

Understanding Perceptions of Racism in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: The Roles of System and Group Justification

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Abstract The present study examined perceptions of racism in events that occurred during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina among a community sample of New Orleans area residents. Drawing on system justification theory, we examined system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) and group justification motives (i.e., group identity) as predictors of perceptions of racism among African Americans and European Americans. Compared to African Americans, European Americans perceived much lower levels of racism in Katrina-related events. Furthermore, meritocracy beliefs were negatively related to perceptions of racism among both African Americans and European Americans. However, private regard (a component of group identity) was positively related to perceptions of racism among African Americans, but negatively related to perceptions of racism among European Americans. The results suggest that both system and group justification motives independently predict perceptions of racism in an important real-world event. Furthermore, system and group justification motives appear to operate in opposition for African Americans, but in tandem for European Americans.

Keywords Perceptions of racism · System justification theory · Ethnic identity · Ethnic differences · Hurricane Katrina

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Introduction

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, it exposed widespread racial inequality among residents of New Orleans, Louisiana. For example, while many European Americans had the resources to evacuate the city prior to the storms' landfall, many African Americans were left trapped in the city's emergency shelters during and after the storm without adequate provisions. In days following Hurricane Katrina, whether or not racism played a role in the response to African American residents was hotly debated (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006a; Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006; Kaiser, Eccleston, & Hagiwara, 2008; Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006; Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). For example, many questioned whether race played a role in the government's slow response time and inadequate provision of supplies to those trapped in the New Orleans Super Dome (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2005).

The goal of the present study is to utilize a system justification perspective (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994) in order to understand perceptions of racism against African Americans in Katrina-related events. That is, we examined the independent contributions of system justification and group justification motives in predicting perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among a unique sample of individuals directly affected by the disaster—African American and European American community residents of the New Orleans metropolitan area. In this way, we seek to take a more comprehensive and theoretical approach to understanding the myriad of factors that predicted perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events.

System Justification Theory

System justification theory (SJT, e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2003) proposes that individuals have a fundamental motivation to believe that the social systems in which they live are fair. Furthermore, people seek to maintain and enhance the legitimacy of these social systems. People attempt to rationalize social inequality in a number of ways, and when they are confronted with evidence that the social system is unfair, they often react defensively. Because Hurricane Katrina exposed evidence of widespread, systemic racial inequality with African Americans faring worse than European Americans, the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina posed a strong threat to the legitimacy of the social system (Eccleston, Kaiser, & Kraynak, 2010; Henkel et al., 2006; Kaiser et al., 2008; Levy, Freitas, Mendoza-Denton, Kugelmass, & Rosenthal, 2010; Napier et al., 2006). This threat to the legitimacy of the social system may have led some individuals to deny or minimize the role of racism in Katrina-related events (Adams et al., 2006a, b; Napier et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2009).

According to SJT, system justification motives coexist alongside group justification motives, or motives to enhance the group and collective self-esteem (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). For individuals from high status groups, such as European

Americans, system justification motives tend to be consistent with group justification motives. For European Americans, a group that is afforded a high social status and a high standard of living, a motivation to believe that the social system is fair is generally consistent with a motivation to feel good about European Americans. However, for African Americans, a group that has lower social status and faces chronic racism (e.g., Axt, Absersole, & Nosek, 2014; Sidanius & Pratto 1999), motivations to believe that the social system is fair may conflict with motivations to feel good about African Americans (e.g., O'Brien & Major, 2005). For African Americans, a motivation to see the social system as fair, and thus African Americans' lower position in the social system as fair, may conflict with a motivation to view the ingroup in a positive light.

In our view, it is necessary to simultaneously consider how both system justification motives and group justification motives shape perceptions of discrimination in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of status differences in perceptions of racism. Compared to African Americans, European Americans perceive less racism directed at African Americans and other minorities (e.g., Carter & Murphy, 2015; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013; Norton & Sommers, 2011; Valentino & Brader, 2011). Likewise, in the context of Hurricane Katrina, African Americans were more likely than European Americans to believe that race played a role in the speed of the federal government's response (Page & Puente, 2005). Group differences in perceptions of racism among high status groups may be partly explained by the fact that system justification motives and group justification motives work in parallel for members of high status groups but in opposition for members of low status groups (see also Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998). Thus, for members of high status groups (e.g., European Americans), both system and group justification motives should independently be related to decreased perceptions of racism. In contrast, for low status group members (e.g., African Americans) system justification motives should be related to decreased perceptions of racism, whereas group justification motives should be related to increased perceptions of racism.

In the present research, we sought to take into account the role of both system and group justification motives in perceptions of racism among European Americans and African Americans in an important real-world event. Applied to the present research, both system justification and group justification motives should independently predict perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. Among European Americans, both system and group justification motives should be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. However, among African Americans, system justification motives should be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events, whereas group justification motives should be positively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events.

System Justification Motives and Perceptions of Racism

There are a number of belief systems that can serve system justification functions and the particular belief systems that justify the social system tend to vary across

different cultures (e.g., Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj; & Kumar, 2014; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Levin et al., 1998). For example, whereas the belief in karma can serve a system justification function in India, the belief in a meritocracy can serve a system justification function in the USA and other Westernized countries (Cotterill et al., 2014; O'Brien & Gilbert, 2013). In the USA, the belief in a meritocracy is a potent, pervasive belief system that serves a system justification function (Major et al., 2007). Drawing on ample past research examining the effects of system justification motives on perceptions of and responses to racism, we examined individual differences in system justification motives by assessing endorsement of meritocracy beliefs (e.g., Eliezer, Townsend, Sawyer, Major, & Mendes, 2011; Major et al., 2007; McCoy & Major, 2007; O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012).

Meritocracy beliefs hold that any individual, regardless of group membership, can be successful if he or she has enough talent or works hard enough. Thus, meritocracy beliefs locate the cause of success or failure within the individual and, in this way, serve to justify and legitimize the social system. Compared to people who reject meritocracy beliefs, people who strongly endorse meritocracy beliefs are less likely to perceive racism and other forms of discrimination in society (Major et al., 2007). In addition, experimentally activating meritocracy beliefs lead to increased system justification behaviors including decreased perceptions of racism and increased endorsement of system-justifying stereotypes (McCoy & Major, 2007).

In previous research with European American college students, the endorsement of meritocracy beliefs was negatively related to the perception of racism in Katrina-related events (O'Brien et al., 2009). In the present study, we expected to replicate this negative relationship between meritocracy beliefs and perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events with a community-based sample that was more directly exposed to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, in support of the contention that system justification motives lead to legitimization of the social system among both members of high and low status groups, we expected that meritocracy beliefs would be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events for both European Americans and African Americans.

It is important to note, however, that there is reason to question whether belief systems that serve a system justification function (e.g., meritocracy beliefs) operate similarly among European Americans and African Americans. System justification theorists propose that the conflict between system justification and group justification motives may create cognitive dissonance among people from low status groups (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994). Furthermore, some system justification theorists have argued that members of low status groups may reduce this dissonance by viewing the social system as *more* fair than members of high status groups, a proposition known as the *status legitimacy hypothesis* (Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). Thus, based on the status legitimacy hypothesis, one would not only expect greater endorsement of meritocracy beliefs among members of low status groups, but also a stronger negative relationship between meritocracy beliefs and perceptions of racism among members of low status groups.

The status legitimacy hypothesis has proven controversial. Recent analyses of representative data sets from the USA and around the world fail to provide support for the status legitimacy hypothesis (Brandt, 2013). In the vast majority of tests of the status legitimacy hypothesis, there was either no difference between high status and low status groups in the perception that the social system was fair or high status groups perceived the system as more fair than low status groups (Brandt, 2013; see also O'Brien & Major, 2005). We expected that system justification motives (meritocracy beliefs) would be of similar magnitude and operate similarly for African Americans and European Americans. Nonetheless, we tested for potential group differences in the relationship between system justification motives and perceptions of racism.

Group Justification Motives and Perceptions of Racism

We examined individual differences in group justification motives by assessing identification with the ingroup. People who strongly identify with their ingroup are motivated to view their ingroup in a positive light and react defensively to threats to group and collective self-esteem (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). For members of high status groups, such as European Americans, a desire to justify or defend the ingroup would be inconsistent with perceiving the ingroup as perpetrators of injustice (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998). Consistent with this argument, European American college students who are the most identified with their group are the least likely to perceive systemic racism in the USA against African Americans (Nelson et al., 2013; see also Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Doosje et al., 1998). Applied to the events of Hurricane Katrina, we expected that among European American community members, group identity would be negatively correlated with perceptions of racism against African Americans in Katrina-related events.

Among members of low status groups, such as African Americans, a desire to justify or defend the ingroup would be inconsistent with perceiving the ingroup's misfortunes and lower status as deserved. Instead, a desire to justify or defend the group should be associated with increased recognition or awareness of racism directed at the group. Consistent with this argument, among African Americans, those most strongly identified with the ingroup perceive the greatest levels of racism directed at the ingroup (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Nelson et al., 2013; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Applied to the events of Hurricane Katrina, we expected that among African American community members, group identity would be positively correlated with perceptions of racism against African Americans in Katrina-related events.

Overview and Hypotheses

The goal of the present research was to examine system justification motives and group justification motives as simultaneous predictors of perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among New Orleans community members. We predicted that

system justification motives and group justification motives would have parallel effects on perceptions of racism for members of high status groups, but that these two motives would have opposite effects on perceptions of racism for members of low status groups. Thus, the present research seeks to provide a more nuanced account of the countervailing forces that predict perceptions of racism among members of low status groups.

To this end, we surveyed African Americans and European Americans residing in New Orleans metropolitan area about their perceptions of racism in events that happened in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Past research on perceptions of racism has often focused on perceptions of racism in society more broadly or on perceptions of racism in hypothetical events (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Nelson et al., 2013; Norton & Sommers, 2011; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). In our research, however, we focused on perceptions of racism in concrete, real-world events among individuals directly affected by those events. For the New Orleans community, Hurricane Katrina was a life-changing event whose ramifications continue to be felt today.

We assessed meritocracy beliefs as a proxy for individual differences in system justification motives and group identity as a proxy for individual differences in group justification motives. In measuring group identity, we focused on both the affective component (an individual's liking for the ingroup or *private regard*; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and the cognitive component (i.e., the centrality of group membership for the individual's self-concept or *identity centrality*; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Past research suggests that both private regard (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013) and identity centrality (e.g., Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003) have a positive relationship with perceptions of societal racism among African Americans.

We are only aware of one study, however, that has examined the relationship between ethnic identity and perceptions of societal racism among European Americans (Nelson et al., 2013). This study found that, among European Americans, there was a negative relationship between private regard and perceptions of systemic racism. In addition, they did not find a relationship between private regard and perceptions of more isolated forms of racism among European Americans. This study, however, did not include a measure of identity centrality and thus was unable to assess whether the affective and cognitive components of group identity operate similarly in predicting perceptions of racism. O'Brien et al. (2009) examined the relationship between perceived racism in Katrina-related events and American identity (i.e., identity centrality and private regard) across two time points. Although neither form of American identity was related to perceived racism at time 1, private regard, but not identity centrality was negatively related to perceived racism at Time 2. Although this study focused on American identity as opposed to ethnic identity, it suggests that it is important to examine different components of identity in order to gain a more complete understanding of the relationship between group identity and perceived racism among European Americans. Thus, the present study has the potential to shed light on the nature of the relationship between group identity and perceived racism among European Americans, a topic that has been understudied to date.

We tested four specific hypotheses in the present research:

Hypothesis 1 In line with ample past research demonstrating status differences in perceptions of racism against members of low status groups, we predicted that African Americans would perceive more racism in Katrina-related events as compared to European Americans. Moreover, we predicted that this group difference would remain even after controlling for demographic variables such as income, education, age, sex, and disaster exposure. Although past research suggested that African Americans were more likely than European Americans to believe that race played a role in Katrina-related events (Page & Puente, 2005), this research did not assess whether people applied the label of “racism” to Katrina-related events nor did it specifically assess perceptions among New Orleans residents.

Hypothesis 2 As system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) should theoretically function similarly for members of low and high status groups, we predicted that meritocracy beliefs would be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among both African Americans and European Americans.

Hypothesis 3 As group justification motives (i.e., group identity) should be differentially related to perceptions of racism as a function of group status, we predicted that private regard (the affective component of group identity) would interact with participant ethnicity to predict perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. Among African Americans, there should be a positive relationship between private regard and perceived racism (Hypothesis 3A). In contrast, among European Americans, there should be a negative relationship between private regard and perceived racism (Hypothesis 3B).

Hypothesis 4 As with private regard, we predicted that identity centrality (the cognitive component of group identity) would interact with participant ethnicity to predict perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. Among African Americans, there should be a positive relationship between identity centrality and perceived racism (Hypothesis 4A). However, among European Americans, there should be a negative relationship between identity centrality and perceived racism (Hypothesis 4B).

Methods

Participants

Community members living in post-Katrina New Orleans participated in exchange for \$30. Out of the original sample of 337 participants, we identified 270 individuals who met our inclusion criteria (i.e., identified as African American or European American and completed all measures used in the present analyses). Of these 270 individuals, 244 indicated that they lived in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina,

20 indicated that they did not live in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina, and 6 had missing data for this variable. Since we sought to examine perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among New Orleans community members, we conducted hypothesis testing with the 244 New Orleans residents (55.7 % African American, 61.5 % female).¹

Participants were between 18 and 81 years of age ($M = 44.9$, $SD = 15.58$). The proportion of female participants was similar for European Americans and African Americans, $\chi^2(1) < 1$. Consistent with the demographic makeup of New Orleans, in our sample, African Americans were younger, $t(242) = -5.40$, $p < .001$, had less formal education, $t(242) = -7.21$, $p < .001$, and had lower household incomes, $t(242) = -8.00$, $p < .001$, than European Americans. In addition, compared to European Americans, African Americans reported higher levels of exposure to Hurricane Katrina, $t(242) = 10.02$, $p < .001$.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via advertising in the local newspaper, *The Times Picayune*. In addition, participants were recruited via the “snow-ball method”; individuals were given flyers after participation to distribute to family, friends, etc. Recruitment materials made no mention of race or perceptions of racism in Hurricane Katrina-related events; instead, the study was described as a survey of New Orleanians’ experiences during Hurricane Katrina.

Participants took part in the study at a convenient off-campus location in groups ranging in size from one to four individuals. When participants arrived to the laboratory, they were greeted by a two-person research team. Research assistants were both African American and European American, and an effort was made to have at least one African American and one European American research assistant present for each session. After obtaining consent, participants completed a packet of counterbalanced questionnaires, including our primary dependent measures. When participants had completed the questionnaire packet, they were debriefed and paid. Data collection took place approximately 2 years post-Katrina.

Measures

Meritocracy Beliefs

Meritocracy beliefs were assessed with an eight-item scale (adapted from Levin et al., 1998; see Major et al., 2007) that taps into participants’ beliefs in both the Protestant work ethic (e.g., “If people work hard they almost always get what they want,” “Getting ahead in life doesn’t always depend on hard work”) and individual mobility beliefs (e.g., “Our society is an open society where all individuals can achieve higher status,” “Advancement in our society is possible for all

¹ We also conducted the analyses reported below with the 26 non-residents included, and the results were largely unchanged. The only difference was that the marginally significant meritocracy \times ethnicity interaction ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .057$) emerged as significant ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .05$) when non-residents were included.

individuals”). The possible range of scores was from zero to six with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of meritocracy beliefs. The measure showed acceptable reliability (African Americans: $\alpha = .65$, European Americans: $\alpha = .85$).

Racial Private Regard

We assessed participants’ evaluative judgments of their ethnic group with the 4-item *private regard* subscale from the Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) collective self-esteem scale (e.g., “In general, I’m glad to be African American/White,” “I feel good about being African American/White”).² The possible range of scores was from 0 to 6 with higher scores indicating higher levels of identity. The scale demonstrated adequate reliability (African Americans: $\alpha = .67$, European Americans: $\alpha = .69$).

Racial Identity Centrality

We assessed the importance of participants’ ethnic identity to their self-concept with two items from the *identity centrality* subscale from the Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) collective self-esteem scale (i.e., “Being African American/White is an important reflection of who I am” and “In general, being African American/White is an important part of my self-image”). African American and European American participants received the same items, adapted to be specific to their ethnic group. The possible range of scores was from 0 to 6 with higher scores indicating higher levels of identity. The two items were highly correlated for African Americans, $r = .54$, $p < .001$, and for European Americans, $r = .59$, $p < .001$.³

Perceptions of Racism in Hurricane Katrina-Related Events

Six items measured the extent to which participants perceived racism in events that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The items were based on claims of racism made immediately following Hurricane Katrina (e.g., “The US Federal Government’s slow response to New Orleans residents during the Katrina disaster,” “Media descriptions of White Americans as ‘finding’ food while Black Americans were labeled as ‘looting.’”; O’Brien et al., 2009). See Table 1 for a complete list of items and item means and standard deviations by participant race. Participants rated the extent to which they believed that racism played a role in each event on a seven-point, Likert-type scale, with scores ranging from zero to six. Higher scores indicate greater perceived racism in Katrina-related events. The scale demonstrated adequate reliability (African Americans: $\alpha = .81$, European Americans: $\alpha = .85$).

² The ethnic labels used in the scale were *African American* and *White* because these labels are used most frequently in the local community. However, we use the term *European American* throughout the paper in order to use parallel language to describe both ethnic groups.

³ Participants completed all four items from the original identity centrality subscale; however, for African Americans, the reverse-coded items were uncorrelated with the forward-coded items and including them yielded an unreliable scale. Therefore, for both ethnic groups we created a two-item scale that only consisted of the forward-coded items.

Table 1 Perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events

Measure	African Americans		European Americans		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
The US federal government's slow response to the New Orleans residents during the Katrina disaster	4.88	1.76	2.58	2.00	1.22
The levee breaks that left the poorest areas of New Orleans devastated beyond repair while the affluent areas suffered minor damage	4.55	2.00	1.57	1.90	1.53
Media use of the term "refugees" to describe hurricane evacuees	5.08	1.67	2.31	2.11	1.46
Gretna police refuse to let New Orleanians cross a bridge to the West Bank in order to escape the city	5.06	1.72	3.10	2.11	1.02
Media descriptions of White Americans as "finding" food while Black Americans were labeled as "looting."	5.07	1.73	3.32	2.00	.94
Leaving New Orleans residents trapped for days inside the Superdome	5.28	1.48	2.79	2.20	1.33

Items were measured on a 0–6 response scale

Ethnic differences were significant on all items at the $p < .001$ level

Disaster Exposure

Exposure to Hurricane Katrina and disaster-related stressors was measured using a composite variable consisting of four indicators. These indicators include flood damage to participants' home (not at all, less than 6 in., 6 in.–3 ft., 3 ft.–9 ft., 9ft.+), neighborhood damage (not at all, not very much, moderate damage, substantial damage, total damage), length of evacuation (never left, 1 month, 2–4 months, 5–7 months, 8–10 months, 10–13 months), and whether or not participants were residing in their pre-Katrina home. The scale demonstrated adequate reliability (African Americans: $\alpha = .69$, European Americans: $\alpha = .64$).

Results

Ethnic Differences

In order to explore ethnic differences on the variables of interest, we performed a multivariate analysis of variance on meritocracy beliefs, identity centrality, private regard, and perceived racism in Katrina-related events. The MANOVA was significant, Wilks' $\lambda = .53$, $F(4, 239) = 53.67$, $p < .001$. Next, we conducted one-way univariate ANOVAs for each dependent variable. See Table 2.

As expected, African Americans perceived more racism in Katrina-related events than European Americans, $F(1, 242) = 160.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.61$. Moreover, the magnitude of this effect size was large, far surpassing Cohen's (1988) recommendation that effect sizes larger than .8 be considered "large". African Americans also had higher levels of private regard for their ethnic group ($F(1, 242) = 10.10$,

Table 2 Ethnic differences in key psychological constructs

Measure	African Americans		European Americans		Difference <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	
Private regard	5.21 _b	1.09	4.79 _a	0.95	.41
Identity centrality	5.05 _b	1.43	3.31 _a	1.67	1.12
Meritocracy beliefs	2.99 _a	0.99	2.93 _a	1.11	.06
Perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events	4.97 _b	1.29	2.64 _a	1.58	1.61

All measures used 0–6 response scales

Means in the same row with differing subscripts (a vs. b) differ at $p < .01$ level

$p < .01$, $d = .41$) and higher levels of identity centrality [$F(1, 242) = 76.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$] than European Americans. There were, however, no differences between African Americans and European Americans in endorsement of meritocracy beliefs, $F < 1$, $d = .06$.

Predicting Perceptions of Racism in Katrina-Related Events

We examined predictors of racism in Katrina-related events using regression analyses. We entered ethnicity, the demographic and control variables (age, sex, education, income, and disaster exposure), the key psychological variables of interest (meritocracy beliefs, private regard, and identity centrality), and the interactions between ethnicity and meritocracy beliefs, ethnicity and private regard, and ethnicity and identity centrality.⁴

The overall regression equation was significant, $R^2 = .53$, $F(12, 231) = 21.34$, $p < .001$. See Table 3. Among the demographic covariates, the only significant variable was education, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$, such that higher levels of education were associated with lower levels of perceived racism. This finding was unexpected, and we return to it in the discussion.

Hypothesis 1 We hypothesized that, in contrast to the status legitimacy hypothesis, African Americans would perceive more racism in Katrina-related events as compared to European Americans. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, there was a significant effect of ethnicity, $\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$. As expected, African Americans perceived more racism in Katrina-related events than European Americans even after taking into account variables that covaried with ethnicity in the present sample.

⁴ We view system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) and group justification motives (i.e., group identity) as independent predictors of perceptions of racism. An alternative approach, however, would be to hypothesize and test interactive effects of system and group justification motives on perceptions of racism. Although we did not make a priori predictions that there would be interactive effects of system justification motives and group justification motives on perceptions of racism, we conducted exploratory analyses in which we tested the three-way interactions that emerge from this approach (ethnicity \times meritocracy beliefs \times private regard and ethnicity \times meritocracy beliefs \times identity centrality). These three-way interactions were nonsignificant, and the results reported below were unchanged when the three-way interactions were included in the model.

Table 3 Predictors of perceptions of Katrina-related racism

Predictor	β
Age	-.01
Sex	-.03
Education	-.16**
Income	-.03
Disaster exposure	.06
Ethnicity	-.44***
Meritocracy beliefs	-.22***
Private regard	-.02
Identity centrality	.18**
Merit beliefs \times ethnicity	-.09 [†]
Private regard \times ethnicity	-.16**
Identity centrality \times ethnicity	-.01

[†] $p < .10$, ** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2 As system justification motives should theoretically operate similarly for low and high status groups, we hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between meritocracy beliefs and perceived racism in Katrina-related events among both African Americans and European Americans. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant negative effect of meritocracy beliefs on perceptions of racism, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$. There was, however, an unexpected marginally significant interaction between meritocracy beliefs and ethnicity, $\beta = -.09$, $p = .057$. Although meritocracy beliefs were negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among both European Americans and African Americans, this relationship was statistically significant among European Americans ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$) and only marginally significant among African Americans ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .059$).

Hypothesis 3 As group justification motives should operate differently for members of low and high status groups, we predicted that private regard would interact with ethnicity such that private regard would be positively related to perceived racism among African Americans (Hypothesis 3A), but negatively related to perceived racism among European Americans (Hypothesis 3B). Although the main effect for private regard was not significant ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .721$), the expected interaction was significant ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$). Among African Americans, private regard was positively related to perceptions of racism, $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$; however, among European Americans, private regard was negatively related to perceptions of racism, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$.

Hypothesis 4 Finally, we predicted that identity centrality would interact with ethnicity such that identity centrality would be positively related to perceived racism among African Americans (Hypothesis 4A), but negatively related to perceived racism among European Americans (Hypothesis 4B). Contrary to predictions, there was only a significant main effect of identity centrality ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$) such that higher levels of identity centrality were associated

with greater perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. This main effect was not qualified by an interaction with ethnicity ($\beta = -.01, p = .796$), suggesting that identity centrality was positively associated with perceptions of racism for *both* African American and European American individuals. Thus, hypothesis 4A was supported, but hypothesis 4B was not.

Discussion

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the role of racism in events such as the federal government's response to the disaster and media coverage of the disaster became a hotly contested topic. The present research applied system justification theory in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) and group justification motives (i.e., group identity) predicted perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among African Americans and European Americans residing in New Orleans. We expected that system and group justification motives would have parallel effects for European Americans—that is, both system justification and group justification motives should be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. In contrast, we expected that system and group justification motives would have opposite effects for African Americans—that is, system justification motives should be negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events, while group justification motives should be positively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events.

In a sample of New Orleans community members, European Americans perceived much lower levels of racism in Katrina-related events than African Americans. In addition, as hypothesized, there was evidence that both system and group justification motives independently contributed to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. Meritocracy beliefs were negatively related to perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among both European Americans and African Americans. Private regard for the ingroup, a proxy for group justification, was negatively related to perceptions of racism among European Americans, but positively related to perceptions of racism among African Americans. Thus, as expected, system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) and group justification motives (i.e., private regard for the ingroup) have parallel effects on perceptions of discrimination among European Americans and opposing effects on perceptions of discrimination among African Americans (see also Jost et al., 2001; Levin et al., 1998).

The present study contributes to a growing body of research that challenges the status legitimacy hypothesis (e.g., Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006b; Brandt, 2013; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Nelson et al., 2013). Following from the status legitimacy hypothesis, African Americans should be more motivated to legitimize the social system than European Americans. If this were the case, one might not only expect higher endorsement of meritocracy beliefs among African Americans, *but also* expect a stronger negative relationship between meritocracy beliefs and perceptions of racism among members of low status groups. Instead, however, we

found no ethnic differences in meritocracy beliefs. Furthermore, although meritocracy beliefs were strongly related to decreased perceptions of racism among European Americans, meritocracy beliefs were only marginally related to decreased perceptions of racism among African Americans. Thus, while system justification motives are present among African Americans, their effects on perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events were weak and group justification motives may act as a countervailing force to system justification motives in predicting perceptions of racism.

Another important contribution of the present research is that we examined perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events among individuals highly impacted by the disaster—European American and African American community members residing in New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Whereas most research examining perceptions of racism focuses on the interpretation of racism in hypothetical scenarios among college students, the current research is strengthened by its focus on community members' interpretation of racism in real-life events. Hurricane Katrina was a watershed event that continues to be very salient in the everyday lives of New Orleans residents. The present study provides documentation of the community's interpretation of the role of racism in an important historical event. The findings from the present study may also prove useful to policy makers and other public officials who strive to help communities heal and move forward following similar events.

Although the results of the present study largely supported our hypotheses, some unexpected findings emerged. Although private regard was differentially related to perceptions of racism among African Americans and European Americans, identity centrality was positively related to perceptions of racism among both African Americans and European Americans. The positive relationship among African Americans was consistent with our expectations; however, the positive relationship among European Americans was in direct opposition to our hypotheses. Whereas private regard is a more affective component of group identity, identity centrality is a more cognitive component of group identity and, as such, may be less closely linked to group justification motives. People who are high in racial identity centrality may be more likely to view the world through the lens of race, which leads to higher perceptions of racism among both African Americans and European Americans. Some scholars have argued that a greater awareness of racial identity among European Americans has the potential to improve intergroup attitudes and relationships if European Americans develop a greater understanding of how race impacts the lives of all Americans (e.g., Helms, 1992).

The literature on identity among members of dominant groups is complex and often yields contradictory findings (e.g., Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Knowles & Pang, 2005). When considering both the affective and cognitive components of identity, the present research yields findings similar to O'Brien et al. (2009) research examining perceptions of racism among European Americans. That is, among European Americans, American private regard was negatively related to perceived racism in Katrina-related events, but American identity centrality had no relationship to perceived racism (O'Brien et al., 2009). Thus, we see that for both American identity and ethnic identity, private regard and identity centrality are

differentially related to perceptions of racism among European Americans both when considering American identity and ethnic identity. Together, these findings suggest that using multifaceted measures of identity may help elucidate the complicated nature of the relationship between identity and perceptions of racism (see also Leach et al., 2008).

An unexpected negative relationship between education and perceived racism emerged such that individuals with higher levels of education perceived lower levels of racism. Moreover, additional analyses suggested that the relationship between education and perceived racism was not moderated by race. Although curricula targeted toward educating people about structural causes of inequality can raise awareness of societal racism (e.g., Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008; Lopez, 2004), the relationship between formal education and attitudes toward inequality is complex and at times education can lead to more sophisticated justifications of inequality (Federico & Sidanius, 2002a, b). Given that the relationship between education and perceived racism was small in magnitude and that there were several covariates included in the model, it is possible that this relationship is spurious and should be interpreted with caution. The relationship between formal education and perceptions of racism in society more broadly is an important avenue for additional research.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our theoretical model proposes that system justification motives (e.g., meritocracy beliefs) and group justification motives (e.g., group identity) directly impact the amount of racism that individuals perceive in society. There are, however, a few important limitations inherent in our approach to testing this model that should be noted.

First, although meritocracy beliefs are often thought to serve a system-justifying function (e.g., Eliezer et al., 2011; Major et al., 2002; McCoy & Major, 2007; O'Brien & Major, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2012), this may not always be the case (Son Hing et al., 2011). For example, beyond serving as a motivation to justify the social system, the endorsement of meritocracy beliefs among members of low status groups may reflect a cognitive identity management strategy (e.g., Rubin & Hewstone, 2004). In addition, one's past personal experiences observing unfairness could contribute to a tendency to see the world as less fair. These two alternatives highlight possible non-motivated sources of meritocracy beliefs. Furthermore, meritocracy beliefs may be more likely to serve a system justification function among members of high status groups than members of low status groups. To this end, the negative relationship between meritocracy beliefs and perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events was weaker among African Americans than European Americans. Although this group difference may be due to ceiling effects in perceptions of racism among African Americans, it is also possible that meritocracy beliefs have a different meaning among African Americans as compared to European Americans. Given that African Americans and European Americans endorsed meritocracy beliefs at equivalent levels in the present study, the question of whether meritocracy beliefs have different meaning for African

Americans and European Americans will be an important direction for future research.

Second, because the present research is a cross-sectional survey, we are unable to assess causal relationships among the variables. In addition to manipulating system and group justification motives in future experimental research, longitudinal research should be conducted in order to fully examine the interrelationships among system justification, group justification, and perceptions of racism. In past research, system justification motives (i.e., meritocracy beliefs) at Time 1 predicted perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events at Time 2 after controlling for perceptions of racism at Time 1 (O'Brien et al., 2009). Further, experimental research has found that meritocracy beliefs do constitute a system justification motive and play a causal role in predicting perceptions of discrimination (McCoy & Major, 2007). This suggests that system justification motives can indeed lower perceptions of racism. Nonetheless, it is likely that the relationships between meritocracy beliefs and perceived racism are bidirectional such that perceiving high levels of racism almost certainly reduces people's faith in the existence of a meritocratic system.

Third, we tested system justification motives and group justification motives as independent predictors of perceptions of racism in Katrina-related events. While we expected that the relationship between these motivations and perceptions of racism would depend on group status, such that they would operate in parallel for European Americans and in opposition for African Americans, we conceptualized these motives as independent predictors of perceptions of racism. It is also possible, however, that the effects of system justification and group justification motives on perceptions of racism are interactive. Although we found no evidence in exploratory analyses that system justification motives and group justification motives interact to predict perceptions of racism, additional research is needed to more thoroughly examine the potential for independent versus interactive effects of system and group justification motives when predicting perceptions of racism.

The present study focused on participants' perceptions of relatively institutionalized manifestations of racism that harmed African Americans in Katrina-related events such as the slow government response to the disaster. Compared to more individualistic forms of racism, perceptions of institutionalized racism may be particularly threatening to system justification motives because the existence of institutionalized racism suggests that instead of being isolated incidents carried out by individuals, racism is systemic and widespread (O'Brien et al., 2009). The existence of institutionalized racism also raises questions about the extent to which European Americans benefit from unearned racial privileges, and European Americans respond more defensively to institutionalized forms of racism than individualistic forms of racism (Nelson et al., 2013; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). In line with both of these perspectives on the threatening nature of institutional racism, racial differences in perceptions of institutionalized racism are larger than racial differences in perceptions of individualistic racism (Nelson et al., 2013). Thus, the present research focused on a type of racism that may have been especially likely to elicit both system and group justification motives. Future research should examine system justification motives and group justification motives as simultaneous

predictors of perceptions of both individualistic and institutionalized forms of racism.

Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina and the government response to the disaster were important historical events that affected the lives of millions of individuals living near the Gulf Coast. The present research demonstrates that system justification motives and group justification motives independently predicted perceptions of racism among community members directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. By taking into account when and why individuals perceive racism, the present research may inform the understanding of disagreements surrounding the role of racism in the highly publicized police shootings and physical assaults of African American individuals (e.g., Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York). Because disagreements about racism can contribute to intergroup distrust and harm intergroup relations, it is critical to understand the source of these disagreements. Furthermore, the present findings may have important implications for policy makers. Recognizing racism is an important first step to taking action to eliminate it. To the extent that we are able to understand the factors that affect perceptions of racism among the general populace, we will be better able to increase recognition of racism and build support for policy changes within the community directed at lessening the existence of systemic forms of racism.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest There were no conflicts of interest in this work.

Informed Consent All data were collected following ethical standards, including informed consent.

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