

System Justification in Responding to the Poor and Displaced in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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We examine people's reactions to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, most of whom are minorities living in poverty, and we do so in terms of system justification theory. We propose that the social system was indirectly threatened for the public when inadequate relief efforts exposed governmental shortcomings, called into question the legitimacy of agency leadership, and highlighted racial inequality in America. In response to such system threats, both victims and observers (e.g., the general public, commentators, policy makers) are known to engage in various forms of system justification, including direct defense of the status quo, victim blaming, stereotyping, and internalization of inequality. These processes can reduce emotional distress and restore perceived legitimacy to the system, but they may have a number of troubling consequences for the storm victims in their efforts to return to normalcy.

On August 29, 2005, Katrina made landfall on the U.S. Gulf Coast area as a strong "Category 4" hurricane, and in its path was the highly vulnerable city of New Orleans. As would be expected from a truly major hurricane, its impact was extensive; there was flooding, great loss of life, and damage to infrastructure, as well as massive economic ramifications. The impact of Hurricane Katrina, as evidenced by this special issue in a psychological journal, also has substantial social and political implications that go well beyond the natural disaster itself.

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While the vast majority of New Orleans residents had evacuated by the time the storm hit, approximately 100,000 people remained. The predominant media images in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, specifically in the hardest hit urban areas of New Orleans, depict a social rather than a natural disaster; thousands of poor, mainly Black citizens were left homeless by the storm and stranded for days before receiving food, water, or transportation. The catastrophic hurricane and the unprecedented response failure made headlines across the globe. Among the most striking aspects of the calamity, from a social psychological perspective, were the divergent responses of those observing the tragedy from afar relative to those directly affected.

The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Many Americans tended to play what President Bush referred to as the “blame game” when discussing the government’s failure to respond. For example, polls showed that two-thirds of respondents believed that President Bush could have done more in the relief efforts, and more than half characterized the response of both the federal and state and local governments as “only fair” or “poor” (Pew Research Center, 2005). It may not seem surprising that people would blame those in charge, given that five disastrous days passed between the storm and the relief effort. What is more intriguing and more worrisome is the blame that was often directed toward the *victims* of Hurricane Katrina. Shortly after the hurricane, observers began to question the victims’ failure to evacuate in a timely manner. Some notable politicians went so far as to imply that the failure to evacuate was a criminal offense. For instance, Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) suggested that there was “a need to look at tougher penalties for those who decide to ride [a hurricane] out and understand that there are consequences to not leaving” (Hamill, 2005).

Another feature of the aftermath of Katrina was the widely reported violence, looting, and mayhem among the evacuees. For example, news host Paula Zahn referred to “bands of rapists, going block to block” (Pierre & Gerhart, 2005) and Geraldo Rivera indicated that he was reporting from a “scene of terror, chaos, confusion, anarchy, violence, rapes, murders, dead babies, dead people” (Fumento, 2005). While attempting to flee the designated hurricane shelter at the Louisiana Superdome, one evacuee exclaimed “There are bodies in the kitchen, babies who had their throats slashed” (Davis, 2005).

Once relief and rescue efforts subsided, a more objective look at the situation revealed a much different picture. Regarding the failure of residents to evacuate, a report investigating the evacuation process found that no transportation out of the city had been provided (CNN Headline News, 2005, September 6). As a result, the 28% of New Orleans residents who live below the official poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 1999) had no means to leave. In fact,

the same report acknowledged that the mandatory evacuation had not even been communicated to the poorer areas of the city, other than by the standard radio and television broadcasts. As far as the reports of violence, a major New Orleans newspaper investigated the reports of violence during the storm's aftermath and found the accounts of evacuees and journalists alike to be "false, or at least unsupported by any evidence" (Thevenot & Russell, 2005). Despite the widespread reports of murders throughout the city in the days following the hurricane, there were four murders in all of New Orleans that week, which means that it was a *below* average week for the city in terms of homicide (New Orleans Police Department, 2004). Even more remarkable was the fact that exactly one murder occurred in the infamous stadium shelter and the other three elsewhere. These revelations suggest that social and psychological processes were strongly involved in how people interpreted the disaster and its victims when they were poor and also minorities.

We propose that in response to the clear failure of local and national government (i.e., "the system") many political elites, journalists, and ordinary citizens spontaneously developed victim-blaming attributions that deflected blame away from the system.¹ We consider research findings designed to examine system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002), which may help explain people's responses to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Our overall assumption is that the converging events following the disaster constituted a threat to the existing system, evoking a psychological need to justify it. System-justifying mechanisms (such as stereotyping and victim blaming) are used to achieve this end. We begin with a brief overview of the theory, discuss why and how events that occurred may have activated system justification needs, and then lay out the ways in which system justification theory may explain why government officials, the media, and others resorted to derogating the victims, and even why the victims themselves were sometimes willing to accept and perpetuate rumors about the violence and criminality in their midst. We draw on system justification theory to interpret the responses of both observers and victims.

A Brief Overview of System Justification Theory

System justification theory suggests that people are motivated to accept and perpetuate features of existing social arrangements, even if those features were arrived at accidentally, arbitrarily, or unjustly (e.g., see Jost et al., 2004). In other

¹ In general, we use the term *system* to refer to any set of social arrangements that possess sustained differentiation or hierarchical clustering of relations among individuals or groups. Systems that are justified can range from dyadic relationships and family systems to much larger work organizations and societal institutions.

words, the theory posits that people support, defend, and bolster the status quo simply because it exists. The point is not that people always believe that every aspect of the system is fair and good in absolute terms; rather, the point is that they hold more favorable attitudes toward the system than is warranted, given a dispassionate look at the evidence. The theory further suggests that system justification manifests itself in a desire to see the current system as fair and legitimate, even when a different system might better meet their personal or group needs. There is reason to believe that the process is a motivated one because people tend to show increased system justification in response to experimentally induced forms of threat (Jost, Kivetz, Guermandi, Rubini, & Mosso, 2005; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

The term *system justification* is used to refer to a specific set of social psychological processes by which this legitimization and support are achieved. These processes include: sour grapes and sweet lemon rationalizations, direct defense of the current regime and its authorities, stereotypic differentiation of social groups, internalization of structural inequalities, victim blaming and, in some cases, victim enhancement (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost, Pietrzak, Liviatan, Mandisodza, & Napier, in press; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). Because some forms of system justification efforts are not normatively acceptable (e.g., negative stereotyping of and discrimination against low status groups) and may therefore interfere with social desirability concerns on a conscious level, many system justification processes are presumed to operate implicitly (or nonconsciously) rather than explicitly (e.g., see Jost et al., 2004).

Although the theory predicts a general motivational tendency to rationalize the societal status quo, there is substantial variation in the expression of that tendency due to situational and dispositional factors. In general, system justification satisfies multiple needs, including epistemic and existential needs to manage uncertainty and threat (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Thus, individuals who are especially high on these needs (either chronically or for situational reasons) are more likely to justify the system. Moderators of the system justification tendency include personal needs for order, structure, and closure as well as the degree of threat in the environment (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

System justification serves a palliative function by reducing emotional distress associated with social inequality (e.g., see Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2006). The palliative function of system justification can thus help to explain why members of disadvantaged groups would defend and perpetuate the very system that puts them at a disadvantage (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Although system justification leads to increased positive and decreased negative affect as well as a general reluctance to endorse social change, some important differences emerge depending on the status of one's group (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Among the advantaged, system justification is associated with increased self-esteem and subjective

well-being (Jost & Thompson, 2000), as well as increased in-group favoritism (Jost et al., 2004). For the disadvantaged, however, system justification is associated with decreased self-esteem and well-being (Jost & Thompson, 2000), ingroup ambivalence (Jost & Burgess, 2000), decreased in-group favoritism, and increased out-group favoritism (Jost et al., 2004). Taken as a whole, we believe that the theoretical insights and empirical findings of system justification theory are useful for understanding reactions following Hurricane Katrina.

Why Was There a Need to Justify the System Following Katrina?

The tendency to engage in system justification can be strengthened by situational (as well as dispositional) factors. Specifically, system-justifying tendencies are increased when the system is under threat (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2002; see also Echebarria & Fernandez, 2006). Threats to the system can be direct, such as when a system is attacked, or indirect, such as when its shortcomings are exposed.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are an example of a direct threat to the system, and the responses to this attack illustrate that support for the system is bolstered following such a threat. President Bush received support from only about half of Americans from the time he became president until 9/11. Immediately after the attacks, his approval rating shot up to almost 90%, and he continued to receive approval from 70% of Americans for the following year (Gallup, 2004). While the president's approval rating has since declined a great deal as numerous other events have unfolded, research has shown that conscious and nonconscious reminders about the terrorist attacks increase presidential approval. For instance, between 2001 and 2004, Willer (2004) found that when the terror alert level was raised, so was popular support for President Bush—even on aspects unrelated to terrorism, such as his handling of the economy. Additionally, people who were experimentally primed to think about the 9/11 attacks two years later showed significantly more support for President Bush than did those who were instructed to think about another (non-system-threatening) negative event (Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2005; Landau et al., 2004).

Whereas 9/11 posed a direct threat to the system, Hurricane Katrina threatened the system *indirectly* by exposing the shortcomings of governmental procedures and authorities. To many Americans, it seemed inconceivable that residents of New Orleans could suddenly find themselves in “third world” conditions. The events also raised questions about the legitimacy of those holding high-level positions. For instance, much of the news coverage during the storm aftermath was focused on the inadequate credentials of the Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael Brown (e.g., Hsu, 2005).

We think that the type of threat (indirect versus direct) could affect the type of system-justifying mechanisms that are engaged.² A study conducted in Israel experimentally induced high (versus low) indirect system threat in their participants by exposing them to a short passage that was (or was not) critical of their nation (Jost et al., 2005). Participants assigned to the high system threat condition engaged in increased reliance on system-justifying stereotypes of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, compared to those assigned to the low system threat condition. In an experiment by Kay et al. (2005), one group of participants read a similar passage ostensibly written by a journalist that was broadly critical of U.S. society, while a second group read a more neutral passage. The group that was exposed to the indirect threat (i.e., the critical passage) showed an increase in indirect forms of system justification, including victim-blaming on causally related dimensions and victim enhancement on other dimensions.

In sum, research demonstrates that system justification needs are greater following both direct and indirect threats.³ The different types of responses to direct versus indirect threat may explain why September 11 resulted in explicit bolstering of the status quo (e.g., increased patriotism, direct support for President Bush and other institutional authorities), whereas the Hurricane Katrina response led to other system-justifying mechanisms, such as victim blaming, complementary stereotyping, and the internalization of inequality. Of course, one event was an attack on the United States emanating from outside the United States and man-made, while the other was a natural disaster. Nonetheless, system justification processes may well be relevant to understanding responses to both disasters. We now turn to expanding on the role of these mechanisms and discuss the evidence for their usage by the general public and the evacuees alike in responding to this threatening event.

How Were System-Justifying Mechanisms Manifested in This Instance?

Direct Defense of the Status Quo

Members of advantaged versus disadvantaged groups diverge in the process by which they justify an unequal system. For the disadvantaged, blatant inequality can create a discrepancy between competing needs to justify the system and to

² By “direct” system threat, we have in mind events such as attempted revolutions, *coup d’etats*, and terrorist activity aimed at toppling or replacing a current regime. By contrast, we use the term “indirect” system threat to refer to events or activities that expose, through criticism or otherwise, the shortcomings of the system, thereby calling into question its claim to legitimacy. Although we think that this distinction possesses theoretical significance, we know of no previous research that has investigated it explicitly.

³ We have also considered the possibility that self-related, group-related, and system-related threats might elicit different types of attitudinal responses, but we have not found evidence of this. It appears that threatening circumstances in general increase the appeal of system justification (e.g., see Jost, Glaser et al., 2003).

feel good about oneself and one's fellow group members (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). For members of high status groups, however, viewing the system as fair legitimizes their advantage, and thus is consistent with holding a positive view of the self and the group. Therefore, we would expect Whites and Blacks (high-status and low-status groups in the United States, respectively) to differ in their opinions about whether the hurricane-response failure revealed problems in the system, such as inherent inequality and unfairness. Consistent with this prediction, a recent Pew Research Center (2005) poll shows a large disparity between the views of Blacks and Whites with respect to the governmental response. For instance, only 32% of Whites believed that the disaster exposed a racial inequality problem in the country, whereas 71% of Blacks indicated that it did. Even more striking is the finding that 77% of Blacks felt that the government's response would have been faster if the victims had been White, whereas only 17% of Whites agreed.

Previous research suggests that the denial of pervasive and systematic inequality among Whites involved a system-justifying effort to reduce the emotional distress that would come with confronting the inequality in the system (Chen & Tyler, 2001; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). For example, Branscombe (1998) found that when men were reminded of their gender privilege, they experienced an increase in guilt and a concomitant reduction in subjective well-being. Several other studies have shown that Whites experience guilt and dissonance when confronted with evidence of fellow group member's prejudicial or discriminatory actions toward Blacks (Devine, Montieith, Zuwerinik, & Elliot, 1991; Swim & Miller, 1999). Taken as a whole, research in this area suggests that when people have an opportunity to deny or ignore advantageous inequality, they will do so in order to avoid the negative affect that accompanies unjustified privilege.

Victim Blaming

One sentiment that took hold following Katrina was that those who lived in New Orleans were at fault for having chosen to live there in the first place, and for not having evacuated when the officials issued a mandate. Some went so far as to ask why people would choose to live in a city that lies beneath sea level. Talk show hosts and local newspapers blamed victims and asked why the government was obligated to help those who did not evacuate. Conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly sought to draw a system-justifying lesson from the tragedy:

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina should be taught in every American school. If you don't get education, if you don't develop a skill and force yourself to work hard, you'll most likely be poor and sooner or later you'll be waiting on a symbolic rooftop waiting for help, and chances are that it won't be forthcoming (O'Reilly, 2005).

The pervasiveness of victim blaming led one liberal political action committee to create a petition to demand that the president stop blaming the victims (MoveOn PAC, 2005).

Social psychologists know well that people underestimate the effects of the situation and overestimate dispositional effects as causal factors in outcomes (Ross, 1977). This means that there will be a general tendency to locate fault with the victims for their own predicament. Research on agenda-setting in the media has shown that different types of news coverage can lead the public to focus their attention either on the individual or on the system (Iyengar, 1987). When the focus is on the individual, observers tend to blame people for their own misfortune.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that innocent victims threaten a belief in the existence of justice, suggesting that some responses to victims may represent attempts to reduce this threat (Hafer, 2000). Blaming victims for their own misfortune therefore serves the psychological function of maintaining the “belief in a just world” (Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). It can be viewed as a means by which people can generally defend and justify the societal status quo as legitimate (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005).

In accordance with system justification theory, derogating the victim allows people to make individual rather than systemic causal attributions about a victim’s status, thereby deflecting potential responsibility away from external factors, including the social system. In his well-known book, *Blaming the Victim*, William Ryan (1976) argues that locating the cause of social problems and failures of the system within the victim (whether the flaws are seen as inherent or acquired developmentally) allows policy makers to focus their attention on “fixing” the victim rather than taking larger and more effortful steps to reform the system as a whole. Admitting that there are faults with the system is motivationally threatening, and victim blaming may alleviate the negative affect associated with such an admission.

Victim blaming could have serious consequences for those affected by the hurricane because their future will depend in part on the generosity of those who were unaffected. Negative perceptions have the potential to affect victims’ future employment opportunities, job quality, benefits, and social services (e.g., Biernat & Ma, 2005; Pager & Quillian, 2005). They might also affect how the integration of displaced children into new schools proceeds and the quality of their peer interactions. There is some survey evidence that victim blaming has already begun to take a toll on survivors of Hurricane Katrina. An Ipsos poll found that one in four respondents in cities surrounding the affected areas believed that crime would increase as a result of the influx of evacuees (Gross, 2005).

Complementary Stereotyping

Another system-justifying mechanism that is closely related to victim-blaming is stereotyping both as rationalization and as a way of maintaining the view that the world is a fair place (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kay & Jost, 2003). In the case of Hurricane Katrina, stereotypes that were used in connection with the affected residents arise through both of these mechanisms. As recent research has

demonstrated, both victim-derogating stereotypes and complementary off-setting, victim-enhancing stereotypes are capable of satisfying system justification needs (Kay et al., 2005).

On one hand, many began to talk about residents of New Orleans as “immoral,” especially in terms of drinking, gambling, corrupt politics, and even the practice of voodoo (e.g., see LifeSite, 2005; Louis, 2005). Furthermore, general stereotypes about Blacks and/or poor people (i.e., as aggressive and criminal) were plentiful. News reports described some actors (e.g., Blacks) as “looting” and others (Whites) as “finding food” in this horrific situation (Ralli, 2005). Stereotyping the residents of New Orleans as immoral and aggressive could have allowed many to rationalize the predicament of the people who were affected. On the other hand, there was also a surge in references to their “fun-loving” nature, and President Bush recounted his fond memories of “enjoying [himself], occasionally too much” in the city (White House Office of Press Secretary, 2005). Praising victims for qualities unrelated to their dilemma may have been a way of maintaining a belief in ultimate fairness. In short, even though the people of New Orleans possess negative characteristics that led to their demise, they have unique positive qualities that compensate for their deficiencies.

Research on system justification provides evidence that bears directly on both of these types of stereotyping. There is some evidence to suggest that stereotyping serves to rationalize the status quo by ascribing characteristics to high- and low-status groups that makes their relative positions seem natural and appropriate (e.g., see Jost & Hamilton, 2005). An experimental paradigm designed to manipulate perceived socio-economic status in real-world groups revealed that neutral observers (not belonging to either target group) generally stereotyped the high-status target group as more intelligent, hard-working, and competent as compared with the low-status group, thus explaining and rationalizing unequal social outcomes (Jost, 2001).

Research on complementary stereotyping has demonstrated that people use victim enhancement in addition to victim derogation to bolster the status quo. It appears that negative, victim-derogating stereotypes are effective for system justification when they are perceived as causally relevant to the status dimension. When a trait is unrelated to differential outcomes, however, people tend to ascribe complementary, victim-enhancing stereotypes. For example, in studies conducted by Kay and colleagues (2005), people assigned to a high versus low system threat condition judged overweight people to be lazier but also more sociable, and they judged powerful people to be more intelligent and independent but less happy (Kay et al., 2005). This study illustrates how victim-derogation on causally relevant traits (e.g., stereotyping obese people as being lazy) and victim enhancement on causally irrelevant traits (e.g., ascribing gregariousness to obese people) can both serve system-justifying functions. In the case of Katrina, stereotyping New Orleans residents as stubborn (causally related to their not evacuating) and at the same time

happy-go-lucky (not related to their plight) may both be routes to justifying the status quo and maintaining the perception that the system is fair.

Internalization of Inequality

While victim blaming and complementary stereotyping can help explain how observers were able to maintain their faith in the system, they do not shed as much light on the victims' own rationalizations and justifications of their circumstances. As previously mentioned, one of the most striking falsehoods in the news reports following the hurricane was in evacuees' reports of violence in their midst. Reviewing research on biased memory and depressed entitlement (a diminished sense of deservingness) can help to flesh out a more complete account from a system justification perspective.

Research has shown that the need to justify the system can produce biases in information processing, including misremembering explanations for the status quo as legitimate. That is, participants will misremember the explanations experimenters gave for an inequality as more legitimate than they actually were, falsely recalling legitimate explanations when no explanation or even an illegitimate explanation was originally given (Haines & Jost, 2000). This work illustrates how biases in information processing can arise when there is a conflict between one's preferred beliefs about the fairness of the system and the information one is given.

This system-justifying bias could help explain the rumors of violence perpetrated by evacuees themselves about their fellow group members. Given that there was a discrepancy between reality (e.g., apparently being abandoned by the government) and their beliefs about the system ("America takes care of its citizens"), it follows that people would search for explanations that restore the system's legitimacy. By reconstruing the situation in terms of the group's failure, the inequality in the system was seen as more legitimate. Indeed, reports of violence were then used as excuses for authorities' lack of response. For instance, CNN Headline News (2005, September 1) reported that a hospital evacuation was halted due to sniper fire, an incident that remains unconfirmed by the military (Hill & Spangler, 2005). The rumors of violence are a fascinating example of an attempt to legitimize the chaotic nature of the rescue efforts. Furthermore, their usefulness in justifying the situation is evidenced by how quickly they spread and by the eagerness of the media representatives, distant observers, and even the evacuees themselves to believe them.

People who make internal attributions for their own misfortune experience less emotional distress compared with those who make external attributions (such as blaming the system), and this is consistent with the notion that system justification serves a palliative function (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). For instance, poor people who blame themselves for their own poverty report feeling more positive emotion, less guilt, and greater satisfaction compared to poor people who blamed others or

society for their situation (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). African Americans and other Americans who are low in socioeconomic status are more likely than others to believe that socioeconomic differences are necessary and legitimate, presumably because they have stronger needs to justify the system in order to reduce dissonance and restore positive affect (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). Research by Jost, Pelham, et al. (2003) also found that the endorsement of beliefs concerning meritocracy (e.g., believing that ambition, ability, and hard work dictate who “gets ahead in life”) was positively related to satisfaction across all respondents. It seems paradoxical that spreading rumors of murder and rape could actually have been an attempt to cope with the emotional distress of being confronted with a system that appeared to have abandoned them, but it is at least possible.

While previous research shows that internalizing inequality can help to restore positive affect, it has disturbing consequences, such as perceiving oneself as less than deserving. This phenomenon, which has been termed the *depressed entitlement effect*, is a system-justifying tendency whereby members of low status groups come to feel that they deserve less than members of high status groups feel that they deserve. Dozens of studies have documented this effect for women as well as other individuals in low-paying jobs (e.g., Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Jost, 1997; Major, 1994; Pelham & Hetts, 2001). Depressed entitlement results from internalizing unequal aspects of a current regime. For instance, women felt they deserved less than did men for past work, but when asked to speculate about future work, women felt they deserved approximately equal payment as their male counterparts (Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001). This suggests that people are especially motivated to justify current (but not necessarily) future arrangements. Depressed entitlement among evacuees with regard to compensation for losses and for rebuilding funds is something to be seriously concerned about. Indeed, there is already anecdotal evidence of this: when a news reporter asked a tire-repair shop owner in the middle-class neighborhood, Bywater, if he thought that the richer neighborhoods were receiving more help, he responded that they were but, “I don’t think it is being unfair. It’s just the way it works” (King, 2005).

Concluding Remarks

We have explored the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through the lens of system justification theory. We have argued that the delayed and inadequate rescue and relief efforts exposed the system’s shortcomings and undermined its legitimacy, thereby indirectly threatening the system. The events may thus have led to increased system justification efforts by observers and evacuees alike. The observers, including political officials, often reacted to this threat by defending the system at the expense of the victims—namely, by denying the existence of inequality in the system and by blaming the victims for their own suffering. The evacuees rationalized their abandonment by authorities by accepting and transmitting rumors of violence

and murder among them, thereby justifying the status quo at their own expense. System-justifying mechanisms that implicate victims—including stereotyping and victim derogation—could well have serious and prolonged consequences for those displaced by Katrina. Furthermore, a depressed sense of entitlement on the part of the storm victims—in which they underestimate what they are entitled to—could well reduce their willingness to advocate for their own fair compensation and to seek assistance in getting home and rebuilding.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that there is a notable exception to the general pattern of system justification. Blacks in America appeared to be more united than at any time in recent years. According to a Pew Research Center (2005) poll, a full 85% of African Americans felt that President Bush could have done more to help the victims. On national television, Kanye West, a popular hip-hop artist, proclaimed that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people,” and an ABC poll showed that 68% of Blacks agreed with him (Langer, 2005). Moreover, the outpouring of support from the Black community to the victims in terms of volunteers and donations was unprecedented (Associated Press, 2005). The solidarity of anger among Black Americans in response to the anemic response to Katrina stands in contrast to the system-justifying reactions of so many other observers and evacuees. Many White Americans, too, believed that the authorities’ responses to the hurricane were inadequate, even incompetent, but not to the same degree that Blacks did (Pew Research Center, 2005). Hence the system was blamed to some degree for the consequences of governmental inaction.

Nonetheless, the inadequacy of the treatment of hurricane victims appears to have threatened government legitimacy indirectly, at least among some constituents (cf. Tyler & Huo, 2002). Some people appear to have responded defensively to restore perceived legitimacy to the system, whereas others did not. The precise circumstances that elicit system-justifying versus system-challenging responses warrant continued research attention. One possible explanation for the racial disparity in attitudes toward the system is that Blacks perceived discrimination against their group that was too overt to be rationalized away and therefore rallied together in an effort to change rather than defend the status quo (see also Arrighi, Hopkins, & Wallerstein, 1989; Mansbridge & Morris, 2001).

In the current analysis of immediate reactions to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we have treated the “system” as a relatively undifferentiated construct. In the weeks and months following the disaster, discussions ensued about whether local, state, or federal government was responsible for failures in rescue and recovery efforts. These discussions illustrate that a large, broad-based system can be composed of multiple layers or subsystems and that legitimizing practices at one level of the system can serve to delegitimize practices at another level (and vice versa). For example, pointing out failures of the local government can deflect blame from the national government, and so on. The way in which an event is *framed* can result in blame being directed at one level of a system (or its representatives), while

actions at other levels are exonerated, even though it is possible that liabilities exist at multiple levels (e.g., see Blasi & Jost, 2006). Which frame seems most appropriate to people will depend upon, among other things, the underlying needs and allegiances of social actors.

A remaining theoretical question for system justification theory is how people deal with competing pressures to advocate on their group's behalf and to view the system as fair when these two goals are in conflict (e.g., Jost et al., 2001). Future research would do well to explore the social, cognitive, and motivational determinants of how such conflicts are likely to be resolved and with what consequences, as well as the question of how media, politicians, and group leaders can facilitate more thoughtful, less-biased responses to human suffering and apparent injustice. For the time being, we hope that by understanding how system-justifying mechanisms are triggered and by identifying the subtle as well as obvious forms they can take, it is possible to increase the level of vigilance against harmful and often nonconscious biases. While justifying the system in times of threat may placate us temporarily, it also has deleterious consequences, such as preserving a system that has failed us, inhibiting learning from tragic events, and obstructing social innovation and change.

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