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## An Empirical Analysis of the Structuration of American Ideologies About Economic Justice

**Abstract** A consensus has been forming among structural social psychologists that most Americans hold beliefs in both individualistic and structural explanations of inequality. Yet, even many who espouse structural beliefs nonetheless emphasize individual-level explanations of inequality to disproportionate extents. This study is aimed to identify common trends in the logic used by a conventional group of Americans – MBA students – to rationalize their more general political and economic beliefs. While a large number of studies have emphasized the prevalence of dominant ideology beliefs, and others have speculated theoretically on how such beliefs are reproduced, this study aims to bring these bodies of work together. I sought to build an initial understanding of how contradictions in Americans' political and economic ideologies are transmuted, and to identify heuristic concepts fundamental to this process. Findings suggest that particular assumptions about human nature serve to "fill" the cognitive "gap" which would otherwise present individuals with insurmountable ambiguities in their ideologies about economic justice. Respondents also reflected some level of awareness of the impact of ideology on their thought processes, even as they accept such processes, and the realities they constitute, as inevitable.

**Keywords** Dominant Ideology; Structural Social Psychology; Inequality; Great Recession; Human Nature; Economic Sociology

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Despite some progressive social movements in the U.S. aimed at promoting greater economic equality (i.e., the Occupy movements), the concentration of corporate power and unprecedented rates of inequality have not been met with demand for fundamental social change from a majority of Americans. The recent "Great Recession" and ongoing economic struggles of Americans are due, in part, to the current divisiveness of political culture in Washington and the com-

plex realities of a deregulated global economy. Still, the democratic response of American citizens as a whole has been, at best, ambiguous and merits further inquiry. Previous research suggests that while Americans generally believe in both structural and individualistic explanations for inequality, the latter have held disproportionate sway over the last three decades (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Jackman 1994; Hunt 1996; 2007). To best construct a discourse that can begin to transcend the relatively narrow boundaries of political discussion in America on issues of inequality, first an in-depth understanding of the framework of popular ideologies about economic justice is required. The present study attempts to build an initial understanding of how ambiguities in Americans' political and economic ideologies are reconciled, and to identify heuristic devices fundamental to this process.

American ideologies of economic justice have been widely studied by sociologists. Yet, questions remain as to the nature of such ideologies and the particular cognitive processes which constitute them. "The dominant ideology" (Huber and Form 1973) – a widely held set of American beliefs, which commonly justify social inequalities – has been one of the most influential and debated concepts among structural social psychologists (Howard and Renfrow 2003). Most commonly associated with American dominant ideology about economic justice are the assumptions that individuals from all classes are generally able to succeed economically through merit, that "individuals are personally responsible for their positions, and third, that the overall system of inequality is, therefore, equitable and fair" (Kluegel and Smith 1986:23). The tendency among Ameri-

cans to frame economic justice in terms of equal opportunity, yet oppose policies geared towards fostering equal outcomes, has been consistently shown to be associated with these assumptions (Feagin 1972; Huber and Form 1973; Della Fave 1974; Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Jackman 1994). More broadly known as the "fundamental attribution error" – or the tendency of people to disproportionately favor dispositional explanations for behavior over structural explanations – such assumptions have been frequently supported empirically as strong predictors of attitudes favoring anti-egalitarian policies (Feagin 1972; 1975; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McLeod and Lively 2003; Hunt 2007). Specifically, the fundamental attribution error corresponds to the view that, because America offers equal opportunity, individuals are to blame for their economic hardships and thus, undeserving of social assistance (see also Gans 1995).

A consensus has been forming among structural social psychologists that most Americans hold views which include *both* individualistic and structural explanations for inequality (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt 1996). Yet, even many who adhere to structural explanations, nonetheless, emphasize individual-level explanations to disproportionate extents. For example, while emphases on the need for the government to actively guarantee equal opportunity do exist among Americans, a majority do not support policy solutions geared towards reducing unequal economic outcomes among social classes (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Jackman 1994; Gans 1995). This belief, and the general tenets of the dominant ideology mentioned above, are espoused by both liberals and conservatives and across racial, class, religious,

and gender boundaries to some degree.<sup>1</sup> Still, little empirical work has documented how Americans resolve the contradictions between support for policies geared towards promoting equal opportunity and the rejection of those aimed at reducing unequal outcomes. How do simultaneous beliefs in structural and individualistic explanations for inequality exist. There also remains little empirical work on how people rationalize beliefs in conventional ideologies about the causes of inequality in the face of economic uncertainty and systemic economic crisis.

This study is aimed to identify common trends in the logic used by a conventional group of Americans – MBA students in the Northeastern United States – to rationalize more general political and economic beliefs. While a large number of studies have emphasized the prevalence of dominant ideology beliefs, and others have speculated theoretically on how such beliefs are reproduced (Della Fave 1974; Sallach 1974; Giddens 1979; Hebdige 1979), this study aims to connect these literatures. I sought to discover common patterns in how a conventional group of Americans “make sense” of the current economic crisis, the particular heuristics

<sup>1</sup> African Americans are unique in their tendency to support structural over individualistic explanations for inequality to greater extent than whites (Hunt 2007). The young, women, college educated, and politically liberal are also more likely than older individuals, men, the uneducated, and the politically conservative to support structural explanations for inequality (Kluegel and Smith 1986). Still, as Kluegel and Smith illustrate, even many of the more structural-oriented groups also adhere to dominant ideology beliefs. Hunt (2007) also found that explanations for poverty cited by African Americans and Hispanics have become more similar to those of white's over the past three decades, though African Americans remain the most progressive group in terms of their attitudes about the causes of inequality and poverty. Findings of Rytina, Form, and Pease (1970) suggest that those who profit most from the *status quo* are disproportionately likely to reiterate dominant ideology beliefs, though even the working poor have been shown to favor dispositional factors over structural trends in explaining inequality (Gans 1995).

integral to the rationalization of their views, and where in the overall structure of their argument such concepts become instrumental.

Most questions asked of respondents focused on events related to the recent “Great Recession,” since this is a contemporary event with structural causes and implications which implicitly conflict with dominant ideology beliefs, and which has created a sense of uncertain job prospects for blue-collar and white-collar workers alike. Thus, by framing questions in the context of the current recession, respondents were especially likely to reflect carefully on structural economic trends implicated by this event and publicly discussed in contemporary political and academic discourses. How (if at all) respondents rationalized continued beliefs in general tenets of dominant American ideologies about inequality provided, in this context, an especially lucid account of the heuristic processes made effective in doing so. On the other hand, the extent to which respondents espoused such tenets at all, in the context of the Great Recession, indicates their relative strength in the collective American consciousness.

One methodological approach common in social psychology in analyzing ideology corresponds with the idea that people unwittingly seek cognitive “consistency” rather than “efficiency” through the use of heuristics or cognitive “shortcuts,” guiding the formation of solutions to problems which would otherwise be impossible amid various ambiguities and lack of information (Kluegel and Smith 1986:11; Howard and Renfrow 2003). In this sense, misconceptions of causal relations reflect people’s attempts to feel that they can predict and control their environments (see Kluegel

and Smith [1986] and Howard and Renfrow [2003] for a thorough review of these theories). Martin and Desmond’s (2010) study suggests that distinctions among the attitudes of particular groups towards political issues lie more so in their disparate understandings of how the world works than in contrary values. However, as the literature on American dominant ideology indicates, a majority of Americans agree, on at least a basic level, that individuals hold significant power over their own economic fate. How, then, does this shared belief persist amid various differences and a simultaneous recognition of structural causes of inequality and injustice? According to Hochschild (1981), what individuals believe to be the most just social system possible rests on a type of foundational knowledge about social relations which, to some extent, simplifies complex institutional relations constituting social life in a capitalist society (see also Giddens 1979). Similarly, Sallach (1974) suggests that the inability of individuals to conceptualize the nature of their dependency on the wider society is due, in large part, to the challenges of understanding the complex nature of capitalist social relations. Perhaps, then, identifying how people conceptualize, or simplify, supposed basic underpinning(s) of such relations may help to determine why (if at all) American dominant ideologies about inequality have persisted amid otherwise stark differences across political lines. To fulfill this purpose, and answer the basic questions discussed above, I framed specific interview questions (discussed below) around the following research questions: Is there a common set of heuristic concepts which underscore individuals’ understandings of the social causes and implications of the 2008 crisis? Are there concepts which are integral to individuals’ understandings of this event

which have not been empirically documented by previous research on American economic ideologies? If so, what role do they play in (re)shaping respondents’ more general views? Or, where in respondents’ overall logic do these concepts repeatedly appear, and why? Finally, what is the basis, if any, upon which differences between individuals’ attitudes about inequality and the legitimacy of the contemporary capitalist structure become less divisive, and how (if at all) do the identified heuristic concepts maintain such a basis?

Although various quantitative studies have indicated important trends in Americans’ attitudes about inequality, their methodological approach inhibits a more in-depth understanding of the logic underscoring conventional ideologies and why and how alternative realities are rendered untenable or undesirable. Hebdige quotes Stuart Hall’s definition of ideology as “transparent” because of its “naturalness,” or “its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded” (1979:11); its transparency lies in its inability to be deducted beyond cultural, common-sense assumptions. I entered the study with the hypothesis that culturally-specific, commonsensical ideas would be found to play an integral role in underscoring respondents’ more empirically-based analysis of the causes, implications, and proposed solutions to the Great Recession. With semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and efforts made by the interviewer to encourage respondents to reflect with depth on their more general responses, culturally-specific, ahistorical underpinnings of their beliefs were illuminated. This approach towards conceptualizing the structure of ideology – by indicating how constructed truths are “rendered invisible [to subscribers] by [their] apparent

transparency” (Hebdige 1979:11) – provided an especially instrumental analytic framework for a qualitative analysis of cognitive process. By identifying such truths – claimed as universal and implied as self-evident – and how they fit within the overall logic underscoring general ideological beliefs about contemporary capitalism and economic justice, I sought to determine how (if at all), and to what extent, dominant ideologies about inequality and economic justice are reproduced through discourse (Giddens 1979).

## Method and Data

### Sample and Data Collection

Data we collected using a combination of semi-structured and open-ended interviewing and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Respondents were MBA students from five universities in the Boston area, including Boston College, Northeastern University, Boston University, the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This group was chosen because they represent a group of young-to-middle-aged professionals who are all especially embedded within environments (i.e., business schools and corporations) particularly prone to promoting adherence to conventional beliefs about economic justice and market-oriented ideologies (Frederick 2008; Freeman and Newkirk 2008). Being ensconced within such a culture is likely to result in members being especially knowledgeable of the ideologies commonly espoused within it, if not becoming more faithful in such ideologies. At the same time, asking this group of educated people, of whom a majority is uncertain of their future ca-

reer prospects,<sup>2</sup> about a recession that exacerbates such uncertainty could seemingly only encourage them to second-guess conventional ideological beliefs. This point can only add to the reliability of the study. This sample, however, is quite specific, coming from similar institutions that promote a relatively conventional worldview. As such, it is uncertain whether respondents’ attitudes are shaped by business school experiences and not reflective of the population more generally. This is a potential limitation of the study.

Interview questions asked to all respondents include the following: Has the current economic crash made you rethink your career goals? If so, how? Who or what do you think is to blame for the crisis, and why? What do you think about how the economic crisis is currently being handled by the U.S. government? Do you think anything else should be done, and why or why not? Do you see any problems with how the economy has been functioning over the last several years? What permanent changes (if any) do you think need to be made? What do you think are the main reason(s) why recent corporate scandals have occurred (such as Enron, etc.)? How, if at all, do you think the government should deal with these scandals?

Follow-up questions were unique to each interview and were broad and open-ended, simply encouraging respondents to elaborate on previous comments by asking, “how exactly do you mean?” – or a variant of this – and by showing general appreciation of everything that is said. Most respondents seemed interested in the topics we discussed and were apparently happy to give in-depth responses

<sup>2</sup> This trend was illuminated by respondents during the interviews.

to most questions without much prodding from the interviewer. To establish rapport with respondents as best as possible in a short amount of time, and before asking the above listed interview questions, I asked each participant why he/she decided to get an MBA degree, where he/she was from originally, his/her area of specialization, and similar, personal questions. This also helped me to obtain demographic information from respondents, relevant for comparative purposes at the stage of analysis. Each respondent was interviewed only once, due to time and funding restraints. Data gathered from multiple interviews with the same respondents have been shown to be more reliable, due to the rapport that is built over time (Edin 2000). The one-time interaction between interviewer and interviewee is thus, one potential limitation of this study. On the other hand, most interview questions were non-personal in nature; thus, the effect on reliability of having only one interview with each respondent was likely minimal.

Among the 23 respondents interviewed, 14 were male and 9 were female, with ages ranging from mid-twenties to early forties. The sample includes five students from India studying with temporary visas (four men and one woman), in addition to a man from Iran and a woman from Vietnam. The sample also contains two Asian-American men and one Mexican-American man, with the remainder being Caucasian (six men and seven women). Surprisingly, all but two international students conveyed very conventional attitudes about economic justice prevalent within conservative circles in the U.S. Yet, how they adopted these views may differ from the American-born population. The relatively substantial size of foreign-born participants may thus be an additional limitation. Nine

respondents had specializations in finance, four in accounting, three in marketing, one in entrepreneurship, one in global management, and one in health care administration. Of the four students who did not declare a specialization, three aim to enter the non-profit sector. I included individuals with different specializations and backgrounds in order to best capture a diverse sample of the MBA population. All interviewees were second-year students or recent graduates (who had been graduates for less than 1 year from the date of the interview). Since Boston is a city known to contain a diverse and relatively liberal population – as compared to central or southern regions of the U.S. – the chances of recruiting students with diverse views, not neatly aligning with conventional American business ideologies, were relatively fair. In this sense, the findings are especially striking.

I recruited respondents by personally contacting Deans’ offices in request of their assistance. The administrations that agreed to assist me either sent mass-emails to all of the MBA students and/or posted a brief description of the study on their online student newsletters. In these postings, students were advised to contact the author via email if interested. In one case I contacted professors individually, after being ignored by administration, and they personally spoke to students they thought might be interested in participating. Only one subject was recruited via the latter approach, with the rest responding to the emails and postings sent by their respective business schools’ administrations. After being contacted by students interested in participating, I asked them to choose a location they would be comfortable with where the interviews could be undertaken. The self-selective nature of this non-random sampling approach may, to some

extent, pose problems of validity and reliability, and is a limitation of the study. I offered a compensation of \$20 for participation. The interviews were conducted between August 15, 2009 and October 30, 2009 in reserved study rooms on the respective campuses of respondents, or in other public places of their choosing, ranged from 45 minutes to 2.25 hours, and lasted on average 1.25 hours. All participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any question or end the interview if they felt it was necessary. Only one respondent refused to answer a question, none ended the interview prematurely. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the author. All names have been changed to protect the identities of respondents.

### Analysis

The systematic, grounded theory approach employed for the study began with a form of literal coding, followed by a process of data reduction, or identifying themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1984). Themes were not predetermined by the author but emerged from an analytic-inductive process. No software was used in the analysis; all open codes were marked by hand, and then consolidated into themes on a data excel sheet. Every line containing any amount of substantive meaning was coded in language similar to that used by respondents. The same open codes emerging from at least four interviews were then tagged, with all others discarded. All interviews underwent open coding before thematic coding began. After the initial thematic coding of 10 interviews, selective coding was employed to speed up the analytic process (Glaser 1998). The ways in which each code was framed by participants – in relation to the more general beliefs conveyed at the

given point of the interview from which it emerged – were compared with these same instances in all other interviews with the same open code. This was done after categorizing all quotes with the same code together in an excel sheet and developing new codes indicating similarities in how they are used by respondents to express a particular view or set of views. These theoretical codes were then compared, with particular attention paid to how (if at all) each code links with others within the logic underpinning overall belief systems conveyed by respondents. The latter two stages of thematic coding correspond to a process defined by Strauss and Corbin as “axial coding,” in which “data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (1990:96).

### Results

Consistent with previous studies, respondents generally espoused quite ambiguous ideas about what constitutes economic justice and what they felt were the causes and proper solutions to the “Great Recession.” Most respondents framed their comments in ways which implicated both “the system” and individuals as at fault. Still, roughly 78 percent of respondents expressed either unfavorable or ambiguous attitudes towards structural solutions, disproportionately emphasizing individual-level solutions and explanations for social inequality more generally. Even while many saw structural flaws as contributing to economic decline (approximately 65 percent), all but five among this milieu also saw the source of such flaws as lying within individual dispositions and behaviors. Ironically, human propensities respondents associated with causes of the crisis were also consistently posited as rationales behind the general belief

that structural economic change would inevitably fail. References to “human nature,” or more specific, naturalistic explanations of human behavior, were cited in similar proportions by both genders and by those from different ethnic and national backgrounds. Such naturalizations included the notions that individuals easily adopt “mass crowd mentalities,” in the words of one respondent, that they are naturally greedy, that disproportionate monetary incentive is most necessary in promoting productivity and filling the most important work with the most qualified people, and that people are naturally competitive. A majority of respondents (approximately 70 percent) cited a combination of at least two of these concepts, most commonly during points of discussion at which attention to structural causes of economic hardship transitioned to discourse on possible solutions (or lack thereof). One example of this general position was reflected in the commonly held logic of eleven respondents who suggested that “greed” is – in particular – fundamental in driving competition and economic growth. As one young man commented, “greed is good to a certain extent because it motivates people. I don’t think there’s any way you can stop that. It’s like an innate thing.” According to this logic, restraining the extent to which individuals are able to pursue this natural inclination by imposing regulatory limitations or a more equitable distribution of wealth would hinder the incentives which drive economic productivity. In Peter’s view, success in business

relates to almost a sexual thing...in terms of more money, more power, you know, you are able to get more women... I think that relates to guys in business in a lot of ways. I think those are absolutely basic...things of human nature. I don’t think they will change any time soon. But, when I think of all the un-

believable things that business, greed and competition or drive has created... [sic]. You know, look at the quality of life we have. A lot of those things would not be here if everyone was kind of just fat, lazy, and content with no drive to do anything... Life wasn’t born easy. And now we have all these benefits that society has given us, like medical care and all these things. But, just because it’s there, doesn’t mean you just give it, that you just deserve it. You still have to work hard for some of those things. I think everyone needs to scale down their expectations...

Four respondents (1 woman and 3 men) offered rationales behind their views favoring the deregulation of markets in response to the current recession by explicitly citing a type of Social Darwinism. A young man from India, for example, explained how he

believe[s] in Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest. I just can say this is equal under capitalism. So why should you drug somebody and save him for another two days because you know he is going to die? But, that’s the hard truth because if you are smart enough, you survive in this world. It’s true everywhere; it’s not even just the market... I think that’s nature.

As seven other respondents explained with more depth, human nature not only determines the limitations of non-capitalist social structures but also informs their views about economic justice on an individual level. Because the human characteristics (greed, competition, etc.) associated with the positive facets of capitalist society – such as improved quality of living – as well as negative facets, are also posited as innate, such characteristics also structured how respondents framed their discourse on ethics. The quote from Peter cited above reflects this trend, as do others cited below.

As mentioned above, many respondents commented on what they perceived to be the systemic implications of the current recession. Yet, such comments were, nonetheless, disproportionately grounded within the broader frameworks of discussion centered on individual-level concepts (i.e., human nature) proposed as the bases of systemic problems. More than half of respondents (approximately 65 percent) pinpointed elements of “the system” as partly at fault for the crisis – ineffective regulations and unfair lending practices being the most common. Nonetheless, a majority of this milieu supported either individual-level solutions – such as enhanced work ethic and financial responsibility – or favored structural solutions, but feared that the hindrance of free-markets would impede financial incentives and economic recovery. Just five respondents primarily stressed the need for progressive economic policies to address the recession. For example, Sarah blamed the crisis on a combination of things – greed among executives, lack of innovation among “dinosaur” industries (General Motors in particular), lack of effective regulations, and a “trickle-down” business culture wherein authority structures hinder employees’ ability to act ethically. While she does indicate a belief that the system facilitated unethical behavior, and that changes in the structure of business are necessary, she, at the same time, suggests that the efficacy of such changes will be limited, or even counter-productive, if not taking account of tendencies in human nature:

[t]he cultural environments that start to build at these companies...just fuels competitiveness, but [it is] not necessarily the right kind of way to go about business. It’s just a series of chain events. I don’t know, I mean, I think it was management [that encouraged unethical lending by financial firms], and then people

not knowing it’s okay to speak up... There has to be incentives in place to stop them from being greedy... I guess part of the reason we’re in trouble is [because] there weren’t enough regulations. But, it’s hard to stop people from being greedy. People are going to be greedy; its human nature... I haven’t quite made up my mind about financial regulations because I think you need to be really careful about what incentives you’re giving people who are particularly in the finance industry.

Those not in this general milieu either solely invoked conservative beliefs in individual responsibility when discussing causes and solutions to the recession (three men and two women) or put blame predominantly on structural trends (three women and two men). Generally, there were no differences in the prevalence of each view according to respondents’ academic specializations, gender, or ethnic background.

One respondent concentrating on finance, Muhammad, emphasized both a belief in the social responsibility of corporations and a loyalty to dominant ideology beliefs. Several respondents seemed to struggle in balancing their views about social responsibility and common welfare with their views on how their professional worlds should run. This led their discussions to often start out on a relatively progressive note and become more individual-focused as the conversation became centered more on their own professional roles and interests. It was often at this point that many referenced assumptions of human nature, shifting from emphases on systemic implications of the recession to individual-level explanations for wider social trends they relate to that event. Five respondents – three foreign students and two Americans – noted this explicitly, commenting on how they still do not

know whether particular facets of American business culture are fair, but have chosen to adhere to its conventional tenets nonetheless. Muhammad, for example, implied some level of awareness of this contradiction, indicating that part of the explanation for the ambiguity of his comments is due to the structural forces which we are all subject to yet have difficulty defining. As Muhammad explained when commenting on his belief in corporate social responsibility:

my idea is that you should be responsible to your stockholder, but there is something called social responsibility. So, I don’t know why, but the level of social responsibility is not high for some of these [American] companies.

Q: Do you think it should be?

M: This is something cultural for me. I think that you should be responsible for your society. It’s just increasing the money, making a big fat bank account, doesn’t mean that you are doing well. You should have a balance, like with your family. I have no better answer for that. But the point is, I don’t know how you will design a way that by going high [making a lot of money] you cannot [also] damage other people. Or, maybe I have no intention to see the disadvantages... I don’t want to ruin anybody’s life. But, the point is that money is just moving from you to me. So, when I am increasing my amount from half a million to one million, it means that somehow the money is moving toward me [and away from others]. [But], as long as I’m not cheating, I’m not misleading you, I’m not doing a scandal or fraud, that’s okay... The money going down [to help the lower-classes in America] is not enough... I don’t know, for three generations they have been living in these public houses. So, the point is that, we can never eliminate the poverty, we can just decrease the level of pain... But, you cannot [do this] for the unemployed. They don’t go and pay attention to their kids, to their wife, pay the rent. They usually go buy alcohol and cigarettes...

Five other respondents made elaborative comments on the undeservingness of welfare recipients and long-term unemployed when discussing what they thought were appropriate *versus* inappropriate solutions to the recession. These comments were made during the same points in discussion where their account of structural problems shifted to individual-level explanations for those problems, and where human nature beliefs were often invoked. Some of these respondents, among others, compared their own achievements and level of responsibility to the supposed irresponsibility of others. Transforming the context of the conversation from a “system-blame” framework to criticism of behaviors associated with particular social groups (i.e., those on welfare, irresponsible consumers, etc.) was consistently instrumental for respondents in their attempts to rectify contradictions between their recognition of structural problems and beliefs that natural immutabilities of human behavior both constitute and are made productive by a market society. A normative emphasis on meritocracy and belief in particular assumptions about human nature were often implied as interdependent and underscoring more general attitudes about economic justice. According to this logic, because the current system is as good as it gets, individuals have a responsibility to abide by its normative framework. As Stephanie explained,

[i]t is a true statement when they say that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the middle-class just stays the same. And some people who are rich don’t belong being rich. It was handed down to them from generation to generation, and it’s not fair. Life’s not fair. You know? In order to have a middle you need to have a bottom and you need to have a top. And that’s just the way life is. We do so much for the lower class; you’ve got to look at all the tax breaks

they get and this, and... But, there is a way to come out of being lower class. I was barely making \$12,000-\$13,000 a year, and I worked two jobs and I put myself through school and now I'm what's considered middle-class. Not everybody can be me and not everybody can be like me. But making everyone the same would be to have a socialist economy. And having everybody the same in a socialist economy is having everybody lower-middle class. Does everybody want to be lower-middle class? I don't... Anybody has the chance to make something of themselves – if you work hard, that is. That's the fundamental of a capitalist economy: you work hard, you make money; if you don't work hard, you don't make money. It sucks for the lower class. But, everybody thinks they deserve better. It's like the person on welfare who won't take the job at McDonald's because "I'm too good to work at McDonald's."

Emphases on individual responsibility as the central cause of contemporary social ills was conveyed at least once by a strong majority of respondents (approximately 70 percent), framing their conceptions of economic justice. At the same time, as indicated above, the value of individual responsibility was often implied as legitimate in accordance with supposed limits of human nature. Because the current system is generally considered by a majority of respondents as most just in its capacity to facilitate the inherent strength of the natural inclinations or propensities of human beings – such as the pursuit of monetary self-interest and competitiveness – other systems (i.e., socialism) whose objectives (i.e., equality) are posited as inherently antagonistic with human nature are deemed unjust. Some version of this utilitarian view was conveyed by approximately 65 percent of respondents.

Interestingly, several respondents recognized the limitation of this logic, even as they adhered to

it. Peter, for example, consistently espoused his belief in free-markets and the importance of individual responsibility among workers, consumers, and borrowers. Yet, he also indicated some level of understanding that these types of solutions alone may not be effective in fueling economic growth in a sophisticated capitalist society. When outlining his rationale for minimal policy change based on preconceptions of human nature and individual responsibility, and, simultaneously, on the need to "scale down our expectations" in order to curb the moral bankruptcy of consumer society, he seemed to recognize, at some level, the contradictions in such views, and demonstrate a limited, yet practical, awareness that structural forces play a larger role than he is able to explain:

I think there's a huge growing divide between the haves and the have-nots... I'm not socialist, but it seems like the rich is getting richer and richer, and it seems like there is just a growing divide... And I think that is a real problem. I think that that's just got to come back into line. I don't know what the answer is or how to really enforce it without making, you know, the country socialist, I guess. You know what man, I think a lot of things boil down to people's level of decency. But, how do you instill that overnight? You can't. I think you got to go through things like this. But, even that, I mean, I don't know if that's going to work...

It was at this point in the discussion that Peter offered more in-depth explanation for why he considers a lack of individual responsibility to be the primary issue, moving away from his previous emphasis on structural problems and inequality. Like many respondents, Peter framed "fairness" in both individuated and egalitarian contexts, while putting more emphasis on the former as the conversation became focused on solutions to the cur-

rent recession. Just under half (approximately 48 percent) of respondents conveyed concern with economic inequality at least once. Yet, the conflict many saw between their human nature beliefs and potential implications of a more regulated or "socialist" economy often led them to favor conventional market approaches to fostering economic growth in the U.S. (i.e., low taxation, limited regulation, and minimal social welfare spending). With reasoning based on this general logic, a majority of respondents (approximately 70 percent) thought that long-term regulations should not be implemented in response to the current recession, and all but five believed that short-term intervention was necessary. As he elaborated on his time at a lending mortgage firm at the height of the housing bubble, Peter explained how blaming "big business" is unfair, even as he recognized that executives held a disproportionate share of responsibility. Also noticeable in my discussion with Peter, and with five other respondents, is that the contradiction between what they framed as financially responsible behavior as citizens and the requirements of competition and organizational loyalty as employees were transmuted by similar human nature beliefs indicated above. The result was often concluding statements reflecting fatalistic attitudes about the prospect of favorable social change. The following statement by Peter reflects these trends. It was shortly after the following statement that he provided the above-cited comment on the utility of "greed" and competition.

I think that the investment banks were the ones pulling the strings [which eventually caused the housing bubble to burst]. That's easy for me to say; I literally sat at a desk and people would call up and say "I need a mortgage," and I would say ok. I would pull up their credit, look at the value of their house, and I gave out

[sic] – I was a loan officer at [a major bank]... I thought a lot about my role, whether I saw it coming. I remember saying to myself, "Man, if this was my money, I would not be lending it to this person." I didn't look at myself as judge and jury. I looked at myself as doing my job... I think that everyone was just trying to do their job and make money. You just didn't think about the big picture. I think subconsciously for a whole group of people to put their judgments aside and say, well, I'm just doing my job [is easy]. It's very easy to put aside your big picture thoughts, or your conscience, I guess; it's very easy to put that aside and say, this is how I pay my bills and my mortgage, and put food on my table. It's easy to do that. It's just the way life goes after a while. In some cases, there was some greed. But, I think it's easy to sit back and look at the big picture after the statistics are compiled and say, "It's this person's fault, it's that person's fault." But, when you're going about your everyday job, you don't see those problems forming as much, you know?

Again, like Muhammad, Peter reflects here some level of understanding of the limitations of his views. For example, he comments on how "it is easy to sit back after the statistics are compiled and say, 'It's this person's fault, it's that person's fault,'" but that during the ongoing processes leading up to the crisis everyone involved was impacted by the same forces that neither he nor they could foresee and which he subtly implies he cannot quite explain after the fact. During the interview, he seemed to suggest that he was susceptible to the same forces he described as keeping him from addressing signs of a coming crisis he saw as an employee at a large mortgage lending firm. Specifically, he seemed to suggest that it is his (and our) lack of ability to understand the breadth of events as they unfold that in part presupposes crises. He thus implied, even while adhering to conventional ideologies, that society in general, like him, falls back on

such ideologies because we lack the wherewithal to completely transcend them. Hence, he indicates the need to “think outside the box,” as he later put it, while simultaneously falling back upon conventional, dominant ideology beliefs when elaborating more specifically on his views towards contemporary social and economic issues.

Similarly, as Tom commented on his time working for a major financial firm, he emphasized both a relatively progressive attitude about how the current recession should be resolved, as well as a pessimistic view on the likelihood or potential success of the solutions he cites. Like Peter, he indicates how organizational culture, and “life” in general, hinders people’s ability to “see the big picture.” Tom demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of global financial processes, and stressed the need for enhanced regulations. At the same time, he implied a lack of faith in the capacity of individuals to unite around such a cause, and reluctance about whether effective regulations would be worth the social costs. While not suggesting that “greed” or other human nature assumptions are necessarily good for capitalism, he concluded our discussion about potential solutions by emphasizing his beliefs in personal responsibility and a fatalistic attitude about the commensurability of human propensities with the implications of an overhaul of the economic structure. Despite the sharp distinctions between the views of Tom and a majority of other respondents, he, like them, nonetheless, falls back upon emphases on particular individual behaviors as the foundation of larger social trends and as in implicit conflict with structural reform of the *status quo*.

Q: What do you think about how the crisis has been handled by the government?

A: I mean, it’s hard to know. I’ve worked at an executive level, and I was able to see the bigger picture. I think a lot of times people don’t see the bigger picture. I personally thought, I would have been okay with a government takeover of those banks... [But] now everything’s so connected, and global capital can flow so fast, that if they [financial banks] find one commodity, all the money can go straight into it, and it will cause the price to go up. But, then it’s so fast that the way they can pull the money out is really fast too, right? We’ve liberalized so much of these things. They’re supposed to bring good benefits, but we’re going to live in a less stable world than our parents. Part of it makes me think, “Man, I have to get mine ‘cause who knows, right?” I think I need to be smarter about investing more too because there’s going to be things you just can’t rely on in the future. I almost feel like they’ll almost have to reset the way this works to really regulate it, and I think that would be just a huge amount of pain for everybody. They talk about banks being leveraged, but most consumers are leveraged too, right? I think there’s personal responsibility and all those things, and I don’t know if regulation can change that... Unless you put incentives [in place]...you’re asking people to be very altruistic, and I don’t know if people are really like that, you know?

To summarize, several important findings emerge from the data. First, human nature beliefs associated with economic behavior are posited as inherent or biologically fixed, providing an important basis for respondents’ greater logic behind their attitudes about the viability of capitalism and economic justice. Such beliefs include notions that people are naturally greedy and self-interested, are naturally competitive, are motivated disproportionately by monetary incentive, and tend to follow “herd mentalities.” Overall, findings suggest that many individuals have a relatively sophisticated understanding of events related to the contemporary crisis, with recognition of structural conditions as partly

responsible for current increases in economic inequality and instability. As differences did exist between respondents across political lines, the shared belief in human nature as inherent and commensurate with capitalist society led the more conservative milieu to justify their normative positions, while making the more liberal milieu skeptical of the prospects associated with greater equality and government overhaul of the economy. At this point, a strong majority of respondents expressed similar opposition to significant change in the function of contemporary capitalism. Moreover, respondents’ ethical attitudes were often framed around similar notions of human nature, which typically corresponded to fatalistic views towards social change, if not unfavorable attitudes towards change in general. This was particularly striking given that interviews were conducted at the height of the economic downturn. Finally, some respondents implied that they recognized the ambiguities in their rationales, felt discomfort with differences between what was implied as ideal and “realistic” ethical conditions, and were somewhat aware of the impact of ideology on their thought processes.

## Discussion

Espousing conventional American beliefs about economic justice, yet simultaneously recognizing the imperfections of those beliefs in light of the current economic crisis, respondents seemed to transmute implicit cognitive contradictions and legitimize the *status quo* by invoking the notion that liberal capitalism is most compatible with immutable elements of human nature (competition, greed, etc.). As Hochschild (1981) points out, many Americans hold multiple social views which often contradict one another. Findings reported here suggest that

assumptions of human nature may serve to “fill” the cognitive “gap” which would otherwise present individuals with insurmountable ambiguities. Given the tumultuous state of the U.S. (and global) economy during which this study was conducted, the general patterns identified above begin to suggest that this cognitive process may be pivotal for Americans in making sense of economic realities in a complex capitalist world. The cognitive point at which human nature assumptions are invoked may correspond to an incapacity to conceptualize a better alternative social system – a result of the very opaque manifestations of power such assumptions keep hidden.

This finding supports the theoretical speculation of Della Fave (1974) who proposes that human nature must be considered by a majority of society to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate equality in a complex society, and not inherently or biologically fixed. While drawing on little empirical literature, Della Fave suggests that a belief in human nature as inherently selfish and motivated only by material reward will lead subscribers to this view to oppose efforts geared towards promoting greater social equality. This study adds an empirical element to this theoretical claim, as well as to the existing literature on American attitudes about inequality. Literature on dominant ideology in America indicates that Americans tend to blame both individuals and the social structure for economic injustice, while still favoring the former to some extent. Findings from these studies tend to emphasize the role of normative beliefs of Americans in explaining why they tend to oppose wealth redistribution and favor tenets of personal responsibility. Findings reported here also indicate that normative emphasis on personal responsibility is important in explaining Americans’ generally

anti-egalitarian attitudes but also illustrate that this normative framework is often framed around an understanding of human nature which marks conceptual boundaries between the ideal of equality and its supposed unrealistic prospect. Belief in a biologically fixed human nature commensurate with a market society may thus explain, at least in part, why Americans tend to espouse the ideal of equal opportunity yet oppose government efforts in promoting equal outcomes. It may not be simply that individuals tend to hold contradictory normative political attitudes about economic justice and capitalism in general. Rather, they may tend to see conflicts between ideals of justice and limited prospects of a reality whose elements they view as containing inherently fixed boundaries. Hence, values in and of themselves may not be the most effective predictors of why many Americans oppose the redistribution of wealth (see Martin and Desmond 2010). As the findings reported here suggest, many may also believe that equality is simply an unrealistic objective or, if implemented, contrary to the public good. The human nature beliefs, espoused by both conventional and progressive respondents in this study, may correspond with the beliefs that equality is untenable or undesirable in the larger society.

As noted above, however, the specific group of respondents – MBA students – may share ideas especially prevalent and openly espoused within their common institutions (i.e., graduate business schools), but less so outside those institutions. Six respondents who rationalized political and economic views with naturalistic logic referenced ideas conveyed by their professors. For example, four referenced professors' lectures when suggesting that periodic market shifts they associate with the current recession are driven by "herd mentalities" of

consumers, investors, and lenders. One limitation of the study is the possibility that the views of this group do not reflect that of the general population. Studies using larger, more heterogeneous samples could shed light on this potential limitation.

Finally, the fact that many respondents explicitly identified their very incapacity to deduct the points of rationale beyond notions of human nature and personal responsibility implies that they possess some awareness of the limitations of the very ideologies they use to justify the *status quo*. In this sense, respondents do not simply display a type of "false-consciousness," but are aware, to some level, of the impact of ideology on their thought processes, even as they accept such processes, and the realities they constitute, as inevitable. This finding highlights, paradoxically, both a limit to, and potential opening within, American social consciousness. Individuals, regardless of their intellectual prowess, seem unable to escape many of the conceptual boundaries of common-sense which hinder the formation of alternative worldviews and social changes they may otherwise underscore. Yet, at the same time, respondents' recognition of the impact of ideology on their reasoning, to a limited but notable extent, indicates that boundaries are not fixed, and that potential exists for new forms of common-sense to emerge within the popular consciousness.

### Acknowledgements

In addition to the QSR editors and reviewers, the author would like to thank Paul Schervish, Paul Gray, Stephen Pfohl, Matthew Hunt, and Jonathan and Michelle White for theoretical and methodological critiques which contributed to the development of this paper.

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