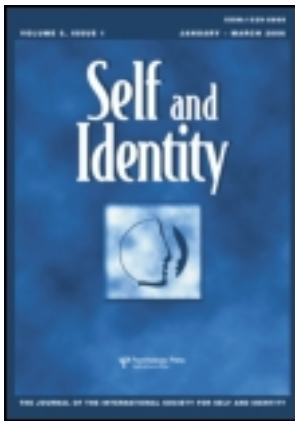


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Meritocracy, Self-Concerns, and Whites' Denial of Racial Inequity

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We propose that embracing meritocracy as a distribution rule causes Whites to deny the existence of racial inequity. On this view, Whites who endorse meritocracy seek to regard themselves as high in merit, and maintain this self-view by denying racial privilege. Four studies show that preference for meritocracy better predicts denial of White privilege than anti-Black discrimination (Study 1), that the desire to see the self as meritorious mediates the relationship between preference for meritocracy and denial of privilege (Study 2), that this meritocracy–privilege relationship is moderated by Whites' need to bolster the self (Study 3), and that priming the meritocracy norm reduces perceptions of racial privilege among highly identified Whites (Study 4). Implications for the amelioration of social inequity are discussed.

Keywords: Preference for meritocracy; social inequity; White identity; White privilege.

In the United States, few prescriptive norms are as sacrosanct as that of *meritocracy*—the notion that individuals ought to be allocated social goods in proportion to their individual abilities and efforts (Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). At the same time, well-documented patterns of racial stratification in the USA raise the possibility that the demands of meritocracy—fair treatment and equality of opportunity—are not being met (Bourg & Stock, 1994; Brown et al., 2003; Kozol, 1991; Loury, 2002; Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). One might therefore expect racial inequity to be of grave concern to most Americans: Human beings are generally sensitive to the violation of social norms (DeRidder & Tripathi, 1992; Wengrat, Castillo-Yee, & Abrams, 1996), including those governing economic distribution (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Yet, despite the fact that African Americans experience markedly worse economic, judicial, and health outcomes than do European Americans, Whites are generally sanguine about the health of the meritocracy (Kluegel & Smith, 1983). Members of the dominant group, it seems, are reluctant to attribute Blacks' and Whites' disparate outcomes to bias within the system.

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Why, then, do so many White Americans resist attributing inequality to inequity (i.e., unfair treatment)? Several well-studied mechanisms help explain why Whites frequently fail to acknowledge systemic bias: Members of the dominant group may be motivated to see the status quo as legitimate (Jost & Banaji, 1994), to regard the world as just (Lerner, 1980), or to protect the in-group's advantaged position in the social hierarchy (Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006). The present work examines another possible source of Whites' tendency to deny inequity—namely, embrace of the meritocratic norm itself. The more importance Whites place on meritocracy as a distribution rule, we propose, the *less* able or willing they are to see the rule as having been violated. We argue that the link between meritocratic-norm endorsement and inequity denial is driven by Whites' self-concerns. According to this account, Whites who endorse meritocracy seek to see themselves as personally possessing merit (i.e., talent and diligence), and deny the existence of racial inequities—specifically, unearned White privilege—that challenge this desired view of self. The four studies reported here document the effect of the meritocratic norm on Whites' perceptions of inequity, and provide converging evidence that self-concerns account for this impact.

From the Meritocratic Norm to the Denial of Racial Inequity

The meritocratic norm prescribes that individuals' "inputs" into the social system (i.e., talent and effort) determine the system's "output" to individuals (i.e., economic resources). We theorize that Whites' strong endorsement of this distribution rule accounts, at least in part, for their tendency to deny the existence of unearned racial advantage. On our account, the causal influence of meritocratic-norm endorsement on privilege perceptions is mediated by Whites' adoption of merit (talent and work ethic) as a desired self-view.

From the Meritocratic Norm to the Idealization of Merit

Prescriptive norms are rules defining "proper" conduct (Myers, 1993), whereas ideals represent an individual's desired self-views (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Though conceptually distinct, norms and ideals are related in important ways. For instance, norms can act as precursors to ideals; the process by which an adhered-to norm becomes an inherently valued ideal is known as "norm internalization" (e.g., Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). Ideals (highly internalized norms) are thought to influence behavior more strongly and in a wider range of situations than do norms alone (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In the present context, individuals who believe the system ought to reward others based on individual merit should also want their own rewards to be a function of merit. This proposition alone does not, however, entail that individuals will seek to see themselves as talented and hard working (i.e., meritorious), but rather only that they will want their outputs to match their inputs. One additional assumption is required to complete the proposed link between preference for meritocracy and merit as desired self-view—that people, all else equal, wish to regard themselves as successful. Given the wealth of evidence indicating that individuals seek to maintain a positive self-view by interpreting life outcomes in a self-serving manner (e.g., Miller & Ross, 1975; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998), this premise is uncontroversial. Consequently, if one has internalized the meritocratic norm and seeks to regard oneself as successful within the context of

this norm, then it follows that endorsement of meritocracy will be accompanied by a desire to see oneself as talented and hard-working.

From the Idealization of Merit to the Denial of White Privilege

Information that challenges individuals' desired view of self can motivate a host of self-defensive strategies, one of which is simply to dismiss the threatening information as false (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). Individuals may experience such threat when confronted with the possibility that they are not living up to their ideals (Higgins, 1987). Therefore, because unearned racial privilege is antithetical to meritocracy, Whites ought to deny the existence of privilege to the extent that they support—and therefore are likely to have internalized—the meritocratic norm.

Work by Lowery, Knowles, and Unzueta (2007) confirms that the potential existence of White privilege interferes with dominant-group members' efforts to maintain a positive self-view. In this research, Whites who experienced a threat to the self were less likely to acknowledge the existence of White privilege than were those who experienced no such threat. While this finding implies that Whites deny inequity because they regard merit as a personal ideal, it falls to the present research to show that endorsement of meritocracy as a distribution rule is a source of this effect.

Does Endorsement of the Meritocratic Norm Cause Whites to Deny Privilege?

The most basic datum of evidence for the present account would consist in a relationship between Whites' affinity for meritocracy and their denial of racial privilege. However, if the meritocratic norm is part and parcel of American identity, as many researchers have argued (e.g., Hochschild, 1995; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993), then it may be questioned whether individuals vary meaningfully in their endorsement of the norm. This concern is allayed by the fact that there exist alternative distribution rules (e.g., humanitarian–egalitarian; Katz & Hass, 1988), and that individuals have been shown to vary in their endorsement of meritocracy (Davey, Bobocel, Son Hing, & Zanna, 1999). Consequently, while researchers ought to expect generally strong support for the meritocratic norm among White Americans, “preference for the merit principle” (PMP; Davey et al., 1999) remains an important individual difference dimension.

Even if PMP predicts the denial of racial privilege, we sought more compelling evidence that this link is mediated by Whites' self-concerns—specifically, their desire to view themselves as possessing merit. We therefore identified factors that should be expected to qualify the relationship between affinity for meritocracy and privilege denial—if, as we theorize, self-concerns mediate this link.

Inequity Frame

Any intergroup inequity can be validly framed as dominant-group advantage or subordinate-group disadvantage (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005). In the context of race, Black–White inequity can be construed, not only as White advantage (privilege), but also as Black disadvantage (discrimination). Although these frames are formally interchangeable, Whites tend not to understand their group's position in a purely relative manner—and therefore fail to infer their group's undue advantage from Blacks' unfair disadvantage. Importantly, inequity frames affect Whites' self-views to

different degrees, with privilege posing a greater threat than discrimination. Evidencing this, self-threat manipulations tend to reduce acknowledgement of White privilege, but not of anti-Black discrimination (Lowery et al., 2007). Because of its greater relevance to Whites' self-views, we expected perceptions of White privilege to vary more strongly as a function of PMP than do perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. Such a finding would, in turn, provide nuanced evidence for the importance of self-concerns in binding meritocratic-norm endorsement to perceptions of societal inequity.

Variations in Self-defensive Motivation

We have argued that Whites with a strong affinity for meritocracy—and who therefore value merit as a personal ideal—experience self-threat when contemplating the possibility that their group is unfairly advantaged; this threat, in turn, leads high-PMP Whites to downplay the existence of White privilege. If this account of the PMP–privilege link is correct, then interventions that increase or decrease individuals' current need to bolster the self ought, respectively, to strengthen or weaken the link between endorsement of the meritocratic norm and perceived privilege. Experimentally induced threats to the self have been shown to increase self-defensive motivation (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), while affirming the self has been shown to decrease it (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Therefore, if self-concerns mediate the relationship between PMP and perceived privilege, threatening Whites' sense of their own merit should strengthen the relationship between PMP and privilege perceptions, whereas affirming Whites' merit ought to attenuate this link.

White Identity

Even if a White person strongly endorses the meritocratic norm, and hence values merit as a personal ideal, she or he will not necessarily experience self-threat when considering the possible existence of White privilege. Rather, only those individuals who see membership in the White group as self-relevant—that is, who are subjectively identified with the group—will regard White privilege as impugning personal merit. Recent research indicates that Whites vary in terms of identification with the White in-group, whether identity is conceptualized as an implicit association between the self-concept and in-group category (Knowles & Peng, 2005), an explicit link between the self and in-group (Lowery et al., 2007), or sense of “common fate” with the in-group (Lowery et al., 2007). White identity, in turn, has been found to moderate dominant-group members' defensive and self-conscious reactions to information threatening to internal attributions for success (Lowery et al., 2007) or the image of the group as moral (Knowles & Peng, 2005). In light of this work, we expected White identity to moderate the negative relationship between PMP and perceptions of racial privilege, such that only highly identified Whites would exhibit this link. Such a pattern would lend credence to our claim that concern for the self mediates the impact of Whites' affinity for meritocracy on their perceptions of racial inequity.

Overview of Studies

On our account, the belief that the world ought to function as a meritocracy causes Whites to deny racial inequity. This “ought/is” link, in turn, is mediated by Whites' self-concerns—specifically, Whites' desire to see themselves as personally meritorious. Four studies were conducted to test the model. Study 1 examined the relationship between preference for the merit principle (PMP; Davey et al., 1999) and

Whites' perceptions of racial inequity framed either as in-group advantage (White privilege) or out-group disadvantage (anti-Black discrimination). Because White privilege is more threatening to dominant-group members' self-views than is anti-Black discrimination (Lowery et al., 2007), we predicted a stronger negative relationship between PMP and privilege than between PMP and discrimination. Study 2 examined the relationship between PMP, adoption of merit (ability and work ethic) as a personal ideal, and Whites' perceptions of racial privilege. In line with our model, we predicted that Whites' personal idealization of merit would mediate a negative association between their affinity for meritocracy and their perceptions of privilege. Study 3 tested whether, consistent with the role of self-concerns, experimentally varying dominant-group members' need to bolster the self would moderate the link between PMP and perceived White privilege. Finally, Study 4 had two purposes: (1) to address the issue of causality by manipulating the salience of the meritocratic norm and examining subsequent changes in Whites' acknowledgement of in-group privilege; and (2) to examine whether White identity moderates this effect in a manner consistent with the involvement of the self. Across all studies, we sought to show that PMP only predicts perceptions of inequity when that inequity is framed as White privilege and not as anti-Black discrimination—a pattern that would further support the claim that self-concerns are responsible for the PMP–inequity link.

Study 1

As a first test of our model, we examined the relationship between Whites' endorsement of the meritocratic norm, as operationalized by PMP, and their perceptions of racial inequity, framed either as White privilege or anti-Black discrimination. We hypothesized that Whites' affinity for meritocracy would be associated with the denial of in-group privilege. Moreover, because Whites find privilege more self-threatening than discrimination (Lowery et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2005), we predicted that the PMP–privilege association would be stronger than any negative association between PMP and perceived discrimination.

Methods

Participants

The present sample consisted of 856 self-described “Caucasian/White” individuals (644 women, 209 men, 3 unreported sex) ranging in age from 18 to 86 ($M = 37.72$, $SD = 11.97$). Participants were recruited from an e-mail list, maintained by a private California university, of individuals interested in receiving online study announcements. As compensation, each participant was entered in a drawing to win one of ten \$10 gift certificates from an online retailer.

Measures

Preference for meritocracy. In order to measure participants' endorsement of the meritocratic norm, we administered Davey and colleagues' (1999) 15-item Preference for the Merit Principle (PMP) Scale. The PMP Scale gauges the degree to which participants believe that outcomes should be distributed on the basis of personal merit (i.e., ability and work ethic) rather than need and group membership. Sample items include: “It is never appropriate to choose which students to hire by how much the student needs the job”; and “Sometimes it is appropriate to give a raise to the

worker who needs it, even if he or she is not the most hard working” (reverse-scored). Participants made their responses on a 7-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .72$).

Perceived White privilege. In order to measure participants’ belief in the existence of White privilege, we administered Swim and Miller’s (1999) 5-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” (reverse-scored). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .90$).

Perceived anti-Black discrimination. As a measure of perceived anti-Black discrimination, we administered Iyer, Leach, and Crosby’s (2003) 7-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” (reverse-scored). Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale anchored on the left by *strongly disagree* and on the right by *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .91$).

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed a link to the experiment website. After linking to the site, participants were told that the online session would consist of a short study of “social attitudes and beliefs.” Participants were then administered the PMP, White privilege, and anti-Black discrimination measures. The order of scales was randomized, as was the order of questions within each scale. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed as to the purpose of the experiment, given contact information for questions, and thanked.

Results

Using the Amos software package (Arbuckle, 2007), we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of PMP, perceived White privilege, and perceived anti-Black discrimination. These constructs were represented by latent variables indicated by their associated scale items, and each latent variable was allowed to covary with the other two. In order to examine the relative strengths of the PMP–privilege and PMP–discrimination covariances, we specified two models: one in which these covariances were allowed to vary freely and one in which they were constrained to be equal. In the first model, we observed a significant negative association between preference for meritocracy and perceptions of White privilege, $r = -.18$, $p < .001$, a smaller but nonetheless significant relationship between PMP and perceived discrimination, $r = -.11$, $p < .01$, and a large association between perceptions of privilege and discrimination, $r = .75$, $p < .001$. Confirming that the association between PMP and privilege was bigger than the PMP–discrimination relationship, the model in which the two covariances were constrained to equality fit the data significantly less well than the unconstrained model, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 8.11$, $p < .01$.¹

Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide initial evidence for our account of the relationship between belief in the meritocratic norm (as operationalized by PMP) and the denial

of social inequity. PMP was negatively correlated with perceptions of White privilege, thus providing an empirical demonstration of the notion that endorsement of the meritocratic norm is associated with the denial of societal inequity. Moreover, PMP was more strongly correlated with perceived privilege than with discrimination. In light of previous research suggesting that White privilege is more self-threatening to Whites than is anti-Black discrimination (Lowery et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2005), this finding suggests that self-defensive motives intervene between affinity for meritocracy and perceptions of privilege. The next three studies provide more direct evidence for the role of self-concerns in mediating a causal link between endorsement of the meritocratic norm and denial of racial inequity.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated a relationship between Whites' embrace of meritocracy and their denial of racial privilege; Study 2 provided a first test of our explanation for this relationship—that Whites who embrace meritocracy as a distribution rule or norm (i.e., high-PMP Whites) desire to see themselves as high in merit. In Study 2, we predicted that the association between PMP and perceptions of White privilege would be mediated by Whites' incorporation of merit—that is, a combination of aptitude and work ethic (Hochschild, 1995; Lemann, 1999; McNamee & Miller, 2004)—into the ideal self (Higgins, 1987). In light of evidence that perceptions of anti-Black discrimination are unrelated to Whites' self-regard, discrimination perceptions were not expected to be mediated by the idealization of merit.

Study 2 also addressed potential alternative explanations for the results of Study 1. It may be that the Preference for Merit Scale proxies individuals' levels of system-justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) or just-world motives (Lerner, 1980), and therefore that the observed relationship between PMP and denial of White privilege stems not from self-concerns but, rather, from the desire to view the system or world as fair. By directly assessing self-concerns in Study 2, we sought to rule-out these alternative explanations of the PMP–inequity link.

Methods

Participants

The present sample consisted of 209 self-described “Caucasian/White” individuals (91 women, 118 men) ranging in age from 18 to 67 years ($M = 33.75$, $SD = 10.88$). Participants were recruited from an e-mail list, maintained by a private California university, of individuals interested in receiving online survey announcements. As payment, each participant received a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer.

Measures

As in Study 1, participants completed the White Privilege Scale ($\alpha = .90$), the Other-Focused Belief in Discrimination Scale ($\alpha = .92$), and the PMP Scale ($\alpha = .64$). An additional measure tapped Whites' incorporation of merit into the ideal self.

Idealization of merit. Our measure of Whites' idealization of merit was adapted from Hardin and Leong (2005). Participants first read the following definition of the ideal self derived from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987): “Your *Ideal Self*. These are qualities that you would IDEALLY like to possess. They make up your goals for what type of person you would like to be.” Participants were then asked to

rank a series of characteristics in terms of importance to the ideal self: *intelligent/smart*, *hard-working/industrious*, *kind/compassionate*, *charismatic/charming*, *wise/insightful*, *creative/original*, and *strong/resilient*. The first two qualities—*intelligent/smart* and *hard-working/industrious*—represent aptitude- and effort-related dimensions of merit. Scores reflecting participants' idealization of the individual merit dimensions were computed by subtracting the average rank given to non-merit dimensions from the rank given to *intelligent/smart* or *hard-working/industrious*. These scores were then reversed such that higher values reflect greater importance to the ideal self. Finally, scores for the two dimensions were averaged to form an adequately reliable scale ($\alpha = .51$). The resulting "idealization of merit" scores represent the degree to which participants consider merit to be a central component of their ideal selves.

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed a link to the survey website. After linking to the survey, participants completed measures of PMP and idealization of merit in fixed sequence. Perceived White privilege and anti-Black discrimination scales were then completed in counterbalanced order. The order of items within all measures was randomized.

Results

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for, and correlations between, variables assessed in the present study. We hypothesized that Whites who prefer merit as a distribution rule for society come to internalize merit as a personal ideal. These individuals should, in turn, downplay the existence of unearned racial privilege, since privilege implies that Whites are living in breach of meritocracy. Thus, we predicted that the relationship between PMP and perceptions of privilege would be mediated by Whites' incorporation of merit into the ideal self. Mediation was examined using the three-step regression procedure described by Baron and Kenny (1986); this analysis is summarized in Table 2. We first regressed perceived privilege on PMP, revealing a significant negative relationship. Replicating the results of Study 1, Whites who endorse merit as a distribution rule for society tended also to downplay the existence of racial inequity framed as in-group privilege. Next, we regressed the proposed mediator—endorsement of merit as a personal ideal—on PMP. As hypothesized, high-PMP Whites tended to identify merit as a central component of the ideal self. Finally, we examined the relationship between PMP and perceived White privilege while controlling for the proposed mediator. Inclusion of idealization of merit in this model attenuated the relationship between PMP and

TABLE 1 Means and Standard Deviations of, and Correlations Among, Variables Assessed in Study 2

	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1	PMP	5.19	0.61	—	.23**	-.15*	-.10
2	Idealization of merit	0.21	1.69		—	-.21**	-.28**
3	White privilege	4.11	1.66			—	.70**
4	Anti-Black discrimination	4.26	1.44				—

Notes: $N = 209$. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

TABLE 2 Analysis of Idealization of Merit as Mediator of the Relationship Between Preference for Merit and Perceived White Privilege in Study 2

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Model 1 predicting perceived privilege				
PMP	−0.40	0.19	−0.15	−2.14*
Model 2 predicting idealization of merit				
PMP	0.65	0.19	0.23	3.47**
Model 3 predicting perceived privilege				
PMP	−0.29	0.19	−0.10	−1.50
Idealization of merit	−0.18	0.07	−0.18	−2.60**

Notes: $N = 209$. PMP = Preference for the merit principle. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

perceived privilege to below significance. A Sobel test revealed that idealization of merit significantly mediated the PMP–privilege relationship, $z = 2.08$, $p < .05$.²

We next sought to examine whether the idealization of merit might mediate a relationship between PMP and Whites' perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. However, regression analysis failed to reveal a relationship to mediate: PMP was not significantly related to perceived discrimination, $B = -0.23$, $SE B = 0.16$, $\beta = -0.10$, $t = -1.39$, $p = .17$.

Discussion

Study 2 tested whether the link between Whites' endorsement of the meritocratic norm and their denial of unearned White privilege is due to Whites' internalization of merit as a personal ideal. Mediation analysis indicated that, as predicted, Whites who endorse meritocracy as a distribution rule for society (i.e., high-PMP Whites) tend also to regard merit as a desired self-view. Providing evidence for the role of self-concerns in linking meritocratic-norm endorsement to perceptions of White privilege, the idealization of merit mediated the link between PMP and acknowledgement of privilege. Also consistent with our perspective, we failed to observe a significant relationship between PMP and perceived anti-Black discrimination; thus, idealization of merit could not have mediated a link between these constructs. Other explanations for the link between PMP and perceptions of racial inequity, such as those offered by system justification theory and the just world hypothesis, fail to predict that any such link is rooted in Whites' self-concept, or that the link would only obtain when racial inequity is framed as in-group privilege.

Study 3

Study 3 focuses on the second component of our explanation for the PMP–privilege link—that the potential existence of in-group racial privilege threatens Whites' sense of their own merit. Self-defensive motivations are known to vary as a function of individuals' exposure to information that either threatens or affirms the self (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). If we are correct that self-concerns underlie the relationship between endorsement of meritocracy and the denial of racial privilege, then Whites who experience self-threat should deny privilege to the extent that they also endorse the meritocratic norm. In contrast, Whites whose selves have been affirmed ought to exhibit little or no meritocracy–

privilege association. Study 3 examined this hypothesis by giving Whites false feedback on a supposed personality test. Because perceived anti-Black discrimination has been shown not to directly impugn Whites' self-regard (Lowery et al., 2007), we expected our manipulation not to affect the relationship between PMP and the acknowledgement of discrimination.

Methods

Participants

The present sample consisted of 156 self-described "Caucasian/White" individuals (117 women, 39 men) ranging in age from 19 to 72 years ($M = 36.68$, $SD = 11.92$). Participants were recruited from an e-mail list, maintained by a private California university, of individuals interested in receiving online survey announcements. As payment, each participant received a \$5 gift certificate from an online retailer.

Measures

As in the previous studies, participants completed the White Privilege Scale ($\alpha = .90$), the Other-Focused Belief in Discrimination Scale ($\alpha = .88$), and the PMP Scale ($\alpha = .61$).

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed a link to the survey website. Upon visiting the site, participants were led to believe that the study examined relationships between a "commonly used personality test" and various other psychological variables. Participants were administered the "Interpersonal and Social Skills Test," consisting of 60 true/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). Subjects 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 false-feedback manipulation, participants completed measures of perceived racial inequity (i.e., White privilege and anti-Black discrimination). The order of scales was counterbalanced and questions were randomly ordered within each scale. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed as to the nature and true purpose of the experiment, given contact information, and thanked.

Results

We predicted that receiving positive versus negative feedback on a personality test would change the relationship between PMP and perceived racial privilege. Statistically, we expected a two-way interactive effect of feedback condition and PMP on perceptions of White privilege. This hypothesis was tested in accordance with Aiken and West's (1991) procedures for evaluating categorical-by-continuous

interactions and simple effects using multiple regression. We began by effects-coding the false-feedback manipulation (such that -1 and 1 represent negative and positive feedback, respectively), mean-centering PMP, and multiplying these factors to create a Feedback \times PMP interaction term. White privilege was then regressed on the main effects and interaction. No main effect of feedback on perceptions of White privilege emerged, $B = 0.07$, $SE B = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.05$, $t = 0.64$, $p = .26$. However, we observed a significant relationship between PMP and privilege perceptions, $B = -0.41$, $SE B = 0.19$, $\beta = -0.18$, $t = -2.18$, $p < .05$. Most importantly, feedback condition moderated the relationship between PMP and perceived privilege, $B = 0.42$, $SE B = 0.19$, $\beta = 0.18$, $t = 2.22$, $p < .05$.

In order to visualize the observed Feedback \times PMP interaction, we plotted it in accordance with procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991). Inspection of Figure 1 (left panel) reveals that the interaction is driven by the fact that participants who received positive personality feedback exhibited no PMP–privilege relationship. Confirming this, simple slopes analyses indicate that the PMP–privilege relationship was highly significant in the negative feedback condition, $B = -0.83$, $SE B = 0.30$, $\beta = -0.36$, $t = -2.78$, $p < .01$, but not in the positive feedback condition, $B = 0.01$, $SE B = 0.23$, $\beta = 0.00$, $t = 0.04$, $p = .97$.

We next reran the above analysis, this time replacing perceived White privilege with perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. We observed no main effect of feedback on perceptions of anti-Black discrimination, $B = -0.13$, $SE B = 0.09$, $\beta = -0.11$, $t = -1.43$, $p = .16$. A significant relationship between PMP and discrimination perceptions emerged, $B = -0.39$, $SE B = 0.16$, $\beta = -0.20$, $t = -2.44$, $p < .05$. Finally, as suggested by Figure 1 (right panel), we failed to observe a significant interactive effect of feedback condition and PMP on perceived anti-Black discrimination, $B = 0.13$, $SE B = 0.16$, $\beta = 0.06$, $t = 0.78$, $p = .44$.

Discussion

We have argued that the relationship between Whites' embrace of the meritocratic norm and their denial of racial inequity stems (in part) from Whites' self-defensive denial of in-group racial privilege. The potential existence of racial privilege is presumed to threaten high-PMP Whites because it implies that they are failing to live up to their desired view of self as meritorious. Study 3 tested this hypothesis by experimentally manipulating Whites' self-defensive motivation. We found that affirming Whites' notion of themselves as socially skilled and well adapted reduced the degree to which PMP predicted their denial of in-group privilege. At the same time, varying the need to bolster the self did not significantly alter participants' perceptions of anti-Black discrimination, either as a main effect or interactively with PMP. These findings provide strong evidence for a key element of our explanation for the relationship between PMP and the denial of racial inequity—namely, that the potential existence of White privilege, but not of anti-Black discrimination, threatens Whites' self-concept.

To this point, our analyses of the relationship between Whites' embrace of meritocracy and denial of inequity have been correlational in nature. We are therefore limited in our ability to make causal claims concerning the influence of PMP on perceptions of privilege. For instance, it could be the case that the observed PMP–privilege relationship is due to a causal effect of inequity perceptions on endorsement of the meritocratic norm. Study 4 attempted to clarify the issue of causality by manipulating the salience of the meritocratic norm. Findings in which

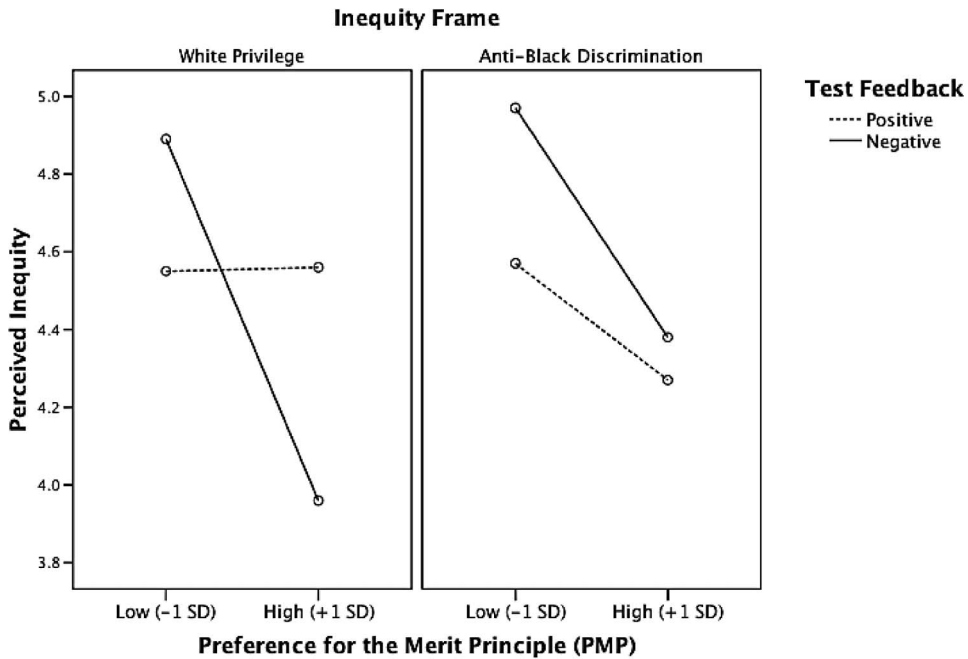


FIGURE 1 Perceived White privilege and anti-Black discrimination as a function of preference for merit and test feedback condition.

raising the salience of PMP renders Whites less willing to acknowledge the existence of racial privilege would provide evidence that embrace of the meritocratic norm causes White to downplay privilege.

Study 4 also examined the role of an important potential moderator of the PMP–privilege relationship: White racial identity. Any tension between unearned privilege and high-PMP Whites’ internalized merit goals is contingent upon identification with the White in-group; absent some degree of group identity, beliefs concerning the group’s privileges are irrelevant to individuals’ sense of personal merit (Lowery et al., 2007). It is important to note that other potential explanations for the relationship between embrace of the meritocratic norm and denial of racial inequity—such as system justification theory and the just world hypothesis—attribute perceptions of inequity to motives unrelated to self-concerns or social identity.

Study 4

The present study examined the causal impact of the meritocratic norm on perceptions of racial inequity. We primed Whites with norms reflecting different rules for the distribution of societal resources: a meritocratic norm (according to which resources are to be allocated according to individuals’ talents and efforts) versus a humanitarian norm (according to which resources are to be apportioned according to individuals’ needs). Consistent with the hypothesized causal influence of the meritocratic norm on perceptions of racial inequity, we predicted that Whites exposed to the meritocratic prime would perceive less in-group privilege than those exposed to the humanitarian prime. However, because the potential existence of

White privilege threatens only Whites who identify with their racial in-group, we predicted that the priming manipulation would only affect highly identified Whites' privilege perceptions.

Methods

Participants

The present sample consisted of 313 self-described "Caucasian/White" individuals (215 women, 95 men, 3 unreported sex) ranging in age from 19 to 87 years ($M = 35.87$, $SD = 10.94$). 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.

Measures

In order to measure perceptions of racial inequity, participants were administered a 3-item subset of the White Privilege Scale ($\alpha = .95$) and a 3-item subset of the Other-Focused Belief in Discrimination Scale ($\alpha = .92$). The items gauging perceived White privilege were: "White people have certain advantages that minorities do not have in this society"; "Being a White person grants unearned privileges in today's society"; and "I feel that White skin in the United States opens many doors for White people in their everyday lives." The items measuring perceived anti-Black discrimination were: "A lot of Black people are treated unfairly because of race"; "Many Black employees face racial bias when they apply for jobs or are up for a promotion"; and "There is a great deal of discrimination against Black people looking to buy or rent properties."

White identity. As a measure of participants' identification with the White in-group, we modified three items from the Centrality subscale of Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith's (1997) Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) by altering each question to refer to participants' "racial group." The items were: "In general, being a member of my racial group is an important part of my self-image"; "My destiny is tied to the destiny of other members of my racial group"; and "I have a strong sense of belonging to my racial group." Participants made their ratings on a 6-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. The items formed an adequately reliable scale ($\alpha = .69$).

Priming Manipulation

Work by Katz and Hass (1988) suggests that Americans simultaneously possess conflicting visions of the "good" society. For instance, these researchers' participants were equally willing to endorse a social order governed by meritocratic norms or by humanitarian mandates—despite the inherent contradiction between these values. Thus, Katz and Hass (1988) argued, norms and values are best regarded as cognitive structures whose influence on judgments and behavior can be increased or attenuated according to the rules of construct activation (Higgins, 1996). This insight provides researchers with an important tool for assessing a norm's causal influence: By temporarily activating (i.e., priming) the construct of interest and examining subsequent changes in judgment, a causal link from value to judgment can be established. Following Katz and Hass (1988), we examined the causal impact of the meritocratic norm on Whites' perceptions of racial inequity by having

participants rate statements strongly evoking either meritocracy or a contrasting resource-distribution principle (i.e., humanitarianism).

Meritocratic prime. The prime of meritocratic norms consisted of three items drawn from the PMP Scale (Davey et al., 1999). In a pretest, agreement with these items averaged above 5 on a scale from 1 to 7. These items were: “In organizations, people who do their job well ought to rise to the top”; “In life, people ought to get what they deserve”; and “If every person in an office has the same abilities, the promotion ought to always be given to the person who puts in the most effort.”

Humanitarian prime. The prime of humanitarian norms consisted of three items drawn from Katz and Hass’ (1988) Humanitarian–Egalitarian Scale. In a pretest, agreement with these items averaged above 5 on a scale from 1 to 7. These items were: “One should always find ways to help others less fortunate than oneself”; “A person should always be concerned about the well-being of others”; and “A good society is one in which people feel responsible for one another.”

Procedure

Participants were e-mailed a link to the survey website. Upon visiting the site, participants were informed that the study examined “personal values and social views.” Participants were first administered the White identity measure, before being randomly assigned to receive one of the two primes (meritocratic or humanitarian). After rating the prime items, participants completed measures of perceived White privilege and anti-Black discrimination; the order in which these scales were presented was randomized, as was the order of questions within each scale. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed as to the nature of the experiment, given contact information, and thanked.

Results

We hypothesized that Whites exposed to the meritocracy prime would perceive less in-group racial privilege than would those exposed to the humanitarian prime. However, this effect was predicted to hold only for Whites who are relatively high in identification with the White in-group. Statistically, this amounts to a White Identity \times Norm Prime interaction for perceived White privilege. In accordance with procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), we mean-centered White identity, effects-coded norm prime (such that -1 and 1 corresponded to the humanitarian prime and meritocracy prime, respectively), and multiplied these factors to create a White Identity \times Norm Prime interaction term. We then regressed perceived White privilege on the main effects and interaction. The predicted White Identity \times Norm Prime interaction was significant, $B = -0.18$, $SE B = 0.09$, $\beta = -0.12$, $t(312) = -2.07$, $p < .05$. In order to visualize this interaction, we plotted the effect of norm prime at high ($1 SD$ above the mean) and low ($1 SD$ below the mean) levels of White identity. Inspection of Figure 2 reveals that, among highly identified Whites, exposure to the meritocracy prime decreased acknowledgement of White privilege; this was confirmed by simple slope analysis, $B = -0.30$, $SE B = 0.14$, $\beta = -0.17$, $t(312) = -2.11$, $p < .05$. However, as predicted, among weakly identified Whites, the meritocracy prime did not reduce privilege perceptions; indeed, simple slope analysis revealed no significant effect of prime on these Whites’ ratings of racial privilege, $B = 0.12$, $SE B = 0.14$, $\beta = 0.07$, $t(312) = 0.84$, $p = .40$. Also as predicted,

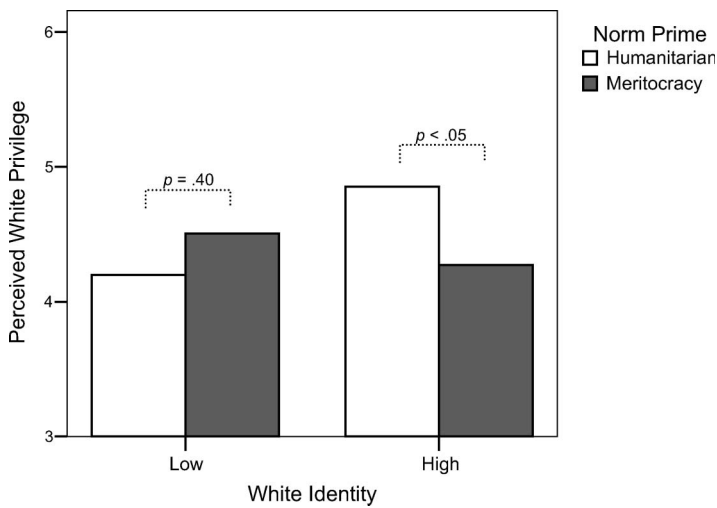


FIGURE 2 Perceived White privilege as a function of norm prime and White racial identity.

White identity and norm prime failed to interactively affect perceptions of anti-Black discrimination, $B = -0.08$, $SE B = 0.08$, $\beta = -0.05$, $t(312) = -0.96$, $p = .34$.

Discussion

The present study examined the causal influence of the meritocratic norm on perceptions of racial inequity, as well as the role of White racial identity in linking endorsement of meritocracy to perceptions of inequity. As predicted, priming meritocracy decreased White participants' acknowledgement of racial privilege, but only among those highly identified with the White in-group. Moreover, we observed no White Identity \times Norm Prime interaction for perceptions of anti-Black discrimination. In addition to clarifying the causal connection between meritocratic norms and perceptions of inequity, these findings provide further evidence that this link is self-defensive in nature.

General Discussion

The present studies suggest that Whites' belief in the health of the meritocracy is motivated largely by self-concerns stemming from endorsement of meritocracy as a distribution rule for society. Study 1 demonstrated that endorsement of meritocracy predicts the denial of racial inequity—especially inequity framed as in-group privilege. Providing further evidence for the role of self-concerns, Study 2 showed that Whites' desire to see themselves as high in merit mediated the association between PMP and perceived privilege. In Study 3, Whites whose need to bolster the self had been experimentally increased showed a stronger relationship between PMP and privilege denial than those whose concern for the self had been lowered. Finally, Study 4 used a norm-priming manipulation to confirm the causal role of meritocratic-norm endorsement in Whites' perceptions of in-group racial privilege. In sum, there is good reason to believe that self-concerns spawned by the embrace of

the meritocratic norm cause Whites' to deny to the existence of in-group racial privilege.

Protection of Personal Identity or Collective Identity?

We have argued that Whites' denial of societal inequity reflects concern for the personal self—specifically, the desire to see oneself as a talented and hard-working individual. On this account, the prospect of in-group privilege threatens to undermine Whites' desired view of self as meritorious. However, it is equally plausible that White privilege threatens the *collective* self by undermining Whites' esteem for their racial group. Either process can be fairly characterized as involving “self-concerns”; nevertheless, the distinction between threats to the collective versus personal self is interesting and important in its own right (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Sherman & Kim, 2005; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Study 2 strongly suggests that inequity militates against the personal self. In this study, idealization of individual merit was found to mediate the association between the preference for meritocracy and the denial of privilege. Study 4, however, might be taken to reflect collective self-processes. In this study, we found that priming the meritocratic norm decreased privilege perceptions only among highly in-group-identified Whites. Here, much depends on one's interpretation of the identity measure used in this study, namely, a modified version of Sellers and colleagues' (1997) identity centrality subscale.

Assuming that denial of inequity reflects concern for the personal self, the subjective importance of group membership to the self-concept ought not to moderate the effect of norm priming. Whether or not White people regard their race as an abstractly important part of the self, they undoubtedly know they are White, and therefore that in-group privilege threatens to impugn their personal merit. On the other hand, if our measure of identity reflected a sense of “common fate” with the group (Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Lowery et al., 2007)—that is, of a concrete connection between the fortunes of the group and self—then White identity should, as was observed, moderate the effect of norm priming on inequity denial. For Whites who perceive low levels of common fate with the White group as a whole, the prospect of in-group privilege has little bearing on individual merit, thus rendering it unnecessary to deny privilege.

In short, to the extent that our identification measure tapped individuals' collective selves, the results of Study 4 suggest the operation of self-concerns at the group level. To the extent that our measure tapped the level of connectedness between the personal self and the group category, Study 4 is wholly explicable in terms of individual self-concerns. A fruitful avenue for future research would be to measure both White identity centrality and Whites' sense of common fate, such that these constructs' independent contributions to Whites' self-concerns can be ascertained.

The Separation of Advantage and Disadvantage

Throughout the present work, we have treated *unearned advantage* and *undeserved disadvantage* as distinct ways of framing intergroup inequity. While the advantage/disadvantage distinction functioned to lend empirical leverage to the reported studies, it is itself theoretically important. In fact, the distinction is at the core of our model concerning individuals' perception of and explanations for social inequality,

which we refer to as the inequity-framing model (Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2010). We propose that, when presented with an intergroup disparity—say, that Group A has an average net worth of \$10,000 more than Group B—individuals begin reflexively to *interpret* that disparity.

The first interpretive question one faces upon learning that Group A has more than Group B is, “Does the disparity reflect inequity?” The answer to this question may call upon the individual’s stereotypic beliefs concerning the relative superiority or inferiority of the groups in question. If Group A is seen as superior to Group B (e.g., more industrious or smart), then the individual will likely assume that each group deserves its respective status, and thus that no inequity exists. Indeed, various explanations for racial inequality hinge on the perception of disparities as essentially fair. Until quite recently, for instance, it was common for Whites to explain racial disparities in terms of Blacks’ genetic inferiority (see Gould, 1981; Winston, Butzer, & Ferris, 2004). While such essentialist accounts of racial stratification enjoy little currency today, many scholars and pundits now argue that racial disparities stem from Blacks’ unwillingness to take advantage of ample economic opportunities afforded by the Civil Rights Movement (Brooks, 2004; Connerly, 2000; Sowell, 1994; S. Steele, 1990; A. M. Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; S. Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). When racial stratification is deemed not to reflect inequity, individuals tend to be relatively unperturbed by—and disinclined to seek remedies for—intergroup inequality.

To the extent that an individual does not believe that Group A is (biologically, culturally, or otherwise) superior to Group B, she or he may attribute the intergroup disparity to inequity. Individuals, we have argued, fail to apprehend inequity in a purely relative manner; hence, the statements “Group A is unfairly advantaged with respect to Group B” and “Group B is unfairly disadvantaged with respect to Group A” are not subjectively equivalent. Rather, we posit that individuals impute an “equity standard” specifying the appropriate or “fair” level of a given resource (e.g., monetary assets), and against which each group is separately compared. As such, an individual confronted with intergroup inequity faces a second interpretive question: “Does the inequity represent dominant-group advantage or subordinate-group disadvantage?” Put differently, the individual must determine where Groups A and B lie with respect to the equity standard. Group A may be seen to occupy the standard, in which case the individual comes to believe that Group B has *less* than it deserves. Or, Group B may occupy the standard, in which case Group A is seen as having *more* than it deserves.

The advantage and disadvantage frames, while equally valid in a formal sense, affect members of the dominant group in different ways. Notably, framing inequity as in-group advantage may threaten Whites’ esteem for the self or the in-group (Lowery et al., 2007). Self-defensive strategies triggered by this type of threat can, in turn, have important consequences for Whites’ policy beliefs. Specifically, dominant-group members may do mental work allowing them to deny the existence of privilege (Lowery et al., 2007), which ought to dispose them against redistributive social policies such as affirmative action. However, if Whites can be convinced that in-group privilege exists, they may actually decrease their default opposition to aggressive affirmative action policies, since these policies promise to reduce privilege and in so doing move the in-group closer to the equity standard (Lowery et al., 2010).

While the present research adds to a growing body of literature on individuals’ perceptions of intergroup disparities, most of this work (ours included) has focused

narrowly on inequality between Blacks and Whites. Given the growing multiculturalism of the United States—as well as the entanglement of other racial and ethnic identities (e.g., Mexican and Latin American) in political debates—it will be important to examine identities and inequalities beyond the Black–White dichotomy. How the social fortunes of such groups invoke and affect Whites’ self-concerns is an open question.

The Importance of Dominant-group Identity

Social and personality psychologists have devoted a great deal of attention to the nature, antecedents, and consequences of racial identification among members of ethnic minorities (e.g., Sellers et al., 1997). By contrast, social identification among members of the dominant racial group in Western society—Whites—has garnered relatively little interest (Knowles & Peng, 2005; Phinney, 1990). Knowles and Peng (2005) speculated that this neglect stems from disciplinary assumptions concerning the “invisibility” or “transparency” of membership in a hegemonic group. If correct, these assumptions imply that White racial identity will not figure prominently in Whites’ mental lives. The current work belies these assumptions. In Study 4, exposure to statements evoking the meritocratic norm only reduced perceptions of White privilege among those scoring high on a measure of White identity. This, in turn, suggests that racial group membership was central to these Whites’ selves. The larger point raised by these findings—one which we believe deserves to be underscored—is that racial identity is not always invisible to Whites, and thus moderates the self- and social perceptions of dominant-group members.

Conclusion

The United States generates more wealth per person than almost any other nation in the world (Central Intelligence Agency, 2005). Despite this, the USA tolerates the highest rate of poverty in the “developed” world (Smeeding, Rainwater, & Burtless, 2002). The concentration of poverty among ethnic minorities and the heritable nature of wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995) belie claims that these inequalities are equitable (e.g., Sowell, 1994). A range of processes likely contribute to majority-group members’ tendency to see current social arrangements as fair despite evidence of inequity, including system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and just-world beliefs (Lerner, 1980). The studies reported here support an additional explanation for why privileged individuals who genuinely believe in fairness tolerate such egregious injustice. For many individuals, acknowledging personal privilege is tantamount to acknowledging that they do not embody an important personal ideal. Ironically, the more dominant-group members support the norm of equity, the less sensitive they are to the possibility that their social position may represent a deviation from this norm.

Notes

1. Importantly, the fact that the relationship between PMP and anti-Black discrimination was weaker than that between PMP and White privilege cannot be attributed to a difference in the reliabilities of the privilege and discrimination scales. Latent variable modeling serves to disattenuate associations for unreliability (Fan, 2003) and, moreover, the anti-Black discrimination and White privilege measures exhibited almost identical reliabilities.

2. It may also be the case that meritocratic norm endorsement mediated the relationship between idealization of merit and privilege beliefs. To test this, we ran another mediation analysis, this time with merit idealization as the predictor and norm endorsement as the mediator. When privilege beliefs were regressed onto merit idealization and norm endorsement, the relationship between merit idealization and privilege was significant, $B = -0.18$, $SE B = 0.07$, $\beta = -0.18$, $t(208) = -2.60$, $p < .05$, whereas the relationship between norm endorsement and privilege was not, $B = -0.29$, $SE B = 0.19$, $\beta = -0.10$, $t(208) = -1.50$, $p = .14$. The corresponding Sobel test failed to reach significance, $z = 1.38$, $p = .17$, casting doubt on the idea that norm endorsement mediated a relationship between merit idealization and privilege beliefs.

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