Reminders of Ingroup Privilege Often Threaten Identity but Rarely Change Beliefs

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Abstract

Despite progress over the past century, social inequality remains pervasive in the United States. One approach for addressing inequality is persuading members of high-status groups that their status is partly a product of privilege—that is, unearned advantages that are shared by most members of their group. However, telling people that the accomplishments of their group are not fully earned often elicits defensiveness. Acknowledging ingroup privileges can threaten ingroup identity, raising concerns that attempts to raise awareness of group-based advantages can backfire, making people *less* supportive of equality efforts. Two studies ($N = 773$) test the effects of exercises intended to raise privilege awareness. In Study 1, men completed checklists describing privileges men have relative to women. In Study 2, White people completed checklists describing White privileges and received feedback informing them of their privilege. People who acknowledge inequity felt guilt and gratitude after text-based privilege exercises, while people who deny inequity felt threatened by them. However, we find weak and inconsistent evidence that privilege awareness polarizes attitudes about race, gender, and social policy. While privilege awareness activities often appear to evoke defensiveness, they do not consistently polarize attitudes or backfire against their intended goals.

Keywords: White privilege, male privilege, threat, identity management, meritocracy, self-affirmation

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“[Q]uestions that are worded in a way that are supposed to make me ‘feel’ privileged only make me angry”

“This made me realize just how well off I have it compared to others. Thanks for the slap in the face and waking me up.”

– Comments from anonymous participants about privilege awareness exercises

Despite progress over the past century, some groups still face additional obstacles to success that others do not. For example, White people typically do not have to worry about their name alone penalizing them on job applications (Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017), and the transition to parenthood usually does not undermine the perceived competence and commitment to work among men as it does women (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). As a corrective, some have suggested reminding people of the group disparities that result from unearned advantages—also referred to as “privileges” (McIntosh, 1990). Privilege reminders aim to help people hold themselves accountable for inequality, but efforts to raise privilege awareness produce strong, diverging responses. The opening quotes are a sample of the positive and negative responses we received to our privilege awareness activities. Vitriolic responses to privilege reminders may cause concern that asking people to reflect on their advantages makes them defensive or, even worse, backfires and *increases* resistance to egalitarianism (Dover, Kaiser, & Major, 2019; Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014; Leslie, 2019). If negative reactions indicate changing attitudes in an unintended direction, then reminders of privilege may be ineffective at addressing inequality.

The present studies had three objectives. First, we examined whether the effects of gender (Study 1) and race (Study 2) privilege reminders extended beyond initial reactions by assessing a broad range of attitudes about gender or race relations and social policy. Second,

given the possibility of backlash effects, we tested a novel reframing strategy of privilege reminders based on self-affirmation theory in an effort to reduce negative reactions and circumvent unintended consequences (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Finally, we investigated status-legitimizing beliefs as a possible explanation for why reminders of privilege may produce polarizing, emotional reactions (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007).

Privilege Interventions

McIntosh (1990) originally conceptualized privilege as an “invisible package of unearned assets” (p. 31). Relatedly, we define a privilege intervention as any educational activity intended to increase awareness of unearned advantages generally shared by members of high-status groups. Proponents of such exercises argue that raising awareness of gender and racial privileges mobilizes high-status groups to support efforts to “level the playing field” (Case, Hensley, & Anderson, 2014). Pedagogical strategies to increase privilege awareness include instructional videos, handouts with lists of examples of privilege, and group discussion. These activities aim to increase awareness of social disparities and support for equitable policy by illustrating how privileges are disproportionately allocated across groups (e.g., race, gender, religion).

Indeed, privilege interventions can increase awareness of social disparities (e.g., Case, 2007; Cole, Case, Rios, & Curtin, 2011). Privilege awareness, in turn, predicts more positive attitudes towards Black Americans among Whites (Steward, Latu, Branscombe, Phillips, & Denney, 2012). Privilege interventions also show some success in increasing privilege acknowledgment (Case & Rios, 2017; Case et al., 2014), support for affirmative action, and gender egalitarian attitudes (Sevelius & Stake, 2003; Malkin & Stake, 2004).

In contrast, a recent test of a privilege interventions found evidence of backlash to the activity (e.g., increases in discriminatory attitudes), but this effect was only present among more

politically conservative participants (Brad, Spisz, & Tanega, 2018). Notably, Brad and colleagues' results were based on a sample of Amazon's Mechanical Turk workers, while the previous studies discussed recruited from college courses, particularly women's studies and diversity courses. Case (2007) mentions that sample bias almost certainly affects the types of responses to privilege education teachers see among students. Relative to an employed, adult population, undergraduate students (particularly those taking diversity or gender studies courses) are more likely to espouse left-leaning views (Eagan et al., 2016), potentially making them more open to discussions of race- and gender-based privilege. Testing privilege interventions only among left-leaning samples fails to evaluate their impact upon those who are likely most skeptical of their message.

Prior Beliefs and Unintended Consequences of Privilege Interventions

Knowles and colleagues (2014) argue privilege awareness poses two threats to members of high-status groups: threats to meritocracy and group image. In moments of success, calls to "check one's privilege" undermine the feeling of achievement, while leaving fewer excuses in times of failure. Convincing members of high-status groups to acknowledge their privileges amounts to requesting they partially give up credit for their success (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Privilege interventions also conflict with the motivation to see our ingroups as morally good (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For members of high-status groups, privilege reminders suggest one's ingroup is operating unfairly, reaping benefits at the expense of disadvantaged others. Thus, confronting the unearned advantages of one's ingroup also poses threats to its moral standing.

We propose the critical moderator of people's reactions to privilege interventions is the extent they manage meritocratic and group image threats by denying privilege. Knowles and

colleagues (2014) argue that privilege denial is often the preferred strategy for managing threat among dominant group members and is, thus, a major obstacle to motivating social action.

Indicators of the denial of discrimination, such as modern racism or modern sexism (McConahay, 1983; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), legitimize the current system, undermining needs for social action (Branscombe et al., 2007). People who embrace these status legitimizing beliefs (SLBs) deny their group advantage and, instead, endorse meritocratic explanations for group-level inequality. Privilege interventions conflict with these beliefs, suggesting that the success high-status groups is not only a product of merit, but also of good fortune. Thus, to people who subscribe to SLBs, privilege interventions undermine their strategy (i.e., denial) for managing threats to their group. In contrast, those who acknowledge discrimination occurs should react less defensively when faced with information about their unearned privileges. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

***Hypothesis 1:** The denial of discrimination against members of low-status groups will moderate reactions to privilege interventions among members of high-status groups, such that (H1a) members of high-status groups who deny discrimination will react defensively (i.e., feel threatened), while (H1b) members of high-status groups who acknowledge discrimination will react non-defensively (i.e., feel guilt and gratitude).*

Attenuating Defensiveness through Self-Affirmation

Members of high-status groups often respond to privilege interventions by claiming disadvantage in other domains (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Individuals making this argument often claim that while most men or white people are afforded certain privileges, these privileges do not apply to them. Instead, they encounter adversity just as any disadvantaged group might. People are motivated to maintain a positive image of their group—one that depicts them as

triumphing over adversity, not handed their accomplishment illegitimately (Young & Sullivan, 2016). Thus, one possible strategy to mitigate reminders of privilege is to affirm people's hardships in other domains. We test here one tactic for doing so based on self-affirmation theory (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation theory states that the overarching objective of the self is to protect self-worth (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). When threatened, people deploy defensive strategies to protect self-integrity. However, affirming an individual's valued aspects of the self, like the ways that one has overcome hardship, can circumvent defensiveness. In other words, giving people the opportunity to express the hardships they face in life may enable them to acknowledge their privileges.

***Hypothesis 2:** Privilege interventions that affirm people's hardships will attenuate defensive reactions (relative to a non-affirming intervention) among those who deny the existence of discrimination against low-status groups.*

From Initial Reactions to Attitude Change

While people often react strongly to privilege reminders, neither the positive nor the negative responses to privilege interventions are necessarily indicative of shifting attitudes. In addition to raising awareness of privilege among members of high-status, these interventions aim to increase egalitarianism. However, while awareness is necessary for attitude change, it is not always sufficient (e.g., Baranowski, Cullen, Niklas, Thompson, & Baranowski, 2003). As discussed earlier, the effects of privilege interventions on participants' attitude change has been mixed. Thus, when looking at explicit reactions to privilege reminders (e.g., disliking the activity, feeling threatened by it, etc.), we predict strong, diverging reactions; however, whether or not our privilege interventions shift egalitarian attitudes remains an open research question.

***Research Question 1:** Do privilege interventions polarize egalitarian attitudes, such that (RQ1a) those who deny the existence of discrimination against low-status groups become less egalitarian, while (RQ1b) those who acknowledge discrimination against low-status groups become more egalitarian?*

***Research Question 2:** Do privilege reminders more effectively increase egalitarian attitudes when their targets are given the opportunity to affirm their hardships?*

Overview of Studies

The present studies test whether and for whom privilege reminders prompt defensive or non-defensive reactions. Study 1 explored men's reactions to a male privilege awareness exercise, and Study 2 explored White people's reactions to a White privilege awareness exercise. Study 1 exposed participants to one of three activities: one, modeled after "Privilege Lists" commonly used to raise privilege awareness, a second privilege activity designed to attenuate threat by giving men the opportunity to affirm some of their own disadvantages, and a neutral activity about historical trivia. We then measured how participants responded to the interventions in terms of affect and attitudes. Study 2 investigated the same phenomena in the context of race. We also added a condition using "Black disadvantage" rather than "White privilege" language, provided a more nuanced test of participants' emotional reactions to the activity, and examined more outcomes.

Study 1

Method

Participants

A power-analysis setting alpha at .05 and power at .80 suggested a sample of 315 to detect an ΔR^2 of .03 due to two tested predictors (i.e., the two terms representing the interaction between modern sexism and dummy coded condition). We recruited 345 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants were excluded from analysis if they identified as female ($n = 25$) or accessed the survey from outside the United States ($n = 58$).¹ This left a final sample of 262 men ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.84$), able to detect a ΔR^2 of .037 due to the key interaction with .80 power.

Materials and Procedure

Participants first completed the 8-item Modern Sexism (MS) Scale (Swim et al., 1995; $\alpha = .88$) followed by either one of the two privilege interventions or a control task. In both interventions, participants completed an activity (ostensibly used at a university) designed to

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¹ Due to recent concerns over MTurk data contamination from unqualified users via virtual private servers (e.g., participants outside of the United States), we examined our data for suspicious GPS coordinates, finding 33 cases with coordinates matching the location of one server farm in Buffalo, New York identified by Dennis, Goodson, and Pearson (in press). Treating this as a red flag for potential data contamination, four independent raters coded participants' responses to four different open response items in the survey for suspicion (0 = no suspicion, 1 = suspicion). For example, Dennis and colleagues found responses from virtual private servers were frequently nonsensical (e.g., responding with "THIS SURVEY VERY IMPORTANT" to unrelated questions). Such nonsensical, qualitative responses were coded as suspicious. All four raters' suspicion ratings completely agreed in 90.3% of cases. At least two raters marked responses as suspicious for 58 cases.

raise awareness of the advantages they may have relative to others. Participants then completed a privilege exercise adapted from McIntosh (1990), listing several examples of daily advantages that come with being a man (i.e., the male privilege condition) or with being a man or woman (i.e., the male privilege plus affirmation condition). They were instructed to spend a few minutes thinking about each statement and to check all that applied to them. The male privilege condition contained 12 statements highlighting male privileges (e.g., “You don’t have to worry about being paid less because of your gender.”). The privilege plus affirmation intervention contained eight of these 12 statements selected at random for each participant and an additional five statements affirming hardships unique to men (e.g., “When you get hurt, people never tell you to toughen up and get over it.”). To accentuate the manipulation, the following page asked participants to reflect on the importance of women’s issues (privilege condition) or both men’s and women’s issues (privilege plus affirmation condition). The control task was a history activity that listed 12 obscure historical facts, asking participants to indicate whether they were familiar with each fact. See supplemental materials (Appendix A) for a summary of the study protocol and full lists of the privilege statements.

Next, participants completed a 4-item measure ($\alpha = .81$) of the valence of their reaction to the activity (e.g., “How much did you like the activity?” from *not at all* to *very much*; “How offensive was the activity?” from *not at all offensive* to *very offensive* [reverse-scored]), and a single, open-ended question asking them to reflect on the task and write a couple sentences describing anything they learned. This was followed by a 6-item measure of affirmative action support (Case, 2007; e.g., “Laws that protect women from discrimination in employment and education are no longer needed,” [reverse-scored], $\alpha = .84$), an 8-item measure of perceived anti-man bias (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014; e.g., “Prejudice and discrimination against men are on the

rise,” $\alpha = .84$), a 10-item measure of attitudes towards feminism and the women’s movement (Fassinger, 1994; e.g., “Feminist principles should be adopted everywhere,” $\alpha = .90$), and a single item asking whether they approve or disapprove of the way Trump is handling his job as president. All measures used 7-point Likert scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) except where otherwise indicated. All measures, manipulations and exclusions are reported here or in supplemental materials (see Appendix C).²

Results

We first tested the unmoderated effects of the privilege exercises upon how positively participants reacted to the activity, attitudes towards social policy, and gender relations. Overall, experimental condition affected perceived anti-man bias, $F(2, 259) = 3.94, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$. Tukey’s post hoc tests revealed that the privilege plus affirmation condition ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.95$) increased perceived anti-man bias relative to the male privilege ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.21; p = .05, 95\% CI [.003, .75]$) and control activities ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.93; p = .04, 95\% CI [.01, .73]$). We found no other differences across condition for the valence of participants’ reaction to activity, $F(2, 259) = 0.57, p = .57, \eta^2 = .00$; affirmative action support, $F(2, 259) = 0.25, p = .78$,

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²Both Studies 1 and 2 contained additional measures excluded from the main text due to space limitations. Study 1 also included measures of three state emotions. Study 2 also included the same measure of participants’ general reaction to the activity reported in the results of Study 1, an additional measure of pro-White attitudes, a measure for intentions to vote in the 2016 US midterm elections, and a measure of perceived agenda pushing. Both Studies included measures of self-perceived disadvantage. Results for additional measures do not impact the conclusions reported in the main text. Detailed results are located in supplemental materials (Appendix C).

Figure 1. Estimated means for negativity of reaction to the different types of interventions among participants high and low in modern sexism.

$\eta^2 = .00$; support for the women's movement, $F(2, 259) = 0.40$, $p = .67$, $\eta^2 = .00$; or support for Donald Trump, $F(2, 259) = 0.49$, $p = .61$, $\eta^2 = .00$.

We then compared how positively men high and men low in MS reacted to the privilege exercises. We entered the dummy coded independent variable with the control condition as the reference group, MS, and the interaction terms as predictors of participants' reaction to the activity in a regression. The interaction terms significantly increased variance explained in reaction to the activity, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 256) = 11.302$, $p < .001$. Tests of simple effects revealed that, relative to control, men low in MS reacted positively to the male privilege intervention, $b = .88$, $t(256) = 3.23$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.34, 1.41], and men high in MS reacted negatively to the male privilege intervention, $b = -.85$, $t(256) = -3.16$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [-1.37, -0.32]. This provides support for Hypothesis 1. Importantly, men high in MS did not respond negatively to

Figure 2. Summary of effects of privilege intervention upon the valence of participants' reactions to the activity and attitudes related to egalitarianism. Black squares represent effects among participants at the 84th percentile on modern sexism. Gray circles represent participants at the 16th percentile.

the privilege plus affirmation intervention relative to control, $b = -.02$, $t(256) = -0.09$, $p = .93$, 95% CI [-0.53, 0.49], supporting Hypothesis 2.

To address Research Questions 1 and 2, we examined how the privilege exercises affected attitudes about social policy and gender relations among men high and low on MS. We found no significant interaction effects upon support for the women's movement, $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $F(2, 256) = 2.10$, $p = .12$, perceived anti-man bias, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 256) = 2.73$, $p = .07$, affirmative action support, $\Delta R^2 = .002$, $F(2, 256) = .06$, $p = .95$, or Trump support, $\Delta R^2 = .003$, $F(2, 256) = .69$, $p = .50$ (see Figure 2 for summary, simple effects are reported in supplemental materials, Appendix B).

Discussion

Men who deny the existence of sexism respond substantially more negatively to male privilege exercises compared to exercises that also affirm their hardships or a neutral activity. Men low on MS show the opposite pattern, responding most positively to exercises couched in male privilege language. However, we found, at best, suggestive evidence of effects upon men's attitudes about gender relations and social policy. When you ask how much men like or are offended by male privilege exercises, responses appear polarizing, but effects upon actual attitudes about social policy and gender relations are minimal. Admittedly, loss of participants in Study 1 resulted in a sample that was slightly underpowered to detect interaction effects. Thus, Study 2 collects a sufficiently powered sample and examines an even broader set of outcomes. Study 2 also expands our test of the effects of privilege awareness to the context of race.

Study 2

Study 2 extended Study 1 in several ways. First, we examined White privilege rather than male privilege to see if effects generalized to other identities. Second, we tested the effectiveness of additional variations in the framing of our exercises. One condition framed the activity around disadvantages Black people face rather than privileges White people hold. Another condition, similar to the privilege plus affirmations condition used in Study 1, included statements giving White people the opportunity to express their hardships. And third, to more precisely assess people's reactions to the activity, we measured self-reported, guilt, gratitude, and threats to moral image and meritocracy.

Method

Participants

We conducted a power analysis based on an ΔR^2 of .025, due to three tested predictors (i.e., the three terms representing the interaction between symbolic racism and dummy coded condition), which suggested a sample size of 430. To ensure we met this target in the event of similar data contamination encountered in Study 1, we recruited 511 White volunteers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform ($M = 42.42$, $SD = 31.57$; 62% women, 37% men, 1.2% other). We also used filtering tools that have since been implemented by the TurkPrime website to prevent unqualified users from taking the survey. We found none of the suspicious GPS coordinates or nonsensical open-ended responses encountered in Study 1. No participants were dropped prior to analyses. Our final sample had .80 power to detect an ΔR^2 of .021 due to the key interaction.

Materials and Procedure

Prior to the intervention, participants completed the 8-item Symbolic Racism (SR) Scale (measured on 4-point Likert scales; Henry & Sears, 2002). Participants then completed one of four exercises described as a learning activity ostensibly administered to undergraduates at a university. We designed activities to elicit varying degrees of threat. The White privilege frame featured language such as, "On the following pages you will read examples of unearned, daily privileges that promote the status and power of White people in America." Participants then completed a 12-item privilege list (e.g., "I have never been stopped or questioned by the police because of my race") by checking all items that applied to them personally (see supplemental materials Appendix A for full list). They then received visual feedback ostensibly depicting their privilege percentile score relative to the average White and Black person. All participants received feedback indicating they scored similarly to the average White person and advantaged

relative to the average Black person (see Figure 3). Finally, participants saw a graphic attributing racial inequality in America to White privilege.

Figure 3. Feedback participants received about their relative advantage in the (from left to right) affirmation Black disadvantage, and White privilege interventions. The anvils were meant to imply disadvantages, while the balloons implied advantages.

The Black disadvantage condition framed the activity as “examples of disadvantages and hardships that suppress the status of Black people in America.” Items were rephrased to reflect disadvantage rather than privilege (e.g., “I have been stopped or questioned by the police simply because of my race”). Participants were then given feedback showing they had about the same number of disadvantages as the average White person and fewer disadvantages than the average Black person, and a graphic attributing racial inequality to hardships faced by Black people in America.

The affirmation condition stated, “On the following pages you’ll read examples of fortunes or misfortunes you personally may have encountered in your life,” with no overt mention of race. The list featured statements describing various childhood experiences and life circumstances (e.g., “The schools I went to as a kid had good teachers and up-to-date textbooks and computers”) (see supplemental materials Appendix A for full list). Because these statements were race-neutral, it allowed White people opportunities to express their hardships. Participants

then received feedback illustrating they were more fortunate than the average Black person. The text accompanying the feedback in the affirmation condition stated, “Everyone faces obstacles that weigh them down while also having opportunities that not everyone has. However, not every group in America has the same fortunes and misfortunes. Based on your responses, you are about as fortunate as the average White person.” They then saw a graphic attributing racial inequality to (mis)fortune. The control condition was identical to the activity used in Study 1, with the addition of feedback (which indicated they had average knowledge of obscure history) to mirror the interventions.

Participants then completed eight items measuring both meritocratic and group image threats (e.g., “The activity claimed my successes in life were handed to me,” $\alpha = .95$), three items measuring guilt (e.g., “Doing the exercise made me feel guilty,” $\alpha = .91$), and three items measuring gratitude (e.g., “Doing the exercise made me feel thankful,” $\alpha = .88$).

To assess egalitarian attitudes, we included three items measuring support for affirmative action (e.g., “affirmative action programs are still needed today to address racial inequality”, $\alpha = .85$) and three assessing support for economic programs helping disadvantaged groups (adapted from the American National Election Studies Surveys; e.g., “Should federal spending on programs that assist people of color be (1) *decreased*, (2) *kept about the same*, or (3) *increased*?” $\alpha = .91$). We also measured two other racial attitudes including eight items for perceived anti-White bias (e.g., “Prejudice and discrimination against Whites are on the rise,” $\alpha = .90$) and six items assessing race based zero-sum beliefs (e.g., “Blacks take jobs away from Whites,” $\alpha = .91$). Finally, we included a two-item measure of support for Donald Trump (e.g., “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President?” from *strongly disapprove*

Table 1. *The effects of privilege exercises on threat, gratitude, and guilt*

Outcome	Condition	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>p</i> - value of Tukey Test; 95% CI of mean difference		
			1.	2.	3.
Threat	1. Control	1.67 (1.00)	-		
	2. Privilege plus affirmation	2.62 (1.48)	< .001; [1.44, .46]	-	
	3. Black disadvantage	2.92 (1.66)	< .001; [1.73, .76]	.40; [-.19, .78]	-
	4. White privilege	3.12 (1.80)	< .001; [1.94, .96]	.04; [.01, .99]	.71; [-.29, .69]
Gratitude	1. Control	4.50 (1.17)	-		
	2. Privilege plus affirmation	5.39 (1.26)	< .001; [.47, 1.32]	-	
	3. Black disadvantage	4.90 (1.40)	.07; [-.02, .83]	.02; [-.92, -.06]	-
	4. White privilege	4.77 (1.46)	.34; [-.16, .70]	.001; [-1.05, -.19]	.86; [-.56, .30]
Guilt	1. Control	2.73 (1.54)	-		
	2. Privilege plus affirmation	2.71 (1.44)	.99; [-.52, .49]	-	
	3. Black disadvantage	3.27 (1.68)	.03; [.03, 1.04]	.03; [.05, 1.06]	-
	4. White privilege	3.26 (1.62)	.04; [.02, 1.04]	.03; [.04, 1.05]	.99; [-.52, .50]

to *strongly approve*; $\alpha = .98$). All scales used 7-point Likert scales except where otherwise indicated.

Results

One-way ANOVAs found significant effects of the intervention upon threat, $F(3, 507) = 23.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$; gratitude $F(3, 507) = 10.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$; and guilt, $F(3, 507) = 5.05, p = .002, \eta^2 = .03$. See Table 1 for means and post hoc test statistics. Participants felt threatened by all the exercises relative to the neutral task and the White privilege condition induced more threat than the privilege plus affirmation condition (supporting Hypothesis 2). Participants felt substantially more gratitude following the privilege plus affirmation condition than the neutral activity, the Black disadvantage frame, and the White privilege frame. The Black disadvantage and White privilege conditions both increased feelings of guilt relative to the neutral and affirmation exercises. We found no effects upon support for affirmative action, $F(3, 507) = 0.73, p = .53, \eta^2 = .00$, race-based zero-sum beliefs, $F(3, 502) = 1.41, p = .24, \eta^2 = .01$, perceived anti-white bias, $F(3, 507) = 2.29, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$, support for safety net spending, $F(3, 507) = 1.37, p = .25, \eta^2 = .01$, or Trump support, $F(3, 503) = 0.81, p = .49, \eta^2 = .01$.

To compare effects at high and low levels of SR, we ran OLS regressions entering dummy coded condition, SR, and the three interaction terms between SR and each dummy coded variable as predictors. The interaction terms significantly increased variance explained in threat, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(3, 503) = 13.36$, $p < .001$. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, at low SR, the privilege plus affirmation, Black disadvantage, and White privilege conditions all produced similarly small increases in threat relative to control (see Table 2 for complete simple effects). However, at high SR, all three privilege exercises substantially increased threat. SR also moderated effects upon gratitude, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(3, 503) = 6.28$, $p < .001$. At low SR, each of the exercises increased gratitude. At high SR, only the privilege plus affirmation condition increased gratitude. SR did not moderate effects upon guilt, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 503) = 1.88$, $p = .13$.

Running the same regressions with egalitarian attitudes entered as outcomes, we found suggestive evidence of SR moderating effects upon affirmative action support, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 503) = 2.58$, $p = .05$, race-based zero-sum beliefs, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 498) = 3.06$, $p = .03$, and perceived anti-white bias, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 503) = 2.23$, $p = .08$. Probing these interactions revealed that the White privilege condition decreased affirmative action support at high SR, but not low SR (see Table 3 for complete simple effects). However, this was our only result consistent with a backfire effect of the privilege exercises. The only remaining effects among participants high in SR were slight decreases in race-based zero-sum beliefs in the privilege plus affirmation and Black disadvantage conditions. Low SR participants in the White privilege condition perceived slightly less anti-White bias, but no difference occurred among high SR participants. We found no other simple effects upon affirmative action support, zero-sum beliefs, or perceived anti-white bias. SR did not moderate effects upon support for safety net spending

Table 2. *Simple slopes probing interactions between SR and type of privilege exercise*

Outcome	Condition (vs Control)	Level of Symbolic Racism	Privilege Exercise vs. Control		
			<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Threat	Privilege plus affirmation	Low	0.45 (0.23)	1.93	.05
	Black disadvantage		0.42 (0.25)	1.68	.09
	White privilege		0.51 (0.23)	2.21	.03
	Privilege plus affirmation	High	1.44 (0.22)	6.49	.00
	Black disadvantage		1.70 (0.21)	8.11	.00
	White privilege		2.49 (0.23)	11.07	.00
Gratitude	Privilege plus affirmation	Low	1.37 (0.23)	5.99	.00
	Black disadvantage		1.03 (0.24)	4.28	.00
	White privilege		0.88 (0.22)	3.92	.00
	Privilege plus affirmation	High	0.45 (0.22)	2.07	.04
	Black disadvantage		0.01 (0.20)	0.07	.94
	White privilege		-0.37 (0.22)	-1.67	.10
Affirmative Action Support	Privilege plus affirmation	Low	0.27 (0.19)	1.42	.16
	Black disadvantage		0.17 (0.20)	0.82	.41
	White privilege		0.25 (0.19)	1.34	.18
	Privilege plus affirmation	High	-0.22 (0.18)	-1.19	.23
	Black disadvantage		-0.18 (0.17)	-1.01	.31
	White privilege		-0.45 (0.19)	-2.46	.01
Race-Based Zero-Sum Beliefs	Privilege plus affirmation	Low	-0.04 (0.18)	-0.19	.85
	Black disadvantage		0.21 (0.20)	1.07	.28
	White privilege		-0.08 (0.18)	-0.45	.65
	Privilege plus affirmation	High	-0.33 (0.17)	-1.90	.06
	Black disadvantage		-0.51 (0.17)	-3.10	.00
	White privilege		-0.23 (0.18)	-1.27	.21
Perceived Anti-White Bias	Privilege plus affirmation	Low	-0.20 (0.17)	-1.21	.23
	Black disadvantage		0.14 (0.17)	0.78	.44
	White privilege		-0.30 (0.16)	-1.82	.07
	Privilege plus affirmation	High	0.00 (0.16)	0.02	.99
	Black disadvantage		0.01 (0.15)	0.05	.96
	White privilege		0.13 (0.16)	0.79	.43

Figure 4. Summary of effects of privilege intervention upon participants' feelings toward the activity and attitudes related to egalitarianism. Black squares represent effects among participants at the 84th percentile on symbolic racism. Gray circles represent participants at the 16th percentile.

($\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(3, 499) = 1.18$, $p = .32$) or Trump support $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(3, 499) = .32$, $p = .81$. See Figure 4 for summary.

Discussion

Similar to the results of Study 1, White people who deny (vs. acknowledge) the impact of racism upon inequality respond far more negatively to privilege reminders. Regardless of how

reminders of White advantage are framed, people high on SR report feeling threatened by them. Using privilege language specifically evokes even greater feelings of threat. However, giving participants high on SR the opportunity to affirm their hardships increased feelings of gratitude following the exercise. Conversely, people who acknowledge the role of racism in inequality report feeling guilt and gratitude following reminders of White advantage. However, while privilege reminders produce polarized feelings, they have inconsistent impacts upon egalitarian attitudes. For people who embrace the message of privilege activities, we find little change across five attitudes related to race and social policy. For people who are skeptical of the idea of White privilege, we only find evidence of a backfire effect upon one outcome within one type of framing (i.e., White privilege frame upon affirmative action support). The effects of privilege reminders upon egalitarian attitudes are weak and inconsistent, despite people having strong feelings towards activities. Study 2 replicates Study 1's results in a large sample, using diverse types of message framing, and measuring a broad range of outcomes related to social policy and race relations.

General Discussion

Privilege awareness exercises are often used to persuade members of high-status groups that not all of their success is fully earned. However, acknowledging ingroup advantages can threaten valued group identities, causing defensiveness. While many people embrace the message of privilege interventions, others feel accused of laziness and immoral conduct. Polarized reactions to privilege reminders raise concerns that they may be further dividing people on social issues. Across two studies, examining a broad set of indicators for race and gender relations, political candidate preference, and social policy, we find weak and inconsistent

effects of privilege reminders even in the presence of highly polarized explicit reactions (see Figures 2 and 5 for summaries).

Studies 1 and 2 both found strong support for our first hypothesis—that the denial of sexism and racism moderates initial reactions to privilege interventions. Participants high in MS and SR responded negatively and felt threatened by privilege reminders, while people low in MS and SR felt more guilt and gratitude. In support of Hypothesis 2, giving participants an opportunity to affirm their disadvantages attenuated defensiveness (relative to a control activity). Despite attenuating backlash, the affirmation conditions were no more effective at increasing egalitarian attitudes among people high in MS or SR, providing mixed results for our research questions.

Limitations

Two alternative explanations for the inconsistent effects of privilege reminders upon attitudes is that our manipulation failed to make privilege salient or we did not measure the proper outcomes. However, given that we observed strong effects in opposing directions on our affective measures, it is unlikely that the manipulation was ineffective. Second, we measured a broad range of attitudes toward gender and race relations, affirmative action, Donald Trump, and safety net programs using a high-powered sample. This design provides a powerful test of the immediate effects of privilege awareness activities upon attitudes towards progressive social goals.

We caution against generalizing the results of our privilege exercises, modeled after privilege lists, to all privilege awareness activities. More vivid demonstrations of privilege or opportunities for meaningful interactions between people from diverse backgrounds may exhibit different effects. For example, Case and colleagues (2014) found video interventions to more

successfully raise privilege awareness than list interventions. The present results may apply primarily to text-based reminders of group-based privilege. Moreover, our interventions focus on the immediate effects of privilege interventions. It is possible, for instance, that the repercussions of backlash to privilege checking do not emerge from a single exposure to a privilege intervention, but rather accumulate over repeated reminders of privilege.

Conclusion

Reminders of privilege appear to evoke polarized reactions, but on their own, they likely do not have substantive effects upon attitudes towards race, gender, or social policy. If one aims to increase egalitarianism among a group of people, giving them examples of their privilege will not consistently change attitudes, even if they appear to respond positively or defensively to the activity. This does not mean that privilege reminders have no place in conversations about inequality. Our results only suggest that privilege reminders are likely not enough to shift attitudes by themselves, at least not immediately. Importantly, if one does plan to use privilege reminders to start a conversation about inequality, our results demonstrate that affirming people's hardship may be an effective tactic for reducing defensiveness from those who typically deny the existence of racial and gender discrimination.

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