

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Social devaluation of African Americans and race-related conspiracy theories

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of conduct. All data are available upon request.

## Abstract

African Americans in the United States endorse conspiracy theories at greater rates than Whites. The extant literature explains this pattern in terms of a rational motivation to blame the social system for prejudice and discrimination. However, little research distinguishes between race-relevant conspiracy theories against African Americans and general conspiracy theories. We propose that African Americans may seek out race-relevant conspiracy theories in particular because they satisfy a search for meaning that is brought about by chronic social devaluation. We present two studies that examine this social devaluation hypothesis. In Study 1 African Americans endorsed race-relevant conspiracy theories, even when controlling for perceptions of discrimination, an aspect of system blame. Study 2 employed an experimental affirmation of social value that significantly reduced African Americans' endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories consistent with the social devaluation hypothesis. These data indicate that there may be psychologically adaptive features of race-relevant conspiracy theory endorsement.

Conspiracy theories, defined as beliefs in secret plots by powerful people or groups to accomplish harmful or sinister goals (Goertzel, 1994; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012), are generally endorsed by members of ethnic minority groups in the United States more frequently than Whites.<sup>1</sup> Members of marginalized ethnic minority groups are more likely than Whites to believe that the United States government was behind the September 11 attacks (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007), that the air force is hiding flying saucers (Newman & Baumeister, 1996), that the government deliberately spreads AIDS in African American communities (Bogart & Thorburn, 2006; Ross, Essien, & Torres, 2006) and intentionally spreads drugs in inner city communities (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Goertzel, 1994).

The extant literature explains African Americans' conspiracy theory endorsement primarily in terms of realistic appraisals of social practices and policies (e.g., Bird & Bogart, 2005; Nelson, Adams, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2010) but does not make a distinction

between race-relevant (e.g., AIDS was created to harm the African American community) versus race-neutral conspiracy theories (the moon landing was a hoax). Race-neutral conspiracy theories are typically counter-narratives to mainstream beliefs, but race-relevant conspiracy theories involve specific malevolent intentions toward particular ethnic groups or their leaders. Although there is substantial evidence that ethnicity-based differences in conspiracy theory endorsement exist, relatively few mechanisms for these effects have been tested, especially with respect to the racial content of the theory. We examine the proposition that African American endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories in particular may stem in part from a social motivation to manage chronic societal devaluation (e.g., Henry, 2009, 2011a).

## Rational Motives for Conspiracy Beliefs

A recent review proposes three categories of motivations underlying belief in conspiracy theories, two of which include (i) the motivation people have to seek causal explanations to reduce uncertainty (epistemic), and (ii) to feel in control and safe in their lives (existential; Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). These motivations suggest that belief in conspiracy theories can help people manage realistic threats.

<sup>1</sup>In this article we use the term 'marginalized ethnic minorities' to refer specifically to African Americans in the United States. However, we expect the patterns would apply to other minority groups to the extent that they experience similar chronic social devaluation.

These rational motives may be true for members of ethnic minority groups insofar as race-relevant conspiracy theories often contain a kernel of truth. There are innumerable historical examples of majority groups conspiring to do harm to minorities. The eugenics movement in the early 20th century encouraged the use of birth control among poor and ethnic populations to curb reproduction by the “unfit” (Bird & Bogart, 2005; Dugger, 1998; Roberts, 1998, 2000). These policies fueled later rumors that birth control is a form of African American genocide, driving subsequent reductions in the use of birth control in African American communities (Bird & Bogart, 2005). Similarly, the Tuskegee syphilis study, in which medical researchers withheld treatment for syphilis from African American participants, helped drive later suspicions among ethnic minorities that the AIDS virus was created by the government to wipe them out (Russell *et al.*, 2011). Exposure to historical narratives of anti-African American conspiracy theories, such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, predicts increased endorsement of novel anti-African American conspiracy theories (Nelson *et al.*, 2010). These data show that endorsement of race-based conspiracy theories can flow from realistic appraisals of historical discriminatory social practices and policies.

### Social-emotional Motives for Stigmatized Groups

A third motivation for conspiracy theory endorsement is the desire for individuals to see themselves and their group in a more positive light (social motivation; Douglas *et al.*, 2017). Our theoretical approach focuses on this social motivation as an important driver behind African Americans' endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories.

People have a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009) and yet stigmatized groups, in this case African Americans, experience systemic prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012) that leads to a chronic sense of devaluation (for discussion, see Davis & Reyna, 2015). Social devaluation is conveyed to stigmatized groups in many ways, from negative portrayals of a group in the media to microaggressions in daily social interactions. People who belong to stigmatized groups believe that they are, or at least should be (see e.g. Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013), of equal social value as others, yet their experience of social devaluation contradicts this expected relation to society. Consequently, in addition to collective action and other forms of explicit corrections of injustices in the system (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), stigma compensation theory suggests that members of stigmatized groups develop self-regulatory strategies to compensate for a diminished sense of social value that is inherent in their social context (Henry, 2009, 2011a). These strategies help bolster or protect

their existing sense of social worth but do not necessarily have to address the source of social devaluation directly.

According to stigma compensation theory, those strategies include any attitude or behavior that serves a psychologically self-defensive or reassuring function (Henry, 2009, 2011a). Such attitudes or behaviors should therefore be found in greater frequency and intensity among members of devalued groups in society compared to their more socially valued counterparts, and there is ample evidence supporting this prediction. For example stigmatized groups show more aggression in response to insults (Henry, 2009), greater hostile reactivity (Davis & Reyna, 2015), authoritarianism (Brandt & Henry, 2012a; Brandt, Henry, & Wetherell, 2015; Henry, 2011b), distrust (Brandt, Wetherell, & Henry, 2015), religiosity (Brandt & Henry, 2012b), and more concern for respect in the workplace (Henry, 2011a) when compared to non-stigmatized majority groups.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the theory argues that these compensatory strategies do not result from individual deficits that may accompany stigma (cf. lack of sophistication, Lipset, 1959; lack of impulse control, MacDonald, 2014) but instead are a function of, and a reaction to, broader social patterns of prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization.

The social motivation associated with conspiracy theories can function in at least two different ways for those who are stigmatized. First, endorsing conspiracy theories can deflect blame away from stigmatized groups such as African Americans for their lower social status. Conspiracy theories are often external attributions that blame systematic prejudice and discrimination for problems within the African American community, and system blame is correlated with endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories (Crocker *et al.*, 1999). On the other hand, conspiracy theories can also, in and of themselves, provide a sense of meaning that can compensate for social devaluation. When people feel socially excluded they are more motivated to search for meaning (Stillman *et al.*, 2009), and those who have been excluded may be drawn to the meaning provided by conspiracy theories (Graeupner & Coman, 2017). Given that those who are stigmatized face a kind of chronic social exclusion (cf. Davis & Reyna, 2015; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009), we predict that those who are stigmatized will be particularly attracted to conspiracy theories, in particular those theories that concern plots against their group specifically.

<sup>2</sup>See these individual papers for more detailed explanation for *how* these particular attitudes and behaviors serve a psychologically self-defensive or protective function. For example, increased religiosity buffers social devaluation by providing an increased sense of connectedness to one's community (Brandt & Henry, 2012b), while increased authoritarianism can help manage threats associated with stigmatization (Henry, 2011b).

## African Americans and Race-related Versus Race-Neutral Conspiracy Theories

African Americans consistently endorse general conspiracy theories at greater rates than majority groups (Goertzel, 1994). This pattern is robust and can be explained in terms of the rational, epistemic, and existential motivations described above (e.g. Bird & Bogart, 2005; Douglas et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2010). General conspiracy theories are not tied to an ethnic minority identity, and thus may not satisfy the social motivation of ethnic minorities who face chronic devaluation. On the other hand, endorsing race-related conspiracy theories may address a specific social motivation to repair their sense of threatened social value (Henry, 2009, 2011a).

Crocker et al. (1999) describe a predominantly rational, social motivation for belief in conspiracy theories where experiences of prejudice and discrimination make race-relevant conspiracy theories seem like plausible causal explanations for African Americans' disadvantage. These data show a positive correlation between blaming the social system and endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories; however, the *system blame hypothesis* has not been experimentally shown to cause endorsement, nor does it address the social devaluation that results from those experiencing systemic prejudice and discrimination. The *social devaluation hypothesis* presented here predicts that ethnic minorities will be more likely to endorse race-relevant conspiracy theories in particular because they provide an avenue to compensate for the chronic marginalization that comes with social disadvantage. We expect this mechanism likely operates in parallel with the system blame hypothesis and similarly only with race-relevant conspiracy theories.

### The Present Research

The current research examines two social motivations that may drive increased endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories among African Americans; specifically the motivations to blame the social system and to compensate for social devaluation. We present two studies to test the hypothesis that African Americans' beliefs in race-related conspiracy theories are driven by a motivation to compensate for social devaluation when controlling for system blame. In Study 1 we examine whether ethnic minorities endorse conspiracy theories in a pattern that is consistent with the social devaluation hypothesis. Study 2 uses an experimental manipulation to test the social devaluation hypothesis directly through an affirmation of social value. If ethnic minorities have a motivation to mitigate social devaluation and are provided an opportunity to achieve this through affirmation, then they should decrease their endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories.

## Study 1

Study 1 provides a preliminary test of the hypothesis that social devaluation drives endorsement of conspiracy theories using the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2012 time series data. We examine the effects of ethnicity on three specific conspiracy theories, a race-neutral theory, and two different race-relevant conspiracy theories. The first concerns the questions surrounding former President Obama's citizenship and thus his legitimacy as a U.S. president. Beginning during the 2008 presidential campaign and continuing even after his term had concluded, many political pundits questioned the validity of President Obama's birth certificate. (In the United States one must be a naturally born U.S. citizen to be eligible for the presidency.) The "birther conspiracy," as it became known in popular parlance, is the belief that President Obama was not actually born in the United States and that a conspiracy exists to falsify his records and hide evidence of his true birthplace. This conspiracy is unique because the election of the first African American president was seen by many as a move toward greater racial equality in the United States, an event that could enhance the social value of African Americans. In contrast, the notion that the government intentionally flooded ethnic minority neighborhoods of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina is a race-relevant conspiracy that explains an event that negatively affected minorities disproportionately. To the extent that race-relevant conspiracy theories address a social motivation to attenuate feelings of devaluation over and above the effects of blaming the system, we should expect that the discrepancies in belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories between African Americans and Whites will be greater than for race-neutral conspiracy theories. African Americans will be more likely to embrace the Katrina conspiracy because it provides a source of meaning that is connected to their group, which may help compensate for chronic social devaluation. If conspiracy theories function in this way, then we would expect the opposite pattern for the conspiracy surrounding President Obama's birth certificate. Specifically we predict that African Americans will be much less likely than Whites to endorse the belief that former President Obama was not born in the United States (and the implied conspiracy to cover up this "fact"), because even though the conspiracy theory contains racial content, it does not provide the kind of meaning that helps compensate for devaluation. (Indeed, the birther conspiracy could be interpreted as yet another example of systemic social devaluation aimed at delegitimizing the first African American president). We predict that these patterns will persist when a component of system blame is included in the model, and that there will be stronger differences between African American participants and Whites for belief in the birther and Katrina conspiracy theories (i.e., the race-related conspiracy theories)

than for a conspiracy theory regarding September 11 (i.e., a race-neutral conspiracy).

## Method

**Participants.** Participants were selected from the 2012 ANES time series study, a nationally representative sample of data on a variety of political and social measures (ANES, 2014). Only participants who completed all measures (described below) were included in our final sample. Because we are focusing on ethnicity based differences we included only participants who indicated their primary ethnicity as White ( $n = 2164$ ), or African American ( $n = 707$ ). Our final sample of  $n = 2871$  participants were 50.6% male, with a median age of 54 ranging from 18 to 90 years of age. Participants completed the study either via face-to-face interviews or over the Internet both before and after the 2012 presidential election.<sup>3</sup>

### Materials.

**Demographic variables.** Participants' self-reported ethnicity was contrast-coded into a single dichotomous variable with 1 representing Whites and  $-1$  representing African Americans. We also included participant age, income, education, and gender as covariates.

**Conspiracy theories and system blame.** Three items were used to capture participants' endorsement of two race-relevant and one race-neutral conspiracy theory. In the ANES codebook these are both referred to as "non-mainstream mass public allegations" (ANES, 2014, p19). The items ask participants to estimate the likelihood of two common race-relevant conspiracy theories. The first question concerns President Obama's birth certificate: "Was Barack Obama definitely born in the United States?" Response options ranged on a four-point scale from "Definitely born in the United States" to "Definitely born in another country". The second race-relevant item concerns the government's actions during Hurricane Katrina (Katrina conspiracy): "Some people say that when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005, the federal government intentionally breached flood levees in New Orleans so that poor neighborhoods would be flooded and middle-class neighborhoods would be spared". Responses ranged on a four-point scale with the federal government "Definitely did this" to "Definitely did not do this". The final race-neutral item concerns the government's role in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States (9/11 conspiracy): "Did senior federal government officials definitely know about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 before they happened?" with responses ranging on a four-point scale from "Definitely knew about

the terrorist attacks before they happened", to "Definitely did not know about the terrorist attacks before they happened". Participants' responses were scaled such that higher numbers indicated stronger belief in the conspiracy.

We measured system blame using a single question that captures a similar aspect of the construct presented by Crocker et al. (1999). Participants responded to a single item, "How much discrimination is there in the United States today against Blacks", using a five-point scale ranging from "A great deal" to "None at all". This variable was scaled such that higher numbers indicated more perceived discrimination.

## Results and Discussion

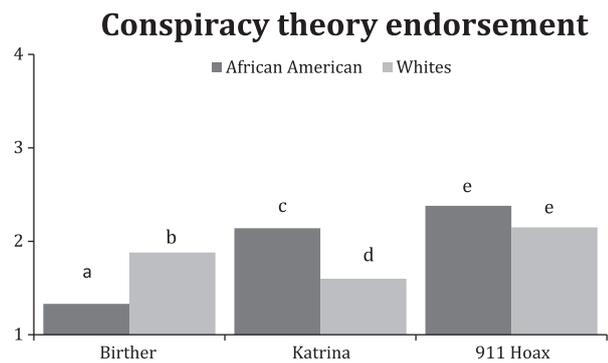
We began by examining the differences between African Americans and Whites on endorsement of the two race-relevant conspiracy theories, birther and Katrina, using two separate ANCOVA analyses (controlling for participant system blame, age, gender, education, and income). African American participants endorsed the birther conspiracy significantly less ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) than the White participants ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) but endorsed the Katrina conspiracy ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) significantly more than White participants ( $M = 1.62$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ; see Table 1). Next we conducted an ANCOVA examining African American and White participants' endorsement of the race-neutral 9/11 conspiracy (controlling for the same covariates listed above). Consistent with previous research, African Americans endorsed the race-neutral 9/11 conspiracy theory significantly more ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than White participants ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ). We conducted a follow-up repeated measures ANCOVA analysis to determine if these ethnicity-based differences persisted across these distinct conspiracy theories while controlling for system blame. Results revealed a significant ethnicity by within-subjects conspiracy interaction,  $F(2, 2863) = 110.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .072$ , indicating Whites and African Americans were significantly different in their endorsement across all three conspiracy theories examined, controlling for the covariates described above (see Figure 1).

Finally we examined the patterns of correlations among the variables (see Table 2) to determine whether the magnitude of the relationships between ethnicity and belief in conspiracy theories varies as a function of the racial content of the theory. We used a  $z$  test to compare the correlation of ethnicity with the Katrina conspiracy ( $r = -.283$ ,  $p < .001$ ) to the correlation of ethnicity with the 9/11 conspiracy ( $r = -.107$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results indicate that the magnitude of the relationship between ethnicity and the Katrina conspiracy is significantly larger ( $z = -4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than ethnicity's relationship with the 9/11 conspiracy. Similarly, the magnitude of the relationship between ethnicity and the birther conspiracy ( $r = -.283$ ,  $p < .001$ ) is significantly larger ( $z = -3.76$ ,

<sup>3</sup>More detailed information on the data collection procedures is available on the ANES website: [http://www.electionstudies.org/study pages/anes\\_timeseries\\_2012/anes\\_timeseries\\_2012.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/study pages/anes_timeseries_2012/anes_timeseries_2012.htm).

**Table 1.** ANES ANCOVA analysis predicting race-relevant and neutral conspiracy theories

	Obama not born in US			Katrina flooding intentional			Government knew about 9/11		
	F	P	η <sup>2</sup>	F	P	η <sup>2</sup>	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>
Ethnicity	98.65	<.001	.026	93.34	<.001	.025	5.11	.024	.001
System Blame	152.47	<.001	.040	36.96	<.001	.010	3.85	.050	.001
Age	10.89	.001	.003	32.60	<.001	.009	35.78	<.001	.010
Gender	.063	.802	<.001	4.89	.027	.001	2.23	.135	.001
Education	103.04	<.001	.028	38.62	<.001	.011	48.51	<.001	.013
Income	4.13	.042	.001	52.25	<.001	.025	27.26	<.001	.007



**Figure 1:** Repeated ANCOVA analysis examining the ethnicity-based endorsement of three separate conspiracy theories. *Note:* Superscript letters that differ from one another indicate significant differences within each of the three conspiracies analyzed

$p < .001$ ) than ethnicity’s relationship with the 9/11 conspiracy ( $r = -.107, p < .001$ ).

These results suggest that the racial content of a particular conspiracy adds a layer of meaning for African Americans that is not present for general conspiracy theories. It may not be surprising that African Americans are less likely than Whites to endorse the conspiracy that Barack Obama was not born in the United States; however, the overall patterns suggest a motivation beyond system blame that we explore further in Study 2.

Study 1 has some important limitations. Without a specific measure or experimental manipulation, these data do not directly test the social devaluation hypothesis. Rather, Study 1 demonstrates that African

Americans are sensitive to the racial content of conspiracy theories in a pattern that is consistent with predictions of stigma compensation theory. Second, the measure that was used to capture system blame only addressed the perceived discrimination aspect of the construct and does not provide a robust test of this motivation to endorse conspiracy theories. Study 2 further expands on the patterns presented in Study 1 by testing the social devaluation hypothesis directly using an experimental design and a more complete measure of system blame.

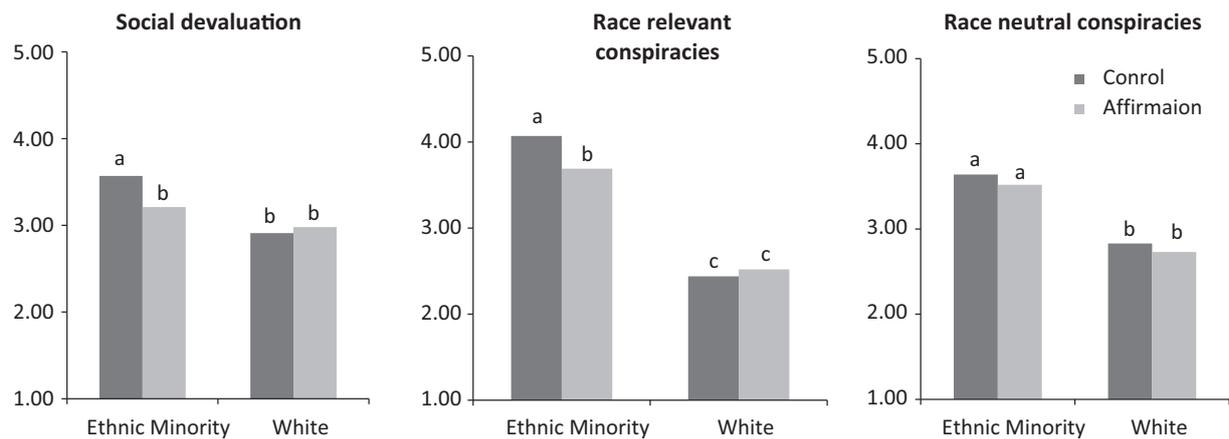
### Study 2

Study 2 examined the social devaluation hypothesis directly using a social worth affirmation manipulation. If social stigma triggers a search for meaning in a manner consistent with prior research on social exclusion (Graeupner & Coman, 2017; Stillman et al., 2009) and this drives a social motivation to endorse race-relevant conspiracy theories in particular, then a social worth affirmation should function to decrease the endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories for African Americans. Affirming one’s social value should disrupt any search for meaning that the socially excluded might otherwise take (Graeupner & Coman, 2017; Stillman et al., 2009). We do not expect the social worth affirmation to affect race-neutral conspiracy theories because these conspiracy theories may be triggered by more rational, epistemic, and/or existential motivations that are less connected

**Table 2.** Correlations among the Study 1 variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9
1 Ethnicity								
2 System Blame	-.432**							
3 Obama not born in US	.253**	-.279**						
4 Katrina flooding Intentional	-.283**	.205**	-.017					
5 Government Knew about 9/11	-.107**	.078**	.093**	.382**				
6 Age	.119**	-.011	.063**	-.107**	-.127**			
7 Gender	-.042*	.085**	-.015	-.073**	-.026*	-.003		
8 Education	.118**	-.024	-.156**	-.165**	-.152**	-.022	-.043*	
9 Income	.222**	-.077**	-.042*	-.220**	-.152**	.039**	.081**	.397**

*Notes:*  $n = 4312$ , ethnicity and gender coded  $-1 =$  African American/female,  $1 =$  white/male. \*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .05$ .



**Figure 2:** Separate analyses examining the interaction between ethnicity and the experimental social worth affirmation on social devaluation, race-relevant, and race-neutral (general) conspiracy theories. *Note:* Superscript letters that differ from one another indicate significant differences within each of the three separate dependent variables analyzed

to the social motivation to mitigate the effects of chronic devaluation.

## Method

**Participants.** We began with a sample of 635 students enrolled in psychology courses at two large Midwestern universities in the United States.<sup>4</sup> One of the universities was predominantly African American ( $n = 243$ ; 76% African American, 7.4% Hispanic, 4.9% White and 11.7% indicating other ethnicities) and the other was predominantly White ( $n = 392$ ; 59.9% White, 17.6% Hispanic, 6.1% African American and 16.4% indicated other ethnicities). We included only those participants whose primary identity was White or African American and those who completed at least half of the items composing each scale used in the analyses.<sup>5</sup> The resulting sample  $n = 471$  participants were mostly women ( $n = 268$ ) and had a median age of 21 with a range from 18 to 65 years of age. Missing values for continuous data were replaced using the expectation-maximization algorithm (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977).

**Materials and procedure.** The study was conducted using an online survey. Participants identified their ethnicity, completed an experimental affirmation of social value (vs. a control), and then indicated their belief in both race-relevant and race-neutral conspiracy theories. Additionally, we measured the degree to which participants experience societal devaluation and blame the social system for disadvantage.

**Demographic measures.** Participants completed a series of demographic measures including sex, age, ethnicity, and income.<sup>6</sup> As with Study 1, participants' ethnic status was contrast-coded into two groups comparing Whites with those who indicated an African American identity. Family income was measured on a ten-point scale ranging from under \$20,000 to \$180,000 and above.

**Social value affirmation.** Participants were randomly assigned to a social value affirmation condition or a control. This affirmation task is based on other standard self-affirmations with the distinction that participants are not just affirming the self generally, but specifically through their *relation* to a social context (cf. Davis & Reyna, 2015; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; see also Henry, 2011b). In the affirmation condition, participants wrote about a time in which they felt socially valued:

Try to recall a situation where something happened that made you feel really important and valuable to other people, something that really made you feel valuable to those around you. This may be because of something that you did or said, or something someone else did or said to you. Please take as much time as you need to remember a situation like this. Try to recall yourself in that position. Try to imagine exactly what happened. Take as much time as you need. When you have the situation clearly in mind, we need you to briefly describe the situation you are thinking of in as much detail as possible, and more importantly, explain why it made you feel important or valuable.

<sup>4</sup>Including the location of the data collection as an independent variable did not significantly influence the results of the analyses reported below.

<sup>5</sup>Thirteen participants responded to the ethnicity item by selecting "other" but then went on to list their primary identity as either African American or White in the open-ended response.

<sup>6</sup>Participants completed demographic measure either first or at the end of the survey. The results reported here were not affected by the presentation order of the demographic measures.

In the control condition, participants wrote about a time they commuted to work:

Try to recall a time when you were commuting to work. Try to recall yourself in that position as clearly as possible and to imagine exactly what happened. Take as much time as you need. When you have the situation clearly in mind, we need you to describe the situation in as much detail as possible.

Typical responses in the affirmation condition involved participants being recognized by peers or other valued social groups for academic, career, or athletic performance, or being appreciated for some act of prosocial behavior. This task was designed to reinforce participants' existing sense of social value and connection.

It should be noted that the affirmation condition draws upon an individual-level affirmation of social worth, and does not necessarily serve as an affirmation of the value of one's group. This choice is deliberate. While a group-level affirmation could trickle down and bolster an individual's sense of social worth, an affirmation of social worth at the individual level helps ensure that the social motive we are manipulating is not about directly protecting or enhancing the self *per se* but rather the self in connection to the group. This process may operate separately from any motives to enhance the group (e.g., through collective action). Stigma compensation theory (Henry, 2009) predicts that one's sense of social worth may be impacted by the value of the groups with which they associate, but that those who are stigmatized engage in regulatory behavior at the individual level to manage group-based social devaluation as well. Hence, we chose to keep the affirmation at the individual level to increase the chances that it directly impacted participants' sense of social worth.

**Social devaluation.** Eight items were used to measure participants' perception of their groups' social devaluation (Davis & Reyna, 2015). The instructions indicated that "we are interested in how you see yourself in relation to the world around you," and participants responded to the eight statements (e.g., "Society values people like me less than others" and "I believe that others in society feel that I am a less worthy human being") using a seven-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The eight items formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ) and were averaged to create a composite of social devaluation, with higher numbers indicating a greater sense of social devaluation (i.e., threatened social worth).

**System blame.** The degree to which people blame the social system for prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities was measured with the six items used by Crocker et al. (1999). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as

"Educational data show that high school drop-out rates are much higher for African American students than for White students. This is due to racism and discrimination that African American students encounter in the educational system," and "Current medical records indicate that, relative to the proportion of African Americans in the population, far more African Americans have AIDS or AIDS-related illnesses than Whites. This is due to prejudice and discrimination in the health care system in the United States". Participants' response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. These items were averaged into a scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ) where higher numbers indicate greater system blame.

**Endorsement of conspiracy theories.** Participants responded to items assessing belief in both race-neutral and race-relevant conspiracy theories. Endorsement of race-neutral conspiracy theories was assessed with 13 items (e.g. "Aliens genetically engineered human beings", "The Apollo moon landing was a hoax"), with response options ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The items were averaged into a scale that was internally consistent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). Endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories was assessed with 13 items similar to those used by Crocker et al. (1999); e.g., "The government deliberately makes sure that harmful, addictive drugs are available in poor Black neighborhoods", "The government deliberately prevents Black people from immigrating into this country to keep the number of Black people small"), with response options also ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. These items were averaged into a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ).

## Results

We began by examining the effect of the experimental manipulation, participant ethnicity, and their interaction on threatened social worth to verify that the affirmation successfully manipulated social worth differentially for the African American participants (correlations among all Study 2 variables are presented in Table 3). We conducted a 2 (White v. African American)  $\times$  2 (affirmation condition vs. control) ANCOVA predicting threatened social worth and controlling demographic covariates (age, sex, and income). There was a significant main effect of ethnicity with African Americans ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) indicating greater social devaluation compared to Whites ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ; see Table 4). There was no main effect of the affirmation condition; however, there was a significant interaction between ethnicity and the affirmation condition. Examination of the simple effects reveals that African Americans in the control condition indicated significantly greater social devaluation compared to those in the affirmation condition,  $F(1, 464) = 5.60$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ . There was not a significant

**Table 3.** Correlations among the Study 2 variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	10
1 Ethnicity									
2 Affirmation condition	.002								
3 Social devaluation	-.247**	-.055							
4 System blame	-.383**	.007	.278**						
5 Race-relevant conspiracies	-.611**	-.040	.422**	.702**					
6 Race-neutral conspiracies	-.426**	.033	.342**	.450**	-.726**				
7 Age	-.469**	.061	.072	.290**	-.417**	.274**			
8 Gender	-.133**	-.043	.041	.064	-.039	-.009**	-.048	.393**	
9 Income	.513	-.012	-.269	-.277**	-.362**	-.302**	-.300**	.050**	-.115**

Notes:  $n = 471$ , ethnicity and gender coded  $-1 =$  African American/female,  $1 =$  white/male.

\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** ANCOVA analysis predicting social devaluation and system blame, from ethnicity, the experimental manipulation, and their interaction

	Social devaluation			System blame		
	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Ethnicity	12.16	<.001	.026	20.95	<.001	.043
Affirmation condition	2.02	.156	.004	0.10	.751	<.001
Interaction	4.21	.041	.009	4.04	1.71	.004
Age	4.69	.031	.010	15.64	<.001	.033
Income	18.43	<.001	.038	4.47	.035	.010
Sex	6.61	.010	.014	10.18	.002	.021

Note:  $n = 471$ , ethnicity and gender coded  $-1 =$  African American/female,  $1 =$  white/male.

difference between Whites in the affirmation condition and control,  $F(1, 464) = .211$ ,  $p = .646$ ,  $\eta^2 < .001$  (left panel, Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> These results indicate that the affirmation condition did successfully bolster African Americans' sense of social worth by decreasing their sense of social devaluation. The affirmation did not affect Whites, a pattern consistent with the idea that Whites' sense of social value is inherently affirmed by the existing social hierarchy. This pattern replicates several published studies (Davis & Reyna, 2015; Henry, 2009, 2011b; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011) and shows social value affirmations do not have the same effect for higher- versus lower-status groups (Henry, 2009, 2011a).

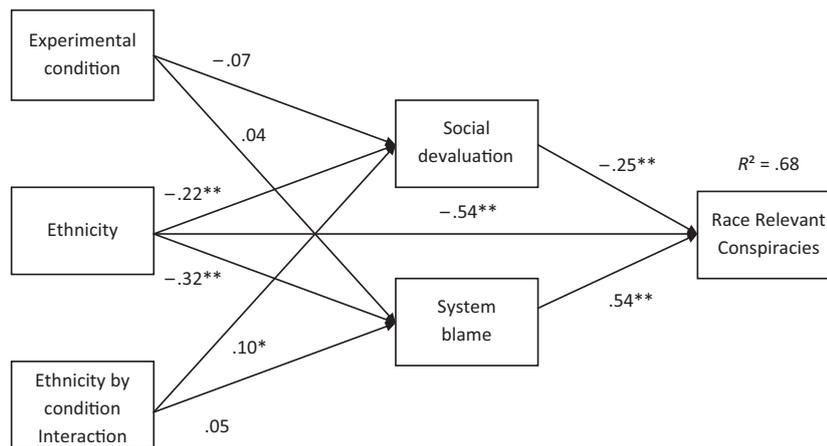
Next we looked to see if the social value affirmation affected the African American participants' motivation to blame the social system. If the motivation to compensate for social devaluation is operating on a similar psychological process as the motivation to blame the system, then we should see a similar interaction with the experimental manipulation. We conducted a 2 (White v. African American)  $\times$  2 (affirmation condition vs. control) ANCOVA predicting system blame and controlling the same demographic covariates as above. There was a significant main effect of ethnicity on system blame (right panel, Table 4) with African Americans ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) indicating greater

system blame than Whites ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ); however, the affirmation condition did not interact with ethnicity.

Next we examined the effect of the experimental manipulation on belief in both race-related and race-neutral conspiracy theories. We examined two ANCOVAs separately predicting beliefs in race-relevant and general conspiracy theories with ethnicity, the affirmation condition, and the covariates described above. As predicted, African Americans ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) endorsed race-relevant conspiracy theories significantly more than Whites ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), and this pattern was qualified by a significant interaction with the experimental manipulation (see Table 5). The experimental manipulation significantly reduced the endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories for African Americans in the affirmation condition compared to control  $F(1, 464) = 5.59$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $\eta^2 = .012$ , (middle panel, Figure 2). African Americans reported significantly greater endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories than Whites in both the control  $F(1, 464) = 99.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .177$ , and the social worth affirmation condition  $F(1, 464) = 49.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .096$ ; however, the effect size was reduced by nearly 50% compared to the control group. Considering a time when participants felt valued by others in society significantly reduced African Americans' endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories in a pattern that is consistent with the social devaluation hypothesis. The experimental manipulation did not interact with ethnicity to affect belief in race-neutral conspiracy theories (right panel, Table 5). With race-neutral conspiracy theories as the dependent variable, African Americans again endorsed conspiracy theories more than Whites; however, this pattern was not moderated by the affirmation condition (see right panel, Figure 2).

To further test the social devaluation hypothesis, we examined a path model to determine if social devaluation and/or system blame mediate the relationship between ethnicity, experimental manipulation, and their interaction on endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories. If the social devaluation hypothesis were supported, we would expect social devaluation to mediate the interaction with ethnicity, even when accounting for system blame in the model. We used

<sup>7</sup>This pattern does not change when the system blame variable is included as a covariate in the model.



**Figure 3:** Standardized path coefficients for the Study 2 model testing the mediation effects of the experimental manipulation and its interaction with ethnicity on social devaluation, system blame and race-relevant conspiracy theories. Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$

**Table 5.** ANCOVA analysis predicting race-relevant and neutral conspiracy theories from ethnicity, the experimental manipulation, and their interaction

	Race-relevant conspiracy theories			General conspiracy theories		
	F	p	$\eta^2$	F	p	$\eta^2$
Ethnicity	116.80	<.001	.201	52.85	<.001	.102
Affirmation condition	2.13	.145	.005	1.86	.172	.004
Interaction	4.04	.045	.009	0.08	.766	<.001
Age	15.64	<.001	.033	8.34	.004	.018
Income	4.47	.035	.010	6.41	.012	.014
Sex	0.42	.515	.001	4.02	.046	.009

Note:  $n = 471$ , ethnicity and gender coded  $-1 =$  African American/female,  $1 =$  white/male.

Mplus 6.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2011) to regress belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories onto ethnicity, system blame, and social devaluation. We then regressed system blame and social devaluation onto ethnicity, the experimental manipulation, and the interaction term (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> We considered the chi-square statistic, the comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) as estimates of model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). When the chi-square is not statistically significant (in small samples), CFI and TLI are greater than .95, and RMSEA is less than .08, a model is considered to have good fit. According to these criteria, the model we examined is a good fit to the data  $\chi^2 (5, n = 471) = 12.21, p = .032, RMSEA = .055, 90\% CI .015, .095, CFI = .990, TLI = .956$ .

Ethnicity significantly predicted social devaluation, system blame, and belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories, and together these variables explained 68%

of the variance in participants’ endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories. The affirmation condition interacted with ethnicity to significantly predict social devaluation. An examination of the indirect effect reveals that social devaluation significantly mediates the effect of the interaction on endorsement of race-related conspiracy theories (indirect effect = .026,  $SE = .013, p = .043$ ), but system blame does not (indirect effect =  $-.032, SE = .033, p = .34$ ). Additionally, both system blame (indirect effect =  $-.17, SE = .043, p < .001$ ) and social devaluation (indirect effect = .055,  $SE = .017, p = .002$ ) independently mediate the effect of ethnicity on belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories. This suggests that the reduction in the effect observed in the ANCOVA analysis above can be attributed to the buffer against chronic social devaluation associated with the experimental manipulation.

### General Discussion

These data provide evidence for the hypothesis that chronic social devaluation, at least in part, drives African Americans to endorse race-related conspiracy theories. Evidence from a representative U.S. sample showed that African Americans endorse race-relevant conspiracy theories in a pattern consistent with the social devaluation hypothesis. Additionally, the magnitude of the correlations between belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories and ethnicity was larger than that of general conspiracy theories, suggesting that the racial component of a conspiracy signals its self-relevance to an ethnic minority beyond general conspiracy theories. Study 2 provides experimental evidence that social devaluation causes African American endorsement of race-relevant, but not race-neutral conspiracy theories. Study 2 also indicates that social devaluation may not cause African Americans to blame the social system for their disadvantaged status. Endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories in

<sup>8</sup>Both system blame and social devaluation were also regressed onto the covariates described above, but for the sake of clarity, these variables are not depicted in the model presented.

particular seems to be one way for African Americans to manage chronic social devaluation (evidenced by the interaction patterns presented above). Additionally, this pattern persists in a model that includes a test of the system blame hypothesis, supporting the notion that race-relevant conspiracy theories can address a social motivation for African Americans that is distinct from a blaming the social system.

These findings suggest that African Americans may be more likely to endorse the view that the government deliberately flooded the poor areas of New Orleans for example, not only because of real experiences of discrimination, but also because such a belief satisfies the kind of meaning search that is likely triggered by chronic social devaluation (cf. Davis & Reyna, 2015; Graeupner & Coman, 2017). In contrast, the birther conspiracy can be construed as further evidence of the continued devaluation of African Americans. The recognition of such a blatantly devaluing conspiracy likely overrides any psychological benefit that ethnic minorities may otherwise derive from endorsing a race-relevant conspiracy theory.

Chronic social devaluation may drive African Americans to restore their sense of social value through endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories, but this is clearly not the only avenue to address social devaluation, nor is it the only mechanism driving African American endorsement of conspiracy theories. African American participants still endorsed both race-related and non-race-related conspiracy theories more than Whites even after the social value affirmation manipulation, which suggests that there are multiple motives involved. Nevertheless, these data offer evidence in support of the social devaluation hypothesis and suggest the motivation behind African Americans' endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories may be more complex than previously thought.

### Future Directions

Beyond the novelty of these data, this article contributes to the literature by providing a theoretically generative set of propositions. To the extent that other groups feel socially devalued, we would expect similar patterns of belief in conspiracy theories that target said groups. For example, groups with extreme political ideologies are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017), and it is quite likely that these groups perceive greater social devaluation because the broader electorate marginalizes their beliefs. Given the evidence that social devaluation leads to a social motivation to compensate for devaluation, addressing this motivation through alternative means (e.g., affirming social value) may reduce belief in conspiracy theories for other groups. In other words, it is possible that if these groups received some form of social validation, they may feel less marginalized and this may decrease conspiracy theory endorsement, a proposition that has been suggested (though

not tested) regarding the socially excluded more generally (Graeupner & Coman, 2017).

Whether or not the endorsement of conspiracy theories *actually* fulfills these motivational functions is a separate yet particularly interesting question. Conspiracy theories can have tangible detrimental effects on both individuals and groups (see Douglas, Sutton, Jolley, & Wood, 2015), and can often exacerbate the very motives that are purportedly being addressed (e.g., they are sought after by mistrusting people but can actually make people even more mistrustful; Douglas *et al.*, 2017). This seeming paradox is true for many compensation strategies that have been examined under the rubric of stigma compensation theory. For example, low-income individuals are often more aggressively reactive in the face of insults, and this may function to protect a self that is otherwise chronically devalued (Henry, 2009); however, aggression as a strategy is not especially socially adaptive. In the case of conspiracy theory endorsement, while those who are stigmatized and otherwise socially ostracized may seek conspiracy theories out for the particular meaning they confer, doing so may not actually manage the very motivational issues they seek to address.

These data highlight the need for more research into the functions of conspiracy theories, especially for stigmatized groups. Very little research has examined race-relevant conspiracy theories specifically. The system blame hypothesis (Crocker *et al.*, 1999) is thus far the only explanation for why minorities might be drawn to race-based conspiracy theories. African Americans are subject to greater rates of prejudice and discrimination and it makes sense that conspiracy theories against them are more plausible; however, when subject to closer scrutiny it seems that system blame exists on the same continuum as conspiracy theories and is just a less extreme form of the *same* psychological construct. The only conceptual distinction between system blame and conspiracy theory is the standard of evidence. Beliefs in conspiracy theories must prevail in the face of considerable contravening evidence, but beliefs in prejudice and discrimination are demonstrably true (and no doubt a frequent experience for most African Americans). Despite this somewhat tautological reasoning and the correlational nature of these data, this hypothesis remains the most salient explanation for ethnic minority endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories. Future research should address this issue by demonstrating support for the system blame hypothesis using experimental methods among other stigmatized groups. Especially helpful would be the development of system blame measures that are more conceptually distinct from the conspiracy theories they purport to predict.

The patterns presented in this article show support for the social devaluation hypothesis but should be viewed as just a beginning. Race-related conspiracy theories seem to provide an avenue for African Americans to compensate for the social devaluation they experience, but we recognize the need to clarify the

precise mechanisms. For example, our theoretical analysis involves speculation (albeit based on the existing literature) that social devaluation from stigma leads to a socially motivated meaning search that is satisfied by belief in race-relevant conspiracy theories, but we did not directly measure meaning search. More work is needed to understand whether African Americans' endorsement of race-relevant conspiracy theories follows the precise causal links that we propose. Nevertheless, our research points to the importance of recognizing that conspiracy theory endorsement is a function of multiple mechanisms that likely operate in tandem to fulfill different motivations for individuals in a society.

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