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Priming meritocracy and the psychological justification of inequality ☆

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Abstract

The belief that status in society is based on merit is a central feature of the American Dream. This belief system justifies status inequalities by locating the cause of status differences in the individual talents and efforts of group members. We hypothesized that activating meritocratic beliefs increases the extent to which individuals psychologically justify status inequalities, even when those inequalities are disadvantageous to the self. Specifically, we hypothesized that priming meritocracy prompts individuals to engage in system-justifying psychological responses when they experience threat either at the personal or group level. Across two studies, priming meritocracy led members of a low status group to justify both personal and group disadvantage by decreasing perceptions of discrimination (Studies 1 and 2) and increasing the extent to which they stereotyped themselves and their group in status-justifying ways (Study 2).

Keywords: System justification; Meritocracy; Discrimination; Sexism; Stereotype

Introduction

Americans adhere to a cultural worldview in which social rewards and status are assumed to reflect individual merit and hard work (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). This worldview is a central component of the American Dream and is reflected in the cultural stories of "Horatio Alger" and "The Little Engine that Could," which promote the belief that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough and are talented enough. Although endorsement of this belief in a meritocracy varies at the individual level, it is so widely held that it has been termed America's dominant ideology (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). By locating the responsibility for social status within the efforts and abilities of individuals, the belief in meritocracy legitimizes existing status differences among individuals and groups and helps to justify the status quo (Augustinos, 1998; Gramsci, 1937/1971; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lukacs, 1923/1971; Major, 1994; Major et al., 2002; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Thompson, 1990). In the current research, we examine the extent to which the belief in meritocracy leads individuals to psychologically justify status inequalities, even when those inequalities are disadvantageous to the self.

Meritocracy and the justification of inequality

If the status hierarchy is based on merit, the logical inference is that those who have higher status must also be more talented, valuable, hardworking, or in other ways more meritorious than those who have lower status. Indeed, research has shown that the more strongly individuals endorse meritocratic beliefs such as the belief in individual mobility (BIM; the belief that any individual can get ahead, regardless of their group membership), the protestant work ethic (PWE; the belief that hard work leads to success), or the belief in a just world (BJW), the more they favor members of higher status groups over lower status groups (e.g. Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002) and blame members of lower status groups for their relative disadvantage (e.g. Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Crandall, 1994; Katz & Hass, 1988). Thus,

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individuals who endorse a meritocratic worldview psychologically justify the status hierarchy by viewing members of high status groups as more deserving than low status groups.

The system-justifying effects of endorsing meritocratic beliefs also occur among members of disadvantaged or lower status groups. For example, Hafer and Olson (1989) denied participants "bonus points" on a computer task and asked them to rate the fairness of the procedures used to assign these points. Individuals who strongly endorsed BJW were more likely to perceive the denial of points as fair and just than individuals who less strongly endorsed BJW, even when cues to the unfairness of the procedure were provided. Working women, who are aware of their group's disadvantage relative to men, are more likely to perceive their own low job status as reasonable the more they endorse BJW (Hafer & Olson, 1993). Overweight individuals who endorse PWE are more likely to endorse anti-fat attitudes, to believe that weight is personally controllable, and to view being overweight as a personal failing (Crandall, 1994; Quinn & Crocker, 1999). In sum, the belief in meritocracy leads to different assumptions about the deservingness or "worthiness" of members of high and low status groups. These system-justifying assumptions appear to be made not only about other groups, but also about one's own group, even when such assumptions appear to be disadvantageous.

These different assumptions about the relative deserving of members of high and low status groups influence how people explain differential outcomes among social groups. If social status is assumed to be based on merit, one's own (or ingroup's) lower status will be seen as due more to a lack of effort or ability than to the discrimination of others. It follows, then, that the more members of low status groups endorse a meritocracy worldview the more they may fail to recognize the extent to which they, or their group, face discrimination. In contrast, the belief in meritocracy suggests that high status group members deserve their position of relative advantage. Consequently, the more members of high status groups endorse a meritocracy worldview, the more they may view outcomes that favor low, over high, status groups or individuals as a violation of distributive justice principles. Based on this reasoning, Major and colleagues (Major et al., 2002) hypothesized that greater endorsement of meritocratic beliefs would be associated with a reduced tendency among members of low status groups to see themselves and their group as victims of discrimination but with an enhanced tendency among members of high status groups to see themselves and their group as victims of discrimination.

Across a series of three studies, Major et al. (2002) found support for these hypotheses using an individual difference measure of the belief in meritocracy. For example, in their third study, women and men were rejected for a desirable role on a workgroup team by a member of the other sex. The more strongly women endorsed meritocratic beliefs, the less likely they were to attribute rejection by a man (higher status) to discrimination. In contrast, the more strongly men endorsed meritocratic beliefs the more likely they were to attribute rejection by a woman (lower status) to discrimination. These studies did not demonstrate, however, that endorsement of meritocracy leads members of low status groups to psychologically justify their own disadvantage by blaming themselves for the rejection (i.e. no effect on internal attribution). Because individuals who do not recognize that they are treated unjustly will not protest, status differences in perceptions of discrimination among those who endorse the belief in meritocracy serves to justify and maintain the existing status hierarchy.

The above studies suggest that meritocratic beliefs lead people to engage in system justifying attributions. Because meritocratic beliefs were measured rather than manipulated in the above research, however, they do not establish the causal impact of meritocracy beliefs on attributions. It is possible that some unmeasured variable, rather than meritocracy beliefs, was responsible for the observed pattern of results. Furthermore, because meritocracy beliefs were measured as an individual difference variable, these studies imply that psychological system justification may occur only among individuals who strongly endorse a meritocratic worldview. We believe that because meritocracy is a dominant worldview in North American society it is well known to members of this cultural context, even if they do not personally endorse this worldview. Thus, we believe that subtle meritocracy cues in the immediate environment can induce system justifying responses among individuals who are aware of this worldview, irrespective of personal endorsement. Finally, previous research has not directly tested the hypothesis that meritocracy beliefs can lead members of low status groups to psychologically justify the system by perceiving their own disadvantage as deserved.

The current research extended our prior research (Major et al., 2002) in several ways. First, rather than measuring individual differences in meritocracy beliefs, the studies reported here experimentally manipulated meritocracy beliefs using a subtle priming procedure. Study 1 examined whether experimentally activating meritocracy influences attributions of personal disadvantage to discrimination in a manner similar to personal endorsement of meritocracy beliefs. Second, we extended our prior research by examining whether activating meritocracy beliefs can lead to the psychological justification of blatant ingroup disadvantage (Study 2), as well as personal disadvantage (Study 1). Third, in addition to examining the effects of activating meritocracy beliefs on attributions (Study 1), we also examined their impact on the extent to which participants viewed their group as a target of discrimination, and stereotyped themselves and their group in system-justifying ways (Study 2).

Priming meritocracy

Meritocracy cues are ubiquitous in North American society. From media advertisements (e.g. Nike's "Just do it" campaign) to children's stories (e.g. *The Little Engine That Could*: "I think I can") to cultural icons (e.g., Horatio