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## **Decoding Modern Racial Discourse A System Justification Theory Approach**

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As a person who conducts anti-racism training, I am immersed in the issue of race in the United States. I find the work rewarding because it focuses on human equality and compassion for others. During my twenty years of leading anti-racism training, however, particular conversations between me and the training participants have been frustrating.

In a typical training session, my co-facilitator, Pamela Smith Chambers, and I will work hard to explain race and racism to a group. We will talk about the nature of prejudice, explain key definitions, discuss the history of race in America, and offer current examples of racism and its effects on people of color. We will spend two days or more engaging people in experiential exercises, lectures, and discussions to help them understand race and racism, and provide them with examples of how they can make a positive difference in the lives of others. Moreover, people of color in the training will usually offer examples—often painful examples—from their own lives to buttress the reality of American racism and the need for change. Then it happens: a somewhat agitated white participant will raise his or her hand and announce to the training cadre, “I don’t see color.”

Because Pamela and I have decided that retorting with the question, “What the hell are you talking about?!!” would be counterproductive, Pamela will gently suggest that the participant is not really saying that he or she has a color vision deficiency, but is using a metaphor to convey the idea that he or she doesn’t see race negatively in others. Pamela will then go on to explain how not seeing another person’s race is a bad idea, and that instead we should strive to be aware of race so that we can examine racial prejudices, acknowledge racial identities that are important to others, and begin the work of addressing racism in society. Despite Pamela’s careful explanation and

efforts not to make the participant feel attacked, he or she will often reply with a non sequitur such as “But black people are prejudiced too,” or “People are just too sensitive about race.” And so we seem to have made no progress.

After more than twenty years of hosting these vexing racial vignettes, I decided to search for a better understanding of why they were happening. Before I discuss my discovery, it is important to know what I think about the many white people involved. I realize that the discourse I’ve described occasionally happens because some people are mean spirited; but in my experience those people are few. In fact, almost all the frustrating discourse comes from people who are apparently well-meaning. Some of them are even my friends—people who treat me with kindness and respect. In that light, I do not feel that comments like, “I don’t see color,” are usually spoken with conscious malice. Instead, the comments are offered automatically, like bromides used to fill a void where critical thinking about race is absent.

But *why?* Why aren’t facts, logic, and gentle persuasion enough to change people’s minds? Why, if white people are generally good people, don’t they want to see things differently? I am a middle-aged citizen of the United States of America—a black man who has lived here all my life. My ancestors have been here for more than 250 years since colonial times. Despite what I have learned from my own personal experience and from the history of the black people who came before me, I was still struck by this puzzle: How can white Americans have such a great ideological investment in the virtues of human equality, yet be so facile about racism that its iniquities are either overlooked, ignored, or unacknowledged?

Fortunately, my research revealed an answer in system justification theory. The theory holds that “people are motivated to justify and rationalize the way things are, so that existing social, economic, and political arrangements tend to be perceived as fair and legitimate” even if they are not (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). The need to keep things as they are is strongly linked to several psychological motivations, including the fear of mortality (such as a terrorism threat), the need to preserve predictability and structure in one’s life, the desire to have a shared world view with others, and the avoidance of having to think of new solutions to societal problems (Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012).

System justification theory is powerful because it explains not only that the preservation of the status quo is an impetus for people's actions, but that the preference for the status quo may be a more salient motive for action than self-interest, domination, or out-group prejudice. In other words, white people may say, "Racism isn't a problem in our society," not because they have a conscious, personal dislike for black people, or are unable to understand the contemporary struggles with racism black people endure. Instead, the theory posits that the dismissive remark arises from a strong psychological need to maintain the current social order even when doing so is contrary to cogent evidence or espoused values of fairness.

To say that people are not necessarily acting out of conscious malice does not mean they are acting altruistically, however. It means that people may act primarily out of a need to preserve the status quo and its existing hierarchies—unjust hierarchies in the case of racism and other forms of oppression—and will rationalize their actions to preserve their own sense of being good, morally-minded people who belong to a fair and inclusive society. Thus, claiming that racism is not a societal problem is not really an insightful expression about the state of race in America, but an automatic expression of the need to feel settled with oneself and the society at large while also finding a way to discount or dismiss unsettling evidence to the contrary.

This rationalization process is supported by a set of ideologies, that is, belief systems, world views, and cognitive tools (social scripts, metaphors, and methods of ego defense) people use to fashion their judgments. Because people are immersed in ideology, it drops into the background and its effects on thinking and action are usually unconscious and invisible. Nevertheless, ideologies inexorably mediate what people perceive as just or unjust, good or bad, or normal or aberrant. They also control social memory, so that people operate to "forget" the past and see the world like a blank slate or a level playing field. In turn, other people's circumstances can be seen as simply their own fault (Balkin, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This explains why the "invisible knapsack" of racial privileges Peggy McIntosh (1988) wrote about is so attractive and persistent despite its now twenty-five-year explication.

It is not one, but a collection of ideologies that support system justification. Those belief systems, derived from a list produced by Jost and Hunyady (2005), are summarized below:

<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Description</b>
Protestant Work Ethic	People have a moral responsibility to work hard and avoid leisure activities; hard work is a virtue and is its own reward.
Meritocracy	The system rewards individual ability and motivation, so success is an indicator of personal deservingness.
Fair Market Ideology	Market-based procedures and outcomes are inherently fair, legitimate, and just.
Economic System Justification	Economic inequality is natural, inevitable, and legitimate; economic outcomes are fair and deserved.
Belief in a Just World	People typically get what they deserve and deserve what they get; regarding outcomes, what “is” is what “ought” to be.
Power Distance	Inequality is a natural and desirable feature of the social order; large power differences are acceptable and legitimate.
Social Dominance	Dominant groups are superior to others.
Equality Opposition	Social and economic equality is unattainable, undesirable and detrimental for society.
Authoritarianism	People should follow conventional traditions and established authorities and not offer unconventional or rebellious ideas.
Conservatism	Traditional institutions in society should be preserved; social and economic inequality is acceptable and natural.

It occurs to me that these ideologies not only explain people’s negative reactions toward anti-racism teaching, but also give a new way of understanding people’s action, inaction, and expressive language around issues of race. If the interlocking belief systems mediate what people say and do, then these system-justifying ideologies offer a way of translating action and language that is bound up in otherwise invisible forces. Keep the ideologies of power distance and meritocracy in mind, for example, and the metaphor of “not seeing color” is transformed into a deceptive and self-deceptive act meant to keep inequality intact. The apparent physical and logical contradictions resolve, and one is left with language that is congruent with actions. The seemingly innocuous bromides of modern racial discourse take on the flavor of old-style racist antipathy. The result is distasteful, but one that seems honest.

Below I have crafted tables that set out a few of the often-repeated statements that I have heard in our racial discourse. Accompanying each statement is an enumeration of the system-justifying ideologies that seem to be at work. Using those ideologies, I have decoded each statement to make the ideology apparent and to reveal the statement's new translation. Finally, because the original statements show themselves to be complex devices to keep the current social, political, and cultural state of affairs in place, I have developed one or more descriptive shorthands for each device.

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I don't see color"	I. Power Distance II. Meritocracism
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I see racial differences because the society has taught me to, but I've learned to deceive myself and others about the matter so I can feel connected to existing power structures. I don't have to take any responsibility to change inequities.</i>	Conveniently-Colorblind The Old Razzle Dazzle Gas-Lighting

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"Blacks, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos are prejudiced/ racist too."	I. Power Distance II. Equality Opposition
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I need a way to feel okay about the obvious injustices that people of color face in our society at the hands of people like me. By saying that people of color are prejudiced, I choose to mask—instead of challenge—oppression.</i>	Everything-Is-The-Sameism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I believe that we're all just human beings."	I. Power Distance II. Social Dominance
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>By announcing a truism about biology, I want to hide my feeling that some people are superior to others or more deserving of societal benefits.</i>	We're-All-The-Sameism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"There is only one race: the human race."	I. Power Distance II. Equality Opposition III. Authoritarianism
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>You should shut up about racial and other differences. By obfuscating those differences, I can feel comfortable about current power structures and inequities.</i>	Raceism-Schmascism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I'm not responsible for racism."	I. Power Distance II. Meritocratic Ideology III. Economic System Justification IV. Belief in a Just World
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I can't bear the idea that my economic, social, and community standing is supported by the oppression of others. I refuse to look beyond the narrow trappings of my daily life for the irrefutable evidence to the contrary.</i>	Lady Macbethism Hand Washing

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I've worked hard to get everything I have."	I. Power Distance II. Meritocratic Ideology III. Economic System Justification IV. Belief in a Just World V. Fair Market Ideology VI. Protestant Work Ethic
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>Our economic system is inherently fair. If others have failed, it is their own fault.</i>	Americo-Nobleism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I don't care if your color is red, green, blue, or purple polka dots. Everyone is the same."	I. Power Distance II. Equality Opposition III. Meritocratic Ideology
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I need you to believe that I'm a good, "moral" person. If I admitted that cultural differences mattered to me, I'd have to carefully examine my own prejudices – which I refuse to do.</i>	Somewhere-Over-The-Rainbowism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"America is the best country in the world."	I. Authoritarianism II. Conservatism III. Social Dominance
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>Traditional institutions should be preserved. I feel comfortable as part of the mainstream and cannot accommodate challenges to the status quo. If you don't feel the same way, you're a traitor to established moral values, and an outsider.</i>	Flag-In-Your-Faceism Red-White-And-Blueism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"People should stop bellyaching about their problems."	I. Opposition to Equality
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>Social and economic equality is unattainable. People of color should just accept their status and stop making trouble.</i>	Pepto-Bismolism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"If you stopped harping on race, we wouldn't have so many problems."	I. Authoritarianism II. Opposition to Equality
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>Join me and the majority in the deception that race makes no difference in our society. You should follow traditional patterns of thinking, no matter how illogical or self-defeating, because change is inherently threatening to me and the society as a whole.</i>	Just-Shut-Up-About-Itism; Yakity-Yakism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"I don't have any special advantages because I'm white."	I. Power Distance II. Meritocracism III. Social Dominance
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>Our society is free of barriers to people of color and rewards individual initiative and ability. I'm successful because I <b>deserve</b> to be successful; if you're not, it is because of your own, personal inadequacies or the inadequacies of the groups to which you belong.</i>	Pulling a Marie Antoinette The Immaculate Deception

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"People are just too sensitive."	I. Power Distance II. Social Dominance III. Equality Opposition
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I want to be free to keep marginalized people in their (lower) place by making injustice <b>their</b> problem. By doing so, I can escape any responsibility for my own prejudices or the part I play in maintaining systems of oppression.</i>	Thick-Skinism Pulling a Princes and the Pea



Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"If you don't like this country, then you should leave."	I. Social Dominance II. Authoritarianism III. Equality Opposition
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>People have a responsibility to immerse themselves in the trappings of the Protestant work ethic, Christianity, heterosexuality, middle-class values, androcentrism, and Eurocentric world views. Those who don't are a threat to my sense of safety, moral superiority, and well-being.</i>	Foreigner-Go-Homeism It's-My-Partyism White-And-Rightism

Undecoded Statement	System-Justifying Ideology
"As a Jew/woman/LGBTQ person, I know what people of color go through."	I. Power Distance II. Meritocracism
Decoded Statement	Descriptive Shorthand
<i>I need to deny the advantages that being white gives me in this society. By asserting a disadvantaged status, I want to ensure that neither you nor anyone else makes me feel accountable for the many perks I get just because I'm white. By telling you that "I'm oppressed too," I can feel like a do-gooder and distance myself from playing a part in racial oppression, yet reap all the benefits of being white in the United States.</i>	Me-Tooism Nicey-Whiteism

The undecoded statements in the tables above can be viewed as “microaggressions,” that is, “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color” (Sue et al., 2007). What I have devised here, however, has a greater emphasis on *why* people eschew the problem of race through their language. If system-justifying ideologies are the answer, what emerges are tools that allow us to grasp underlying motivations and to decode what people mean—all of which is based not on mere opinion, but on sociological research and understanding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly the taxonomy can be applied to matters other than race. In fact, some of the undecoded statements in this article arise in conversations about gender, ethnicity, or immigrant status. Whatever the underlying oppression at issue, the conceptual model gives educators (both formal and informal) another resource for engaging people in the often complex and nuanced process of personal and social change.

The decoded statements are not free of ideology, but interpretations in which the previously hidden system-justifying ideologies are made visible. Balkin (1998, p. 274) puts the matter succinctly:

Tools of understanding (ideology) cannot be discarded at will....Even when we attempt to be unbiased or to engage in critical self-inquiry, we are not really discarding our tools of understanding; rather we are using some of them to think about the adequacy of others or about themselves.

Hence, the process properly can be described as examining a statement coded with system-justifying ideologies and translating that statement to one coded with anti-oppression ideologies.<sup>3</sup>

Although I have used system-justifying ideologies to decode current statements about race, those ideologies are also useful in understanding historical statements and actions. They help explain, for example, how the Constitution of the United States could contain a Preamble that sought to “secure the Blessing of Liberty” to the people, yet expressly allow for slavery; how the country could embrace the idea of expanding into “new” lands for public and personal prosperity, yet take those lands away from the Native Americans and Mexicans who lived there and mistreat Chinese immigrants who helped the nation build an expanded infrastructure; how the country could take arms against tyrants during World War II, yet simultaneously imprison people of Japanese descent because of ethnic bigotry. The ideologies of social dominance, equality opposition, authoritarianism, and conservatism explain how a society demanding liberty can be “comfortable” with the oppression of others: people root themselves in the compelling and usually submerged beliefs (1) that they can do no better, (2) that their actions are justified and benevolent because they secure prosperity for the the majority, and (3) that, in the end, “other, *different* people” are a threat and get what they deserve.

In our modern racial discourse, such strident beliefs are not usually expressed overtly through language. System-justify ideologies, like all ideologies, afford people an easy opportunity to leave their belief systems unexamined and unarticulated. If system-

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<sup>3</sup> I leave to the future a delineation and description of anti-oppression ideologies. For the purposes of this article, taking positions opposed to system-justifying ideologies—whatever we might call and however we might describe those ideological positions—has been fruitful.

justifying ideologies are both “invisible and silent” yet as compelling as research indicates, we have good reason to change how we approach race and racism in the United States. For example, if we are immersed in the system-justifying ideologies, then we must think of the higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and incarceration suffered by people of color not as abstract statistics, but as indicators that our society is actively mistreating many of its inhabitants. We must eschew the idea that not talking about race or promoting colorblindness helps make our nation a better place for everyone. Our silence is not benign, but keeps unjust hierarchies in place. Our colorblind discourse reinforces those hierarchies while masquerading as a vehicle for social cohesion. In brief, our understanding of system-justifying ideologies will attach responsibility where it was absent or its implications were dismissed. That is the point: to offer a critique of what people say and the actions they take (or do not take) so the speakers can live up to their claimed values of fairness.

Although it is important to hold people accountable and to urge change, how we evaluate individual blameworthiness is a matter worthy of circumspection. The rhetoric of race in our society is bound up in what Zerubavel (2006) calls “conspiracies of silence,” in which people mostly agree to ignore racism. But more, they engage in an Orwellian “doublethink:” they agree to ignore racism, and then become unconscious about the act of ignoring. As in the tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, people know they should not talk about the emperor’s nudity, but that “undiscussability” is itself “undiscussable” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Such denial is always partial—people know and don’t know—and even when they can no longer turn a blind eye to the facts, they often deny the implications of those facts or their importance (Cohen, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, how much malevolence we should ascribe to an individual’s use of system-justifying ideologies and the resulting denial of the importance of racism is not easily answered. As Cohen (2001, p. 50) states, “The ability to deny is an amazing human phenomenon, largely unexplained and often inexplicable, a product of the sheer complexity of our emotional, linguistic, moral and intellectual lives.” For people who, like

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the statement, “If you don’t like this country, then you should leave,” is probably stated not by an individual who denies the problem of racism, but one who is contemptuous of its implications. By taking a self-righteous stance, the individual claims not blindness, but *indifference* to the impact of racism on others.

me, are interested in teaching about racism in the pursuit of its elimination, I believe that approaching individuals with a sense of compassion is the best strategy, and the awareness of system-justifying ideologies allows me to have compassion for others and for myself.

For example, as I recall many conversations relating to race, I am now certain that much of my irritation comes from the contradictions between what I hear from others and what I observe around me. Engage me in a casual conversation in an airport about how “open and fair” America is—while at that same airport mostly people of color are performing the low-paying jobs (serving fast food, pushing passengers in wheelchairs, etc.)—and I am no longer perplexed about the divergence between what has been said and what seems to me is plainly observable. Although at first blush it might seem like a small matter, by grasping the system-justifying ideologies at work, my need to understand the intrinsic moral issues at hand and why others ignore or avoid them is fulfilled. That understanding is an act of self-compassion that allows me to think about racial issues without bewilderment or self-deception. It also allows me not to feel trapped by feelings of anger, exasperation, or sadness.

In turn, system-justifying ideologies give me a way to ask others to view their language and actions in a new way. I might say, for example, that emphasizing American fairness without also talking about its inequities is a “red-white-and-blueism” worthy of closer examination. We can talk about an alternative way of looking at our racial discourse that reflects the full experiences of persons of color. With system-justifying ideologies as a background and compassion as a guide, I can then ask others to be accountable for racism in a way that was not previously possible. I can do this while also remembering that to demonize people immersed in system-justifying ideologies—although they inflict suffering on others—will not foster a society free of mistrust, bitterness, anger, and oppression.

## **Epilogue**

Two people have been helpful to me in the initial writing of this article: Pamela Smith Chambers (my colleague at the Beyond Diversity Resource Center) and Jason Laker (a

professor at San Jose State University and Chair in the Department of Counselor Education). Pamela is a black woman. Jason is a white, Jewish man.

I mention some of their cultural identities to be disruptive. It is uncommon to emphasize the race, ethnicity, and gender of individuals when expressing thanks for their help. Actually, I *do* want to do more than thank them. I want to say that sometimes I am keenly aware that Pamela is a black woman and that Jason is a white, Jewish man, and sometimes I'm not keenly aware of those identities. I do not believe that I am a more moral or less prejudiced person during the times that I am not thinking about Pamela's or Jason's race, gender, or ethnicity, however. I harbor societally-taught and experientially-taught prejudices against women, black people, white people, Jews, and other groups. I try to keep those prejudices in mind so I can keep them at bay. The honesty of that makes me feel that I don't have to hide my less-than-perfect self, but can instead offer it up as an example of a different way forward.

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