Short research report

Which American way? System justification and ideological polarization concerning the "Ground Zero Mosque"

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Abstract

The proposal to build an Islamic mosque and community center near the site of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center produced widespread opposition. Although resistance among U.S. citizens was common, there was an ideological divergence, with liberals generally supporting the mosque and conservatives generally opposing it. We tested a theoretical model in which system justification mediated the effect of political ideology on level of support for the development of the "Ground Zero Mosque." Specifically, we conducted a survey of Americans near the site of the proposed mosque, and observed that, as hypothesized, greater conservatism was associated with stronger system justification, which was in turn associated with a lack of behavioral support for the mosque. These findings suggest that ideological differences in opposition to the "Ground Zero Mosque" are linked to system-justifying tendencies to preserve the American "way of life."

"This is a desecration. Nobody would allow something like that at Pearl Harbor."

Rudy Giuliani (quoted in Pollitt, 2010)

"We in New York are Jews and Christians and Muslims, and we always have been. And above all of that, we are Americans, each with an equal right to worship and pray where we choose. There is nowhere in the five boroughs that is off limits to any religion."

Michael Bloomberg (quoted in "Bloomberg on Mosque," 2010)

In the summer of 2010, controversy erupted over the proposed development of a New York City property to be used as an Islamic community center and mosque. The hottest point of contention was the proposed location of the mosque in a building called Park51, which was located a few blocks away from Ground Zero,

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the site of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As this proposal entered into the public's consciousness, there was an outcry from many people, who felt that the development of the mosque and community center was not only disrespectful to the Americans who died in the terrorist attacks, it was also a symbolic and perhaps literal threat to America and its way of life.

Although the furor over this particular issue has since receded from media headlines, the issue remains emblematic of a larger pattern of controversies surrounding Islam in the United States in recent years. Indeed, many other proposed mosques and Islamic centers across the U.S. have encountered community resistance in the years since September 11, 2001, with much of the opposition centering around fears about Islam, Sharia law, and terrorism, on top of the usual pragmatic concerns regarding property development projects (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

It would appear that there are significant ideological differences in terms of support versus opposition to the "Ground Zero Mosque" (Yang, Preston, & Hernandez, 2013). In the midst of the controversy, Republican leaders such as Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich were vocal opponents, whereas Democratic leaders such as Barack Obama and Bill Clinton were supporters. A CNN poll conducted in August 2010 found that 68% of Americans opposed the development of the "Ground Zero Mosque" ("Overwhelming majority oppose," 2010) but there were substantial ideological differences, so that liberals were more than 4 times as likely to support the mosque (51% vs. 12%). The vast majority of conservatives opposed the mosque (87%), but less than half of liberals did (45%).

Ideological disparities in opposition to the development of the Park51 mosque may be due in part to individual variability in system justification motivation. According to system justification theory, people have a (largely nonconscious) goal to defend and justify the extant social, political, and economic arrangements (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). This motivation varies as a function of dispositional and situational factors, and it manifests itself in various forms, including attitudes, stereotypes, and ideologies (e.g., Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). Studies reveal that political conservatives exhibit chronically higher levels of system justification, in comparison with liberals (e.g., Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

Insofar as individuals who are motivated to defend the status quo tend to perceive changes to the social system to be threatening, they are likely to resist and oppose them. For example, prior research has demonstrated that system justification motivation is associated with opposition to proenvironmental initiatives (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010) and programs designed to help the disadvantaged (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). To the extent that the development of an Islamic community center and mosque near Ground Zero poses a symbolic threat to the American social system, we would expect that system justification tendencies would produce considerable ideological resistance.

Consistent with this idea, Jia, Karpen, and Hirt (2011) observed that stronger identification with the United States was associated with strong opposition to the "Ground Zero Mosque." It may be that conservatives are more likely than liberals to oppose the mosque out of a stronger desire to defend and preserve existing social arrangements—that is, system justification motivation (see also Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012). To enrich our understanding of ideological polarization, we hypothesized that variation in system-justifying tendencies would help to explain liberal–conservative differences in support for (vs. opposition to) the "Ground Zero Mosque." Specifically, we predicted that conservatives would reject the development of the mosque to a greater extent than would liberals, and this relationship would be mediated by system justification motivation.

Method

We recruited 49 U.S. residents (mean age = 36, SD = 13; 61% female) to participate in a study

that ostensibly tested participants' memory for "issues covered in the media." We used this cover story to minimize suspicion that the study was associated with a pro- (or anti) mosque agenda. Participants were approached in New York City's Battery Park (in close proximity to Ground Zero and the proposed mosque) for voluntary participation. All participants were residents of the United States, with 34 reporting residences in the New York metropolitan area. Approximately half (51%) of the participants identified themselves as White/European American, 20% as Black/African American, 14% as Latino/Hispanic, 4% as Asian/Asian American, and 4% identified with more than one race. Of those who reported a religious affiliation, 27 identified as Christian (including Catholic, Protestant, Christian Orthodox, and Christian Science), 2 as Jewish, 1 as Buddhist, 1 as Hindu, and 1 as Muslim. Another 15 identified themselves as agnostic or atheist.

Political Ideology

Participants reported their political orientation using a single ideological self-placement item ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 11 (*extremely conservative*). On average, participants were slightly liberal (*M* = 5.18, *SD* = 2.23).

System Justification

We assessed individual differences in the tendency to defend and justify the American system using the general system justification scale (Kay & Jost, 2003). Participants indicated their levels of agreement or disagreement with each of eight statements (e.g., "In general, the American system operates as it should") on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*; α = .72).

Attitudes and Behavior Concerning the "Ground Zero Mosque"

Pro-Mosque attitudes. Participants reported their levels of agreement or disagreement with each of the following four items on a response scale

ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*): (a) "Building an Islamic community center and mosque near the World Trade Center site would jeopardize the principles that the U.S. stands on" (reverse-scored); (b) "Every American citizen and resident, including Muslims, should enjoy guaranteed religious freedom"; (c) "It is disrespectful to the memory of the victims of 9/11 to even consider developing an Islamic community center near the site of the World Trade Center" (reverse-scored); (d) "Supporting the development of the Park51 Islamic community center will ultimately lead to a safer and more secure nation for all Americans" (α = .64).[1]

Pro-Mosque behavioral intentions. Next, participants reported on their behavioral intentions with respect to the development of Park51 as an Islamic community center and mosque. Specifically, they indicated their levels of agreement or disagreement with each of the following six items on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*): (a) "I intend to immediately stop supporting organizations and politicians that oppose the development of the Park51 Islamic community center"; (b) "I intend to join and provide financial support to organizations that are supportive of the Park51 Islamic community center in the near future"; (c) "I intend to vote for politicians who advocate more comprehensive religious tolerance"; (d) "I intend to speak out in support of the Park51 Islamic community center when I encounter someone who opposes its development"; (e) "I intend to volunteer my time to organizations that fight for religious tolerance"; (f) "I intend to write to my legislative representatives urging them to enact laws that ensure religious equality for every American" (α = .82).

Request for pro-Mosque petitions. At the end of the study, participants were given an opportunity to declare their interest in contributing to an organizational effort "to advocate for the equal treatment of members of all religious groups." The organization's first initiative was detailed as an online petition (to be sent to legislators) in support of the development of the Park51 Islamic

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of study variables.

		M	*SD*	2	3	4	5
1.	Political ideology	5.18	2.23	.41**	−.45**	−.44**	−.35*
2.	System justification	5.25	1.27	–	−.34*	−.56**	−.42**
3.	Pro-Mosque attitudes	6.31	1.62		–	.39**	.26†
4.	Pro-Mosque behavioral intentions	4.13	1.78			–	.39**
5.	Requests for pro-Mosque petitions	.33	.47				–

†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Community Center and Mosque. Participants were asked to leave their email addresses if they were interested in signing the petition and learning more about the organization's work. Responses were coded as 0 if participants did not leave an email address and as 1 if they did. Descriptives for all study variables, including intercorrelations, are shown in Table 1.

Results

We tested the hypothesis that system justification motivation helps to explain ideological differences in support for (vs. opposition to) the "Ground Zero Mosque." We assessed a structural model using MPlus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2011) to determine whether direct associations between (a) political ideology and (b) attitudes, behavioral intentions, and petition requests were mediated by (c) system justification. This allowed us to test three indirect paths involving the measured variables (see Figure 1) using the bootstrapping technique outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008; see also Shrout & Bolger, 2002). We requested 95% confidence intervals using 5,000 resamples. To allow for simultaneous estimation of both the continuous and categorical outcome variables, we used a robust weighted least squares parameter estimator (WLSMV) in computing a saturated, manifest variable model, which, like bootstrapping analysis, helps to overcome limitations of research involving small samples.[2]

Path coefficients in the model provided evidence that was generally consistent with our hypotheses (see Figure 1). Political ideology was significantly associated with system justification, so that greater conservatism was associated with higher system justification scores ($b = .23$, $SE = .08$, $\beta = .41$, $z = 3.04$, $p = .002$). Political ideology explained 16.6% of the statistical variability in system justification.

Although system justification was not significantly associated with self-reported attitudes concerning the mosque ($b = −.24$, $SE = .19$, $\beta = −.19$, $z = −1.26$, $p = .21$), it was negatively associated with pro-mosque behavioral intentions ($b = −.63$, $SE = .17$, $\beta = −.45$, $z = −3.72$, $p < .001$), so that greater system justification predicted less willingness to support the development of the mosque. Greater system justification was also associated with a decreased likelihood of requesting an email petition in support of the mosque ($b = −.37$, $SE = .17$, $\beta = −.42$, $z = −2.22$, $p = .03$). After adjusting for the other variables in the model, the residual variances of attitudes and behavioral intentions ($r = .18$), attitudes and petition requests ($r = .11$), and behavioral intentions and petition requests ($r = .22$) were not significantly correlated with one another, *ns*. The model explained 23.0% of the variance in attitudes, 36.7% of the variance in behavioral intentions, and 34.0% of the variance in petition requests.

When system justification was included in the model, the direct effect of political ideology on pro-mosque attitudes remained significant ($b = −.27$, $SE = .08$, $\beta = −.37$, $z = −3.47$, $p = .001$). The direct effect of ideology on pro-mosque behavioral intentions was also significant ($b = −.21$, $SE = .10$, $\beta = −.26$, $z = −2.09$, $p = .04$). At the same time, the direct effect of ideology on
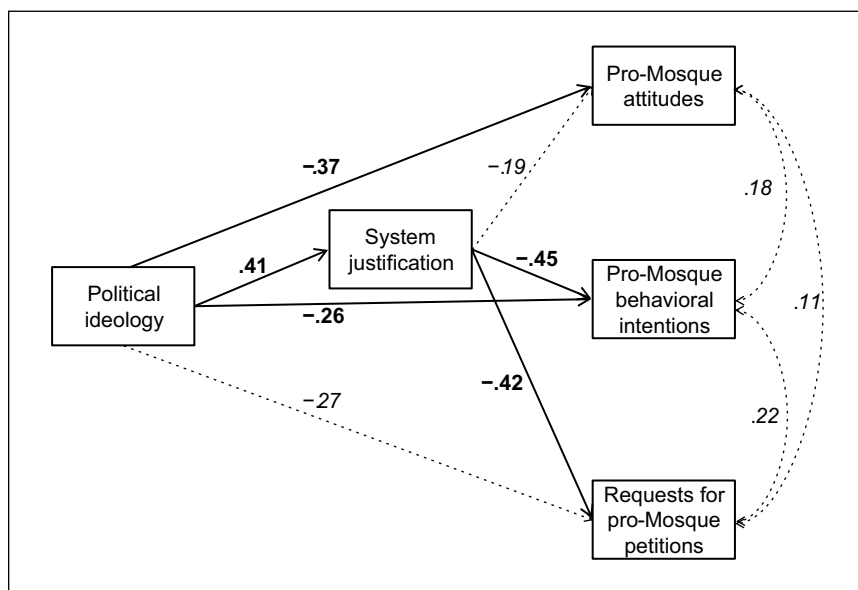
Figure 1. Path model illustrating the effects of political ideology on system justification, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and requests for petitions with respect to the "Ground Zero Mosque."
Note. Path coefficients are standardized regression estimates for the full model. Broken lines indicate nonsignificant paths ($p > .05$).

petition requests became nonsignificant ($b = -.14$, $SE = .12$, $\beta = -.27$, $z = -1.11$, $p = .27$).

To investigate the possibility that system justification motivation would explain the relationship between political ideology and behavioral resistance to the "Ground Zero Mosque," we tested indirect effects using a bootstrapping analysis and found that system justification mediated the effect of ideology on both pro-mosque behavioral intentions {$-.291$, $-.035$} and requests for petitions {$-.207$, $-.003$}. We considered these indirect effects to be significant because 0 was not included in these unstandardized 95% confidence intervals. System justification did not significantly mediate the relationship between ideology and pro-mosque attitudes {$-.150$, $.037$}, given that 0 was included in the 95% confidence interval.

General Discussion

Our results corroborate system justification theory, which suggests that political conservatism is a

system-justifying ideology that opposes social change, especially when the change is regarded as symbolically threatening to the social system. Specifically, we observed that conservatism was associated with increased system justification, which, in turn, was associated with disinclination to engage in personal or collective action in support of the mosque as well as a decreased likelihood of requesting a pro-mosque petition. Mediational analyses using bootstrapping revealed that system justification served as an explanatory variable between political ideology and behavior and action intentions (but not attitudes) regarding the development of the Park51 Islamic Community Center and Mosque.

These findings provide evidence that opposition to the "Ground Zero Mosque" is (at least in part) a function of system-justifying tendencies. They are also consistent with the results of a Pew Research analysis of controversies concerning mosques and Islamic community centers in the U.S., which suggested that much of the opposition to the development of these cultural and

religious centers can be traced to perceptions that their existence challenges or threatens the American system (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012). For example, a proposal to convert a bait-and-tackle store into a mosque in Green Bay, Wisconsin led one alderman to proclaim that Islam was "at odds with the American way of life" (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012).

Presumably, liberals and conservatives have quite different views about which dimensions of the "American way" should be defended and preserved. Construing the "American way" as fundamentally linked to Judeo-Christian traditions could lead some to view Islamic mosques as inherently threatening to the status quo and therefore to oppose their development. On the other hand, construing the "American way" as fundamentally aligned with principles of religious liberty and tolerance could lead others to embrace mosques as consistent with, and indeed, even *sanctioned* by the existing system. Indeed, 27% of New Yorkers endorsed the opinion that the "Ground Zero Mosque" should be built on the proposed site because doing otherwise would "compromise American values" (Barbaro & Connelly, 2010).

There is evidence that presenting potential changes as "system-sanctioned" can increase support for such initiatives (see Gaucher & Jost, 2011). For instance, one study demonstrated that reframing proenvironmental initiatives as "preserving the American way of life" caused high system-justifiers to express stronger intentions to engage in environmentally sound behaviors and to sign more proenvironmental petitions (Feygina et al., 2010). In other research, the priming of an "abstract construal" mindset, which involves consideration of the "bigger picture" and appealing to abstract ideals, attenuated conservatives' prejudice toward Muslims (Luguri, Napier, & Dovidio, 2012) and diminished ideological polarization with respect to the "Ground Zero Mosque" (Yang et al., 2013). Future research would do well to investigate the possibility that abstract, "system-sanctioned" appeals would similarly decrease opposition to the development of

Islamic community centers and mosques around the country.

A clear limitation of our study is the small sample size. To be sure, the extent to which the results of a single study involving only 49 participants can be generalized to the broader population is quite limited. At the same time, the use of a community sample may provide insight into the attitudes and behaviors of individuals who are far more diverse and statistically representative than members of undergraduate participant pools (Sears, 1986). Furthermore, the bootstrapping technique we used is helpful for overcoming shortcomings associated with sample sizes (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). In any case, we acknowledge that follow-up work on this phenomenon is warranted before drawing any strong conclusions about the factors contributing to ideological polarization.

Unlike behavioral intentions and petition requests, ideologically divergent attitudes toward the mosque in general were not mediated by system justification. It is conceivable that the attitude scale combined abstract values associated with religious tolerance with concrete opinions about the "Ground Zero Mosque" and that ideological processes associated with system justification may operate somewhat differently at abstract and concrete levels of construal (e.g., see Luguri et al., 2012). Future work would do well to investigate this possibility directly.

Finally, we note that in the current study opportunities to express behavioral inclinations concerning the mosque were consistently worded in a "pro-mosque" direction. Future work could gain additional insight by focusing specifically on the use of "anti-mosque" language. In any case, we hope that the observation that system justification helps to explain the effect of political ideology on behavioral resistance to the "Ground Zero Mosque" may prove useful in understanding real-world outcomes and public opinion concerning potentially divisive issues such as this one.

Conclusion

When new initiatives such as the Park51 Islamic Community Center and Mosque stimulate

controversy and opposition by wide swaths of the population, it is important to understand the social and psychological causes of resistance as well as opportunities to build consensus. Our results suggest that ideological differences in support for and opposition to the "Ground Zero Mosque" are explained at least in part by variability in system justification motivation. To the extent that the development of the "Ground Zero Mosque" is experienced as a symbolic threat to the legitimacy and/or stability of the U.S. system, system justification tendencies are likely to motivate opposition to the initiative. It follows from this analysis that one key to overcoming resistance would be to capitalize on system justification motivation by characterizing the development of the mosque as consistent with abstract American ideals such as religious liberty and tolerance. Such characterizations might also help to reduce discrimination against religious minorities by including their activities as part of a broader construal of the "American way."

Acknowledgements

Funding

Notes

1. The reliability for this measure seems low, but this is due in part to the small number of items. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), α values of .60 or higher are adequate for purposes of theory testing when it comes to the use of new scales.
2. A parallel set of multiple regression analyses examining the effects of ideology and system justification on pro-Mosque attitudes, behavioral intentions, and petition requests yielded results that were very similar to those obtained with the path model.

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