Thinking about Crime: Race and Lay Accounts of Lawbreaking Behavior

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Lay or commonsense accounts of the origins of criminal behavior may play a key role in sustaining a strong public appetite for harsh criminal justice policies and undergird large black-white differences in opinion in this domain. Using data from the nationally representative Race, Crime, and Public Opinion project's 2001 survey, the authors develop an explanatory mode typology for accounts of involvement in criminal behavior. These include both individualistic and structural accounts of behavior in addition to a mixed-mode category. The authors identify key differences in the demographic and sociopolitical bases of the attributional types and find significant race differences in these attributional types. Attributions strongly affect how individuals wish to see public policy respond to the problem of crime and explain a small but significant fraction of the black-white difference in crime policy views.

Keywords: crime attribution; race; racial attitudes; crime policy; mode of explanation

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NOTE: An earlier version of this article was presented at the Annual American Association for Public Opinion Research conference in Hollywood, Florida, May 17, 2009. We wish to thank Alicia Simmons for her comments on an earlier draft of this article. The authors are responsible for any remaining errors or shortcomings.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716210387057

Matters of law enforcement and criminal justice remain sources of deep racial tension in the United States. Newsworthy flare-ups over police shootings, accusations of racial profiling, and the War on Drugs—the latter regarded by many as both excessive and unsuccessful—highlight a pointedly race-inflected divide regarding the problem of crime in the United States and appropriate policy responses to crime (Wacquant 2001; Kennedy 2003; Roberts 2003; Western 2006; Tonry and Melewski 2008). In this research we focus on one possible source of this racial polarization: namely, whether there are significant differences in how white and black Americans understand the problem of crime.

High-profile events and some key crime response policies (e.g., the sentencing differential for crack versus powder cocaine) may elicit sharply polarized reactions from blacks and whites, primarily because these groups have very different basic understandings of the sources of criminal behavior. For example, those who generally understand criminal behavior as being rooted in personal dispositions and irresponsible individual choices may be inclined to endorse aggressive and punitive responses to crime in policing and in social policy. Alternatively, those who generally understand criminal behavior as having systematic social roots in poverty, unemployment, and so on may recoil against such punishment-centered responses to crime. If distinctive ways of thinking about the sources of criminal behavior vary systematically by race, then blacks and whites may, in sum, be worlds apart in the basic social meanings that they attach to criminal behavior.

We seek to shed light on this possibility using data from the Race, Crime, and Public Opinion (RCPO) project, which allows us to assess the extent, sources, and effects of black-white differences in attributions for criminal behavior (Bobo and Johnson 2001).[1] The RCPO survey involves large national samples of white and black Americans and includes measures of beliefs about the causes of criminal behavior. The RCPO survey also contains measures of other factors relevant to judgments about crime such as an individual's prior victimization, fear of crime, general sociopolitical identities and ideology, as well as policy views on crime. In addition, we are able to append to these data key contextual information about actual levels of serious crime in the respondent's community.

Background

The attribution process. Social psychologists have long maintained that the meaning social phenomena have for us turns crucially on how we explain or account for the observation of them (Heider 1958). For example, individuals who believe that the unemployed are jobless because they have a poor work ethic—a dispositional attribution according to Heider (1958)—are more likely to see the jobless as personally responsible for their lack of employment. However, individuals who believe that unemployment is rooted in poor economic conditions—a situational attribution (Heider 1958)—are less likely to hold individuals responsible for their unemployment, instead focusing on broad structural conditions. In the 1970s, Weiner (1974) expanded on Heider's typology to include both a

locus of causality (internal/external) dimension and a stability dimension (stable/unstable) that further specify key features of the attribution process.

A great deal of experimental social psychological research on attribution processes, however, focuses on judgments about the sources of individual task performance or direct interpersonal interactions. Sociologists and political scientists have extended these insights to attributions about larger matters of observable supraindividual processes and social conditions. Thus, for example, previous research has measured distinct patterns of popular belief about the causes of social inequality more generally (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Wilson 1996) and with regard to racial inequality in particular (Schuman 1971; Apostle et al. 1983; Sniderman and Hagen 1985; Kluegel 1990; Hunt 2004, 2007).

Sociological attribution. Previous sociological research provides grounds to expect a strong tendency toward individualistic thinking when it comes to attributions about crime. Work on beliefs about general economic inequality has pointed to a dominant individualistic ethos or ideology in U.S. public opinion (Mann 1970; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Kluegel and Smith (1986, 5) summarize this tendency via what they term the "logic of opportunity syllogism." The major premise holds that there are many opportunities for economic advancement in American society. Next, the logic proceeds, hard work and talent are rewarded in American society. Therefore, any resulting economic inequality is largely seen as the fair and legitimate result of differences in individual effort and ability. While there are significant race, class, and ideological differences in these attitudes (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Bobo 1991), it seems reasonable to expect that a similar strong general individualistic tilt may also exist when the focus shifts from economic inequality in general to the sources of involvement in crime in particular.

The research on how Americans perceive and explain racial inequality has stressed the existence of distinct modes of explanation for race inequality (Apostle et al. 1983; Sniderman and Hagen 1985; Kluegel 1990; Sigelman and Welch 1991; Hunt 2007). These modes reflect the fact that few people express unicausal accounts of racial inequality, with many individuals recognizing the influence of both individual-level factors and external or structural factors. As might be expected, these "modes of explanation" vary considerably by race (Hunt 2007; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Sniderman and Hagen 1985). African Americans are far more likely to attribute racial inequality to structural factors, such as discrimination or inadequate educational opportunities, compared with whites, who exhibit a clearer tendency to accept various dispositional or individualistic accounts (Kluegel 1990).

These modes of explanation help to explain the steady lack of support for race-targeted policies among whites (Kluegel 1990) and reflect the large gap in perceptions of inequality among blacks and whites (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt 2007). For example, whites who adopt individualist explanations for inequality are much less likely to support policies that seek government spending or aid to address racial inequality in the United States than are whites who have a more structurally

oriented explanation for inequality (Kluegel 1990). The sizable gap in black and white explanations for inequality remained largely unchanged throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Kluegel and Smith 1986), though recent work suggests that it became slightly less polarized in the 1990s and early 2000s (Hunt 2007).

Still, there is a dearth of research on modes of explanation in the context of public response to crime and crime-related policy. Most of the available research tends to focus on perceptions of the criminal justice system's response to particular types of behavior (Carroll and Payne 1976; Carroll 1978), rather than on how people understand the origins of criminal behavior. There is little, if any, research on how individualist and structuralist accounts of behavior help to explain black and white differences in the evaluation of the criminal justice system and crime policy. In addition, the existing information on racial differences in causal accounts of criminogenic behavior remains largely descriptive in nature and incomplete for recent years (see Erskine 1974). Given the polarization of attitudes between blacks and whites toward the criminal justice system in general (Shaw et al. 1998; Hagan, Shedd, and Payne 2005; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005) and toward such issues as the War on Drugs in particular (Bobo and Thompson 2006), it is possible that racial differences in causal accounts of criminal behavior could help to explain differential support for punitive crime policies.

Race and attributions. There are four important reasons to expect differences in causal explanations for crime between blacks and whites. First, despite enormous change and progress over the past several decades, African Americans remain socioeconomically disadvantaged relative to whites and sharply segregated from whites in terms of residential location (Massey 2007). Such profound structural differences in social location are likely to influence thinking about a socially defined and constructed problem such as crime. Second, and more specifically, blacks and whites have historically encountered (Higginbotham 1996; Kennedy 1997) and certainly perceive in the present (Weitzer and Tuch 2006) very different experiences when it comes to their interactions with police and other institutions of the criminal justice system (Tonry 1995; Cole 1999; Mauer 1999; Western 2006). Given these sharply different statuses, histories, and contemporary experiences, we believe that whites and blacks are likely to have polarized views of the causes of crime.

Third, the perception by some that there is a racially biased system of social control (Quinney 1970; Chambliss and Seidman 1971; Hurwitz and Peffley 2005) that reproduces inequality, leading many to question the very legitimacy of the system (Hagan, Shedd, and Payne 2005; Bobo and Thompson 2006), may also act to polarize beliefs about the origins of crime that lead to these disparities in the first place. Fourth, real differences in criminal victimization among blacks and whites (Bobo and Thompson 2010) suggest a pervasive experiential gap in exposure to crime that may lead to very different beliefs about criminogenic behavior (Pettit and Western 2004). For example, Bobo and Thompson (2010) found that blacks were much more likely than white respondents to have a friend or relative incarcerated, regardless of income level or education. Indeed, even among those

with a college education earning more than $60,000 a year, nearly one in three blacks had a friend or relative incarcerated, compared with only one in twenty whites. Exposure to the American criminal justice system is far more common in the black community than it is in the white community.

Ideology and attributions. Beyond race itself, value-based and ideological differences among individuals might also be a determining factor for how people understand the causes of crime and the type of crime policies that they support (Tyler and Weber 1982; Tyler and Boeckmann 1997; Bobo and Johnson 2004; Gottschalk 2008). For example, we know that political conservatism is highly correlated with support for such things as the death penalty, three-strike laws, and truth-in-sentencing laws (Soss, Langbein, and Metelko 2003; Barkan and Cohen 2005; Unnever and Cullen 2007; Matsueda and Drakulich 2009). Therefore, it seems likely that a logic of personal responsibility is one of the factors that links value-based and ideological conservatism on one hand to support for punitive policies on the other. The attribution process may be a key piece of this logic. Accordingly, individuals with traditional and conservative outlooks should be more likely than those with more liberal outlooks to make individualistic attributions about criminal behavior.

Crime salience and attributions. Actual exposure to serious crime may also shape attributions. For example, individuals who live in high-crime areas, who have been victimized, and who are highly fearful of crime may be motivated to see crime as more often a matter of individual responsibility than of social structural causation. A more individualistic view of criminal behavior would be consistent with an agentic and, therefore, potentially more rationally controllable and manageable view of the crime problem. Such a view would also be a way of imposing a greater sense of right and wrong, or a moral order, on one's social surroundings and life circumstances. A personal or individual account of criminal behavior would also be a cognitively simple inference from the more general American cultural tendency toward individualism. That is, it is reasonable to expect those for whom crime is a highly salient personal matter to lean in the direction of more individualistic accounts, as doing so should be more psychologically parsimonious and comforting at several levels.

We suspect that all of these factors may determine support for crime policy and causal accounts of criminogenic behavior. However, we seek to understand how causal accounts of criminogenic behavior help to explain the polarized views that blacks and whites have of the criminal justice system, especially their support for crime policies, independent of these other factors. That is, does mode of explanation elucidate the racial gap in support for particular crime policies even after these other factors are controlled? Are the opinions of blacks and whites largely the product of fundamental differences in opinion about the sources of crime? If so, how much of these groups' support for particular crime policies can we explain by these differences?

Analysis and Results

Lay accounts of involvement in crime

To ascertain popular or lay accounts of criminal behavior, the RCPO survey posed a series of four questions to respondents, in an agree/disagree format, specifying different potential root causes of criminal behavior. The four statements and respective response distributions are shown in Table 1. Of the four questions, the most widely endorsed lay account of crime involvement is that "people become criminals because they do not care about the rights of others or their responsibility to society"—88.2 percent of whites and 73.8 percent of blacks endorse this explanation. The next most commonly accepted statement involves the structurally oriented belief that "poverty and low income in our society are responsible for much of [the] crime," with 61.7 percent of whites and 67.4 percent of blacks endorsing this position. Finally, a smaller number of respondents believed that "people turn to crime because they are lazy" (whites = 51.4 percent; blacks = 37.0 percent) or because "our society does not guarantee that everyone has regular employment" (whites = 24.8 percent; blacks = 49.5 percent).

The distributions in Table 1 immediately suggest that most respondents affirm personal or individualistic responsibility for criminal behavior and situational or social structural accounts. Similar tendencies toward a multicausal view of race-based inequality led Apostle and colleagues (1983), Sniderman and Hagen (1985), Kluegel (1990), and Hunt (2007) to identify distinctive modes of explanation of race inequality reflecting the intersection of the degree of acceptance of particular structural and individual accounts. We follow this analytic approach. Specifically, we employ a set of criteria for determining different modes of explanation for involvement with crime similar to those that Kluegel (1990) and Hunt (2007) used. These scholars constructed modes of explanation for how respondents explained the black-white socioeconomic gap using questions that tapped four possible reasons for black-white inequality, two of which were person-centered/individualist in nature (inborn ability and motivation)[2] and two of which were structural in nature (discrimination and education). Our own set of questions measure similar dispositions toward crime involvement. We base our modes of explanation on the joint configuration of responses that people used to explain involvement in crime.

Respondents endorsed any number of explanations for why people commit crimes, and the categories are by no means mutually exclusive. For example, 91.7 percent of those who agree that laziness explains why people commit crimes also agree that people turn to crime because they "do not care about the rights of others" (whites = 95.9 percent; blacks = 86.0 percent). Likewise, 82.3 percent of respondents who agree that the primary reason people turn to crime is because "society does not guarantee that everyone has regular employment" also agree that "poverty and low income" are causes for crime involvement (whites = 85.3 percent; blacks 80.8 percent). Similarly, there is overlap between individualist and structuralist modes of explanation. For example, 35 percent of respondents

TABLE 1
Reasons Some People Turn to Crime

	White	Black
Individual attributions		
People turn to crime because they are lazy.		
Strongly/mostly agree	51.4%	37.0%
Strongly/mostly disagree	48.6%	63.0%
N	965	994
People become criminals because they don't care about the rights of others or their responsibility to society.		
Strongly/mostly agree	88.2%	73.8%
Strongly/mostly disagree	11.8%	26.2%
N	969	997
Structural attributions		
People turn to crime because our society does not guarantee that everyone has regular employment.		
Strongly/mostly agree	24.8%	49.5%
Strongly/mostly disagree	75.2%	50.5%
N	966	994
Poverty and low income in our society are responsible for much of crime.		
Strongly/mostly agree	61.7%	67.4%
Strongly/mostly disagree	38.3%	32.6%
N	963	999

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

agree that laziness contributes to involvement in crime, while also agreeing that a lack of employment guarantees contributes to criminality. Given this overlap, we found it necessary to construct a mixed category for those who endorsed both structuralist and individualist views equally.

Modes of explaining crime

Table 2 shows the joint configuration of responses used to define different modes of explanation. We sorted respondents who were purely individualist or structuralist in their responses into the corresponding mode of explanation. Individualists include respondents who endorsed either one or both of the individualist attributes and neither of the structuralist attributes; structuralists include people who endorsed one or both of the structuralist items but neither of the individualist items. In addition to these pure individualists and structuralists, we also included people in these categories who straddled the individualist and structuralist divide but were balanced in favor of the mode of assignment. In other words, respondents who endorsed both individualist items or both structuralist items but also affirmed one of the other items were included in the structuralist

TABLE 2
Response Patterns for Mode of Explanation for Involvement with Crime

Mode of Explanation	Response Patterns					
	Individual Attributions			Structural Attributions		
	Lazy		Not Responsible	No Jobs		Poverty
Individualist	Yes	(or)	Yes	No		No
	Yes		Yes	Yes	(or)	Yes
Mixed	Yes	(or)	Yes	Yes	(or)	Yes
	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes
Structuralist	No		No	Yes	(or)	Yes
	Yes	(or)	Yes	Yes		Yes
None	No		No	No		No

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

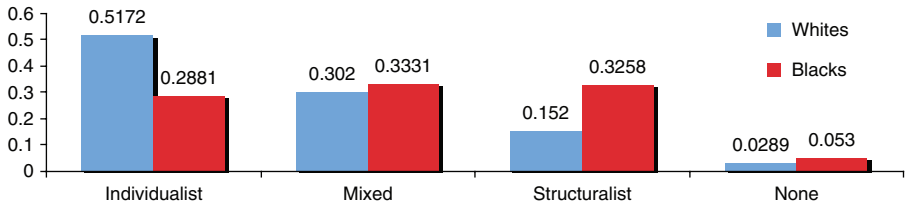
or individualist category rather than the mixed category since their explanations for crime were biased in the direction of one of these modes.[3]

In addition to these two polar modes of explanation, we created a "mixed" mode of attribution category for those who equally straddled the individualist/structuralist divide. That is, they were equally individualist and structuralist in their explanations. We treated respondents as mixed if they affirmed one of each of the structuralist/individualist attributes but denied the other in those categories. For example, a mixed respondent might endorse the belief that people become criminals because they "do not care about the rights of others" (an individualist attribute) but also endorse the idea that "society does not guarantee that everyone has regular employment" (a structuralist attribute). We also treated respondents who affirmed all four items as members of the mixed category. About one in three of all blacks and whites fell in to the mixed category (see Figure 1).

Finally, for whatever reason, a small portion of our sample did not endorse any attribute ($N = 79$). Whether this was because they literally had no views about why people turn to crime or they simply did not like the specific options we offered is difficult to assess. There are enough such individuals, however, to warrant treating them as a separate category. Blacks were significantly more likely to belong to this group than whites. Fifty-one were African American (5.3 percent), and twenty-eight were white (2.9 percent). Within the white population, political Independents and liberals were more likely to fall into this group. Among blacks, liberals and respondents with high incomes were more likely to fall into this category. For both blacks and whites, those who feared crime the least were the most likely to fall into this category.

Figure 1 presents the modes of explanation for criminal behavior by race. Several interesting patterns emerge. First, the majority of white respondents are individualists. Second, both blacks and whites tend to endorse explanations that involve at least some individualist explanations for crime involvement. If we combined the individualist and mixed-mode respondents (recall that the mixed-mode

FIGURE 1
Mode of Explanation by Race



SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

responses also contain individualist explanations for crime), nearly eight in ten whites (81.9 percent) and six in ten blacks (62.1 percent) endorse individualist accounts of criminogenic behavior equal to or greater than the level of their endorsement of structuralist accounts. While blacks do lean slightly toward structuralist explanations (32.6 percent are structuralists and 28.8 percent individualists), the combination of individualist and mixed responses reveals the strength of the individualist narrative of crime involvement among both black and white Americans. Finally, when we compare the modes of explanation by race, racial distinctions emerge. This is most apparent when we compare individualists and structuralists to each other—we find that more than half of all whites (51.7 percent) are individualists compared with less than one in three blacks (28.8 percent). Comparatively, 32.6 percent of blacks are structuralists, while only 15.2 percent of whites are structuralists. In short, whites are more individualist in their explanations, while blacks are more evenly distributed across the three groups.

Indeed, nearly two in three individualists in our sample are white (63.9 percent of individualists are white), while the opposite is true for structuralists (68.5 percent of structuralists are black). If individualists are more punitive in their approach to crime policy, and if more of them are white, it may be that a large percentage of the racial gap in support for punitive crime policy is explainable by the fact that individualists tend to be white. That is, modes of explanation may be a key factor in why blacks and whites have very different levels of support for punitive crime policies.

Factors affecting attributions for crime

Table 3 shows means for each of the modes of explanation in addition to the variables we think are important for whether people adopt a particular mode of explanation. The background, value, and ideological variables and crime salience factors point to significant differences between blacks and whites that may shape their causal explanations. For example, blacks are significantly more likely to identify as Democrats and liberals than are whites, implying that blacks might take a more structuralist view of crime causation. However, blacks also report more frequent

TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations by Race

	Total	White	Black
Mode of explanation			
Individualist	0.44*	0.55	0.31
	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.46)
Mixed	0.30*	0.28	0.33
	(0.46)	(0.45)	(0.47)
Structuralist	0.21*	0.13	0.30
	(0.41)	(0.34)	(0.46)
None	0.04*	0.04	0.06
	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.23)
Demographics			
Female	0.56*	0.54	0.57
	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.50)
Southern	0.45*	0.35	0.57
	(0.50)	(0.48)	(0.49)
Age (in years)	45.19*	47.47	42.45
	(16.17)	(16.45)	(15.38)
Education (in years)	13.33*	13.63	12.96
	(2.49)	(2.50)	(2.43)
Income	$49,366*	$52,763	$45,287
	($32,943)	($32,426)	($33,119)
Value and ideology			
Democrat	0.50*	0.32	0.73
	(0.50)	(0.47)	(0.45)
Independent	0.31*	0.36	0.25
	(0.46)	(0.48)	(0.43)
Republican	0.19*	0.32	0.02
	(0.39)	(0.47)	(0.15)
Conservatism[a]	2.99*	3.13	2.83
	(0.83)	(0.85)	(0.77)
Church attendance[b]	3.73*	3.46	4.06
	(1.56)	(1.60)	(1.45)
Salience of crime			
Victim of crime	0.06*	0.05	0.07
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.25)
Index crime (per 100,000)	4,788.40*	4,145.72	5,560.27
	(2,084)	(1,890)	(2,046)
Murder rate (per 100,000)	9.11*	5.67	13.23
	(10.67)	(7.39)	(12.42)
Fear of crime[c]	2.02*	1.92	2.13
	(0.73)	(0.65)	(0.80)

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.
NOTE: For party identification, we asked respondents to identify as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Conservatism was measured on a 5-point scale from *very liberal* to *very conservative*, with *moderate* as a midpoint. Church attendance was constructed by creating a 6-point scale based on how often a person attended church over the last year: *never*, *once a year or less*, *a few times a year*, *once or twice a month*, *once a week*, or *more than once a week*. "Victim of crime" is a dummy variable for respondents who said that their house or apartment had been burglarized in the past year or someone in their household had been a victim of a violent crime. Index crime rates and murder rates are taken from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports from 2000. Fear of crime is a 5-point scale, ranging from *low fear of crime* to *high fear of crime* based on the responses to two questions that asked how often respondents feared "someone breaking into your house to steal things" and how often they feared "being robbed by someone who has a gun or knife."
*Significant differences between white and black respondents ($p < .05$, two-tailed tests).

church attendance than do whites, which might encourage a more individual-responsibility-focused outlook on crime—though church attendance among blacks may also act in both directions given the black Protestant tradition of emphasizing communal and collectivist orientations and its connections with black political activism (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Likewise, crime is a more salient experience for blacks than for whites, as blacks are more likely to report criminal victimization, to fear crime, and actually to live in higher-crime areas.

But what do these gaps in social experience and identities mean when it comes to how people explain the sources of criminogenic behavior? We explore these questions by modeling the independent effects of these variables, in addition to race, on support for each mode of explanation separately.

Table 4 presents coefficients for logistic regression models, predicting each mode of explanation category pooled across race and also separately for black and white respondents. Several patterns are worthy of emphasis. First, the results show that the overall effects of race are strong for structuralist and individualist attributions. Blacks were about three times ($e^{1.10}$) more likely than whites to be structuralists and about 0.44 times ($e^{-0.82}$) less likely to be individualists. Second, beyond race, ideological conservatives and Republicans were more likely to be individualists and less likely to be structuralists, all else being equal; though party affiliation does not seem to matter as much for structuralists as it does for individualist and mixed respondents.[4] In addition, among structuralists, southerners and older people were less likely to adopt a structuralist mode of explanation, while those who had a greater fear of crime were much more likely to have a structuralist mode of explanation.

We next asked if whites and blacks take different approaches to explaining crime. Among whites, we find that conservatism is a significant factor in predicting crime attributions for individualists and structuralists, while ideological factors appear to be less influential among black respondents.[5] What matters for blacks and not so much for whites is fear of crime, although the direction of the effect is not what we expected. Blacks who fear crime the most were also the least likely to be individualists and the most likely to have a mixed mode of explanation for understanding criminal behavior.[6] Of interest, among black structuralists, the only variables that proved to be significant were region and age. That is, older southern blacks were less likely than younger nonsouthern blacks to make a structuralist argument about crime origins.[7] In the end, there do appear to be differences between blacks and whites in terms of how they explain crime.

Support for punitive policies

Different modes of explanation may in part help to explain the varying levels of support among blacks and whites for punitive policies toward crime. To test this claim, we explore two points of exposure to the criminal justice system and support for policies that either limit or expand the punitiveness of the American criminal justice system. We first address a policy that seeks to widen the net of punishment and expand the reach of police through increased spending on law

TABLE 4
Logistic Regression Models for Each Mode of Explanation (N = 1,091)

	Dependent Variable (Compared to All Other Categories)											
	Individualist			Mixed			Structuralist			None		
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black
Demographics												
Black	–0.82***			–0.15			1.10***			0.95		
Female	–0.07	–0.02	–0.16	0.07	0.14	0.00	–0.05	–0.35	0.15	0.26	0.89	0.02
Southern	0.30	0.29	0.44	–0.07	–0.23	0.05	–0.56**	–0.57*	–0.64*	1.00*	1.35	0.83
Age (in years)	0.44	0.01	1.05	0.22	0.11	0.42	–0.97*	–0.18	–1.54*	–0.06	–0.54	0.30
Education (in years)	0.00	–0.01	0.03	–0.02	–0.02	–0.04	0.05	0.07	0.05	–0.10	–0.08	–0.10
Income	0.23	0.35	0.02	–0.31	–0.51*	–0.16	–0.12	0.10	–0.13	0.98*	0.51	1.39*
Values and ideology												
Independent	0.12	–0.07	0.38	–0.38*	–0.49	–0.29	0.20	0.74*	–0.05	0.48	1.63*	–0.06
Republican	0.50*	0.29	0.74	–0.62*	–0.55	–1.01	–0.27	0.06	–0.13	0.68	1.52	1.32
Conservatism[a]	0.24*	0.41**	0.01	0.04	–0.04	0.17	–0.26*	–0.57***	–0.07	–0.66**	–0.89*	–0.54*
Church attendance[b]	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.04	–0.01	0.11	–0.07	0.02	–0.10	–0.17	–0.15	–0.18
Salience of crime												
Victim of crime	–0.14	0.02	–0.39	–0.10	0.01	–0.36	0.19	–0.55	0.60	0.67	1.43	–0.29
Index crime (per 100,000)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Murder rate (per 100,000)	0.01	–0.02	0.02	0.00	0.05**	–0.01	–0.02	–0.06	–0.01	0.01	–0.13	0.01
Fear of crime[c]	–0.15	0.08	–0.41**	0.06	–0.17	0.32*	0.24*	0.20	0.23	–0.74*	–0.43	–0.97*
Constant	–5.21*	–5.27	–5.37	1.88	5.76	–2.13	3.61	–2.39	7.29	—	–4.87	—
Wald chi-square (*df*)	79.82 (14)	29.62 (13)	20.36 (13)	17.08 (14)	29.26 (13)	14.54 (13)	71.83 (14)	29.87 (13)	22.55 (13)	35.16 (14)	61.79 (13)	14.35 (13)
R^2	.07	.01	.09	.02	.05	.04	.08	.07	.06	.12	.17	.12

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.
a. Range = 1–5; 1 = *very liberal*; 5 = *very conservative*.
b. Range = 1–6; 1 = *never*; 6 = *more than once a week*.
c. Range = 1–5; 1 = *low fear of crime*; 5 = *high fear of crime*.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

TABLE 5
Addressing Crime Problems in the United States by Race

	Whites	Blacks	White to Black Ratio
Question 1: To lower the crime rate in the U.S. some people think more money should be spent on attacking the social and economic problems that lead to crime by improving education and job training programs. Other people think more money should be spent on improving law enforcement and deterring crime by hiring more police and building more prisons. Which comes closer to your view?			
More money for education and job training	35.2%	57.7%	0.6
Both equally	45.2%	35.1%	1.3
More money for police and prisons	10.2%	1.3%	8.0
Neither	9.4%	5.9%	1.6
Total *N*	781	721	
Question 2: When it comes to granting parole to people in prison, should parole boards be . . .			
More strict	77.7%	65.3%	1.2
Same as they are now/less strict	22.3%	43.7%	0.5
Total *N*	775	713	

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

enforcement personnel and prisons. Next, we explore support for a policy that encourages parole boards to be stricter, thereby ensuring that those who do become incarcerated remain so for as long as possible.

As Table 5 shows, there are large differences between blacks and whites in their support for these policies. For example, more than half of all whites view spending more money on police and on more prisons as a viable strategy to decrease crime, whether in conjunction with education and job training programs (45.2 percent) or in ways that focus only on police and prisons (10.2 percent). A much smaller percentage of blacks endorsed these same views, believing instead that education and job training programs were better investments when it comes to solving the nation's crime problem. And although the majority of both whites and blacks think that parole boards should be stricter, there is a sizable difference between blacks and whites when it comes to granting parole to people in prison—77.7 percent of whites compared to 65.3 percent of blacks think parole boards should be stricter.

Certainly, one of the causes of this racial polarization is a crisis of legitimacy and lack of trust of the criminal justice system among blacks (Bobo and Thompson 2006). However, a somewhat different explanation for this large gap in support may be that blacks and whites have fundamentally different causal explanations for crime. If people with dispositional attributions for behavior were more likely to blame the individual for his or her failures, then there is good reason to believe

that these same people would also be more likely to support punitive crime policies (Carroll 1978). After all, if crime were primarily a product of individual traits, the best way to stop crime may simply be to capture more criminals by placing more police on the streets, building more prisons, and keeping prisoners behind bars longer.

Spending solutions to crime. For the first set of questions addressing solutions to crime, we use multinomial logit models (see Table 6) and find significant evidence for the claim that modes of explanation do indeed influence support for crime policies, net all other variables in our models. When we compare the likelihood of support for each solution to crime relative to the other solutions, we find that mode of explanation is important when comparing support for education and job training spending relative to spending policies that contain an element of support for more police and prisons. This is especially true for individualists, who are much more likely than structuralists to advocate spending for police and prisons over education and job training. While there is support among individualists for education and job training, it is more likely to be in conjunction with spending for police and prisons than exclusively for education and job training. People who have dispositional attributions about the causes of crime are committed to policies that improve law enforcement and expand our capacity to incarcerate and are less concerned with attacking the social and economic conditions that lead to crime in the first place. The same is true for mixed respondents when comparing "both equally" to "education and job training"; however, there are no significant differences between mixed respondents and structuralists when comparing spending for more law enforcement and policies that address the social and economic causes of crime.

As expected, conservatism remains important even after controlling for mode of explanation and race. For each unit increase in conservatism, political conservatives are about twice as likely ($e^{0.75}$) as political liberals to support spending for police and prisons over spending for education and job training programs. In addition, they are more likely to support spending for police and prisons over spending policies that include an element of education and job training, and they are more likely to support police and prison spending in conjunction with education and job training spending over spending on education and job training alone. To be clear, the more conservative people are, the more they view the solution to crime as one that requires the expansion of law enforcement by putting more police on the streets and building more prisons and not *just* addressing social and economic problems. Along the same lines, Republicans were more likely to support spending for law enforcement as a deterrent to crime than spending to address social and economic problems.

Exposure to crime also matters, though it is less consistent across models and, in fact, contradicts our initial expectations about its effects. Namely, the negative effect of fear of crime when comparing support for police or support for education

TABLE 6
Multinomial Logit Models of Support for Education and Job Training, Police and Prisons,[a] or Both Equally (N = 1,088)

	Model 1: Police vs. Education	Model 2: Police vs. Education	Model 3: Police vs. Both Equally	Model 4: Police vs. Both Equally	Model 5: Education vs. Both Equally	Model 6: Education vs. Both Equally
Demographics						
Black	–1.22***	–1.05**	–0.36	–0.32	0.85***	0.72***
Female	–0.45*	–0.45*	–0.42	–0.41	0.02	0.03
Southern	0.32	0.20	0.12	0.10	–0.20	–0.10
Age (in years)	–0.45	–0.60	–0.05	–0.05	0.40	0.54
Education (in years)	–0.03	–0.03	0.05	0.04	0.08*	0.07*
Income	0.11	0.02	–0.23	–0.29	–0.34	–0.31
Values and ideology						
Independent	0.59	0.57	0.26	0.22	–0.32	–0.36
Republican	0.85*	0.76*	0.40	0.32	–0.45	–0.44
Conservatism[b]	0.80***	0.75***	0.47**	0.43**	–0.32**	–0.31**
Church attendance[c]	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.00	0.01
Salience of crime						
Victim of crime	–0.25	–0.22	0.26	0.29	0.51	0.51
Index crime (per 100,000)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00*	0.00*
Murder rate (per 100,000)	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.00
Fear of crime[d]	–0.14	–0.09	–0.32*	–0.32*	–0.18	–0.23*
Mode of explanation						
Individualist[e]		1.12***		0.23		–0.89***
Mixed[e]		0.09		–0.76		–0.85***
None[e]		0.73		–0.45		–1.18**
Constant	–2.50	–1.49	0.33	1.25	2.83	2.75
Wald chi-square (*df*)	167.15 (28)	208.50 (34)	167.15 (28)	208.50 (34)	167.15 (28)	208.50 (34)
Pseudo R^2	.09	.11	.09	.11	.09	.11

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.
a. "More money for police and prisons" and "neither" were combined. We performed a likelihood ratio test to determine whether there were significant differences between models that combined the two categories and concluded there were no significant differences.
b. Range = 1–5; 1 = *very liberal*; 5 = *very conservative*.
c. Range = 1–6; 1 = *never*; 6 = *more than once a week*.
d. Range = 1–5; 1 = *low fear of crime*; 5 = *high fear of crime*.
e. Compared to structuralists.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

and job training versus both equally is in the opposite direction of what we expected. We initially thought fear of crime would lead people to support more spending for law enforcement, but we find instead that it is correlated with more support for a mixed strategy of spending as a solution to crime. We can only speculate that people who have a greater fear of crime are also more likely to live in places where the exposure to crime is greater.[8] Thus, because of the more personal relationship to crime, they may take a more holistic approach to solving crime by supporting spending on law enforcement and prisons while at the same time supporting spending that addresses the social and economic conditions that lead to crime.

We next direct our attention to the possibility that mode of explanation acts as an intervening variable in explaining racially polarized attitudes about the criminal justice system. In each model that contains "education and job training" as a comparison group, race is a strong predictor of support for spending policy before mode of explanation is introduced (see model 1) and continues to be significant even after we introduce mode of explanation. However, the mode of explanation variable does help partially to explain away some of the effects of race. In the end, there is only a 15.6 percent decrease in the overall effects of race when comparing support for spending on police and prisons to more spending on education and job training and a 12.2 percent decrease in the likelihood of support for education and job training compared to both equally (converted to probabilities before calculating percentage decrease). There is no effect of race in our models that compare support for more spending on police and prisons to both equally. Mode of explanation is an important part of the story behind the racial gap in support for crime spending policies, but it is not the entire story.

We can draw two conclusions from these models. First, mode of explanation does have an independent effect on support for spending policies, irrespective of other factors. Similarly, it acts to explain part of the gap between blacks and whites, though—and this is important—*not* the entire gap. Second, mode of explanation, along with race, is significant only when the comparison group is spending on education and job training. That is, the key distinction appears to be between those who support spending policies that focus entirely on education and job training and those who support spending for more law enforcement and prisons, even if it includes an element of education and job training spending.

Support for stricter parole boards. These spending policies address only the entry side of the crime problem in America. In cases where crime prevention fails, we must decide what to do with convicted criminals once we have them and, if we decide to incarcerate them, how long we should keep them locked up. As the number of prisoners in the nation's prisons continues to swell, the answer to the latter question becomes an important matter of public policy and human rights. In the next set of models, we test the effects of mode of explanation on people's support for making parole boards more or less strict and find that mode of explanation does indeed predict support for these policies, independent of other variables.

TABLE 7
Logistic Regression of Support for Making Parole Boards "More Strict" versus "Less Strict/Leaving Them the Same"[a]

	Model 1	Model 2
Demographics		
Black	–1.01***	–0.89***
Female	0.37*	0.39*
Southern	0.18	0.09
Age (in years)	–0.66	–0.81*
Education (in years)	–0.10**	–0.10**
Income	–0.06	–0.10
Values and ideology		
Independent	–0.46*	–0.48*
Republican	–0.05	–0.14
Conservatism[b]	0.31**	0.28**
Church attendance[c]	0.08	0.07
Salience of crime		
Victim of crime	–0.14	–0.10
Index crime (per 100,000)	0.00	0.00
Murder rate (per 100,000)	0.00	–0.01
Fear of crime[d]	0.35**	0.42***
Mode of explanation		
Individualist[e]		0.95***
Mixed[e]		0.53*
None[e]		0.81
Constant	4.41	4.99
N	1,077	1,077
Wald chi-square (*df*)	70.21 (14)	82.69 (17)
Pseudo R^2	.07	.09

SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.
a. "Same" and "less strict" were combined. We performed a likelihood ratio test to determine whether there were significant differences between models that combined the two categories and concluded there were no significant differences.
b. Range = 1–5; 1 = *very liberal*; 5 = *very conservative*.
c. Range = 1–6; 1 = *never*; 6 = *more than once a week*.
d. Range = 1–5; 1 = *low fear of crime*; 5 = *high fear of crime*.
e. Compared to structuralists.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

First, the results from these models, shown in Table 7, reflect some of what we saw in the previous models when it comes to conservatism. Conservatives are more likely to support stricter parole boards than are liberals.[9] The effects of conservatism are almost equally strong before and after the mode of explanation variables are introduced, likely reflecting the strong current of "tough on crime" approaches within the dominant conservative political discourse. When it comes to conservatism,

the effects are strong regardless of whether we look at solving the origins of crime or dealing with criminals once they are incarcerated.

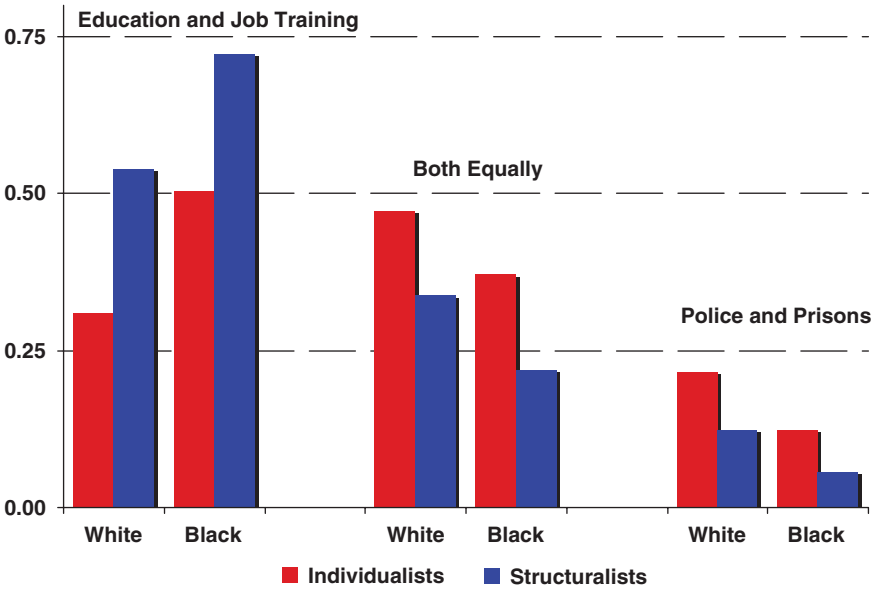
Next, there were somewhat mixed results when it comes to exposure to crime and fear of crime. While crime rates have no impact on support for making parole boards stricter, fear of crime is an important part of the story. People who fear crime the most are also more likely to support stricter parole boards, independent of the crime rates and mode of explanation. We also find that fear of crime is in the expected direction when it comes to attitudes about parole, indicating a more direct link between fear of crime and support for crime policies that promise to keep convicted criminals off the street longer. Ensuring that prisoners remain behind bars for as long as possible may act to alleviate some of the fear that people have about crime.

Last, mode of explanation does have an impact on support for making parole boards more or less strict and seems to also have a small effect on race differences in policy outlooks. Individualists are 2.6 times more likely ($e^{0.95}$) to support stricter parole boards than are structuralists, and those in the mixed-mode category are about 1.7 times more likely ($e^{0.53}$) to do so than structuralists. Mode of explanation is one of the most important predictors of support for stricter parole boards. Nevertheless, race remains a strong predictor of support for stricter parole boards, regardless of what we introduce to the model, and the decrease in the likelihood of supporting stricter parole boards is only about 12.2 percent (converted to probabilities before calculating percentage decrease). Once again, we find mode of explanation to be a significant factor in explaining support for more punitive crime policies, yet it stops short of fully explaining the gap between blacks and whites, only marginally acting as an intervening variable.

A visual representation of these models may sum it up best. Figures 2a and 2b show the main effects from both models after controlling for race and mode of explanation. First, individualists and structuralists, regardless of race, are not likely to support spending money *only* on police and prisons. All else being equal, there tends to be more support for policies that include education and job training. Whites, however, are somewhat split, with more white individualists leaning toward support for policies that include some form of spending for police and prisons and white structuralists being slightly more supportive of policies that include spending for education and job training. Blacks, on the other hand, tend to lean toward policies that include spending for education and job training programs, reflecting a more liberal stance on how America should deal with crime. This is true for both types of policies in Figures 2a and 2b.

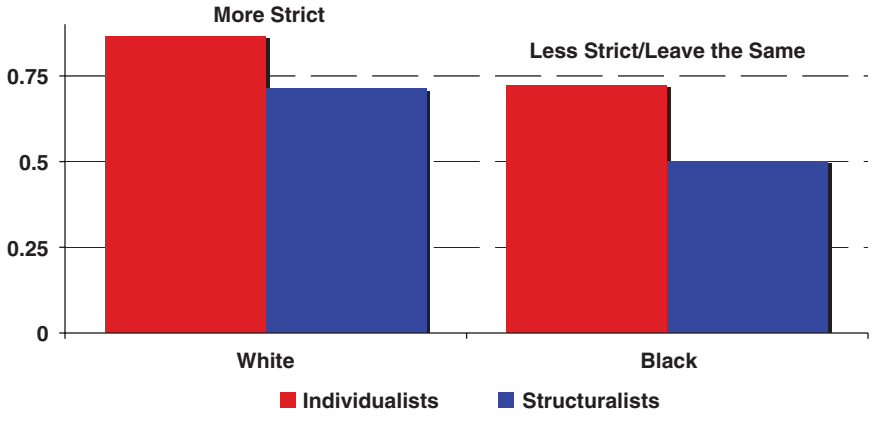
Perhaps the most striking finding in terms of whether whites and blacks are truly worlds apart when it comes to understanding the problem of crime is the fact that even the most externally oriented group of whites—structuralists—are hardly any different from the most dispositionally oriented group of blacks. Put differently, from a policy viewpoint, black individualists are substantively no different from white structuralists. Blacks and whites, despite the significant differences

FIGURE 2a
Predicted Probability of Support for Crime Solutions
for Individualists and Structuralists by Race



SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

FIGURE 2b
Predicted Probabilities of Support for Making Parole
Boards "More Strict" versus "Less Strict/Leaving Them the Same"



SOURCE: Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey, 2001.

between structuralists and individualists within each racial group, remain extremely polarized even when mode of explanation is taken into account.

Discussion and Conclusions

Racial polarization on matters of law enforcement and criminal justice remains a problem. We sought to determine whether one factor underlying this polarization involved sharply different ways of explaining criminal behavior among black and white Americans. Our results point to real differences in the extent to which whites and blacks understand crime as having roots in individuals' choices, dispositions, and failings, on one hand, and situational or structural constraints and limitations, on the other. To be sure, we find that African Americans are substantially more likely than whites to adopt structuralist accounts for criminal behavior and that just the opposite pattern exists with regard to endorsing individualist accounts for crime. Yet blacks and whites are about equally likely to adopt mixed accounts for crime, straddling the line between structuralist and individualist views of criminal behavior. In sum, there are real differences in core attributional tendencies between blacks and whites. These differences, however, do not constitute a sort of gaping polarization in thinking about crime.

Beyond race, we find that values and ideology help to shape crime attributions. In particular, political ideology plays a clear role among whites, though it is less consistently influential among blacks. Among black respondents, exposure to and particularly fear of crime do more to shape attributional modes.

Explanatory modes for crime matter considerably for crime policy outlooks. As expected, structuralists are more likely than individualists or those offering mixed accounts to stress a nonpunitive response to crime. They are more supportive of trying to prevent crime, with an emphasis on educational opportunities and jobs rather than on more police and prisons. They are also more likely to encourage less stringent practices by parole boards. Blacks and whites are significantly different on these policy matters in the expected directions. Race-linked differences in attributional patterns account for a part of the race gap in policy views between blacks and whites. However, most of the gap remains even after we have taken into account black-white differences in explanatory modes.

The latter pattern suggests that other factors beyond the attributional process account for the black-white polarization in the domain of criminal justice. Some of these other factors may include differential personal, family, and community-based experiences with agents and institutions of the criminal justice system. It may also reflect a sort of group cultural identity and outlook. On the former, it seems that direct, personal, negative experiences with agents of the criminal justice system, or knowledge of bad experiences reported by family members and close friends, is sufficiently common in black communities that these experiences create a pervasive cynicism about law enforcement and an expectation of race bias (Wilson and Dunham 2001). On the latter, these ideas are also sufficiently

widely shared and long-standing that they may rise to the level of an aspect of group culture and identity, especially among the most politically engaged segments of the black population. To wit, the lion's share of the foundation of polarized policy views and of enormous differences in expectancies for fair treatment may have more to do with direct experience and group culture than with fundamentally different understandings of the nature of crime.

Notes

1. Descriptions of and reports on the surveys (Bobo and Johnson 2004) and focus groups (Bobo 2004; Bobo and Thompson 2006) have appeared elsewhere (see also Johnson 2008; Bobo and Thompson 2010).

2. Hunt's (2007) terminology differs from Kluegel's (1990) in that Hunt uses "person-centered" to describe these traits because the "lack of ability" response to the General Social Survey (GSS) question denotes a deterministic behavior rather than one that reflects individual choice. Unlike Kluegel (1990) and Hunt (2007), our "individualist" responses ("lazy" and "do not care") are presumably choices an individual makes and not the result of biological determinism.

3. We initially considered a more complex nine-category explanatory mode typology. After extensive analysis, we concluded that this complexity was not warranted. Specifically, we treated respondents who chose only individualist attributes or only structuralist attributes as "strong individualists" and "strong structuralists" and those who chose both individualist and one structuralist attribute or both structuralist attributes and one individualist attribute as "weak individualists" and "weak structuralists," respectively. However, there were few differences among several of these more finely grained groupings. The differences that do exist are among white respondents. Southern whites were more likely to be weak individualists, and ideologically conservative whites were more likely to be strong individualists, all else being equal. Older whites were also less likely to be strong structuralists.

4. There are also significant predictors among respondents in the "none" mode of explanation. Among the total sample, higher-income southerners who were less conservative and had low fear of crime were more likely to be in this category. Among whites, less conservative independents were more likely to choose "none." Higher-income blacks who were less conservative and had a lower fear of crime were the most likely blacks to fall into the "none" category. Though we do include them in our models, we elected not to draw too many conclusions about them given space constraints and the small number of persons in this category ($N = 28$).

5. Full interaction models show that black-white differences are slightly significant for ideological conservatism among individualists ($p < .10$) and structuralists ($p < .05$).

6. Full interaction models show significant differences ($p < .05$) between blacks and whites in both cases.

7. Full interaction models suggest only slight differences between blacks and whites for the effects of age ($p < .10$) and no differences for living in the South.

8. That fear of crime is positively correlated with crime rates and negatively correlated with income and education supports this claim.

9. We performed tests to determine whether there were differences between the "leave the same" and "less strict" categories and concluded that statistically speaking, there were no significant differences.

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