

# Social Location, Ideology, and Undergraduate Explanations of Social Inequality

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## Abstract

Stratification beliefs research has consistently shown that the way people explain social inequality is influenced by both social location and ideology. However, the prior research in this field has only investigated stratification beliefs about forms of inequality that benefit traditionally dominant social groups. The current research investigates how the relationships between stratification beliefs, social location, and ideology vary when respondents are asked to explain forms of inequality that benefit and disadvantage socially dominant groups. Results from a survey of 532 undergraduates suggest that stratification beliefs differ in meaningful ways when respondents are asked to explain social inequalities that advantage traditionally dominant social groups compared to those that disadvantage them. When respondents were asked about forms of inequality that benefitted traditional social powers, findings were very similar to those in the extant literature. However, when asked to explain forms of inequality that disadvantaged traditionally dominant groups, the established patterns of explanation either disappeared or reversed. This suggests that respondents make sense of social inequality, at least partly, based upon who benefits from it and whether it reinforces or challenges the status quo.

Keywords: Inequality, Stratification beliefs, Ideology

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## Introduction

Stratification beliefs research seeks to understand "what people believe about who gets what and why" (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). Prior research suggests that, within the United States, lay explanations of inequality primarily rely on individualistic or structuralistic factors (Feagin 1972, 1975). Viewed through an individualistic perspective, social inequality is the result of individual level factors such as intelligence, skill, talent, or hard work. Through the structuralistic perspective, on the other hand, social inequality is seen as the result of supra-individual factors like discrimination, the uneven distribution of resources, and exclusion from social networks.

Evidence suggests that a respondent's social location is associated with their stratification beliefs (Cech 2017, Hunt 1996, 2001, 2004; Kluegel and

Smith 1981, 1986). For instance, Hunt (2004) found that Latino and African Americans rated both individualistic and structuralistic explanations of poverty as more important than did their white counterparts. Hughes and Tuch (1999) found a similar relationship between white and Asian American respondents. There is less available research focused on how men and women explain inequality, but what evidence there is suggests that men tend to be less willing to acknowledge the importance of structuralist explanations of poverty and wealth (Hunt 1996, 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

Stratification beliefs have also been found to vary by ideology. For instance, politically conservative survey participants place more importance on individualistic explanations of poverty and less importance on structuralist explanations when

compared with more liberal-leaning participants (Hunt 2004). Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that respondents who endorsed the just-world hypothesis, which contends that the world is an orderly and fair place where people get what they deserve, also placed significantly more importance on individualistic explanations of poverty. However, arguments for ideological determinants of stratification beliefs are complicated by the correlation between political ideology, support for the just-world hypothesis, and race; in other words, political conservatives tend to support the just-world hypothesis and are disproportionately white (Hunt 2004).

The current study aims to investigate the relationship between social location, ideology, and stratification beliefs about poverty, wealth inequality, gender inequality, and racial inequality. Prior investigations into stratification beliefs have focused on one (Feagin 1975) or sometimes two forms (Hunt 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986) of social inequality at a time. This parsimonious approach has clear advantages, but it renders scholars unable to decipher whether their findings are localized to their chosen form(s) of inequality or if their findings indicate a broader pattern of inequality explanation. In addition, we are particularly interested in how a respondent's stratification beliefs vary by who is advantaged by the form of inequality in question. Across the available stratification beliefs research, respondents have only been asked to explain forms of inequality that benefit traditionally dominant social groups and disadvantage traditionally non-dominant groups. As a result, it remains to be seen if the patterns of explanation previous scholars have observed are a product of their design uniformity or indicative of real differences between respondents of different social locations.

The current study will address these gaps in the existing stratification beliefs literature by answering three research questions: 1. What associations, if any, exist among respondents' social location and their stratification beliefs about poverty, wealth inequality, gender inequality, and racial inequality? 2. What associations exist between respondents' political ideology, their support for the just world hypothesis, and their stratification beliefs? 3. Do the associations between respondents' social location, political ideology, and support for the just world hypothesis vary based on which social groups benefit/suffer from the inequality they are asked to explain? Specifically, is there variation in respondents' stratification beliefs about forms of inequality that advantage traditionally dominant groups compared to forms of inequality that disadvantaged them?

## Theoretical and Empirical Background

Much of what we know today about the public's beliefs about poverty has been shaped by the national survey instrument Feagin (1972, 1975) used in his foundational work. Feagin provided respondents with a list of possible reasons why poverty exists and then asked them to rate how important they felt each was in explaining poverty. This instrument has been reproduced (in slightly modified forms) roughly every ten years since its publication (e.g., Hunt 1996, 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Feagin (1975) and Kluegel and Smith's (1986) national survey both found that individualistic explanations of poverty were rated as more important than structuralistic.

By the turn of the century, Hunt (1996, 2004) found his California survey respondents had shifted toward viewing structuralist explanations of poverty as more important than individualistic. A recent Pew Research Center (2014) survey asked respondents, "which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor? Lack of effort on his or her own part, or circumstances beyond his or her control?" Fifty percent of respondents chose the circumstantial explanation of poverty, and this figure is the highest it has been since 1992.

Turning to wealth, Kluegel and Smith (1986:76) found public support for both individualistic and structuralistic explanations of, "why there are rich people in the U.S." Hunt (2004), on the other hand, found significantly stronger support for individualistic explanations of wealth than structuralistic. Hunt's (2004:840) finding of support for structuralist beliefs about poverty and individualistic beliefs about wealth led him to conclude that his respondents thought, "the system is generally open for persons to pursue wealth, but with some important qualifications since important subgroups such as the poor are held back by structural barriers."

Prior stratification beliefs research has generally found that people from dominant social groups (e.g., white, older, and high-income respondents) favor individualistic explanations over structuralistic (Hunt 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1981, 1986). Respondents from non-dominant groups, on the other hand, have frequently been found to place more importance on structuralist explanations of inequality, "but not necessarily with greatly diminished support for individualism," (Kluegel and Smith 1986:93). Non-dominant respondents' adherence to individualism is taken as evidence of the ubiquity of individualism as the dominant ideology of the United States (Huber and Form 1973; Hunt 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Taken together, the available research suggests that individualistic and structuralistic stratification beliefs

are not polar opposites of the same continuum; rather, structuralistic beliefs appear to be "'layered' onto, instead of replacing, the existing individualistic base" (Hunt 2004:830). This "layered" conceptualization of stratification beliefs is consistent with previous research that has suggested people from non-dominant groups reconcile contradictions between their lived experience and the dominant ideology by leaning on "compromise explanations" of poverty, homelessness, and social inequality in general (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lee, Jones, and Lewis 1990; Nilson 1981). Race has consistently been shown to influence stratification beliefs (Hunt 1996; Kluegel and Smith 1986). The early research on poverty explanations found that white Americans placed slightly more importance on individualistic explanations of poverty than their counterparts of color (Feagin 1975; Kluegel and Smith 1986). More recent research, however, has found that the racial-ethnic group a respondent belongs to is associated with their beliefs about poverty. For instance, Hunt (1996, 2004) found that Latino and African Americans rated both individualistic and structuralist explanations of poverty as more important than did white Americans. In one study, Hughes and Tuch (1999) similarly found that Asian Americans placed more importance on structuralist and individualistic explanations of poverty than their white counterparts. Within the literature on wealth stratification beliefs, Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that white respondents placed significantly more importance on individualistic explanations of wealth accumulation than respondents of color, but Hunt (2004: 843) found "a rough consensus on the importance of individual-level qualities determining wealth accumulation."

Differences in stratification beliefs by gender have been less thoroughly investigated than race and ethnicity. Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that men attributed significantly less importance to structuralist explanations of poverty and wealth. Hunt (2004) found no significant differences between men and women regarding individualistic and structuralist explanations of wealth. Hunt (1996, 2004), however, did find the men in his sample placing less importance on structuralist explanations of poverty.

An alternative hypothesis about the formation of stratification beliefs contends that the key determinant is ideology, not social location. Previous research has identified significant correlations between political ideology and explanations of wealth and poverty. In general, political conservatives are more likely to explain poverty as the result of self-indulgence, inferior morals, reduced intelligence, or other individual-level factors, while liberals attribute poverty to unjust social practices and structures (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, and Chamberlin

2002; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady 1986). Within the stratification beliefs research, Hunt (2004) found that political conservatism was negatively associated with structuralistic explanations of wealth and poverty and positively associated with individualistic explanations of poverty.

Belief in the just world hypothesis is another ideological belief that has been associated with stratification beliefs. The just world hypothesis contends that we, "live in a world where people generally get what they deserve" (Lerner and Miller 1978: 1030). Respondents who believe in the just world hypothesis are more supportive of individualistic explanations of social inequality (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Furthermore, respondents who believe in a just world are also more likely to minimize the extent of social inequality (Benson 1992) and believe that the poor are to blame for being impoverished (Furnham and Gunter 1984; Wagstaff 1983).

## Methods and Data

### *Data*

The data used in this investigation were gathered via a web survey of undergraduates at a large public university in the southeast region of the United States (referred to from here on as SEU) during the last week of August and the first week of September in 2016. Recruitment emails were sent to the faculty at SEU teaching undergraduate courses that asked them to invite their students to participate via an anonymous link.

Of the 532 respondents, 65.4% were white, 22.7% were African American, 3% were Asian American, 2.3% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 4.9% were multiracial. Latinos comprised 5.8% of the sample. Over two-thirds of respondents were female (70%). The convenience sample contained students from every level of undergraduate education; 30.3% of the sample were freshmen, 22.6% were sophomores, 31.6% were juniors, and 15.4% were seniors. The sample was young (20.8 was the average age) and close to one another in age with 90.8% of the sample aged between 18-23 years old. The majority (58.6%) were not currently enrolled in a sociology course, but many respondents still had some exposure to sociology curriculum; 38.5% were enrolled in introduction to sociology at the time of the survey and 34.4% had taken a sociology course before.

### *Measures*

Independent variables

Multiple sociodemographic variables were created to investigate the relationship between respondents' social location and their stratification beliefs. Given that undergraduates from high-income families may be unemployed and earn no income during their time at university and vice versa, standard survey items used to measure socioeconomic class are rendered unreliable and inappropriate. Therefore, a proxy variable was created to indirectly assess the respondent's socioeconomic status; respondents were asked to report the level of educational attainment their primary economic provider had achieved by the time the respondent was 18 years old. From this data, the dummy variable "Primary Economic Provider < B.A." was created where a value of 1 indicates that the respondent's primary economic provider was not college educated by age 18. To assess how associations varied by sex/gender, we created a dummy variable "woman" (1 = women, 0 = men). A pair of dummy variables were created to model racial-ethnic identity: African American = 1, otherwise = 0; and Latino = 1, otherwise = 0. Thus, respondents who identified as any other racial-ethnic category other than African American or Latino served as the reference category for all multivariate analyses.

Two variables were created to examine the associations among respondents' political ideology, support for the just world hypothesis, and their stratification beliefs. Respondents reported their political beliefs on a seven-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Belief in a just world was a scale ( $\alpha = .65$ ) created by averaging respondents' level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale with the statements: "I feel that people get what they deserve," "I feel that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded," and "I feel that in the U.S., everyone has an equal chance to be successful."

#### Dependent variables

To measure respondents' beliefs about wealth and poverty four dependent variables were created: a measure of individualistic and structuralistic beliefs was created for both wealth and poverty. The items in these measures were slightly modified from Feagin's (1972) and Kluegel and Smith's (1986) surveys of stratification beliefs. An exploratory factor analysis of these items (see Table 1 and Table 2) found four underlying dimensions that neatly formed around individualistic beliefs about poverty, structuralistic beliefs about poverty, individualistic beliefs about wealth, and structuralistic beliefs about wealth.

Respondents were prompted to measure beliefs about poverty: "The following statements refer to possible reasons there is poverty in America. In your opinion, how important are each of the following in

explaining why there are poor people in this country?" Respondents then rated eight statements (four of which were individualistic explanations of poverty and four that were structuralistic) on a four-point scale from "very important" to "not at all important." The individualistic beliefs about poverty scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) were comprised of the following statements: "Lack of ability and talent among those who are poor," "Lack of effort by the poor themselves," "Failure of the economy to provide enough jobs," and "Personal irresponsibility, lack of discipline among the poor." The structuralistic beliefs about poverty scale ( $\alpha = .71$ ) contained four statements: "The failure of society to provide good schools for many people," "Low wages in some businesses and industries," "Lack of saving and proper money management skills among those who are poor," and "Prejudice and discrimination."

Beliefs about wealth were measured using a similar prompt and six statements. The individualistic beliefs about wealth scale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) were comprised of three items: "The rich are harder workers than the poor," "The rich have a stronger personal drive than the poor," and "The rich have greater abilities or talents than the poor." The three statements within the structuralistic beliefs about wealth scale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) were: "The rich are more likely to have inherited money from their families," "The rich have more political influence or pull than do the poor," and "The American economic system allows the rich to take unfair advantage of the poor."

Two vignettes were used to measure respondent beliefs about gender inequality. The first dealt with educational inequality and the second with income inequality. These vignettes were chosen because they described inequalities where women were in the advantaged position (high school graduation rate) and where men were in the advantaged position (median income). Similarly, along racial-ethnic lines, these vignettes described inequalities where white Americans were in the advantaged position (high school graduation rate) and where non-whites were in the advantaged position (median household income).

First, respondents read that, "In 2012, the public high school graduation rate for all U.S. students was 81%. The graduation rate for female students was 85% and for male students, the rate was 78%." Then they were asked to rate, on the same four-point scale used earlier, how important they thought six possible explanations were at explaining educational gender inequality. The individualistic beliefs about educational gender inequality scale ( $\rho = .70$ ) contained two items: "Female students take their schoolwork more seriously than male students," and "Male students are quicker to give up on hard tasks." The two items for the structuralistic beliefs about educational gender inequality scale ( $\rho = .66$ ) were "Teachers

expect more academically from their female students than from their male students,” and “Schools make more of a concerted effort to support female students.”

Later in the survey, respondents were then informed that, “According to the U.S. Census, in 2014, the median income for men was \$50,383. For women, the median income was \$39,621.” Again, respondents were asked to rate four possible explanations on a four-point scale of importance. The individualistic beliefs about income gender inequality scale ( $\rho = .63$ ) were comprised of responses to two statements: “Men are more committed to their careers,” and “Women choose careers that pay less.” The structuralistic beliefs about income gender inequality scale ( $\rho = .77$ ) contained the following two items: “Employers steer women toward lower paying positions within their companies,” and “Employers are less willing to hire or promote women with children.”

To assess the respondent’s beliefs about educational racial inequality, first they were prompted with, “In 2012, the public high school graduation rate for all students was 81%. Amongst white students, the graduation rate was 85% while the graduation rate for African Americans was 68%.” Then they were asked to rate four possible explanations on the same four-point scale of importance. The individualistic beliefs about educational racial inequality scale ( $\rho = .81$ ) were comprised of two items: “African American students are quicker to give up or quit working on hard tasks,” and “White students take their schoolwork more seriously than African American students.” The structuralistic beliefs about educational racial inequality scale ( $\rho = .71$ ) contained two items: “White students attend better-funded schools than African Americans,” and “School administrators are more likely to remove African American students from the classroom for misbehavior than they are for white students.”

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about racial income inequality. Respondents read that, “According to the U.S. Census, in 2014, the median household income for white non-Hispanic Americans was \$60,256. The median household income for Asian Americans that same year was \$74,297.” Then, again, respondents rated four possible explanations for this inequality on the same four-point scale. The individualistic beliefs about racial income inequality scale ( $\rho = .55$ ) contained two items: “Greater ability or talent among Asian Americans,” and “A lack of effort from white non-Hispanic Americans.” The structuralistic beliefs about racial income inequality scale ( $\rho = .65$ ) was comprised of the following items: “Non-Hispanic white Americans are

more likely to live in poor rural areas with lower paying employers,” and “Affirmative Action and other government programs designed to help racial minorities be successful.”

To measure how important a respondent viewed individualistic or structuralistic explanations of inequality in general, two global measures were created by averaging the 15 individualistic items together and then doing the same for the 15 structuralistic items. An exploratory factor analysis revealed two underlying factors and each set of 15 items hung together as theory and previous research would predict.

## Results

Table 1 presents the mean, percentages, and standard deviations for the demographic characteristics of participants by their identified race. Across all but one of the stratification scenarios (i.e., wealth, poverty, gender income inequality, gender education inequality, racial educational inequality) African Americans were assigned the most importance to structuralistic explanations and their mean global structuralistic explanations were significantly different from whites and Latinos. We found no significant differences between white, Latino, or African American participants’ support for structuralistic beliefs about income racial inequality. From here on, we will only report findings that are significantly different. White respondents reported the highest mean importance on individualistic explanations of wealth inequality, and their views were different from African Americans. White respondents placed more importance on individualistic explanations of wealth than either African Americans or Latinos. In aggregate, African American participants found structuralistic beliefs about wealth inequality to be more important than white participants. Turning to poverty, we see that African Americans had higher average individualistic and structuralistic means than white or Latino respondents. When white participants were asked to explain racial educational inequality, a situation where whites are in the advantaged position, they reported the lowest average support for structuralistic explanations. When these dynamics were reversed, and respondents were asked to explain why Asian American households have higher median incomes than whites, white participants had the lowest mean support for individualistic explanations. Finally, white respondents had higher average conservative and just-world scores than African Americans.

**Table 1: Sample Statistics (Means, Percentages, and Standard Deviations) by Racial-Ethnic Identity**

	Total Sample		White (n=333)		Black (n=118)		Latino (n=31)	
	Mean or %	S.D.	Mean or %	S.D.	Mean or %	S.D.	Mean or %	S.D.
Individualistic explanations (global)	2.47	.51	2.46	.46	2.55	.61	2.39	.57
Structuralistic explanations (global)	2.85	.50	2.75 <sup>a</sup>	.47	3.13 <sup>ac</sup>	.47	2.91 <sup>c</sup>	.58
Individualistic beliefs about wealth	2.19	.76	2.27 <sup>ab</sup>	.73	2.00 <sup>a</sup>	.85	2.03 <sup>b</sup>	.81
Structuralistic beliefs about wealth	3.23	.67	3.15 <sup>a</sup>	.65	3.42 <sup>a</sup>	.66	3.30	.72
Individualistic beliefs about poverty	2.95	.67	2.94 <sup>a</sup>	.65	3.09 <sup>ac</sup>	.69	2.62 <sup>c</sup>	.78
Structuralistic beliefs about poverty	3.19	.58	3.03 <sup>a</sup>	.56	3.62 <sup>ac</sup>	.39	3.18 <sup>c</sup>	.62
Individualistic beliefs about educational gender inequality	2.71	.79	2.69	.76	2.85	.87	2.71	.86
Structuralistic beliefs about educational gender inequality	2.33	.81	2.24 <sup>a</sup>	.77	2.52 <sup>a</sup>	.89	2.32	.78
Individualistic beliefs about income gender inequality	2.12	.82	2.08	.78	2.19	.94	2.24	.76
Structuralistic beliefs about income gender inequality	3.00	.83	2.89 <sup>a</sup>	.83	3.30 <sup>a</sup>	.74	3.03	1.03
Individualistic beliefs about educational racial inequality	2.23	.91	2.20	.87	2.38	1.02	2.13	.89
Structuralistic beliefs about educational racial inequality	2.91	.89	2.70 <sup>ab</sup>	.88	3.35 <sup>a</sup>	.78	3.24 <sup>b</sup>	.85
Individualistic beliefs about income racial inequality	2.63	.74	2.58 <sup>a</sup>	.65	2.80 <sup>a</sup>	.89	2.60	.93
Structuralistic beliefs about income racial inequality	2.47	.80	2.45	.77	2.55	.89	2.37	.88
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.44	.50	.47	.50	.40	.49	.39	.50
Women	.70	.46	.70	.46	.71	.45	.74	.44
Conservative	4.08	1.41	4.40 <sup>a</sup>	1.40	3.47 <sup>a</sup>	1.17	3.71	1.53
Belief in Just World	3.17	.83	3.28 <sup>a</sup>	.82	2.92 <sup>a</sup>	.81	3.23	.80
Age	20.84	4.10	20.86 <sup>b</sup>	4.28	20.96	4.13	19.65 <sup>b</sup>	1.31

Note: <sup>a</sup>White vs. black means significantly different ( $p < .05$ ); <sup>b</sup>white vs. Latino means significantly different ( $p < .05$ ); <sup>c</sup>black vs. Latino means significantly different ( $p < .05$ )

Looking at Table 2, we can see that women in comparison to men, had higher means for structuralistic explanations in general and had a higher mean for structuralistic explanations of poverty in particular. The mean individualistic explanations of wealth for men were higher than the mean of women. When women were asked to explain gender income inequality, a scenario that privileges men, they placed less importance on individualistic

explanations and more importance on structuralistic explanations. When asked to explain why women graduated from high school at rates higher than their male peers, women had higher means for both individualistic and structuralistic explanations. On average, men in the sample were more conservative than women.

Results from an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses of the two global explanation

variables suggests that stratification beliefs vary in important ways by the respondent's social location. Table 3 indicates that respondents whose primary economic provider had not earned a bachelor's degree by the time they turned 18 placed more importance on individualistic explanations. Conversely, women endorsed structuralistic explanations across all of the provided inequality scenarios. African Americans were both more individualistic and structuralistic in general than all other racial ethnic groups. Lastly, both conservatism and support for the just world hypothesis were associated with higher individualistic explanations and lower structuralistic explanations of inequality globally.

Table 4 presents the findings of an OLS analysis of poverty and wealth stratification beliefs by demographic characteristics and ideological beliefs.

Female respondents endorsed structuralistic beliefs about poverty at higher levels than their male counterparts. Women also placed less importance on individualistic beliefs about wealth inequality. Compared to whites and Latinos, African American participants rated individualistic and structuralistic explanations of poverty as more important. Similarly, African American participants rated individualistic explanations of wealth as less important than did whites or Latinos. Latino participants, in aggregate, placed less importance on individualistic explanations of poverty. Finally, both conservatism and belief in a just world were associated with individualistic explanations and negatively associated with structuralistic explanations of both poverty and wealth.

**Table 2: Sample Statistics (Means, Percentages, and Standard Deviations) by Sex**

	Total Sample		Men (n=158)		Women (n=374)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Individualistic explanations (global)	2.47	.51	2.48	.48	2.47	.52
Structuralistic explanations (global)	2.85	.50	2.68 <sup>a</sup>	.48	2.92 <sup>a</sup>	.49
Individualistic beliefs about poverty	2.95	.67	2.98	.67	2.94	.68
Structuralistic beliefs about poverty	3.19	.58	2.98 <sup>a</sup>	.60	3.27 <sup>a</sup>	.55
Individualistic beliefs about wealth	2.19	.76	2.30 <sup>a</sup>	.77	2.14 <sup>a</sup>	.76
Structuralistic beliefs about wealth	3.23	.67	3.24	.65	3.22	.67
Individualistic beliefs about income gender inequality	2.12	.82	2.31 <sup>a</sup>	.85	2.04 <sup>a</sup>	.80
Structuralistic beliefs about income gender inequality	3.00	.83	2.69 <sup>a</sup>	.86	3.13 <sup>a</sup>	.79
Individualistic beliefs about educational gender inequality	2.71	.79	2.54 <sup>a</sup>	.81	2.78 <sup>a</sup>	.76
Structuralistic beliefs about educational gender inequality	2.33	.81	2.13 <sup>a</sup>	.77	2.41 <sup>a</sup>	.81
Individualistic beliefs about educational racial inequality	2.23	.91	2.28	.92	2.21	.91
Structuralistic beliefs about educational racial inequality	2.91	.89	2.64 <sup>a</sup>	.84	3.02 <sup>a</sup>	.89
Individualistic beliefs about income racial inequality	2.63	.74	2.47 <sup>a</sup>	.68	2.70 <sup>a</sup>	.75
Structuralistic beliefs about income racial inequality	2.47	.80	2.41	.81	2.49	.80
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.56	.50	.52	.50	.57	.50
White non-Hispanic	.63	.48	.64	.48	.62	.49
Black non-Hispanic	.22	.42	.22	.41	.22	.42
Latino	.06	.23	.05	.22	.06	.24
Conservative	4.08	1.413	4.27 <sup>a</sup>	1.43	3.99 <sup>a</sup>	1.40
Belief in Just World	3.17	.83	3.24	.85	3.14	.82
Age	20.84	4.10	21.10	4.63	20.74	3.85

Note: <sup>a</sup>means are significantly different ( $p < .05$ )

**Table 3: OLS Estimates of Individualistic and Structuralistic Explanations of inequality by Demographic Characteristics and Beliefs**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables			
	Global Individualistic Explanations		Global Structuralistic Explanations	
	B	$\beta$	B	$\beta$
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.102** (.043)	.100	.096 (.038)	.096
Women	.009 (.047)	.008	.200*** (.041)	.183
Black	0.166** (.053)	.136	.252*** (.047)	.210
Latino	-.029 (.092)	.014	.078 (.082)	.036
Conservative	.053** (.017)	.147	-.087*** (.015)	.246
Belief in Just World	.098*** (.028)	.161	-0.097*** (.024)	.161
Age	.009* (.005)	.072	.001 (.005)	.010
Constant	2.373*** (.047)		2.597*** (.041)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.082		.258	

\* =  $p < .1$ , \*\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: College students in a large southeastern university (N=532). Standard errors in parentheses. "White" is the omitted racial ethnic category. Bachelor's degree or higher is the omitted categories in Primary Economic Provider < B.A. Both Conservative and Belief in Just World were mean centered.

Looking at the OLS estimates of beliefs about gender inequality contained in Table 5 we see that women's views of the explanatory power of individualistic and structuralistic explanations varied based on which sex benefitted from the inequality. When asked to explain why women earn less on average than men, women placed less importance on individualistic explanations and more importance on structuralistic. When asked to explain why women graduate from high school at higher rates than men, female respondents assigned more importance to both individualistic and structuralistic explanations than their male peers. In both gender inequality scenarios, African American participants were both more individualistic and structuralistic in their explanations than whites and Latinos. Having a primary economic provider with less than a college education is associated with elevated levels of support for both individualistic and structuralistic explanations of educational gender

inequality. When participants were asked to explain why men earn more than women, both conservatism and support for the just world hypothesis were associated with higher individualistic explanations and lowered structuralistic explanations. When asked to explain why men graduate from high school at lower rates than women, conservatism was associated with lowered support for structuralistic explanations.

Table 6 shows that when asked to explain racial inequality, African Americans were more individualistic and structuralistic in their explanations of why whites graduate from high school at higher rates than white respondents. When asked to explain why Asian American households earn a higher median income than white households, African Americans were more individualistic than white and Latino participants. Women assigned more importance to structuralistic explanations of racial educational inequality and individualistic explanations of racial



income inequality. Having a college educated primary economic provider was positively associated with individualistic explanations of both racial educational and income inequality. Both conservatism and belief

in the just world hypothesis were positively associated with individualistic explanations of racial educational inequality and negatively associated with structuralistic explanations.

**Table 4: OLS Estimates of Beliefs About Wealth & Poverty by Demographic Characteristics and Beliefs**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables							
	Individualistic Beliefs about Poverty		Structuralistic Beliefs about Poverty		Individualistic Beliefs about Wealth		Structuralistic Beliefs about Wealth	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.090 (.056)	.066	.129** (.042)	.110	.004 (.063)	.003	.072 (.053)	.053
Women	.004 (.060)	.003	.241*** (.046)	.189	-.114* (.069)	-.068	-.084 (.057)	-.058
African American	.287*** (.069)	.177	.430*** (.052)	.308	-.134* (.078)	-.073	.095 (.065)	.060
Latino	-.235** (.119)	-.082	.052 (.090)	.021	-.167 (.135)	-.051	.069 (.113)	.024
Conservative	.121*** (.022)	.254	-.099*** (.016)	-.241	.070** (.025)	.130	-.116*** (.020)	-.246
Belief in Just World	.107** (.036)	.132	-.118*** (.027)	-.169	.222*** (.041)	.242	-.212*** (.034)	-.266
Age	.010 (.007)	.061	.006 (.005)	.046	.010 (.008)	.054	.000 (.006)	.001
Constant	2.849*** (.061)		2.845*** (.046)		2.306*** (.069)		3.221*** (.057)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.129		.336		.126		.188	

\* =  $p < .1$ , \*\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: College students in a large southeastern university (N=532). Standard errors in parentheses. "White" is the omitted racial ethnic category. Bachelor's degree or higher is the omitted categories in Primary Economic Provider < B.A. Both Conservative and Belief in Just World were mean centered.

**Table 5: OLS Estimates of Beliefs About Gender Inequality by Respondent Characteristics and Beliefs**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables							
	Positive Outcome for Men Negative Outcome Women				Positive Outcome for Women Negative Outcome for Men			
	Individualistic Beliefs about Income Gender Inequality		Structuralistic Beliefs about Income Gender Inequality		Individualistic Beliefs about Educational Gender Inequality		Structuralistic Beliefs about Educational Gender Inequality	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.071 (.071)	.043	.114 (.068)	.068	.133** (.068)	.084	.129* (.070)	.079
Women	-.247*** (.077)	-.137	.400*** (.074)	.220	.233** (.074)	.136	.260*** (.076)	.147
African American	.182** (.088)	.092	.263** (.084)	.131	.157* (.084)	.083	.198** (.086)	.102
Latino	.208 (.152)	.059	.046 (.145)	.013	.026 (.146)	.008	.000 (.149)	.000
Conservative	.056** (.027)	.096	-.103*** (.026)	-.175	-.017 (.026)	-.031	-.053** (.027)	-.092
Belief in Just World	.114** (.046)	.115	-.106** (.044)	-.106	.007 (.044)	.008	-.015 (.045)	-.015
Age	.010 (.009)	.051	.007 (.008)	.032	.009 (.008)	.049	-.002 (.008)	-.012
Constant	2.200*** (.077)		2.595*** (.074)		2.434*** (.074)		2.029*** (.076)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.059		.156		.040		.059	

\* =  $p < .1$ , \*\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: College students in a large southeastern university (N=532). Standard errors in parentheses. "White" is the omitted racial ethnic category. Bachelor's degree or higher is the omitted categories in Primary Economic Provider < B.A. Both Conservative and Belief in Just World were mean centered.

**Table 6: OLS Estimates of Beliefs About Racial Inequality by Respondent Demographics and Selected Beliefs**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables							
	Positive Outcome for White Americans Negative Outcome for African Americans				Positive Outcome for Asian Americans Negative Outcome White Americans			
	Individualistic Beliefs about Educational Racial Inequality		Structuralistic Beliefs about Educational Racial Inequality		Individualistic Beliefs about Income Racial Inequality		Structuralistic Beliefs about Income Racial Inequality	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Primary Economic Provider < B.A.	.136*	.074	.077	.043	.178**	.120	.058	.036
	(.078)		(.069)		.064		(.071)	
Women	-.038	.019	.294***	.150	.215**	.133	.089	.051
	(.085)		(.075)		.069		(.077)	
African American	.301**	.138	.406***	.189	.201**	.113	.122	.063
	(.097)		(.085)		.079		(.088)	
Latino	.003	.001	.372**	.098	-.010		-.073	-.021
	(.167)		(.147)		.137	-.003	(.152)	
Conservative	.102***	.158	-.170***	-.268	-.015		.018	.032
	(.030)		(.027)		.025	-.028	(.027)	
Belief in Just World	.122**	.111	-.168***	-.157	.013		.038	.039
	(.050)		(.044)		.041	.015	(.046)	
Age	.013	.056	-.005	-.023	.001		.002	.008
	(.009)		(.008)		.008	.007	(.009)	
Constant	2.116***		2.546***		2.334***		2.348***	
	(.085)		(.075)		.069		(.077)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.063		.243		.225		.010	

\* =  $p < .1$ , \*\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Note: College students in a large southeastern university (N=532). Standard errors in parentheses. "White" is the omitted racial ethnic category. Bachelor's degree or higher is the omitted categories in Primary Economic Provider < B.A. Both Conservative and Belief in Just World were mean centered.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, respondents rated structuralistic explanations of inequality as more important than individualistic explanations. Globally, across all six inequality scenarios respondents, on average rated structuralist explanations as more important than individualistic. On average, respondents rated structuralistic factors as more important than

individualistic factors in four of the six inequality scenarios.

Multiple findings suggest that stratification beliefs varied among respondents from different social locations. The global explanation variables, for instance, show that women had higher average structuralistic explanations for inequality than men, and African Americans had higher individualistic and structuralistic explanations for

inequality than whites. Furthermore, respondents with non-college educated primary economic providers were significantly more individualistic.

The six inequality scenarios also suggest that social location influences stratification beliefs. Both the sex and racial-ethnic identity of respondents was found to have a statistically significant influence on stratification beliefs across the six scenarios. Similarly, being from a lower socioeconomic background was found to significantly influence stratification beliefs in all but one of the inequality scenarios (gendered income inequality being the only scenario where no significant differences were observed). Finally, across all of the inequality scenarios, the respondent's socioeconomic status, sex, and racial-ethnic identity were never found to reduce support for structuralistic explanations of inequality significantly.

Similar to Hunt (2004), women had higher structuralistic beliefs about poverty than men. Unlike Hunt (2004), however, women were less individualistic than men when asked to explain wealth inequality. Compared to whites, African Americans were more supportive of both individualistic and structuralistic explanations of poverty but less individualistic in explanations of wealth. The former is in line with, and the latter runs contrary to Hunt (2004). Latinos rated individualistic explanations of poverty as significantly less important, but this finding could be due to the fact that there were only 31 Latinos in this sample. Finally, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (as measured by the educational attainment of their primary economic provider) were more structuralistic in terms of explanations of poverty.

The current study also provides evidence that can be used to address the second research question of this study; what associations, if any, exist between the respondent's political ideology, support for the just world hypothesis, and their stratification beliefs? The influence of ideology on stratification beliefs was fairly consistent. Similar to the available research, whenever political conservatism and support for the just world hypothesis were found to affect respondents' stratification beliefs significantly, they were always associated with more importance being placed on individualistic explanations of inequality and less importance on structuralistic ones. This pattern held across all inequality scenarios investigated except for two: gendered educational inequality and racial income inequality.

These two exceptions can help us answer our third research question; how do stratification beliefs vary based on which social group is advantaged by the social inequality in question? While both social location and ideology were found to be associated with

stratification beliefs, some evidence suggests that the level of importance respondents assign to individualistic and structuralistic factors is influenced by two factors: 1. whether the form of inequality negatively or positively affects people from their social location 2. whether the form of inequality negatively or positively affects traditionally dominant groups. The influence of these two dynamics on stratification beliefs has yet to be explored due to the uniform research designs of previous stratification belief studies, which exclusively asked respondents to explain forms of inequality that benefitted traditionally dominant social groups. To address this question, this study focused on gender educational inequality and racial income inequality where the traditionally dominant groups (i.e., men and white Americans) were also disadvantaged, and the traditionally non-dominant groups (i.e., women and non-whites) were also advantaged in scenarios.

The findings of this study suggest that the relationship between stratification beliefs and social location can vary by whether the form of inequality advantages or disadvantages social groups of which the respondent is a member. When asked why women graduate from high school at higher rates than men, male respondents rated individualistic explanations as less important. Similarly, female respondents rated individualistic explanations as less important when asked why men command higher average incomes than women.

The results from the two racial inequality scenarios also support the argument that stratification beliefs can be self-serving. When asked to explain why white students graduate from high school at higher rates than their African American peers, white respondents had the lowest average rating of importance for structuralistic factors. When these dynamics were reversed, and respondents were asked to explain why Asian American households have higher median incomes than whites, white participants had the lowest mean support for individualistic explanations.

Similarly, the relationship between stratification beliefs and ideology appears to be influenced by whether it benefits or disadvantages traditionally dominant social groups. Consistent with previous research (Kluegel and Smith 1986), being politically conservative and supporting the just world hypothesis was associated with higher support for individualistic explanations and lower support for structuralistic explanations of wealth, poverty, and with both the individualistic and structuralistic global variables as well. We also found this same pattern for gender income inequality and racial educational inequality, two scenarios where traditionally dominant groups are advantaged by inequality. When the tables were

turned, however, and respondents were asked to explain inequalities that disadvantage traditionally dominant groups, no significant associations were found between stratification beliefs and support for the just world hypothesis. This may indicate that the just world hypothesis is not a hypothesis that the world is fair, but rather it is a hypothesis that the world is fair when traditionally dominant groups dominate.

The findings of this study need to be interpreted with some caution as this study was limited in important ways. First, the use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of this study's findings. Compared to national averages, the sample used here was disproportionately young and female. Furthermore, college students may not be the best sample for the exploration of stratification beliefs as a college education is a key determinant of one's place within society's economic stratification system. Given that 31.6% of high school graduates do not immediately enroll in college (NCES 2015) and 67.5% of Americans aged 25 or older have not attained a bachelor's degree (Ryan and Bauman 2016), the findings of this study cannot be read as nationally representative.

A second limitation stems from the timing of this study. Surveys were completed mere weeks from the 2016 presidential election and elevated political rhetoric may have influenced respondents. Replication of this study could help discern the extent of these possible effects.

Finally, the strength of this study's research design may also be one of its limitations. Asking respondents to rate the importance of individualistic and structuralistic explanations of six different forms of inequality allowed us to address research questions previous studies could not. The repetitive nature of this design, however, may have created a priming effect on the respondents' answers to the inequality scenarios they were asked to explain later in the survey. Future research could address this by randomly ordering the sequence of scenarios.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined the relationship between social location, ideology, and stratification beliefs. This work adds to the available literature in two important ways. First, departing from previous work that has looked at only explanations of poverty (Feagin 1975, Hunt 1996, 2001) or only explanations of poverty and wealth (Hunt 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986), the current study examined stratification beliefs across poverty, wealth, gender inequality, and racial inequality. Second, this study is, to the best of my knowledge, the first analysis of stratification beliefs that has asked respondents to explain forms of inequality that advantage and

disadvantage traditionally dominant social groups. These two novel contributions allowed us to explore multiple questions left unanswered by the extant literature.

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