2

BELIEFS ABOUT THE INTERPERSONAL VS. STRUCTURAL NATURE OF RACISM AND RESPONSES TO RACIAL INEQUALITY

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A large body of social science research has provided evidence that egalitarian norms and principles regarding race have become widely endorsed throughout American society. The magnitude of this egalitarian shift in racial attitudes, during the past 50-some odd years, has been perhaps most significant among White Americans. For instance, during the course of the past half-century, White Americans have expressed increasing levels of comfort with racial integration and intermarriage, become much less likely to believe in the biological inferiority of racial minorities, and become much more likely to endorse the view that racial discrimination is unacceptable (Bobo, 2001). In 2008, this egalitarian shift ostensibly led to and was realized in the election of an African American President of the United States—a feat that seemed inconceivable just a decade earlier. Yet, despite this rapid endorsement of racially egalitarian principles and ideals, as well as the landmark civil rights legislative victories of the 1960s (e.g., the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), many stark racial disparities persist in the United States.

Indeed, in nearly every important domain of life, from education to wealth, substantial racial disparities exist in the nation. Relative to non-Hispanic White Americans, for instance, Black Americans have markedly elevated rates of HIV/AIDS, heart disease, diabetes, nearly every form of cancer, infant mortality and just about any other metric of poor health (Washington, 2006). Striking racial disparities in economic resources are also readily apparent. The median wealth of White households, for example, is between 10 and 20 times that of Black and Latino households, and this gap may be continuing to widen (Pew Research Center, 2011). Moreover, a disproportionate number of Black and Latino Americans tend to live in hyper-segregated, less affluent neighborhoods that, compared to more affluent, predominantly White neighborhoods, suffer from higher unemployment and crime rates, and have poorer quality schools and public services (Massey & Denton, 1993; Shedd, 2015).

The obstinacy and ubiquity of these racial inequities, however, is difficult to reconcile with evidence of an apparently widespread ethos of racial egalitarianism in the United States. Indeed, social scientists from Du bois to Myrdal have long focused on this disconnect between the

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egalitarian ideals and profound racial inequalities of the United States (e.g., Du Bois, 1903; Myrdal, 1944). The present chapter continues in this tradition, focusing on how psychological science can help make sense of this clear disconnect between the widespread societal endorsement of racially egalitarian principles and persistent racial inequality throughout American society.

Specifically, here we review social psychological literature on prejudice bearing on this disconnect, focusing primarily on the relationship between beliefs about the nature of racism—as either primarily interpersonal or primarily structural—and individuals' tendency to perceive (or acknowledge) racial inequality as well as how they reason about it. Although we draw upon research largely conducted in and pertaining to the U.S. context, we believe that the principles and processes we review here are likely relevant to other national contexts (e.g., Billig, 1991; Tileagă, 2016; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Indeed, work in discursive psychology, much of which has been conducted outside of the United States, has illustrated the strategic employment of different conceptualizations of racism (often, the denial of racial prejudice) as a means of both justifying personally held negative attitudes toward outgroups and mitigating evidence of intergroup inequality (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Similarly, we expect many of the principles and processes we highlight to apply to dimensions of social identity and social stratification other than race.

Racism: Interpersonal or structural?

Social scientific scholarship on the nature of racism (e.g., Allport, 1954; Duckitt, 1992; Jones, 1996; Richeson & Sommers, 2016) has long emphasized the roles of both personal-level processes and societal-level factors. Interpersonal racism can be defined as holding negative attitudes toward members of different racial and/or ethnic groups. Conceptually, interpersonal racism and racial prejudice can be viewed as one in the same and individuals' prejudices, be they held explicitly or more implicitly, are thought to be the root cause of discriminatory behavior. Structural racism, in contrast, can be defined as a set of policies, practices and/or laws that have a disparate impact on members of particular racial or ethnic groups. Again, these practices can be intentional and explicit in their inclusion/exclusion of members of different groups, or, rather, can do so unintentionally or more subtly. Moreover, structural racism need not necessarily stem from the discriminatory beliefs or intentions of any individual or group of individuals. Evidence of racially disparate outcomes of a policy or practice, then, may suggest the potential presence of structural racism.

Both interpersonal and structural forms of racism are of great concern, as either can be quite harmful to the livelihood of members of racial minority groups, and undermine both meritocratic and democratic societal principles. Because overt racially discriminatory laws have largely been deemed unconstitutional in the United States for the past 50 years, however, concern about the lingering role that structural forms of racism play in contemporary national racial disparities may be under-appreciated. Analyses of surveys examining the beliefs held by American adults are consistent with this idea (Rucker, Duker, & Richeson, 2020a). In one recent nationally representative survey (CNN & Kaiser Family Foundation, 2015), respondents were asked, "which is the bigger problem today?; individuals' own beliefs and prejudices that cause them to treat those of other races poorly" (indicative of a relatively interpersonal racism view), or "discrimination that is historically built into our society and institutions" (indicative of a relatively structural racism view). In a second recent survey (Pew Research Center, 2016), respondents were asked "when it comes to discrimination against Black people in our country today, which do you think is the bigger problem?" Respondents were once again offered two response options: "discrimination that is based on the prejudice of individual people" (indicative of an interpersonal view of racism), or "discrimination that is built into our laws and institutions" (indicative of a structural

view of racism). In both samples, respondents were more likely to indicate that interpersonal racism is a bigger contemporary problem in the United States than is structural racism (64% and 75% selecting "interpersonal" in the CNN/KFF and Pew samples, respectively).

Despite this perception, there is considerable evidence to suggest that structural (or "institutional") forms of racism continue play a significant role in maintaining societal racial inequality (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cogburn, 2019; Jones,1996; Massey & Denton, 1993; Richeson, 2018; Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018). One recent example of structural racism found throughout the contemporary United States, for instance, is the passage of voter identification laws—the requirement that citizens produce official government-issued forms of identification in order to cast a ballot in elections for public office. Regardless of the intentions of the lawmakers, these laws often have a disparate negative impact on voter turnout among members of racial minority (and lower SES) groups (e.g., Hajnal, Lajevardi, & Nielson, 2017).

Despite its importance and potential impact, there has been relatively little research in the social psychological literature examining either the antecedents or consequences of holding a structural, relative to interpersonal, understanding of racism. It stands to reason, however, that a greater tendency to understand racism as a product of unfair structures and institutions, rather than solely as a product of biased individuals, may play an important role in how an individual may reason about and respond to evidence of societal racial inequality. Imagine, for instance, an organization that has a pronounced racial disparity in the promotion rates of White employees and employees of color. A person with a largely interpersonal understanding of racism may only be concerned about this inequality if it appears to have resulted from racial biases among the managers involved in promotion decisions. A person with a relatively structural understanding of racism, by contrast, is likely to view this disparity as evidence that something is awry in terms of company policy regarding promotions or, perhaps even, disparities in the climate of the company for racial minority relative to White employees that must be addressed, regardless of the potential biases (or lack thereof) among the managers. Consistent with this logic, O'Brien and colleagues (2009) found that holding a more structural, rather than interpersonal, understanding of racism predicted the extent to which White undergraduate students in the New Orleans area perceived racism as a cause of the racially disparate relief efforts and outcomes following Hurricane Katrina.

In the balance of this chapter, we will briefly present work on a growing literature exploring the causes and consequences of holding a belief in, if not appreciation of, structural racism in contemporary U.S. society. Specifically, we will discuss evidence regarding the potential roles of both motivated reasoning and education in adopting an interpersonal rather than structural lay belief about the nature of racism. We will then review emerging literature on some of the implications of holding a structural, rather than interpersonal, lay belief; namely, holding a structural lay belief predicts the perception of, and more equity-enhancing responses to, racial inequality. We close the chapter with a discussion of needed directions for future research on both the roots and consequences of individuals' lay beliefs about nature of racism.

What shapes individuals' lay beliefs?

Despite the ubiquity and gravity of structural racism in the United States, there is considerable variance in the extent to which Americans appear to be aware of and/or acknowledge its impact in contemporary society. One factor that is especially predictive of having an appreciation of structural racism is an individuals' own racial group membership. White Americans, relative to Americans from racial minority groups and especially relative to Black Americans, tend to hold an interpersonal model of racism and largely reject more structural understandings (e.g., Bobo, 2001; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Consistent with this literature, in

our analyses of the aforementioned nationally representative samples, we found clear differences in the extent to which respondents endorsed an interpersonal rather than structural model of racism as a function of their racial group membership (Rucker et al., 2020a). Specifically, whereas over two-thirds of White respondents tended to endorse an interpersonal, rather than structural, view of racism, the ratio was closer to fifty percent among racial minority respondents. Moreover, similar perceptual "gaps" have also been observed along other dimensions of identity, suggesting that this phenomenon may generalize across different social identity contexts. For instance, work by Blodorn and colleagues (2012) has found that women, relative to men, were more likely to recognize structural forms of gender discrimination. Of course, group membership is simply a proxy for individuals' experiences within and beliefs about the world. It is these beliefs that are likely to shape subsequent perceptions of inequality. Next, we consider motivational and experiential factors that may help to explain these broad group differences.

Motivation

While any number of factors may contribute to this racial group difference in the tendency to hold a structural, rather than interpersonal, lay belief about racism, motivations to protect the self, group, or even the societal hierarchical system are likely to play a role. For instance, several bodies of research document the role of self- and group-image protection in motivating members of relatively high-status, dominant groups (e.g., White Americans) to justify their societal status (see Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014, for a review). At the individual level, for example, there is evidence that self-image concerns play a meaningful role in White Americans' perceptions of racism and reactions to racial inequity. Central to this work are the insights of Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988), which posits that humans have a fundamental psychological drive to have an overall positive experience of the self. Allowing oneself to maintain a global perception of being good, moral and capable can safeguard against threats to specific domains of the self.

Similarly, at the group level, Social Identify Theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers an important perspective on the differential endorsement of structural vs. interpersonal racism beliefs among White and racial minority group members. Across a wide body of research, Tajfel and colleagues have not only demonstrated the relative ease with which individuals divide themselves into groups on the basis of (sometimes quite arbitrary) distinctions but also the important connections between positive views of the self and of one's social groups (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). And, further, they have demonstrated how threats to the image of the group as good, moral and competent can undermine individual self-esteem (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Consequently, evidence of unearned group advantage or, worse, advantages/status accrued through intergroup aggression and discrimination, pose threats to the value and morality of the group for members of high-status racial groups (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). The potential for, if not experience of, group-image threat for dominant group members, then, could make it especially difficult to acknowledge the role that structural racism, relative to interpersonal racism, plays in current levels of racial inequality (e.g., Kluegel & Bobo, 2001; see also Phillips & Lowery, 2015).

Consistent with this idea, Adams and colleagues (2006) found that White Americans' own perceptions of racism, as well as their beliefs that other Whites Americans understate the extent of racism, varied as a function of self-image threat. Specifically, in this work, White and Latino participants went through an affirmation manipulation (e.g., Fein & Spencer, 1997) wherein they ranked 11 predesignated topics in terms of their personal importance. In the affirmed condition, participants were subsequently asked to describe their most important value and why it was important to them. In the no affirmation condition, participants were asked to describe their

ninth most important value and write about why it might be of importance to a typical college student. After the affirmation manipulation, participants read 20 examples of race-related events/situations (e.g., "Ballot initiatives that eliminate educational and medical services to undocumented immigrants") and rated the extent they thought each example was attributable to racism. The researchers found that, among those who were not affirmed, White participants perceived significantly less racism compared to Latino participants. Among those who were affirmed, however, White and Latino participants did not perceive different levels of racism. Specifically, White participants who had been affirmed perceived or, perhaps, acknowledged more racism than White participants who had not been affirmed.

In addition to a motivated denial of racism, in general, there is evidence suggesting that White Americans may be *especially* motivated to deny structural forms of racism (Bonam, Nair Das, Coleman, & Salter, 2018; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Unzueta and Lowery (2008) found that White Americans' recognition of instances of structural racism varied as a function of the extent to which their identity and self-image had been threatened. White participants whose self-image had been threatened, that is, were significantly less likely to recognize specific practices (e.g., "A downtown renewal project results in the dislocation of a large number of racial minorities from their homes and communities") as examples of racism, compared with control (i.e., non-threatened) participants. Self-image threat had no impact, however, on the extent to which White participants considered specific instances of interpersonal discrimination as indicative of racism, suggesting that acknowledging interpersonal forms of racism may not be as threatening as acknowledging structural forms.

Although there is some evidence that, in general, self-image maintenance may be an important motivator of racial differences in the acknowledgement of structural racism (e.g., Unzueta & Lowery, 2008), it is worth noting that acknowledgment of structural racism (or lack thereof) is not entirely reducible to a self-image maintenance process. Research in discursive psychology, for instance, suggests that a number of competing motivations can shape the complex interplay between desires to adhere to egalitarian social norms and efforts to justify negative attitudes toward outgroups (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007). Moreover, to the extent to which self-image maintenance is implicated, further research is needed to clarify whether particular *types* of self-image threats are especially likely to contribute to these group differences. To that end, some potential insights can be found in recent empirical and theoretical work investigating White Americans' tendency to deny *White privilege* (e.g., Knowles et al., 2014). Knowles and colleagues (2014) offer a theoretical account of the relationship between White Americans' self-image concerns and the denial of White privilege, suggesting that the notion that one's group is unfairly advantaged (e.g., benefitting from White privilege) is threatening to many White Americans' self-image, even at the level of the personal self/identity (see also Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Moreover, Knowles et al. (2014) argue that White Americans are motivated to deny racial group privilege in order to assuage what they call *meritocratic threat*—the concern that one's personal successes could be attributed to external factors, like unfair racial privilege, rather than purely internal factors, like hard work and skill (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Knowles et al., 2014; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Consistent with this idea, Lowery and colleagues (2007) examined the relationship between meritocratic threat and Whites Americans' acknowledgment that White privilege exists. They found that White participants who experienced a meritocratic threat to the personal self, via negative (rather than positive) feedback on a bogus intelligence test, were less likely to acknowledge the existence of White privilege, ostensibly as a means of affirming a global positive self-view.

Based on this work, as well as evidence illustrating a link between perceptions of White privilege and acknowledgment of structural racism (e.g., Unzueta & Lowery, 2008), it seems

possible that meritocratic threat may be a particularly impactful type of self-image threat, in affecting White Americans' perceptions of and/or willingness to acknowledge structural racism. It is worth noting, however, the current literature examining the implications of meritocratic threat is somewhat unclear about whether it may be *more* influential than other types of self-image threat, and, thus, future research is needed to consider this possibility.

It is also important to note that, for White Americans, not only is the notion of White privilege threatening to their personal self-image but it may also pose a *group* image threat, in that it suggests that White Americans benefit from membership to a group that is unfairly advantaged. To this point, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the link between self-image threat and the denial of White privilege is strongest among White Americans who are more highly identified with their racial ingroup (e.g., Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Lowery et al., 2007). Given the compounding effects of both of these threats, when White Americans (particularly those highly identified with their racial group) are faced with the idea of their own privilege, or with evidence suggesting their group's privilege (e.g., structural racial inequality), it seems likely that they would engage in strategies to mitigate these threats, including outright denial of structural forms of racism, if not denial of racial disparities all together.

In addition to motivations to preserve both self- and group-esteem, other motivations are likely to support a relative lack of awareness of structural racism among members of the dominant racial group. According to Social Dominance Theory (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), for instance, despite the ubiquity of social hierarchies among human social groups, people are generally motivated to perceive society as fair and just (see Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006, for a review). Because structural racism is especially difficult to justify in the contemporary U.S. legal context, its denial is a necessary "legitimizing myth." Consistent with this idea, Neville and colleagues (2013) posit that the denial of structural forms of racism is a core component of colorblind racial ideology, which ultimately serves to justify the existing racial status hierarchy (see also Kendi, 2016). Not surprisingly, then, this "colorblind racism" is more likely to be observed among individuals higher in social dominance orientation (SDO)—preference for social hierarchy (e.g., SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Similarly, belief in a just world (e.g., Lipkus, 1991) also predicts the extent to which people endorse "colorblind racism"—and, thus, tend to deny the existence of structural forms of racial discrimination. This is consistent with System Justification Theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), which posits that system-justifying tendencies alleviate the negative effects of societal inequality on well-being. Importantly, system justification may help to explain the circumstances under which members of lower status racial groups (e.g., Black and Latino individuals) may also deny the existence of structural racism.

Educational factors

In addition to motivation, education is another potentially important antecedent of holding a structural, rather than interpersonal, understanding of racism that is likely to contribute to the racial group difference in such beliefs. One's exposure to historical and contemporary racial discrimination in the United States, in other words, is likely to differ by racial group membership and contribute to the differential appreciation of structural racism. Consistent with this idea, research by Nelson and colleagues (2013) found that Black-White differences in perceptions of structural racism were, in part, mediated through group differences in historical knowledge. White participants, relative to Black participants, were less knowledgeable about historical instances of racism and, as a result, were less likely to acknowledge systemic, relative to interpersonal, forms of contemporary racism.

Building upon this work, Bonam and colleagues (2018) found that Black-White differences in critical historical knowledge explained racial differences in the denial of structural racism, with White (relative to Black) participants showing greater denial of structural racism due to their having less historical knowledge. Moreover, when provided with an intervention designed to increase historical knowledge (i.e., learning about discrimination in U.S. housing policy), relative to a control condition, participants acknowledged greater levels of structural racism. Work by Adams and colleagues (2008) also suggests that the extent to which racism is understood as interpersonal or structural can be shifted with an educational intervention. Adams and colleagues found that a multi-day, classroom-based racism tutorial that discussed both interpersonal and structural aspects of racism increased the extent to which participants endorsed a structural understanding of racism and also increased support for policy initiatives designed to combat the effects of societal racial inequity (e.g., Affirmative Action programs), relative to a tutorial that only focused on interpersonal racial bias (what the authors called "the standard portrayal").

Summary

Taken together, this research suggests that a simple lack of relevant knowledge about the history of racial discrimination in society may contribute to the racial group difference in the tendency to endorse a structural, rather than interpersonal, understanding of racism. Indeed, the observed racial group gap in lay beliefs should not be especially surprising, given the known racial group differences in exposure to information about the history of racism at home, at school and through family and social networks. Indeed, racial socialization differs considerably for Black and White Americans (e.g., Lesane-Brown, 2006). Further, Adams and colleagues' work suggests that the dominant discourse on racism in psychology and in society focuses on interpersonal prejudices (i.e., "the standard portrayal"), and, thus, supports the development of an interpersonal lay belief. Efforts to address this historical knowledge gap, however, would be wise to consider the roles of the psychological motivations (e.g., self-image threat, social identity threat, system justifying beliefs), reviewed previously, that lead higher status racial group members to be skeptical, if not outright dismissive, of information about structural racism.

Why does thinking structurally about racism matter?

The extant research on the implications of structural racism beliefs has consistently shown that holding a relatively structural (vs. interpersonal) conceptualization of racism, in general, reliably predicts perceptions of societal racial inequality. For instance, in our research examining nationally representative surveys of American adults, we found that endorsement of a structural racism view predicted a wide constellation of ideas related to perceptions of racism (Rucker & Richeson, 2020). After controlling for respondents' racial background and political ideology, thinking that structural racism was a bigger contemporary problem in the United States. (relative to interpersonal racism) predicted the extent to which they thought that more change needs to be made to ensure racial equality in the United States and perceiving more inequality between Blacks and Whites across several societal domains (e.g., income, education, and housing), both at the community and national levels.

Moreover, we (Rucker et al., 2020a) found that the endorsement of a structural understanding of racism also predicted perceptions of racial inequality in the U.S. criminal justice system. Participants who endorsed a structural, rather than interpersonal, understanding of racism were also more likely to think that Black Americans, relative to White Americans, are disadvantaged in the criminal justice system. In fact, accounting for individual differences in lay beliefs significantly

reduced the Black-White racial gap in perception of racial inequality in criminal justice, even after accounting for other relevant individual differences, including political conservatism. In other words, the tendency for White and Black Americans to hold differential beliefs about the nature of racism—as interpersonal or structural—may be one reason why they also tend to differentially perceive racial inequality.

In a different line of research, we (Rucker, Kraus, & Richeson, 2020b) have also found evidence of a relationship between endorsement of a structural understanding of racism and the accuracy with which individuals perceive racial inequality in the economic domain. Specifically, we (Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017) found that Americans, both White and Black, overestimated the progress society has made toward achieving racial economic equality in the United States on a range of economic markers (e.g., wealth, wages, etc.). Further, the inaccuracy in perceptions of progress was due to over-estimates in perceptions of contemporary (i.e., 2016), rather than past, levels of economic equality (Kraus et al., 2017; see also Kraus, Onyeador, Daumeyer, Rucker, & Richeson, 2019). In follow-up work, we found that lay beliefs about the nature of racism—namely, the extent to which people recognize the role of structural racism in contemporary society—negatively predicted the extent to which participants overestimated current levels of Black-White racial equality in income and wealth (Rucker et al., 2020b). This relationship remained robust even after controlling for political ideology, an important predictor of both holding a structural lay belief and the perception/acknowledgment of the prevalence of racial inequality in contemporary society.

Taken together, this work suggests that accounting for differences in beliefs about the structural nature of racism may be important in explaining the often vast discrepancies in the perception of racial inequality between members of racial minority groups and White Americans (e.g., Nelson et al., 2013; Rucker et al., 2020b). Whether the racial gap in structural understandings of racism is born of education and experiences or, rather, motivations that are correlated with racial group membership, holding such vastly disparate views of reality is not conducive to addressing racial disparities in contemporary society, so as to create a more just and equitable nation.

Structural racism beliefs and responses to racial inequality

In addition to research demonstrating the relationship between holding a structural lay belief about racism and perceptions of racial inequality, there is also a body of work investigating the relationship between these lay beliefs and preferred policy responses to racial inequality. Again, in our research examining nationally representative surveys of American adults, the endorsement of a structural lay belief about racism also predicted a bevy of responses to racism (Rucker & Richeson, 2020). After controlling for participants' racial background, thinking that structural racism (vs. interpersonal racism) was a bigger contemporary problem in the United States was associated with greater attribution of problems in the African American community to past and present discrimination, lack of educational opportunities and lack of jobs. Similarly, endorsement of structural (vs. interpersonal) racism as a bigger contemporary problem was associated with greater endorsement of the belief that the federal government should be responsible for ensuring racial equality in income, in schools and in the criminal justice system. Endorsement of the idea that structural (vs. interpersonal) racism is a bigger contemporary societal problem was also associated with several policy beliefs relevant to addressing racial inequality: greater belief that the Voting Rights Act is still necessary today, greater support for slavery reparations and greater support for considering diversity (rather than solely relying on "merit-based" criteria) in hiring and college admissions.

Consistent with this work, we have also found that holding relatively structural (vs. interpersonal) understanding of racism also predicts the extent to which White Americans support

policies that create and maintain mass incarceration, in general, and racial disparities in incarceration in particular, after exposure to statistics regarding racial inequality in the U.S. prison system. Our work builds from earlier research, examining the effect of exposure to information about racial disparities in mass incarceration (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014). In their research, they found that White Americans who were exposed to starker, rather than more modest, racial disparities in their home state's prison population expressed *greater* support for harsh criminal justice policies that are known to contribute to mass incarceration (e.g., habitual offender laws). Specifically, similar to the procedures introduced by Hetey and Eberhardt (2014), we found that it was primarily among White Americans with a relatively *interpersonal* understanding of racism that exposure to starker (vs. more modest) disparity information lead to increased punitive policy support. White participants with a relatively more *structural* understanding, in contrast, did not report differential levels of support for habitual offender laws as a function of the magnitude of racial disparity in the prison population to which they were exposed (Rucker et al., 2020b).

Moreover, subsequent studies revealed that individual differences in SDO (Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), coupled with racism lay beliefs, predict responses to exposure to racial disparities in incarceration, irrespective of the magnitude of those disparities. Specifically, among participants with more egalitarian attitudes regarding societal inequality (i.e., those lower in SDO), holding a relatively structural, rather than interpersonal, racism lay belief was associated with lower support for habitual offender laws after exposure to information about the racial demographics of the prison population. Among participants with relatively high levels of SDO, in contrast, racism lay beliefs were not related to support for habitual offender laws after exposure to the racial disparity information. In other words, these findings suggest that it may be the combination of concern about societal hierarchy, in general, and holding a structural lay belief about racism that leads people to respond to evidence of racial disparities (in incarceration, in this case) by reducing their support for policies that contribute to them and/or increasing support for policies that disrupt them. Importantly, these patterns were not observed among participants who were not first exposed to racial disparity information, suggesting that exposure to actual evidence of inequality (e.g., racially disparate prison demographics), rather than thinking about inequality in the abstract, may also have an influence in shaping the relationship between structural racism beliefs and responses to inequality. Taken together, then, this emerging research suggests that lay beliefs about the nature of racism may play an important role in both the perception of racial inequality and engendering equity-enhancing policy support upon exposure to evidence of racial disparities in important societal domains.

Structural racism beliefs and minority mental health

Last, in addition to this emerging research on some of the correlates of holding a structural lay belief about racism among White Americans—members of the current dominant racial group, research suggests that these lay beliefs may also have important implications for racial minorities. Specifically, there is some evidence suggesting that, for members of marginalized racial groups, the relationship between perceptions of racism and mental health is, in part, associated with the type of racism they believe to be prevalent in society. Utsey and colleagues (2000), for example, found that, among African American college students, greater perceptions of interpersonal racism were associated with greater social withdrawal, whereas greater perceptions of structural racism were associated with greater social support seeking (see also, Williams, Lawrence, & Davis, 2019). Similarly, Tawa and colleagues (2012) found that, among Asian American college students, greater perceptions of interpersonal racism were associated with lower personal self-esteem, whereas greater perceptions of structural racism were associated with higher collective self-esteem. This

work suggests the need for additional research to consider the broad consequences of holding a more interpersonal, rather than structural, understanding of racism for members of marginalized racial groups.

Summary

In sum, the research surveyed in this section suggests that holding a structural lay belief about the nature of racism may shape individuals' perceptions of societal racial disparities. For White Americans, further, perhaps coupled with strong egalitarian motivates, structural understandings of racism may be critical to decisions to support policies designed to reduce racial disparities in any number of important societal domains, including mass incarceration. For racial minorities, holding a structural rather than interpersonal lay belief about racism may be protective of mental and, perhaps also physical, health, at least for those who perceive and/or experience considerable levels of racial discrimination. All of these relationships, of course, are in need of additional investigation, so as to unpack the mechanisms that give rise to these extremely important outcomes for both individuals and society.

Implications and future directions

Broadly speaking, this body of research suggests that considering how people tend to conceptualize racism—as relatively more interpersonal or structural—can shed new light on how they reason about racial disparities, which in turn, contributes to their support for efforts to reduce discriminatory laws and policies that contribute to the maintenance and/or exacerbation of racial disparities in any number of domains. Given that simply making people aware of even stark racial disparities does not automatically or even typically engender support for reparative policies (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014, 2018), this work suggests that efforts to increase awareness of racial inequality may need to be directly coupled with efforts to highlight the structural causes of those racial disparities.

Given how limited the social psychological research on these lay beliefs currently is, there are still many important questions in need of investigation. First, additional research is needed to shed light on other outcomes associated with, if not caused by, holding a structural racism view, for both members of dominant and members of marginalized racial groups. And, of course, it is important to investigate whether the emerging patterns that have been unearthed thus far, regarding inequality in just a few domains (criminal justice, education, natural disasters, etc.), may also be observed in other domains in which racial disparities are known to exist (e.g., health, housing, etc.).

More research is also necessary to investigate the factors that explain exactly *how* these lay beliefs relate to the perception of and response to racial inequality. And, further, research must examine more thoroughly how people come to hold interpersonal and/or structural lay beliefs about racism, be it through early socialization as children, through the way history and/or psychology is taught in secondary and post-secondary education (Adams et al., 2008), and/or through the prevailing narratives that society holds dear regarding societal racial progress (Kraus et al., 2019). Shedding light on these questions will need to disentangle between the effects of merely receiving information that bolsters a structural view (e.g., Adams et al., 2008) and addressing underlying psychological motivations (e.g., Self-image Threat; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008) that influence individuals' willingness to acknowledge structural racism. Although the limited existing research seems to attempt to shift structural beliefs through either education or motivation, it seems quite likely that education and motivation are inextricably linked and attention to both

will be critical to increasing willingness to acknowledge structural racism. It seems likely, in other words, that the most effective interventions to promote a structural understanding of racism will have to address both deficits in knowledge about structural racism, as well as a motivated reluctance to even acknowledge racism in its structural forms.

Last, research will need to examine whether beliefs about the structural nature of racism may co-occur with holding structural understandings of other forms of societal oppression, such as sexism, and visa-versa. It may be the case, for instance, that one's relatively structural understanding of racism may "bleed over" into how they tend to think about discrimination along other dimensions of social identity (e.g., gender, SES, disability status). And, of course, holding structural understandings of discrimination along any dimension of identity may predict the extent to which people are skeptical of societal inequality/stratification along these various identity dimensions (Craig & Richeson, 2016).

Conclusion

Although there is much to be learned about how lay beliefs about the nature of racism relate to responses to racial inequality, the evidence amassed in the field thus far suggests these lay beliefs are important to incorporate in our social psychological understanding of contemporary racial inequality. Given the obstinacy of racial, and other forms, of intergroup inequality in the United States and throughout the world, a more complete understanding of the factors that shape the perception of and reactions to these inequalities will be crucial in both advancing academic discourse on intergroup inequality and stratification, as well as creating effective interventions to galvanize broader support for equity-enhancing policies.

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