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Framing Inequity Safely: Whites' Motivated Perceptions of Racial Privilege

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Racial inequity was theorized to threaten Whites' self-image when inequity is framed as White privilege but not when framed as anti-Black discrimination. Manipulations of Whites' need for self-regard were hypothesized to affect their perceptions of White privilege but not of anti-Black discrimination. In Experiment 1, White participants reported less privilege when given threatening (vs. affirming) feedback on an intelligence or personality test; in contrast, perceptions of anti-Black discrimination were unaffected by self-concept manipulations. In Experiment 2, threatening (vs. affirming) feedback decreased privilege perceptions only among Whites high in racial identity. Using a value-based self-affirmation manipulation, Experiment 3 replicated the effect of self-image concerns on Whites' perceptions of privilege and provided evidence that self-concerns, through their effect on perceived privilege, influence Whites' support for redistributive social policies.

Keywords: *inequity; self-enhancement; White identity; White privilege*

Few people seriously deny the existence of major racial inequalities in American society—particularly those separating Blacks and Whites. Compared to Blacks, Whites in the United States make more money, experience more favorable outcomes in the courts, receive better health care, and have greater access to coveted jobs (Bourgeois & Stock, 1994; Brown et al., 2003; Kozol, 1991; Loury, 2002; Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). Among those who attribute racial disparities to inequity (i.e.,

unfair treatment), some emphasize the possibility that discrimination deprives Blacks of chances to get ahead (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Dovidio, 2001), whereas others emphasize structural advantages and unearned privileges that afford Whites greater access to desirable social goods (Brown et al., 2003; Lewis, 2003; McIntosh, 1988; Rains, 1998).

Recent evidence suggests that the manner in which individuals frame inequity—either in terms of dominant-group privilege or subordinate-group disadvantage—has important psychological consequences (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999). However, little work has examined the *determinants* of individuals' choice of inequity frame. In this article, we argue that Whites' perceptions of in-group privilege are driven, in part, by individuals' need for positive self-regard. More specifically, we theorize that the existence of racial privilege threatens Whites' self-image, forging a link between their need for positive self-regard and their acknowledgment of privilege. At the same time, we propose that Whites' perceptions of subordinate-group

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disadvantage (i.e., anti-Black discrimination) are not directly tied to self-concerns.

Differences Between Inequity Frames

Individuals who accept the existence of racial inequity may choose to frame this inequity either in terms of Black disadvantage or White advantage. Explanations focusing on minorities' social standing emphasize that discrimination—often due to majority-group members' unconscious biases—deprives Blacks of chances for social advancement (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Dovidio, 2001). In contrast, explanations focusing on dominant-group members' social standing emphasize structural advantages and unearned privileges that afford Whites a disproportionate share of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Brown et al., 2003; Lewis, 2003; Lipsitz, 1998; McIntosh, 1988; Rains, 1998). Although White advantage and Black disadvantage are often intimately connected—with Black “disaccumulation” leading directly to White “accumulation” (Brown et al., 2003)—dominant-group members' choice of interpretative frame can nonetheless profoundly affect their psychological experience of social inequity.

Dominant-group members appear to be especially uncomfortable with an inequity frame that highlights their place in the social hierarchy. Having to think about male privilege, for instance, evokes guilt among men and hurts their image of the group (Branscombe, 1998). Likewise, Whites who believe that their racial background confers privilege experience more group-based guilt than do privilege-denying Whites (Iyer et al., 2003; Swim & Miller, 1999). Furthermore, when perceived White privilege and perceived anti-Black discrimination are pitted against one another, privilege emerges as the stronger predictor of White guilt (Iyer et al., 2003, Study 1). The negative feelings evoked when dominant-group members frame inequity in terms of group privilege can, in turn, have important practical implications. For example, the belief in White privilege more strongly predicts attitudes toward compensatory affirmative action than does the belief in anti-Black discrimination (Iyer et al., 2003). This work suggests that the psychological and attitudinal consequences of membership in a dominant group depend (in part) on whether inequity is framed in terms of dominant-group advantage or subordinate-group disadvantage.

Although research suggests that individuals' choice of inequity frame (White advantage vs. Black disadvantage) affects their emotional response to social inequity, little work has examined factors that determine dominant-group members' preference for one frame over the other. The current studies investigate whether Whites' need for self-regard affects their willingness to embrace

the advantage frame (i.e., unearned White privilege) more than it does their acknowledgment of the disadvantage frame (i.e., anti-Black discrimination). We theorize that unearned privilege poses a threat to Whites' self-regard because privilege represents an alternative to personal merit as an explanation for success (Kelley, 1987; Morris & Larrick, 1995). In contrast, we propose that acknowledging the existence of anti-Black discrimination fails—at least directly—to impugn Whites' feelings of personal merit. If these claims are correct, then it follows that concern for the self will dissuade Whites from framing racial inequity as unearned privilege; for members of the dominant group, privilege should represent an “unsafe” lens through which to interpret racial injustice.

Need for Self-Regard and the Perception of Privilege

People generally prefer to think highly of themselves, and an array of psychological mechanisms help to ensure this outcome in the face of an often less-than-flattering reality (Greenwald, 1980; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Steele, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In particular, perceivers exhibit a robust tendency to make causal inferences that aggrandize the self. For example, individuals tend to take personal credit for success but to focus on situational explanations for failure (Miller & Ross, 1975; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). More relevant to the potential threat posed by unearned group advantage, perceivers actively avoid linking their successes to external factors that facilitate good outcomes (e.g., head starts or wealthy patrons; Chen & Tyler, 2003; Rosette & Thompson, in press).

Notwithstanding individuals' well-documented preference for a positive self-image, perceivers' need for self-regard varies across situations (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Steele, 1997; Swann, 1990; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990). One factor that has consistently been shown to heighten individuals' need for self-regard is ego threat. Based on their meta-analysis of 70 empirical studies, Campbell and Sedikides (1999) concluded that individuals who believe they have failed on a task (e.g., an intelligence test) are more likely to display self-serving biases than are individuals who believe they have succeeded. Conversely, self-affirmation—that is, increasing individuals' sense of self-worth and self-integrity (Steele, 1988)—reduces the likelihood of this bias. For instance, affirmation makes it less likely that individuals will attempt to boost their self-image by negatively evaluating a stereotyped target (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

If, as we have proposed, the notion of racial privilege threatens Whites' self-image, then perceivers' current need for positive self-regard should influence their willingness

to acknowledge privilege. Thus, we hypothesized that Whites would report higher levels of privilege after self-affirmation than after ego threat. At the same time, perceptions of racial inequity framed as anti-Black discrimination, which we suggest fail to threaten Whites' self-image, should not vary as a function of self-regard. Such findings would support our broader claim that Whites' desire for a positive sense of self determines, in part, their choice of inequity frames.

White Identity and the Threat of Privilege

Group privilege does not necessarily implicate all group members. Some Whites may see their fortunes as tightly linked to those of the in-group, whereas other Whites may not believe that any purported benefits or disadvantages of Whiteness extend to them at all. We reasoned that only individuals who identify with the White group should link their sense of self to perceptions of White privilege. For Whites who strongly identify with their racial group, privilege looms as a potent alternative explanation for success; therefore, these individuals' perceptions of privilege should be sensitive to changes in the need for self-regard. In contrast, Whites who do not identify with their racial group should perceive no link between their outcomes and the in-group's station in society, and thus their perceptions of privilege should be insensitive to changes in self-regard. Based on this logic, we hypothesized that only highly identified Whites will report lower levels of perceived privilege after exposure to a self-threat than a self-affirmation. Such findings would support our contention that the aversive power of racial privilege stems from its relevance to Whites' sense of self and would supplement a growing body of evidence suggesting that racial identity shapes Whites' subjective experience in important ways (e.g., Knowles & Peng, 2005; Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006).

EXPERIMENT 1

A large body of evidence suggests that ego threat heightens individuals' momentary need for positive self-regard (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999) and, conversely, that self-affirmation reduces perceivers' concern for self-image (Steele, 1988). Thus, to test our claim that self-concerns influence Whites' acknowledgment of privilege, we measured individuals' belief in the existence of racial inequity after threatening versus affirming their self-image. To ensure that any observed effects are not restricted to a particular operationalization of threat or affirmation, we employed two manipulations. Specifically, participants were given false feedback concerning

either their intelligence or their personality. Following the self-regard manipulations, we measured participants' perceptions of White privilege and anti-Black discrimination. If Whites' perceptions of privilege are linked to their sense of self, as we hypothesize, then participants should endorse the existence of White privilege less after negative feedback than after positive feedback. Moreover, consistent with the notion that the existence of anti-Black discrimination poses no direct threat to Whites' self-image, we expected reports of discrimination to be insensitive to the manipulations of self-regard.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 199 self-described "Caucasian/White" individuals (146 females, 52 males, 1 unreported sex) ranging in age from 19 to 71 years ($M = 37.26$, $SD = 11.07$). Participants were recruited from an e-mail list, maintained by the Stanford Graduate School of Business, of individuals interested in receiving online survey announcements. As compensation, each participant received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer.

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed links to a Web site containing study materials. Thereafter, the procedure (described below) differed according to whether the participant was assigned to the intelligence-feedback or personality-feedback condition. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed as to the deceptive nature and true purpose of the experiment, given contact information should they have questions, and thanked.

Manipulations of Need for Self-Regard

Intelligence domain. Participants exposed to the intelligence manipulation were told that the online session would consist of two unrelated studies: one examining the properties of a commonly used intelligence test ("Study 1") and another investigating social attitudes ("Study 2"). In Study 1, participants were administered the Abbreviated General Intelligence Battery (A-GIB), a test consisting of 15 verbal and logic items taken from various Graduate Record Examination (GRE) practice tests. So that participants would be uncertain as to the accuracy of their responses, only relatively difficult items (i.e., those having a 40% or lower correct response rate) were included in the test (cf. Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). After completing the test, participants were randomly assigned to receive negative feedback (they were informed that their score ranked in the 11th

percentile) or positive feedback (they were told their score ranked in the 89th percentile).

In Study 2, participants completed two measures of perceived racial inequity—one that framed inequity in terms of White privilege and another that framed inequity in terms of anti-Black discrimination. The perceived privilege and discrimination scales were presented in random order, and the order of questions was randomized within each scale.

Personality domain. Participants exposed to the personality manipulation were led to believe that the study examined relationships between a “commonly used personality test” and various other psychological variables. Participants were administered the 60-item Interpersonal and Social Skills Test (ISST), consisting of 60 true or false items culled from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway, 1951). Items were chosen such that participants would have difficulty intuiting what any particular pattern of responses might imply about them. Upon completing the test, participants were given false feedback concerning their standing on four positive personality dimensions (resilience, resourcefulness, conscientiousness, and openness) and four negative dimensions (indecisiveness, neuroticism, pettiness, and anxiousness). Participants randomly assigned to the positive feedback condition were informed that they scored high (percentiles ranging from the 83rd to 92nd) on the positive dimensions and low (percentiles ranging from the 27th to 37th) on the negative dimensions. In the negative-feedback condition, percentile scores were reversed, indicating that participants scored high on negative traits and low on positive traits.

Subsequent to the personality manipulation, participants completed the same two measures of perceived racial inequity—one that framed inequity in terms of White privilege and another that framed inequity in terms of anti-Black discrimination—used in the intelligence-domain condition. The order of scales was counterbalanced, and questions were randomly ordered within each scale.

Measures of Perceived Racial Inequity

Perceived White privilege. To measure participants' belief in the existence of racial inequity framed as White privilege, we administered Swim and Miller's (1999) five-item White Privilege Scale. Sample items include “Being a White person grants unearned privileges in today's society” and “I do not feel that White people have any benefits or privileges due to their race” (reversed). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly disagree* and on

the right by *strongly agree*. The scale exhibited adequate internal reliability, $\alpha = .88$.

Perceived anti-Black discrimination. As a measure of perceived racial inequity framed as anti-Black discrimination, we administered Iyer and colleagues' (2003) seven-item Other-Focused Belief in Discrimination Scale. Sample items include “Many Black employees face racial bias when they apply for jobs or are up for a promotion” and “Although there is some racial discrimination in today's society, most Blacks do *not* face discrimination on a regular basis” (reversed). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly disagree* and on the right by *strongly agree*. The scale exhibited good internal reliability, $\alpha = .90$.

Results

Participant gender did not moderate any of the observed effects and is therefore omitted from the analyses that follow. Perceptions of White privilege ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.41$) and perceptions of anti-Black discrimination ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.27$) were significantly related, $r = .58$, $p < .01$. Using ANOVA, we examined the effects of test feedback (negative vs. positive), feedback domain (intelligence vs. personality), and their interaction on acknowledgment of White privilege and anti-Black discrimination. If individuals' need for self-regard in either the intelligence or personality domain affects their perceptions of White privilege, then we should observe a main effect of test feedback—but no Test Feedback \times Feedback Domain interaction—for this dependent variable. As predicted, there was a significant main effect of test feedback, with participants reporting more White privilege after positive feedback than after negative feedback, $F(1, 195) = 9.16$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Moreover, the simple effect of test feedback was significant, both in the intelligence condition, $t(117) = 2.14$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.40$, and in the personality condition, $t(78) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.48$. Neither the main effect of feedback domain nor the Test Feedback \times Feedback Domain interaction was significant ($F_s < 1$). Repeating the foregoing analyses with perceived anti-Black discrimination as the dependent variable revealed no significant main effects or interaction ($F_s < 1$). The full pattern of results is depicted in Figure 1.

As a stronger test of our hypothesis, we used repeated-measures ANOVA to examine whether test feedback had a significantly stronger effect on perceptions of White privilege than on anti-Black discrimination. In this analysis, the dependent variable was perceived inequity and the independent variables were inequity frame (White privilege vs. anti-Black discrimination), feedback domain, test

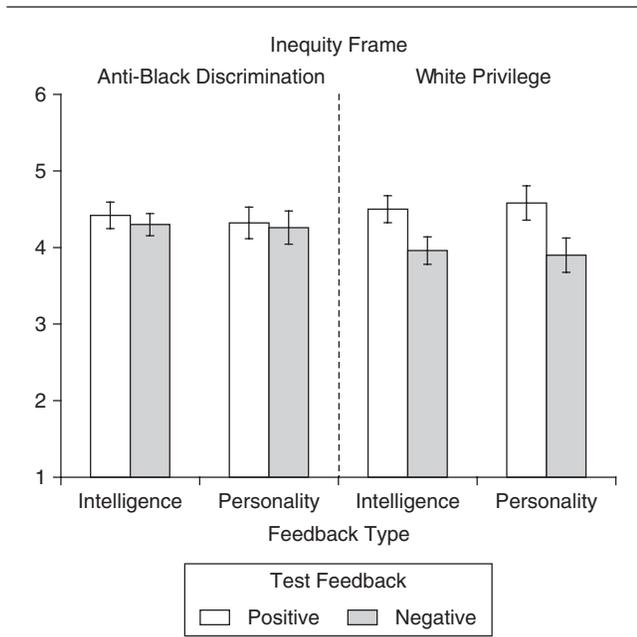


Figure 1 Perceived Inequity as a Function of Test Feedback, Feedback Domain, and Inequity Frame in Experiment 1

feedback, and each of the two- and three-way interactions between these factors. As predicted, we observed a significant Inequity Frame \times Test Feedback interaction, $F(1, 195) = 8.85, p < .01$, indicating, as per the pattern in Figure 1, that feedback had a stronger effect on privilege perceptions than on discrimination perceptions. Also as predicted, we found no main effects or interactions involving feedback domain, supporting our assumption that the intelligence and personality test conditions are functionally equivalent ($F_s < 1$).

Discussion

Experiment 1 provided a first test of our motivational account of Whites' perceptions of racial privilege. If the prospect of racial privilege calls into question Whites' positive self-regard, then a shift in Whites' momentary need for self-regard should affect their perceptions of in-group privilege. Thus, affirming (i.e., positive) feedback on a test should produce higher reports of White privilege than should threatening (i.e., negative) test feedback. Moreover, if the prospect that Blacks are discriminated against fails to impugn Whites' self-image, then perceptions of anti-Black discrimination should not vary as a function of Whites' egocentric concerns as manipulated by test feedback. The results of Experiment 1 support these predictions.

It is possible that the present findings, in which participants' estimates of White privilege were lower in the self-image threat condition than in the affirming condition, do

not reflect the proposed motivated perception of privilege. For instance, participants in Experiment 1 may have believed that negative test feedback constituted *evidence* that Whites are, in fact, not privileged. Participants' reactions to the intelligence manipulation are particularly vulnerable to this alternative interpretation. Specifically, these participants may have regarded negative test performance as being typical of Whites as a group—and thus inferred that Whites could not have managed to amass unearned advantages. However, this “informational” mechanism cannot as easily explain the finding wherein negative *personality* feedback reduced perceptions of White privilege, because it is unclear what conclusions about privilege may be drawn from such feedback. In fact, it strikes us that negative personality information about the self (and, by extension, Whites as a group) might provide just as much evidence for the existence of ill-gotten White privilege as for its nonexistence.

The measure of White privilege employed here did not explicitly tap participants' belief that *they themselves* are privileged because they are White, but rather that *Whites in general* are privileged as a function of race. That participants in Experiment 1 appeared to link perceptions of privilege to their sense of self implies that participants experienced some sense of connection to the in-group. However, White in-group identification should moderate the association between Whites' self-concept and their perceptions of White privilege. Experiment 2 was designed to test this hypothesis.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 tested whether racial identity moderates Whites' tendency to deny (vs. acknowledge) the existence of White privilege in response to threatening (vs. affirming) information about the self. Because social identification is, by most accounts, a multidimensional phenomenon (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Cameron, 2004), we sought to measure the identity dimension most relevant to the perception of in-group privilege. We reasoned that perceived “common fate” (Gurin & Townsend, 1986), or an individual's sense that his or her fortunes are yoked to those of the group as a whole, would render racial privilege relevant to White self-regard. Whites who believe that any benefits or disadvantages experienced by the in-group extend to them personally have the most to lose by acknowledging the existence of racial privilege; for these high-common-fate individuals, White privilege will function as a potent alternative explanation for personal success. In contrast, Whites who feel estranged from the presumed benefits of Whiteness should experience less threat in response to the existence of privilege.

Experiment 2 closely paralleled the previous experiment, with one crucial addition: Before administering the self-threat manipulation and measures of perceived racial inequity, we had participants complete a scale measuring perceived common fate with the racial in-group. We predicted that only participants high in common fate would exhibit the pattern observed in Experiment 1, wherein manipulations of Whites' need for self-regard modulated their acknowledgment of racial privilege.

Experiment 2 also included a measure of anti-Black prejudice—specifically, the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). There is reason to believe that Whites' perceptions of racial inequity are related to levels of prejudice (McConahay et al., 1981), and that manipulations of self-concerns influence prejudicial judgments (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Thus, to ensure that need for positive self-regard affects White privilege per se, we sought to control for potential relationships between White privilege and prejudice in Experiment 2.

Method

Participants

Fifty-two self-described Caucasian/White individuals (37 women, 14 men, 1 unreported sex) ranging in age from 19 to 57 years ($M = 34.17$, $SD = 9.51$) visited a Web site containing study materials. Participants were recruited from an e-mail list, maintained by the Stanford Graduate School of Business, of individuals interested in receiving online survey announcements. As payment, each participant received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer.

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed a link to the experiment Web site. After linking to the site, participants were told that the online session would consist of two unrelated studies—the first examining individuals' "views of self" ("Study 1") and the second examining relationships between a "commonly used personality test" and various other psychological variables ("Study 2"). In Study 1, participants were administered a measure of perceived common fate with the White in-group; the order of items was randomized across participants. In Study 2, participants were administered the same purported personality test used in Experiment 1 (the ISST) and presented with either positive or negative feedback concerning their personality strengths and weaknesses. Participants then completed measures of perceived White privilege and anti-Black discrimination; the order of scales was randomized along with the order of questions within each scale. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed

as to the nature and purpose of the experiment, given contact information for questions, and thanked.

Measures

White racial identity. We created a nine-item scale designed to assess participants' belief that they share a common fate with the racial in-group (cf. Lowery et al., 2006; see Appendix A for scale items). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly disagree* and on the right by *strongly agree*. The scale showed adequate internal reliability, $\alpha = .68$.

Perceived racial inequity. We administered the same measures of perceived White privilege and anti-Black discrimination used in Experiment 1. The scales again exhibited adequate internal reliability (White privilege $\alpha = .89$, anti-Black discrimination $\alpha = .91$).

Anti-Black prejudice. We measured prejudice against Blacks using the Modern Racism Scale. Sample items include "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve" and "It is easy to understand the anger of Black people in America" (reversed). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly disagree* and on the right by *strongly agree*. The scale exhibited adequate internal reliability, $\alpha = .86$.

Results

Participant gender did not moderate any of the reported effects and is therefore omitted from the analyses below. Bivariate correlations between variables assessed in Experiment 2 are shown in Table 1. We reasoned that only individuals high in perceived common fate with the White in-group would exhibit a relationship between self-regard and privilege perceptions. We therefore hypothesized that high-common-fate participants would report higher levels of White privilege after an affirmation than after a threat, but that low-common-fate participants' perceptions of privilege would not be affected by the manipulations of self-concerns. Moreover, we again hypothesized that the manipulation of self-concerns would have no effect on perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. To test these predictions, we first used linear regression to test a model in which White identity (low vs. high), test feedback (negative vs. positive), and their interaction predicted perceived White privilege. To rule out anti-Black prejudice as an explanation for any observed effects, we also included prejudice, its two-way interactions with White identity and test feedback, and the three-way Anti-Black Prejudice \times White Identity \times Test Feedback

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations of, and Correlations Among, Variables Assessed in Experiment 2 ($N = 52$)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. White identity	3.67	0.89	—	.34*	.12	.08
2. Perceived privilege	4.09	1.58		—	.68**	-.53**
3. Perceived discrimination	4.30	1.32			—	-.66**
4. Anti-Black prejudice	2.09	0.85				—

NOTE: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceived White Privilege and Anti-Black Discrimination in Experiment 2 ($N = 52$)

Variable	B	SE B	β	t
Perceived White privilege				
White identity (WI)	0.40	0.28	.22	1.42
Test feedback (TF)	-0.11	0.17	-.07	-0.67
WI \times TF	-0.75	0.28	-.42	-2.70**
Anti-Black prejudice (AP)	-0.96	0.23	-.51	-4.22**
AP \times WI	-0.34	0.33	-.18	-1.03
AP \times TF	0.43	0.23	.23	1.91
AP \times WI \times TF	-0.59	0.33	-.31	-1.79
Perceived anti-Black discrimination				
WI	0.04	0.24	.03	0.17
TF	-0.09	0.14	-.07	-0.63
WI \times TF	-0.07	0.24	-.05	-0.29
AP	-0.93	0.19	-.60	-4.84**
AP \times WI	-0.22	0.28	-.14	-0.78
AP \times TF	0.35	0.19	.22	1.83
AP \times WI \times TF	-0.31	0.28	-.19	-1.11

NOTE: In the above analyses, test feedback was coded such that negative feedback = -1 and positive feedback = 1. ** $p < .01$.

interaction in the model. Main effects were mean centered (or, in the case of self-regard, dummy-coded) and multiplied to form interaction terms in accordance with Aiken and West (1991). As shown in Table 2, the only variables to significantly predict White privilege were anti-Black prejudice and the White Identity \times Test Feedback interaction. We then repeated this analysis with anti-Black discrimination as the dependent variable, revealing no significant effects other than a negative effect of anti-Black prejudice (see Table 2).

Figure 2 displays the observed White Identity \times Test Feedback interaction for perceptions of White privilege. As can be seen, participants high in racial identity reported more privilege after exposure to positive feedback than after negative feedback, $B = -0.79$, $SE B = 0.71$, $\beta = -.50$, $t(51) = -2.52$, $p < .05$. It is interesting that Whites low in racial identity showed an unpredicted tendency to perceive more privilege after negative feedback than after positive feedback, $B = 0.56$, $SE B = 0.29$, $\beta = .36$, $t(51) = 1.94$, $p = .06$.¹

We next examined whether among highly identified participants test feedback had a stronger effect on

privilege perceptions than on perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. Thus, we conducted a repeated-measures ANCOVA in which the dependent variable was perceived inequity and the independent variables were inequity frame, White identity, test feedback, and each of the two- and three-way interactions between these factors. As before, we controlled for the potential influence of anti-Black prejudice on inequity perceptions by including prejudice, its two-way interactions with White identity and test feedback, and the three-way Anti-Black Prejudice \times White Identity \times Test Feedback interaction in the model. It is important that for the purposes of this analysis, we recentered the White identity variable around a value one standard deviation above the mean identity score, ensuring that all other effects in the model reflected the behavior of participants high in White identity (see Aiken & West, 1991). Consistent with our predictions, there was a marginally significant Inequity Frame \times Test Feedback interaction, $F(1, 44) = 3.73$, $p = .06$ —as per Figure 1, the pattern represents a strong trend in the predicted direction.

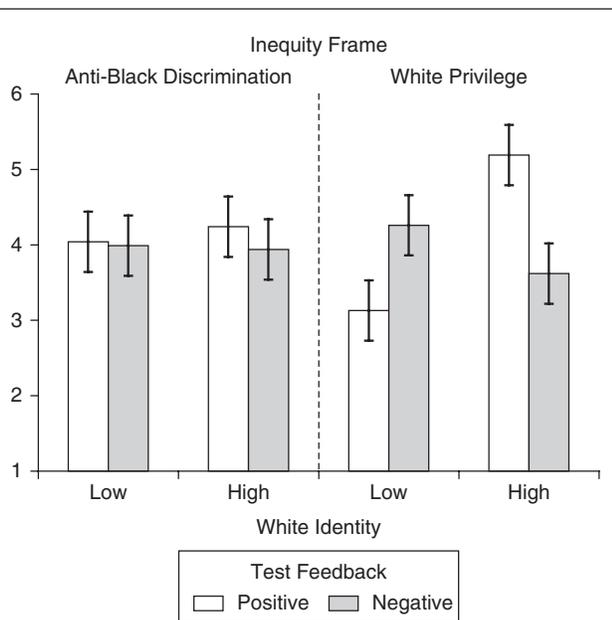


Figure 2 Perceived Inequity as a Function of Test Feedback, White Identity, and Inequity Frame in Experiment 2

Discussion

Experiment 2 examined the effect of an important dimension of social identification—perceived common fate with the in-group (Gurin & Townsend, 1986)—on the relationship between perceptions of privilege and the need for self-regard. As predicted, only individuals who perceive a link between their fortunes and those of the White in-group reported lower levels of privilege after experiencing a threat than after receiving an affirmation. This pattern suggests that individuals who incorporate racial group membership into their sense of self feel particularly threatened by the prospect of privilege.

Of interest, and in contrast to the results of Experiment 1, we failed in this study to observe a significant main effect of test feedback. Although the simple effect of feedback among strongly identified Whites was larger in Experiment 2 than in Experiment 1, weakly identified individuals in Experiment 2 reported somewhat *more* privilege when threatened than when affirmed. This unexpected finding may be due to a procedural difference between the two studies. Specifically, in Experiment 2 we measured common fate prior to administering the feedback manipulation and measures of perceived racial inequity. By priming individuals' racial identity, the common-fate measure itself may have accentuated differences between high and low identifiers. This polarization of identity may have exaggerated the attributional implications of White privilege. High identifiers may thus have been more sensitive to the negative implications of

in-group privilege—leading to the larger feedback effect relative to Experiment 1—whereas nonidentifiers may actually have *benefited* from acknowledging the unearned advantages of a group from which they feel estranged. That is, believing that members of one's group are privileged, but that the self is not, may have served to augment the role of talent and hard work in nonidentifiers' accomplishments. We believe, and these findings suggest, that the psychological experience of individuals particularly low in White racial identity constitutes an interesting avenue for future research.

Although the effect of prejudice was not the focus of the present experiment, it is worth noting that prejudice was related to perceptions of both privilege and anti-Black discrimination. The current experiment does not provide the means to determine the nature of the relationship between prejudice and perceived inequity. By way of speculation, however, it could be that the less inequity individuals perceive, the more they blame Blacks for their relatively poor outcomes, which in turn manifests in higher levels of prejudice. It is also possible that the more prejudice individuals harbor against Blacks, the less willing they are to acknowledge the existence of racial inequity. The potential complexity of the relationship between perceptions of inequity and prejudice suggest that this relationship is an interesting topic for future inquiry.

EXPERIMENT 3

To further rule out the alternative interpretation that our self-regard (i.e., test feedback) manipulations imparted information concerning the existence of White privilege, Experiment 3 relied on a well-established manipulation of self-affirmation that does not require the use of false feedback. In this procedure, participants were asked to rank values in order of personal importance. Participants in the affirmation condition proceeded to write a passage elaborating on the significance of their top-ranked value, whereas participants in the unaffirmed condition described reasons why someone else might care about a value ranked relatively low. Evidence suggests that when individuals reflect on personally important values, their sense of self is affirmed and ego-defensive biases reduced (Steele, 1988). For example, value affirmations have been shown to reduce individuals' tendency to reject self-threatening health information (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000), make group-serving attributions (Sherman & Kim, 2005), and derogate out-group members (Fein & Spencer, 1997). We expected self-affirmed participants to report higher levels of White privilege than participants in the unaffirmed condition. Crucially, this manipulation imparted no information that participants could use to

base judgments about the existence or nonexistence of White privilege.

In Experiment 3, we also sought to extend our findings into the domain of individuals' public policy preferences. People support policies designed to ameliorate inequity to the extent that they believe inequity exists. For example, evidence suggests that the more racial inequity Whites perceive, the more they support policies such as affirmative action (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Iyer et al., 2003; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994; Tuch & Hughes, 1996). This finding, in conjunction with evidence that the need for positive self-regard affects Whites' perceptions of privilege, raises the possibility that Whites' self-concerns may affect their support for redistributive social policies, such as affirmative action. In this experiment, we tested the possibility that situational variations in Whites' need for positive self-regard influence their support for redistributive social policies.

Method

Participants

Participants completed this survey as a part of a mass data collection session conducted at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Although participation in this session was open to individuals of all races, only surveys completed by self-identified White participants were analyzed. This criterion left 36 usable participants (16 men, 20 women) ranging in age from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.06$, $SD = 1.82$). Each participant received \$20 in compensation.

Materials and Procedure

Self-affirmation manipulation. Participants were asked to rank the following 11 values in order of personal importance: artistic skills and aesthetic expression, sense of humor, relations with friends and family, intelligence, social skills, athletics, musical ability and appreciation, physical attractiveness, creativity, business and managerial skills, and romantic values (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Participants in the affirmed condition were asked to write a few sentences explaining why their first-ranked value was personally important to them. Participants in the unaffirmed condition were asked to write a few sentences explaining why their ninth-ranked value might be important to a typical student at their university.

Perceived White privilege. As in the previous experiments, participants' belief in the existence of White privilege was measured using Swim and Miller's (1999) White Privilege Scale. The scale exhibited adequate internal reliability, $\alpha = .83$.

Support for redistributive policies. In line with previous research (Lowery et al., 2006), attitudes toward redistributive policies were measured by asking participants to rate their support for specific hiring policies. Participants rated their support for five separate policies on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly oppose* and on the right by *strongly support*. The policies included (a) a preferential recruitment policy, (b) a preferential training policy, (c) a "tiebreaker" policy, (d) a "minimum qualifications" policy, and (e) a "color-blind" policy (reversed). (See Appendix B for the complete text of each policy description.) Aggregating responses to each of the policies produced an adequately reliable scale, $\alpha = .61$.

Results

Participant gender did not moderate any of the reported effects and is therefore omitted from the analyses below. As predicted, a one-way ANOVA found that participants in the affirmed condition did, in fact, perceive more White privilege ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.37$) than did participants in the unaffirmed condition ($M = 4.45$, $SD = .78$), $F(1, 34) = 4.71$, $p < .05$. Moreover, participants in the affirmed condition were more supportive of redistributive policies ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .78$) than were participants in the unaffirmed condition ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .87$), $F(1, 34) = 5.93$, $p < .05$.

We next conducted a mediation analysis to test whether the effect of self-affirmation on support for redistributive policies was due to the effect of affirmation on privilege perceptions. Thus, we first regressed redistributive policy support on ratings of White privilege, revealing a significant positive relationship, $B = 0.40$, $SE B = 0.11$, $\beta = .52$, $p < .05$. We then regressed redistributive policy support on affirmation condition, this time controlling for privilege perceptions. Consistent with mediation, the previously observed relationship between self-affirmation and redistributive policy support dropped below significance, $B = 0.41$, $SE B = 0.27$, $\beta = .23$, $p = .14$; moreover, a Sobel test revealed that the attenuation of the direct relationship between the affirmation manipulation and policy support was marginally significant, $z = 1.84$, $p = .07$.

Discussion

Despite providing no information about Whites' standing in society, the value-based affirmation manipulation used in Study 3 had the predicted effect on Whites' acknowledgment of racial privilege. Specifically, affirmed participants were more willing to report White privilege than were participants in the unaffirmed condition. As such, Experiment 3 replicated the results of Experiment 1, as well as the findings with respect to

high-identity Whites in Experiment 2, while ruling out the informational alternative explanation possible in Experiments 1 and 2.

Experiment 3 also offers important practical insights. Not only did variation in Whites' need for positive self-regard influence their privilege perceptions, but our results also suggest that affirmation-induced changes in privilege perceptions affected Whites' attitudes toward policies designed to ameliorate racial inequity (i.e., affirmative action). This pattern raises the intriguing possibility that Whites' policy views are influenced by their self-concerns—that is, by their need to think highly of themselves.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A growing body of evidence suggests that individuals face a choice when conceptualizing inequitable relationships between groups in society: Perceivers may frame a given inequity as unearned dominant-group *advantage* or as undeserved subordinate-group *disadvantage*. Of importance, these alternative “inequity frames” carry different emotional and attitudinal consequences for members of dominant groups.

This research extends these insights, examining why dominant-group members choose one or the other inequity frame in the first place. We focus here on one potential determinant of framing: the need for positive self-regard. Specifically, we theorized that the prospect of unearned White privilege, but not the existence of anti-Black discrimination, threatens Whites' sense of self. As a consequence, Whites' desire for a positive sense of self dissuades them from framing racial inequity in terms of White privilege. Supporting this account, manipulations designed to temporarily raise or lower Whites' need for self-regard altered their acknowledgment of privilege but left reports of anti-Black discrimination unchanged (Experiment 1). This privilege effect recurred only among those high in identification with the White in-group, providing further evidence that observed variations in privilege perceptions are attributable to ego concerns (Experiment 2). Finally, an experimentally induced decrease in Whites' need for self-regard heightened participants' support for redistributive policies—an effect mediated by the impact of self-concerns on privilege perceptions (Experiment 3).

This article has focused on threat that stems from a desire to believe that one's positive outcomes are earned. However, we also believe that privilege, and under certain circumstances out-group disadvantage, may also pose a threat to group image (Iyer et al., 2003; Swim & Miller, 1999). Evidence suggests that threats to the group can be sufficient to provoke defensive responses from group members, even if such threats do not implicate the individual directly (Branscombe,

Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Leach et al., 2002). For example, evidence suggests that a focus on the in-group's responsibility for the negative outcome of an out-group is sufficient to provoke guilt, a self-focused emotion (Iyer et al., 2003). Thus, a threat to the need for positive group image might reduce perceptions of both advantage and disadvantage. Although further work is necessary to elucidate the nature of all of the threats associated with perceptions of privilege and discrimination, these data provide strong evidence that for Whites the need for positive self-regard marks White privilege as an “unsafe” lens through which to view inequity.

The Separation of Advantage and Disadvantage

We have argued that individuals have at their disposal different inequity frames through which to understand Black–White racial inequality. That is, individuals may frame the intergroup difference as White privilege or as anti-Black discrimination. That only one of these frames—White privilege—appeared to impugn Whites' self-regard illuminates the manner in which Whites conceptualize group advantage and disadvantage. The willingness to acknowledge either inequity frame requires that one admit the existence of inequity in general—thus creating a conceptual and empirical link between White advantage and Black disadvantage. Nevertheless, the frames are separable. Specifically, Whites do not treat advantage and disadvantage as alternative descriptions of a *single* quantity—namely, racial inequity. In other words, it is not simply the case that Whites perceive a resource differential (Whites > Blacks) and articulate it, equivalently, as either White advantage or Black disadvantage. Rather, our findings make clear that Black disadvantage is psychologically separable from White advantage, and thus that individuals do not automatically translate discrimination against competitors into in-group advantage.

The precise nature of the disjunction between advantage and disadvantage is open to speculation. If individuals do not conceptualize inequity merely as an unfair gap between two groups, described equivalently as advantage or disadvantage, what sort of comparison underlies equity judgments? We propose a model of inequity framing wherein individuals appraise the fairness or unfairness of a group's position by judging it against an “equity standard”—that is, a reference point representing the fair allotment of resources. How inequity is framed communicates the location of a group relative to the equity standard. When told that a group is *advantaged*, individuals take this to mean that the group is positioned above the equity standard (i.e., has more than it deserves). Likewise, when told that a group is *disadvantaged*,

individuals take this to mean that the group is positioned below the equity standard (i.e., has less than it deserves). Therefore, when racial inequity is framed as White privilege, Whites perceive themselves to have more than they deserve, calling into question the legitimacy of their success. But when inequity is framed as anti-Black discrimination, Whites are free to assume that they have the appropriate level of opportunity, and thus do not experience any threat to their self-image. Future research is necessary to more clearly establish the psychology that underlies differences in response to these two representations of inequity.

Eliminating the Threat of Privilege

Although our studies focus on *group* privilege, participants' responses appear to be driven by egocentric concerns. That is, individuals want to ensure that their personal deservingness is above suspicion. This can be accomplished in at least three ways. First, individuals may simply deny the existence of group privilege. The experiments reported here illustrate this strategy. In each experiment, Whites relatively high in need for self-regard were less willing to acknowledge White privilege than were those lower in self-concerns. The denial strategy demands that individuals either deny the existence of group disparities or offer an explanation for inequality that does not imply that the dominant group benefits from *unearned* privilege. Although some individuals are more aware of group inequality than others, it would be difficult for the average person not to notice that some groups are better off than others. Therefore, we suggest that this strategy is more likely to entail the endorsement of explanations for inequality that deny the existence of privilege than denial of differences in groups' outcomes. To accomplish this, individuals may explain group disparities by highlighting real or imagined shortcomings of subordinate groups. For example, individuals might endorse the idea that cultural deficiencies of subordinate groups account for differences in groups' outcomes. Alternatively, individuals may focus on barriers faced by the subordinate group. For example, individuals may believe that group differences in outcomes are due to discrimination against minorities without acknowledging that discrimination against minorities may advantage the dominant group.

The second strategy allows individuals to acknowledge the existence of unearned privilege but requires that they deny benefiting from it. Individuals may accomplish this by denying a meaningful connection with the privileged group. For example, to deny the possibility that they have benefited from unearned advantage, individuals can point to hardships they overcame or the amount of effort they expended to achieve their success. An individual might say, "Yes,

Whites are privileged, but *I* struggled for everything I have. *I* did not experience the benefits associated with my group membership." If group identity includes a sense of shared fate with the group (Deaux, 1996; Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), this strategy requires the refusal to consciously define one's self in terms of group membership, thus ruling out the possibility that White privilege played a role in one's successes (Chow, Lowery, & Knowles, 2007; Leach et al., 2002). The results of Experiment 2, wherein heightening low-identity Whites' need for self-regard failed to reduce their perceptions of privilege, are consistent with the disidentification strategy. Of interest, the pattern of results also suggests that individuals may actually benefit from acknowledging their group's privilege—provided they simultaneously deny profiting from this advantage.

The third strategy requires individuals to eliminate unearned advantages for the dominant group. If individuals can be induced to believe their group benefits from unearned privilege, and that this impugns their self-image or group image, they may be willing to take steps to eliminate the privilege (Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Moreover, their support for resource redistribution would not require a commitment to helping disadvantaged groups; rather, it could be driven by concern for themselves or their group.

Potential Consequences of Privilege Denial

Egocentric denials of racial privilege may undermine support for attempts to eliminate inequity. It is not surprising that the belief that the current social system is inequitable predicts support for redistributive social policies, such as affirmative action (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Bobocel et al., 1998; Murrell et al., 1994; Tuch & Hughes, 1996). Thus, the self-serving minimization of social inequality can undermine support for policies such as affirmative action: All else being equal, people who question the existence of dominant-group privilege are more likely to oppose redistributive social policies than those who acknowledge its existence. The results of Experiment 3 demonstrate the relevance of self concerns, and these concerns' effect on privilege perceptions, to Whites' attitudes toward redistributive policies (Unzueta, 2006).

In addition to possibly undermining support for policies designed to ameliorate inequity, the motivated denial of privilege may make individuals more likely to blame subordinate-group members for extant inequalities. If there are a limited number of explanations for inequality, eliminating one should make the others more plausible (Morris & Larrick, 1995). Therefore, if individuals deny the possibility that White advantage creates inequality, then they should be more likely to believe that minority deficiencies are to blame.

The reported experiments also hint at a relationship between privilege and self-esteem among dominant-group members. The finding that the need for positive self-regard may motivate denial of privilege suggests that privilege may be negatively related to self-esteem. If people believe that the world should be meritocratic, thinking that one has not earned one's success should undermine self-esteem. A number of studies have made this point with respect to the effect of affirmative action on subordinate group members' self-esteem (e.g., Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997; Heilman, Rivero, & Brett, 1991). A similar argument can be made for the effect of White privilege: Dominant-group members' self-esteem should be undermined if they accept the existence of racial privilege. Although counterintuitive, it may be that membership in the dominant group undermines self-esteem (cf. Branscombe, 1998).

If dominant-group members are willing to deny White privilege to protect their self-image, as suggested by the studies reported here, it is possible that they are willing to go further and claim victim status to bolster their self-esteem. Although it may seem strange for members of the dominant group to suggest that they are discriminated against, the cultural currency enjoyed by the term "reverse discrimination" and the content of the debate surrounding affirmative action suggests that this possibility is not far-fetched. If the belief in discrimination augments the role of ability and effort in success, and thereby increases self-esteem, Whites may benefit from the belief that the political atmosphere discriminates against them (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2007). Thus, egocentric motives may lead dominant-group members to believe not only that they do not benefit from privilege but also that their chances for success are unfairly curtailed. This may help explain the pervasive belief that affirmative action is tantamount to quotas (Crosby, 2004; Eberhardt & Fiske, 1994; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). Ironically, this belief may allow dominant-group members to bolster their self-esteem when accepted into organizations that use affirmative action, while simultaneously increasing their opposition to the policy.

NOTE

1. It might be objected that certain items in our measure of White identity (the Perceived Racial Common Fate Scale) bear too close a resemblance to the construct of perceived White privilege, clouding interpretation of the White Identity \times Test Feedback interaction on perceived privilege. In particular, items 4, 5, 6, and 9 mention privilege-relevant concepts: employment practices that affect Whites, unfair White advantage, and government policies that hurt the White in-group. Of importance, however, these items do not ask participants to rate their belief that such conditions actually exist but rather to imagine how affected they would feel if the conditions were (hypothetically) to exist. Despite this consideration, we reran our analyses, omitting items 4, 5, 6, and 9 from the common-fate aggregate. The results remain substantively unchanged. The main effect of White

identity (i.e., common fate) on perceived White privilege remained nonsignificant, $B = .21$, $SE B = .24$, $\beta = .15$, $p = .38$, as did the main effect of test feedback, $B = -.17$, $SE B = .18$, $\beta = -.11$, $p = .33$. The crucial White Identity \times Test Feedback interaction slipped just below conventional significance, $B = -.45$, $SE B = .24$, $\beta = -.33$, $p = .06$, but remains a strong trend in the predicted direction. The simple effect of test feedback among low-identity participants weakened relative to our original analysis, $B = .35$, $SE B = .30$, $\beta = .22$, $p = .25$, but the simple effect among high-identity participants remained significant, $B = -.70$, $SE B = .35$, $\beta = -.44$, $p = .05$.

APPENDIX A

PERCEIVED RACIAL COMMON FATE SCALE

1. What happens to my racial group as a whole in this country will have something to do with what happens in my life.
2. Economic pressures that affect my racial group as a whole don't have much of an effect on me personally (reversed).
3. My opportunities in life are tied to those of my racial group as a whole.
4. Government policies that affect my racial group as a whole, such as affirmative action, don't affect *my* life very much (reversed).
5. If I learned that employers unfairly favored members of my racial group when hiring, I would feel more confident of my ability to find a new job.
6. Even assuming that my racial group as a whole enjoys unfair advantages in society, these advantages don't extend to me personally (reversed).
7. My fortunes in life can be expected to rise and fall with those of my racial group as a whole.
8. Because of my unique experiences and personal qualities, my opportunities aren't influenced by the changing fortunes of my racial group as a whole (reversed).
9. If the government instituted a policy that was bad for my racial group as a whole, I would be concerned for my own chances for advancement.

APPENDIX B

ITEMS IN THE SOCIAL POLICY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. A policy whereby a minority group member can get hired over a White applicant as long as the minority group member meets a minimal level of qualifications. Under this policy it is possible for a minority group member to get hired even if he/she is relatively less qualified than a White applicant.
2. A color-blind policy whereby a candidate's race is completely ignored throughout the entire employment procedure (i.e., in both the recruiting and hiring stage).
3. A "tie-breaker" policy in which a minority applicant is selected over a White applicant when the two applicants are *equally* qualified.
4. A policy through which minority group members can receive supplemental training to prepare them for the selection process. However, minority group status is not considered at the hiring stage.

5. A policy that requires an organization to make extra efforts to get members from minority groups to apply for positions but *does not* take minority status into consideration at the hiring stage. Examples of such extra efforts include advertising in magazines with a high minority readership or recruiting applicants at historically Black colleges and universities.

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