses can be found in Study 1 (see also Judd et al., 2001). To illustrate interaction patterns, we calculated the simple slopes at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean (see Aiken & West, 1991). See Table 2, Study 2, for the estimated means and simple slopes and Table 3, Study 2, for regression statistics.

Meritocracy. We determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' meritocracy beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 5.21, SE = 0.04$) significantly more than descriptive beliefs of meritocracy ($M = 4.16, SE = 0.05$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in their meritocracy beliefs. We also found a marginally significant interaction between beliefs and SES. As predicted, participants of low SES perceived a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy beliefs than participants of high SES. More specifically, participants of higher SES were just as likely to agree with the prescriptive beliefs as participants of lower SES; however, participants of higher SES were significantly more likely to agree with the descriptive beliefs than participants of lower SES.

Democracy. Next, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' democracy beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 5.78, SE = 0.06$) significantly more than descriptive beliefs of democracy ($M = 3.40, SE = 0.07$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in their democracy beliefs. However, there was no significant interaction between beliefs and SES (although the trend was in the predicted direction). Everyone, regardless of status, perceived the American system as falling short of its democratic ideals.

General system justification. We determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' general system justification beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by

status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs ($M = 5.77, SE = 0.05$) significantly more than descriptive beliefs of general system justification ($M = 3.51, SE = 0.07$). We did not find a significant interaction between beliefs and SES. However, the patterns of the simple effects were as predicted. Participants of low SES perceived a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs than participants of high SES. More specifically, participants of higher SES were just as likely to agree with the prescriptive beliefs as participants of lower SES; however, participants of higher SES were significantly more likely to agree with the descriptive beliefs than participants of lower SES (although the means are below the midpoint of the scale).

Combined ideologies. Finally, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' combined ideological beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed the combined prescriptive beliefs ($M = 5.58, SE = 0.04$) significantly more than combined descriptive beliefs ($M = 3.69, SE = 0.05$). We did not find a significant interaction between beliefs and SES. However, the patterns of the simple effects were as predicted. Participants of low SES perceived a greater discrepancy between combined prescriptive and descriptive beliefs than participants of high SES. More specifically, participants of higher SES were just as likely to agree with the combined prescriptive beliefs as participants of lower SES; however, participants of higher SES were significantly more likely to agree with the combined descriptive beliefs than participants of lower SES (although the means are below the midpoint of the scale).

Motivation to endorse prescriptive beliefs. Across all three ideological belief scales and the combined ideological belief scales, participants explicitly agreed that they endorsed prescriptive beliefs more to promote an ideal system than to legitimize the actual system (see Table 5, Study 2). These results suggest that participants endorse prescriptive beliefs not to legitimize the current status quo but to uphold the ideal standards of a system that they want achieved in society. We also found, across three ideological belief scales and the combined ideological belief scales, that perceiving a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs positively predicted the motivation to promote an ideal

system, suggesting that participants are motivated to push for higher ideal standards to rectify the discrepancy between how society should work and actually does work (see Table 6, Study 2). Across the meritocracy, democracy, and combined ideological scales (but not for the General System Justification Scale), we found that perceiving a discrepancy in these prescriptive and descriptive beliefs negatively predicted the motivation to legitimize the system, suggesting that participants are not motivated to accept how the system currently works when they perceive that it diverges from how it should work (see Table 6, Study 2). By and large, status was not related to motivation; however, higher SES at times predicted marginally greater endorsement of motives to promote the ideals of meritocracy and legitimize beliefs about general system justification (see Table 6, Study 2).

Satisfaction with America. We determined whether status and perceived discrepancies between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of ideology would predict satisfaction with America. In line with predictions, we found that participants of higher SES were more satisfied with America than participants of lower SES. We also found that greater perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs (using a difference score) predicted less satisfaction with America (see Table 4, Study 2). These findings suggest that satisfaction is dependent upon status, and more important, by the perceived congruency between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs, replicating Study 1 results. These effects were not moderated by status.

Support for federal policy. Finally, we examined whether status and perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs would predict support for federal policy. As predicted, we found that participants of higher SES were less supportive of hierarchy-attenuating, and more supportive of hierarchy-enhancing, policy than participants of lower SES (see Table 4, Study 2). More importantly, we found that perceiving a discrepancy positively predicted support for hierarchy-attenuating policies and negatively predicted support for hierarchy-enhancing policies (see Table 4, Study 2). The perceived discrepancy was a stronger predictor of satisfaction and policy. This evidence provides further confirmation that participants are dissatisfied with the current system, and it also suggests that they support making the system a more equal and democratic place that is more in line with their system ideals. Status did not moderate these effects.

Table 5

Motivation to Endorse Prescriptive Beliefs (Studies 2 and 3)

Belief	Promote an ideal system		Legitimize an actual system		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Study 2					
Meritocracy	5.79	0.06	3.67	0.08	21.08***
Democracy	5.25	0.09	3.98	0.09	11.61***
General system justification	6.02	0.06	5.34	0.06	11.12***
Combined ideologies	5.69	0.06	4.33	0.06	19.52***
Study 3					
Meritocracy	5.88	0.08	3.54	0.11	16.10***
Democracy	5.49	0.11	4.01	0.11	10.08***
Combined ideologies	5.68	0.08	3.77	0.10	14.92***

*** $p < .001$.**Summary**

Study 2 both replicated and extended most of the findings from Study 1. First, we were able to replicate most of the Study 1 patterns using clearer measures of prescriptive and descriptive beliefs. Even when the measures were worded identically except for the manipulation, we found a robust main effect of belief. Across three ideologies and the combined ideologies scale, people endorsed prescriptive ideals but simultaneously believed that these ideals are not being achieved in society. Furthermore, high-status people were usually more likely to see the actual system as being closer to its stated ideals than low-status people, replicating the predicted interaction from Study 1.

Study 2 offers additional insights as well. We were able to confirm that people were able to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs. This is important because collective action

Table 6
Hierarchical Regression Analyses With Status and Prescriptive–Descriptive Belief Discrepancies Predicting Motivations to Endorse Prescriptive Beliefs (Studies 2 and 3)

Variable	Promote an ideal system		Legitimize an actual system	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Study 2				
Socioeconomic status	.08	.11 [†]	.06	.01
Meritocracy discrepancy		.30***		-.43***
Socioeconomic status	.01	.03	.01	-.01
Democracy discrepancy		.36***		-.30***
Socioeconomic status	-.01	.04	.10	.12 [†]
General system justification discrepancy		.58***		.25***
Socioeconomic status	.03	.08	.07	.04
Combined ideologies discrepancy		.53***		-.32***
Study 3				
Socioeconomic status	.01	.05	.15*	.08
Meritocracy discrepancy		.40***		-.62***
Socioeconomic status	.06	.12 [†]	.17*	.09
Democracy discrepancy		.36***		-.44***
Socioeconomic status	.04	.11	.18*	.08
Combined ideologies discrepancy		.42***		-.62***

Note. Numbers represent standardized regression coefficients (beta).

[†] $p < .10$. *** $p \leq .001$.

hinges on the ability to consciously perceive discrepancies between ideals and a reality that fails to achieve these ideals. The participants in this study were able to make clear distinctions between these evaluations and were aware that they were making such distinctions.

We were also able to explore explicit motives for endorsing prescriptive beliefs. Previous research has claimed that endorsing ideologies that justify the status quo is evidence that low-status groups legitimize the system as much as, if not more than, high-status groups (Jost et al., 2003). However, the present findings suggest an alternative explanation. People endorse prescriptive ideologies in an effort to hold a failing system accountable to its promises and goals. This represents a very different motive than system justification and may suggest an opposing motive. In fact, the more people perceived a discrepancy between system ideals and actual outcomes, the more they were dissatisfied with the system and the more they supported policies designed to transform the system. This later pattern lends extra support for the idea that endorsing ideals serves a transformative function as opposed to a legitimizing one.

The findings from Study 2 offered new perspectives on the function of ideology and system justification, but it is possible that these effects are due to the fact that the participants were college students who were fairly liberal (55.3% identified as liberal, 31.3% as moderate, and 13.3% as conservative). It is possible that these students endorsed system-transforming beliefs because they fit well with their existing motives to help disenfranchised groups in society. It is important to replicate these findings with a community sample to ensure that these motives and ideological distinctions are more generalizable.

Study 3

Study 3 replicated Study 2 with a community sample of adults. We used a sample from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. To prevent fatigue (participants are only paid a nominal sum of money), we shortened the survey to only include the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs about meritocracy (a shorter and slightly different scale than that in Study 2) and democracy (we excluded the general system justification scales). The rest of the items were identical to Study 2.

Method

Participants. We recruited 228 U.S. participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. We excluded 50 participants because they spent too little time (less than 5 min) taking the survey, suggesting that they were not paying close enough attention to the survey (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2012).⁷ Therefore, the total number of participants used in the analyses was 178 (86 women, 87 men, and five who did not indicate their gender). Participants were older than those in Study 2. On average, participants were 36 years old ($M = 36.23$, $SD = 13.33$). Participants were also more ideologically diverse in this sample (42% liberal, 31% moderate, and 27% conservative) than in Study 2. Participants' SES ranged from below poverty line to lower upper class. On average, participants were upper working class, which is similar to the average SES in the United States in 2011 based on census data (data were collected in early 2012). Participants were paid a small sum of money for completing the survey.

⁷ It is not possible to complete the survey in less than 5 min.

Procedure and materials. The procedure and materials were the same as in Study 2 except when noted. Participants answered the same manipulation check questions. They completed shorter (six-item) prescriptive ($\alpha = .86$) and descriptive ($\alpha = .88$) meritocracy scales. The prescriptive ($\alpha = .75$) and descriptive ($\alpha = .78$) democracy scales were reliable, as were the combined prescriptive ($r = .59, p < .001$) and descriptive ($r = .53, p < .001$) ideological scales.⁸ They answered the same motivation items that were averaged into two scales: Promote an Ideal System (meritocracy, $\alpha = .87$; democracy, $\alpha = .89$) and Legitimize the Actual System (meritocracy, $\alpha = .84$; democracy, $\alpha = .84$). The Satisfaction With America Scale ($\alpha = .85$), as well as the Hierarchy-Enhancing ($\alpha = .62$) and Hierarchy-Attenuating ($\alpha = .75$) Policy Scales, was reliable. Status was again determined by perceived SES, where higher numbers mean higher SES. SES was mean centered. See Appendix C for a more complete list of questions.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. To determine whether participants were reading the instructions carefully and evaluating the items for the prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs in an appropriate mind-set, we conducted paired-samples *t* tests (see Table 1, Study 3). Across both ideologies, when answering questions about descriptive beliefs, participants indicated that they answered in terms of their beliefs about the way the United States actually is more than when they answered questions about prescriptive beliefs: meritocracy, $t(175) = 15.38, p < .001$; democracy, $t(174) = 16.22, p < .001$. Moreover, the means for the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs were found to be significantly different from the midpoint of the scale (all $ps < .001$). In short, participants were paying attention to the instructions and were in appropriate mind-sets for the prescriptive and descriptive ideology questions.

Ideological beliefs. To test whether participants perceived a discrepancy in their prescriptive and descriptive ideological beliefs and to test whether this discrepancy is moderated by status, we conducted regression analyses for each ideology. The predictor variable was status (SES), and the criterion variable was a difference score between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs so that higher numbers indicate more endorsement of prescriptive than descriptive beliefs. An explanation of these analyses can be found in Study 1 (also see Judd et al., 2001). To illustrate interaction patterns, we calculated the simple slopes at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean (see Aiken & West, 1991). See Table 2, Study 3, for the estimated means and simple slopes and Table 3, Study 3, for regression statistics.

Meritocracy. We predicted that there would be a discrepancy in participants' meritocracy beliefs, such that they would endorse prescriptive beliefs more than descriptive beliefs. In line with predictions, we found a main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs about meritocracy ($M = 6.07, SE = 0.07$) significantly more than descriptive beliefs ($M = 4.03, SE = 0.10$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in the way meritocracy should operate and how it actually operates. There was no significant interaction between beliefs and SES (although the trend was in the predicted direction), suggesting that, regardless of status, participants believed that meritocracy was not manifesting the way that it should in society.

Democracy. Next, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' democracy beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found a main effect of beliefs. As predicted, participants endorsed prescriptive beliefs of democracy ($M = 5.90, SE = 0.07$) significantly more than descriptive beliefs ($M = 3.67, SE = 0.08$), suggesting that participants of all statuses perceived a discrepancy in their democracy beliefs. We also found a significant interaction between beliefs and SES. As predicted, participants of low SES perceived a greater discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs than participants of high SES. Specifically, participants of higher SES were just as likely to agree with the prescriptive beliefs as participants of lower SES; however, participants of higher SES were significantly more likely to agree with the descriptive beliefs than participants of lower SES (although the means are below the midpoint of the scale).

Combined ideologies. Finally, we determined whether there was a discrepancy in participants' combined ideological beliefs and whether this discrepancy would be moderated by status. We found the predicted main effect of beliefs. Participants endorsed the combined prescriptive beliefs ($M = 5.98, SE = 0.06$) significantly more than combined descriptive beliefs ($M = 3.85, SE = 0.08$). We also found a significant interaction between beliefs and SES. As predicted, participants of low SES perceived a greater discrepancy between combined prescriptive and descriptive beliefs than participants of high SES. More specifically, participants of higher SES were just as likely to agree with the combined prescriptive beliefs as participants of lower SES; however, participants of higher SES were significantly more likely to agree with the combined descriptive beliefs than participants of lower SES (although the means are either at or below the midpoint of the scale).

Motivation to endorse prescriptive beliefs. Across both ideological belief scales and the combined ideologies scale, participants explicitly agreed that they endorsed prescriptive beliefs more to promote an ideal system than to legitimize an actual system (see Table 5, Study 3). We also explored whether there were differences across status in motivation to endorse prescriptive beliefs. Results showed that there was only one marginal status effect for the motivation of promoting an ideal system. Higher SES predicted marginally greater endorsement to promote the ideals of democracy (see Table 6, Study 3). However, there were significant differences across status for the motivation of legitimizing the actual system (see Table 6, Study 3). As predicted, high-SES individuals were significantly more likely to agree that they endorse prescriptive beliefs of meritocracy, democracy, and the combined ideologies scale to legitimize the actual system than low-SES individuals. System justification theory (among others) predicts that people are motivated to endorse ideologies that frame the actual outcomes in society as just and fair. However, when this prediction does appear (albeit weaker than the motivation to promote an ideal system), it applies more to higher status members

⁸ A factor analysis was conducted on each ideological belief scale. Two-factor solutions were found for both meritocracy and democracy scales. Prescriptive items never loaded on the same factor as descriptive items. These analyses demonstrate that the items fall on independent dimensions and participants were considering these items under different mind-sets: how society should be versus how society actually is.

whose perception of the actual society is better matched with their ideal society.

We also found, across both ideological belief scales and the combined ideologies scale, that perceiving a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs positively predicted the motivation to promote an ideal system and negatively predicted the motivation to legitimize the system (see Table 6, Study 3). These results replicate those from Study 2 and demonstrate that when a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs is perceived, participants want the system to work more fairly in the future and they do not legitimize how the system works now. When the discrepancies were accounted for, the status effects disappeared, suggesting that the perceived discrepancies reflect status differences.

Satisfaction with America. We determined whether status and perceived discrepancies between the prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of ideology would predict satisfaction with America. Consistent with predictions, participants of higher SES were more satisfied with America than participants of lower SES. We also found that a greater perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs (using a difference score) predicted less satisfaction with America (see Table 4, Study 3). These findings support the prediction that satisfaction with America is dependent upon status, and more important, by the perceived congruency between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs, replicating Study 1 and 2 results. When participants' prescriptive beliefs do not match their descriptive beliefs, they feel dissatisfied and are less likely to legitimize the current system. These effects were not moderated by status.

Support for federal policy. Finally, we examined whether status and perceived discrepancies between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs would predict support for federal policy. As predicted, we found that participants of higher SES were less supportive of hierarchy-attenuating, and more supportive of hierarchy-enhancing, policy than participants of lower SES (see Table 4, Study 3). We also found that perceiving discrepancies between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs positively predicted support for hierarchy-attenuating policies and negatively predict support for hierarchy-enhancing policies, replicating earlier results (see Table 4, Study 3). This evidence provides further confirmation that when participants believe that the system is not living up to its stated goals, they do not legitimize the system. Rather, they support policies designed to change the system. Only to the degree that participants perceive a system as living up to its ideals will a person see the system as legitimate and worth perpetuating with status-quo-maintaining policies. Status did not moderate these effects.

Summary

Study 3 replicated the general predictions and patterns from Studies 1 and 2. In essence, neither high- nor low-status groups believe that the system is living up to its promises; however, high-status groups are (slightly) more likely to see a greater congruence between prescriptive ideals and the actual functioning of the system. Lower status and the perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs about the system predicted dissatisfaction with the system and a motivation to try to change the system via hierarchy-attenuating policies. Furthermore, both

low- and high-status groups endorse prescriptive ideologies of a system in an effort to hold the system at a higher standard than what is reflected in reality—a motive that is very different from legitimizing the extant system. However, high-status groups are more likely to endorse prescriptive ideologies of a system to legitimize the actual system. Study 3 was able to replicate these patterns with a community adult sample from across the country, suggesting that these beliefs about the system and its legitimacy are robust and pervasive.

General Discussion

America is a paradoxical place. On the one hand, the American system has been touted as a model of democratic ideals and the standard bearer of equal rights and protections, whereas on the other hand, stark disparities in access to resources and privileges persist in America across a wide range of demographic groups. Regardless of these disparities, members of low-status groups appear to uphold the ideals of America and perpetuate the idea of the American dream (sometimes even more so than members of high-status groups). Social scientists in a variety of fields have attempted to resolve this paradox. One prominent perspective, which is both provocative and controversial, is that all members of a society, regardless of status, are motivated to support the system in which they live, even if supporting the system goes against personal or group interests. For example, members of low-status groups often endorse ideologies that frame the system in ideal ways while simultaneously casting their own group in an unflattering light. For example, low-status groups will endorse ideologies that hard work leads to success, which has the (perhaps inadvertent) effect of framing their own low-status as the result of laziness, thereby justifying existing status hierarchies as deserved and legitimate.

Despite the seemingly robust faith in the American dream, members of low-status groups do push back against systems that persistently disadvantage them in the form of protest and at times revolution. Contrary to perspectives that assert that people across the status spectrum legitimize extant systems, social scientists find that disadvantaged groups can be quite aware and critical of systems that fall short of promised ideals. What remains is how to resolve these seemingly contradictory perspectives.

The present work investigated the role of ideologies in framing the legitimacy of a system from the point of view of high- and low-status groups in America, with the explicit goal of reconciling research that suggests that low-status groups justify the very system that keeps them disadvantaged with research showing that they are often the ones to criticize and oppose the system. Specifically, we propose that ideologies can take different forms (e.g., Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009), and that when one examines legitimacy in terms of the correspondence between actual achievements of a system (descriptive beliefs) and ideal goals of a system (prescriptive beliefs), we may gain a better understanding of when and why people of different statuses legitimize or fight the system.

Results from all three studies show that when examining system ideologies in terms of prescriptive versus descriptive beliefs, different patterns emerge. When it comes to the endorsement of prescriptive beliefs, low- and high-status members agree that America should strive for equality, democracy, and meritocracy,

and in some cases, low-status groups endorse these goals more strongly than high-status groups (Study 1). Low- and high-status groups, however, sometimes diverge when it comes to descriptive beliefs. First, contrary to the assertion that people are motivated to justify the system, both high- and low-status groups usually believe that the system falls short of its stated ideals. Although everyone likes the idea of democracy, equality, and meritocracy, most people, regardless of status, acknowledge that these ideals are largely unattained in America. There were a few exceptions to this in Studies 2 and 3. In some instances, participants slightly agreed with the descriptive beliefs of meritocracy and democracy, but the means were either at or just above the midpoint of the scale, suggesting fairly neutral attitudes. Low-status groups were usually more likely to recognize these disparities than high-status groups, which are more inclined to think the system is doing a (somewhat) better job at achieving these goals.

Our prescriptive versus descriptive measures of ideologies correspond with work by *Levy, West, Ramirez, and Karafantis (2006)* showing that ideologies can have multiple manifestations—one more abstract and definitional (similar to our prescriptive beliefs) and the other more rooted in how the ideology is shaped by one's life experience. In their work, abstract ideological beliefs (about Protestant work ethic) predicted greater egalitarianism, but Protestant work ethic as viewed through the lens of life experience or justification for actual outcomes predicted lower egalitarianism and more discrimination. The present work builds on this work by showing that experiences that justify the system (being of high status and/or thinking the system actually achieves its ideals) predict policy preferences and beliefs that perpetuate the system (similar to *Levy, West, et al.'s, 2006*, justification findings), but that experiences that reveal shortcomings in the system predict delegitimizing the system. This suggests that the types of life experiences matter in terms of how they shape and inform ideology.

Our findings are also consistent with work by *Son Hing et al. (2011)* demonstrating that prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy beliefs are separate constructs and can reflect a justice principle or a hierarchy-legitimizing ideology. In their research they found that only perceiving that a meritocracy exists (descriptive beliefs) was related to legitimacy, hierarchy-enhancing beliefs, and prejudice. Although the present study demonstrated perceived legitimacy via the congruence of prescriptive and descriptive beliefs, the greater variability in people's descriptive beliefs was likely responsible for people's satisfaction and policy preferences.

By separating out prescriptive and descriptive beliefs of ideologies, we are able to see a more nuanced pattern and draw different conclusions about ideology's relationship to legitimacy. If we only used the endorsement of ideologies framed prescriptively as our evidence of system justification and satisfaction (or ideologies that mix the two beliefs), it would appear that low-status groups are just as culpable as, or more culpable than, high-status groups in perpetuating current inequality. On the contrary, when examining descriptive beliefs, it appears that the system has fewer advocates.⁹ Everyone (especially low-status members) showed neutral attitudes at best, or more often disappointment, with how the system is currently operating. What is also interesting is that only when there is a correspondence between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs does ideology predict satisfaction with one's system. When the two beliefs diverge, people express dissatisfaction and a will-

ingness to support policies that change the system to bring it more in line with their prescriptive standards. Although it is impossible to definitively claim a causal direction with the present data (it could be that factors that go beyond the system, like the global recession, could predict dissatisfaction that results in perceptions of system failure), the point that a perceived discrepancy is related to dissatisfaction with the system and a willingness to change it is important regardless of the source of this perception.

Why Do People Endorse Prescriptive Ideologies?

If people across the status spectrum are more likely to perceive that society is not living up to its ideals, why do they continue to believe in the prescriptive beliefs? Studies 2 and 3 examined the motives for endorsing these beliefs. Study 2 revealed that high- and low-status members similarly endorse these prescriptive ideologies to promote a more equal and democratic system rather than to legitimize the actual one. In other words, they endorse system ideals as a way of promoting higher standards and positive change because they think the system right now is falling short. The majority of these patterns seem to be driven by, at least in part, the perceived discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs. These results, however, may have been due to a liberal-minded student sample. Study 3, a community sample, may reflect more representative views. This study revealed that members of high- and low-status groups endorse these ideologies for different reasons. Members of high-status groups endorsed prescriptive beliefs to promote an ideal system and to legitimize the actual system. On the contrary, low-status groups endorsed these beliefs to promote an ideal system because they (more dramatically) detected the actual system's shortcomings. Interestingly, perceiving a discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs positively predicted a motive to promote an ideal system and negatively predicted a motive to legitimize the actual system, regardless of status. This suggests that even though people of different statuses perceive different levels of discrepancy between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs, to the degree that they perceive a discrepancy, they have similar motives.

It is important to point out, though, that we only measured people's explicit motivations—a potential limitation of these studies. Motivations are often examined implicitly (e.g., *Kruglanski, 1999; Kunda, 1990*) because often people are unaware of why they hold certain beliefs or engage in particular kinds of behavior (*Nisbett & Wilson, 1977*). System justification theory in particular posits that the legitimacy motive is likely unconscious (e.g., *Jost et al., 2004*). However, there are reasons to believe that people may be consciously aware of both the discrepancies and their motives to rectify these discrepancies. People engage in a variety of behaviors designed to change the system, and the planning and coordination of these behaviors would require some conscious awareness of the underlying motive to make things better. Indeed, some theorists assert that conscious thinking is important for planning and social coordination (for reviews, see *Baumeister &*

⁹ These data were collected during the economic recession. It is possible that this robust discrepancy pattern across levels of status may be driven, in part, by perceptions that the system is functioning less well during the slow and disproportionate recovery. It is possible that under more ideal economic conditions, perceptions of discrepancy might not be as dramatic.

Masicampo, 2010; Baumeister, Masicampo, & Vohs, 2011). Perceived discrepancies predicted motives as well as policy preferences. Policy preferences suggest a more powerful motive to change the system than just ideologies alone.

Although we might expect motives to change a system to be explicit, we even find variance in people's explicit endorsement of motives to legitimize the system. In fact, there was a wider use of the scale range for explicit motives to legitimize the system than for the motive to uphold standards. Under certain circumstances (when people were of higher status and/or when they perceived smaller discrepancies), people were willing to endorse a legitimacy motive in conceptually consistent ways. These findings provide divergent evidence that the motive to legitimize a system might be both implicit and explicit. Future research could investigate whether system legitimacy motives are more apparent with the use of implicit measures and how these patterns differ from, or correspond to, explicit measures.

Do Low-Status Groups Ever Justify the System?

Although the present research provides important insights into one aspect of system justification, there are other manifestations of system justification that are not examined here. For example, research shows that low-status groups often endorse negative stereotypes about their group that can be used to rationalize disadvantage (Dasgupta, 2004; Jost, 2001; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost & Kay, 2005; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Kay & Jost, 2003; Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011; McCoy & Major, 2007). Although some researchers have identified conditions when this tendency is less prevalent (see Reynolds, Oakes, Haslam, Nolan, & Dolnik, 2000; Stott & Drury, 2004), the present research does not address low-status endorsement of stereotypes or its consequences, but instead focuses on perceptions of the American system and how it operates. Beliefs that are tangential (albeit perhaps not unrelated) to perceptions of the American system, such as in-group stereotyping, remain provocative.

There is a new direction in system justification research focusing on the conditions under which system justification is more or less likely to occur. For example, if people perceive the system as inescapable (Kay et al., 2009) or perceive themselves as dependent on the system (Kay et al., 2009; van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011) or perceive threats to the system in which they live (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermendi, & Mosso, 2005; Kay et al., 2009; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007), they are more likely to perceive the system more positively (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007) and defend the system (Kay & Zanna, 2009; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007; van der Toorn et al., 2011). Future research could examine prescriptive and descriptive beliefs about the system under these motivating conditions to see whether discrepancies between these perceptions are as strong when system dependency is high or when the system is under threat. It might also be interesting to test whether discrepancies predict the same attitudes or system-level interventions under personal or system threatening circumstances.

It should also be noted that participants in the present study did not appear to reject the system outright. Instead, they expressed sentiments to change or improve the system using existing means within the system such as via established political and economic processes. Although the present research did not measure attitudes toward revolution or outright dismantling of the system, the com-

bination of a willingness to support ideal goals and a drive to use existing means within a system (e.g., political policies) to promote change suggests that people, although not necessarily justifying the system in its present form, see merits of it that should be maintained or promoted.

Do High-Status Groups Justify the System?

The present research also raises the question about the degree to which high-status members justify the system. Although high-status members were usually more likely to see the system as being more effective at achieving its goals across the three studies (see Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius et al., 1994), high-status members still thought the system was falling short of its ideals and in some cases had similar motivations as low-status members to improve it (Study 2). These relative differences, although statistically significant, cannot overshadow the fact that none of these groups were particularly happy with the system.

Attention to actual evaluations above and beyond relative patterns is critical for developing solutions to systemic disparities. For example, knowing that both low- and high-status groups recognize shortcomings in the system could have important implications for policy and system transformation. If high- and low-status members agree that the system is not living up to its ideals, finding common ground in improving the system might be more attainable if these shortcomings are made salient. This was a strategy used powerfully and effectively by Black civil rights leaders who used the language of American ideology to highlight the hypocrisies of the American system and mobilize radical change.

Conclusion

When Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, he mentioned some of the struggles that African Americans were currently experiencing (e.g., police brutality, lack of voting rights, and segregation); however, he also expressed that Americans should not give up hope that America could be an equal society one day:

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. *It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream* [emphasis added]. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

King's words remind us that although the American system does not always function in the manner that it should, America also represents the *promise* of an ideal that many people, regardless of status, believe in. Although this promissory note has yet to be redeemed for low-status Americans, there are rational reasons to believe that the American system can improve with collective vigilance and persistent action. After all, the America today is in many respects different from King's America. Believing in the hope of an as yet unrealized system is not the same as legitimizing the existing one. The former can foment powerful transformation, and the latter, complacency.

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Appendix A

Prescriptive and Descriptive Ideological Beliefs (Study 1)

(1) Strongly disagree, (2) Somewhat disagree, (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (4) Somewhat agree, (5) Strongly agree

Equality

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. All groups should be given an equal chance in life.
2. In getting you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups. (R)
3. It's okay if some groups have more of a chance in life than others. (R)
4. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.
5. We would have fewer problems if more people were treated equally.
6. If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems. (R)
7. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom. (R)
8. Inferior groups should stay in their place. (R)
9. We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible.

10. Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place. (R)
11. No one group should dominate society.
12. It would be good if all groups could be equal.
13. Group equality should be our ideal.
14. Increased social equality.
15. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups. (R)
16. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups. (R)

Note. R = reverse scored. Adapted from “Social Dominance Orientation: A Personality Variable Predicting Social and Political Attitudes,” by F. Pratto, J. Sidanius, L. M. Stallworth, and B. F. Malle, 1994, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, p. 763. Copyright 1994 by the American Psychological Association.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. Everyone in American society receives the same quality of health care.
2. Some groups of people in our society have more opportunities than others. (R)
3. All children in America receive the same quality of education.

(Appendices continue)

4. Discrimination in American society contributes to inequality. (R)
5. People of color are just as well off as are Whites.
6. Poor people and wealthy people receive the same treatment.
7. High-status groups have a better chance of accomplishing their goals/dreams than low-status groups. (R)
8. There are more policies in place that benefit the privileged than the underprivileged. (R)
9. In America, it is clear that some groups are on the top and other groups are on the bottom. (R)
5. Low-status groups do not work as hard as high-status groups do.
6. Discrimination limits some people's ability to succeed. (R)
7. People get ahead when they know the "right" people rather than when they work hard. (R)
8. There is not a clear link between hard work and success. (R)

Note. R = reverse scored.

Note. R = reverse scored.

Meritocracy

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. If one works hard enough, he or she is likely to make a good life for him/herself.
2. People who work deserve success.
3. Hard work is fulfilling in itself.
4. Nothing is impossible if you work hard enough.
5. If you work hard you will succeed.
6. You should be the best at what you do.
7. By working hard an individual can overcome most obstacle that life presents and make his or her own way in the world.

Note. Adapted from "Development of an Australian Work Ethic Scale," by R. Ho and J. Lloyd, 1984, *Australian Psychologist*, 19, pp. 325. Copyright 1984 by Taylor & Francis.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. In American society, working hard does not automatically lead to success. (R)
2. Employed individuals are responsible people.
3. People who work really hard might not become successful. (R)
4. In America, people get rewarded for their effort.

Democracy

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. Our country should be democratic.
2. Our politics should address the needs of some groups more than other groups. (R)
3. All Americans should have equal access to voting.
4. All Americans should receive the same legal proceedings.
5. Police should be able to search anyone without probable cause. (R)
6. In our society church and state should be separated.
7. It is okay for jurors to use defendants' physical appearance to determine their guilt or innocence. (R)
8. All Americans should have a say in government policies.
9. Some groups should automatically get the right to vote whereas other groups should be required to apply. (R)
10. Laws should reflect certain religious beliefs. (R)

Note. R = reverse scored.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. Our country runs on the principles of democracy.
2. U.S. policies reflect the interests of majority groups more than minority groups. (R)
3. The United States government ensures that all voices are heard and represented.

(Appendices continue)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>4. The United States government listens to the voices of Americans when making decisions about the war on terrorism.</p> <p>5. American political decisions reflect the opinions of a few rather than the majority. (R)</p> <p>6. All Americans have the same access to voting.</p> <p>7. The United States is doing a bad job of separating church and state. (R)</p> <p>8. The police engage in racial profiling. (R)</p> <p>9. All Americans are equally protected under the criminal justice system.</p> | <p>4. The government should provide special college scholarships for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who maintain good grades.</p> <p>5. The government should provide a job to anyone who wants one.</p> <p>6. The government should create a free universal health care system.</p> <p>7. The government should not have to provide housing for those who cannot afford it. (R)</p> <p>8. The government should strive to hire people of color more.</p> <p>9. The government should provide more chances for children from poor families to go to college.</p> <p>10. The government should spend less on benefits for the poor. (R)</p> <p>11. The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed.</p> |
|---|---|

Note. R = reverse scored.

Hierarchy-Attenuating Policy (Study 1)

1. We should not spend any more federal money on programs that assist Blacks. (R)
2. The government should increase support for people receiving food stamps.
3. The government should spend more money on preschool or other early education programs in poor neighborhoods.

Note. R = reverse scored. Adapted from *General Social Surveys, 1972–2010: Cumulative Codebook* (pp. 678, 2110, 2226, and 2227), by T. W. Smith, P. V. Marsden, M. Hout, and J. Kim, 2011, Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix B

Prescriptive and Descriptive Ideological Beliefs (Study 2)

(1) *Strongly disagree*, (2) *Moderately disagree*, (3) *Slightly disagree*, (4) *Neither disagree nor agree*, (5) *Slightly agree*, (6) *Moderately agree*, (7) *Strongly agree*

Meritocracy

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. In organizations, people who do their job well *ought* to rise to the top.
2. In life, people *ought* to be rewarded on the basis of their competence and ability.
3. At times, employers *ought* to overlook workers' individual contributions and give bonuses to the employees who need the money the most. (R)

4. Success *ought* to be possible for anyone who works hard enough.
5. In general, people's financial success *ought* to depend on their skills.
6. In many situations, employers *ought* to be able to hire people they know, without advertising to other candidates. (R)
7. Anyone who is willing to work hard enough *ought* to be able to find a decent job.
8. People's financial success *ought* to depend primarily upon their natural abilities.
9. In most circumstances, organizations *ought* to offer the job to the most highly skilled candidate.

(Appendices continue)

10. When a bonus is given to a work team for good performance, the money generally *ought* to be divided equally among the group members. (R)
11. People's wages always *ought* to be determined by their effort and ability.
12. People who work hard *ought* to have the most opportunities for advancement.
13. At times, it *ought* to be acceptable for an employee's performance to be less than ideal. (R)
14. Employers always *ought* to hire the most skilled candidate for a job.
15. In organizations, raises *ought* to be determined primarily by employees' effort.

Note. R = reverse scored.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. In organizations, people who *do* their job well do rise to the top.
2. In life, people *are* rewarded on the basis of their competence and ability.
3. At times, employers *do* overlook workers' individual contributions and give bonuses to the employees who need the money the most. (R)
4. Success *is* possible for anyone who works hard enough.
5. In general, people's financial success *does* depend on their skills.
6. In many situations, employers *do* hire people they know, without advertising to other candidates. (R)
7. Anyone who is willing to work hard enough *is* able to find a decent job.
8. People's financial success *does* depend primarily upon their natural abilities.
9. In most circumstances, organizations *do* offer the job to the most highly skilled candidate.
10. When a bonus is given to a work team for good performance, the money generally *is* divided equally among the group members. (R)
11. People's wages always *are* determined by their effort and ability.

12. People who work hard *do* have the most opportunities for advancement.
13. At times, it *is* acceptable for an employee's performance to be less than ideal. (R)
14. Employers always *do* hire the most skilled candidate for a job.
15. In organizations, raises *are* determined primarily by employees' effort.

Note. R = reverse scored. Adapted from "Preference for the Merit Principle Scale: An Individual Difference Measure of Distributive Justice Preferences," by L. M. Davey, D. R. Bobocel, L. S. Son Hing, and M. P. Zanna, 1999, *Social Justice Research*, 12, p. 228. Copyright 1999 by Springer Science and Business Media.

Democracy

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. Our country *should* be democratic.
2. Our politics *should* address the needs of some groups more than other groups. (R)
3. All Americans *should* have equal access to voting.
4. All Americans *should* receive the same legal protections.
5. In our society, church and state *should* be separate.
6. All Americans *should* have a say in government policies.
7. Some groups *should* have more access to voting than other groups. (R)
8. The United States government *should* hear all Americans' voices equally.

Note. R = reverse scored.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. Our country *is* democratic.
2. Our politics *do* address the needs of some groups more than other groups. (R)
3. All Americans *do* have equal access to voting.
4. All Americans *do* receive the same legal protections.
5. In our society, church and state *are* separate.

(Appendices continue)

6. All Americans *do* have a say in government policies.
7. Some groups *do* have more access to voting than other groups. (R)
8. The United States government *does* hear all Americans' voices equally.
8. Society *should* be set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

Note. R = reverse scored.

General System Justification

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. In general, you find society *should* be fair.
2. In general, the American political system *should* operate as intended.
3. American society *should* not need to be radically re-structured.
4. The United States *should* be the best country in the world to live in.
5. Most policies *should* serve the greater good.
6. Everyone *should* have a fair shot at wealth and happiness.
7. Our society *should* not get worse every year.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. In general, you find society *is* fair.
2. In general, the American political system *does* operate as intended.
3. American society *is* structured adequately.
4. The United States *is* the best country in the world to live in.
5. Most policies *do* serve the greater good.
6. Everyone *does* have a fair shot at wealth and happiness.
7. Our society *does* get worse every year.
8. Society *is* set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

Note. Adapted from "Complementary Justice: Effects of "Poor but Happy" and "Poor but Honest" Stereotype Exemplars on System Justification and Implicit Activation of the Justice Motive," by A. C. Kay and J. T. Jost, 2003, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, p. 828. Copyright 2003 by the American Psychological Association.

Appendix C

Prescriptive and Descriptive Ideological Beliefs (Study 3)

(1) *Strongly disagree*, (2) *Moderately disagree*, (3) *Slightly disagree*, (4) *Neither disagree nor agree*, (5) *Slightly agree*, (6) *Moderately agree*, (7) *Strongly agree*

Meritocracy

Prescriptive Beliefs

1. People who work hard *should* achieve success.
2. If people work hard they *should* get what they want.
3. With hard work, ethnic minorities *should* be able to climb the ladder of success just as much as Whites.
4. Discrimination *should not* prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard.
5. America *should* be an open society where all individuals can achieve higher status through hard work.
6. Advancement in American society *should* be equally possible for all individuals.

Descriptive Beliefs

1. People who work hard *do* achieve success.
2. If people work hard they *do* get what they want.
3. With hard work, ethnic minorities *are* able to climb the ladder of success just as much as Whites.
4. Discrimination *does not* prevent minority groups from getting ahead if they work hard.
5. America *is* an open society where all individuals *do* achieve higher status through hard work.
6. Advancement in American society *is* equally possible for all individuals.

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