



# The hard-knock life? Whites claim hardships in response to racial inequity

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We explore why and how Whites deny the existence of racial privilege
- We introduce belief in personal privilege as important to psychology of privilege
- When given privilege evidence, Whites claim more life hardships
- Whites use hardship claims to deny personally benefitting from privilege
- Self-affirmed Whites acknowledge personal privilege and support equality policies

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## ABSTRACT

Racial inequity continues to plague America, yet many Whites still doubt the existence of racial advantages, limiting progress and cooperation. What happens when people are faced with evidence that their group benefits from privilege? We suggest such evidence will be threatening and that people will claim hardships to manage this threat. These claims of hardship allow individuals to deny that they *personally* benefit from privilege, while still accepting that group-level inequity exists. Experiments 1a and 1b show that Whites exposed to evidence of racial privilege claim to have suffered more personal life hardships than those not exposed to evidence of privilege. Experiment 2 shows that self-affirmation reverses the effect of exposure to evidence of privilege on hardship claims, implicating the motivated nature of hardship claims. Further, affirmed participants acknowledge more personal privilege, which is associated with increased support for inequity-reducing policies.

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Racial privilege persists in America today: Whites enjoy greater lifetime earnings (Hao, 2011), life expectancies (Bleich, Jarlenski, Bell, & LaVeist, 2012), access to health care (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003), and access to high-quality education (Rumberger, 2010) than do Blacks. Despite this reality, policymakers and power brokers continue to debate whether racial privilege even exists and whether to address such inequity (e.g., Baker & Fausset, 2015; Blow, 2014; New York Times, 2013; Robertson, Dewan, & Apuzzo, 2015; Spencer, 2015). One reason for this inaction might be an unwillingness among Whites to acknowledge racial privilege – acknowledgment that may be difficult given that Whites are motivated to believe that meritocratic systems and personal virtues determine life outcomes (Knowles & Lowery, 2012). What do people do when they are exposed to evidence that they are helped along by racial privilege? In a society roiling with questions about how to deal with expanding inequality (e.g., Noah, 2012; Porter, 2012), it is

increasingly important to understand how the privileged – who are most likely to have power to make changes – respond to inequity.

Racial privilege means that Whites' life chances and outcomes are better than they would be if they happened to be another race (McIntosh, 1989). Thus, racial privilege is not determined by idiosyncratic life circumstances. Rather racial privilege is either present or absent as a function of group membership: Whites enjoy privileges due to their race, regardless of the difficulty or ease of their particular life circumstances. Whites suffer hardships, and sometimes greater hardships than particular minorities; however, Whites' non-racial hardships are irrelevant to racial privilege. One might even argue that racial privilege manifests most clearly when it shields White victims of hardship from the worst possibilities. For instance, joblessness is less likely to lead to homelessness, crimes are less likely to result in jail time, and illness is less likely to result in death for Whites compared to minorities (Mustard, 2001; Thomas, Meschede, Mann, Boguslaw, & Shapiro, 2014; Wong, Shapiro, Boscardin, & Ettner, 2002).

However, claiming personal life hardships may help Whites manage the threatening possibility that they benefit from privilege. To

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the extent that they can perceive their *personal* lives as having been more difficult, they might be able to blunt the negative implications of attributions to group-level privilege. We reason that people may erroneously feel that experiencing hardships proves that external causes, such as systemic racial privilege, did not help them along; they might reason that the more difficult their lives have been, the less racial privilege applies to them personally, even if their group as a whole benefits from privilege.

It is ironic that exposing Whites to evidence of their group privileges might cause them to claim more personal life hardships — both because these claims defy objective evidence, and because they are in fact irrelevant to racial privilege. Furthermore, these motivated beliefs in personal hardship likely have both individual and societal consequences. For instance, if people think they have suffered hardships, and thus that they have not *personally* benefitted from privilege, then they may be reticent to endure personal costs associated with policies designed to reduce inequity (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007) — a potential consequence that makes understanding the experiences of those on the advantaged side of inequity all the more important.

## 1. Motivated responses to privilege

Being exposed to evidence of privilege is an aversive experience that elicits self-protective reactions (Branscombe, 1998; Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006; Lowery et al., 2007; Rosette & Tost, 2013; see also Kunda, 1990). For instance, when men are told that their group experiences more favorable hiring than do women, men respond by claiming that men as a group are actually discriminated against instead (Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe, & Rothschild, 2012). We argue that Whites may manage the threat of racial privilege by pointing out personal disadvantages they have experienced in their lives.

Prior work has demonstrated that members of privileged groups feel better about themselves when instructed to think about their group's disadvantages (Branscombe, 1998), suggesting that thinking about hardship in the context of in-group privilege is restorative. Despite people's motivations and efforts to maintain rosy and even exaggerated views of their lives (Cummins & Nistico, 2002), they might claim increased life hardships in response to threatening evidence of racial privilege. We suggest that Whites respond to evidence of racial privilege by claiming a hard-knock life.

We hypothesize that claiming hardships allows Whites to deny racial privilege extends to them *personally* while accepting its existence for the *group* as a whole. If people believe that racial privilege entails a lack of hardship, then the presence of hardship would signal an absence of personal privilege. By claiming life hardships, Whites can protect their sense of self from threat associated with racial privilege. How can outcomes be undeserved, how can privilege have offered personal benefits, when life has been so hard?

## 2. Current research

We test the hypothesis that exposure to evidence of White privilege leads Whites to claim more personal hardships. That is, they perceive their own lives as *worse*, rather than better, when exposed to evidence of White privilege (Experiments 1a and 1b). We posit this response occurs as a motivated response to threat to the self. Self-affirmation is a well-established procedure for protecting individuals from threats to the self (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). If Whites claim hardship in response to a threat to the self, affirmation should weaken or eliminate the effect of evidence of privilege on hardship claims. Furthermore, we suggest claiming personal life hardships serves to help deny *personal* privilege, even though such claims do not necessarily challenge the existence of group-level privilege. We predict affirmation will reduce claims of hardship, and increase participants' beliefs that they have personally benefitted from privilege

(Experiment 2). Finally, we expect increased acceptance of personal privilege to be associated with greater support for policies intended to alleviate inequities (Experiment 2).

## 3. Experiments 1a and 1b

In Experiments 1a and 1b, we investigate whether individuals claim increased life hardships after being exposed to evidence of White privilege using a two condition (White Privilege, No Privilege) between-participants design. We expect those in the White Privilege condition to claim more life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition. We present methods and results for both Experiment 1a and Experiment 1b together.

### 3.1. Methods

#### 3.1.1. Participants

Adult volunteers from a national online subject pool (Amazon's Mechanical Turk) were paid \$1.00 for participating. All participants were adult U.S. citizens who had previously self-identified as White/European-American. 94 (55 female; age  $M = 34.31$ ,  $SD = 11.64$  years) participated in Experiment 1a; 91 (47 female; age  $M = 32.81$ ,  $SD = 11.21$  years) participated in Experiment 1b.

#### 3.1.2. Procedure

Participants completed two ostensibly unrelated surveys, the first regarding beliefs about inequality in America and the second about childhood memories. Participants were randomly assigned to either the White Privilege (1a:  $n = 54$ ; 1b:  $n = 49$ ) or the No Privilege (1a:  $n = 40$ ; 1b:  $n = 42$ ) condition.<sup>1</sup>

In the White Privilege condition, participants read instructions asking them to think about inequality in America as they took the survey, followed by a paragraph about Whites' advantages in American society (adapted from Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012):

*In the last half of this century, Americans have given considerable attention to matters of racial inequality. Despite increased attention to the issue, most social scientists agree that, even today, White Americans enjoy many privileges that Black Americans do not. White Americans are advantaged in the domains of academics, housing, healthcare, jobs, and more compared to Black Americans.*

Participants in the No Privilege condition read only the instructions, which said that they would be asked about American inequality.<sup>2</sup> Afterward, participants completed questions measuring belief in White privilege.

Upon entering the second survey, described as investigating childhood memories, participants completed questions measuring life hardships, along with filler items about their childhood and adult life (e.g., "How many times did you move cities while growing up?"). Finally, participants reported demographic information.

#### 3.1.3. Measures

*Belief in White privilege* was measured with five items (e.g., "White people have certain advantages that minorities do not have in this

<sup>1</sup> We recruited 150 participants per experiment. Participants in a third, "Black Disadvantage" condition did not respond consistently across Experiments 1a and 1b. Please see supplementary online material for additional detail.

<sup>2</sup> To assess Whites' sensitivity to evidence of White privilege, we conducted a pilot test of our primary manipulation. Belief in White privilege did not differ by condition,  $t(184) = .49$ ,  $p > .62$ . However, those in the White Privilege condition ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) perceived that others believe in White privilege more than did those in the No Privilege condition ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $t(184) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ . Previous research suggests exposure to evidence of White privilege evokes threat among Whites in multiply-determined ways (Leach et al., 2006; Lowery et al., 2007, 2012). The pilot test in conjunction with previous literature suggests Whites are sensitive to evidence of White privilege. Please see supplementary online material for additional detail.

society";  $\alpha_{1a} = .93$ ;  $\alpha_{1b} = .95$ ; Swim & Miller, 1999). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

Life hardships was measured with five items ("My life has been full of hardships"; "There have been many struggles I have suffered"; "My life has had many obstacles"; "My life has been easy" (reverse scored); and "I have had many difficulties in life that I could not overcome";  $\alpha_{1a} = .86$ ;  $\alpha_{1b} = .90$ ). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

### 3.2. Results

See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables, and Table 2 for means and standard deviations of variables by condition. Across experiments, we found no moderating effects of gender or political ideology. We therefore do not discuss these variables further.

#### 3.2.1. Life hardships

As hypothesized, participants in the White Privilege condition claimed more life hardships than participants in the No Privilege condition, Experiment 1a,  $t(92) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = .49$ , 95% CI [.10, 1.10].

We replicated this effect in Experiment 1b. Participants in the White Privilege condition claimed more life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition,  $t(89) = 1.93$ ,  $p = .057$ ,  $d = .41$ , 95% CI [−.02, 1.16].

#### 3.2.2. Belief in White privilege

As hypothesized, belief in White privilege did not differ by condition in either experiment. Experiment 1a:  $t(92) = -.35$ ,  $p > .72$ , 95% CI [−.70, .49]. Experiment 1b:  $t(89) = .42$ ,  $p > .67$ , 95% CI [−.79, .51].

### 3.3. Discussion

Experiments 1a and 1b suggest that Whites respond to evidence of White privilege by claiming more hardships. In both experiments, we found that Whites exposed to evidence of White privilege claimed more hardships than those not exposed to evidence of privilege. Consistent with the possibility that Whites claim life hardships to deny that privilege extends to them personally, rather than to deny the existence of White privilege per se, White privilege beliefs did not differ by condition. In Experiment 2, we sought to further test the hypothesis that exposure to evidence of White privilege causes Whites to claim hardships, because privilege threatens their sense of self.

## 4. Experiment 2

If increased hardship claims are motivated by threats to the self, then a self-affirmation should reduce this effect (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Experiment 2 tests this possibility using a 2 (White Privilege, No Privilege)  $\times$  2 (Affirmation, Control) between-participants design.

In Experiments 1a and 1b, we found that Whites exposed to evidence of White privilege claim more *personal* life hardships, but do not deny the existence of White privilege at the *group* level. We theorized that increased hardship claims may serve to help individuals deny the extension of privilege to *themselves*. Importantly, these beliefs

**Table 1**  
Variable means, standard deviations, and correlations (Experiments 1a and 1b).

Variable	Mean (standard deviation)	Correlations (r)
1. Life hardships	a. 4.16 (1.23) b. 4.27 (1.43)	–
2. Belief in White privilege	a. 4.43 (1.43) b. 4.45 (1.54)	a. .02 b. −.13

a. Experiment 1a.  
b. Experiment 1b.

**Table 2**  
Variable means and standard deviations by condition (Experiments 1a and 1b).

Experiment Condition	Experiment 1a		Experiment 1b	
	No Privilege	White Privilege	No Privilege	White Privilege
Variable				
1. Life hardships	3.82 (1.20)	4.41 (1.20)	3.96 (1.28)	4.53 (1.52)
2. Belief in White privilege	4.50 (1.44)	4.39 (1.44)	4.38 (1.44)	4.52 (1.64)

Mean (Standard Deviation).

might also diminish support for redistributive policies that can alleviate group inequity. For instance, people's failure to recognize positive external influences on their life outcomes erodes their support for redistributive policies (Bryan, Dweck, Ross, Kay, & Mislavsky, 2009; Savani & Rattan, 2012). Thus, those who claim hardships and deny benefitting when exposed to evidence of racial privilege might show less support for policies that could alleviate inequity. In short, feeling one has personally experienced hardships may harden one against the hardships suffered by others. We expect that hardship claims should be associated with diminished belief in personal privilege, which in turn should be associated with diminished support for policies like affirmative action. We test this possibility in Experiment 2 by adding measures of both belief in *personal* privilege and affirmative action support.

### 4.1. Method

#### 4.1.1. Participants

234 adult volunteers from a national online pool maintained by Stanford University were paid \$5 for participating. All participants were U.S. citizens who had previously self-identified as White/European-American (165 female; age  $M = 38.59$ ,  $SD = 12.21$  years).

#### 4.1.2. Procedure

Participants first read one of two randomly assigned prompts. Those in the Affirmation condition ( $n = 106$ ) were asked to rank the personal importance of each of 12 values that the experimenter provided, and then write about why their 1st ranked value was important to them (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Control participants ( $n = 128$ ), were simply asked to "Please click continue."<sup>4</sup> It is important that affirmation occur before participants begin engaging in self-defensive rationalizations (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Thus, we had participants complete the affirmation phase of the experiment before being exposed to evidence of privilege.

Participants then read instructions for the experiment, which said that they would be asked about American inequality. Those randomly assigned to the No Privilege condition ( $n = 119$ ) saw only these instructions, while those randomly assigned to the White Privilege condition ( $n = 115$ ) read the White Privilege paragraph from Experiment 1a. Participants then completed questions measuring belief in White privilege.

Upon entering the second survey, ostensibly about childhood memories, participants completed questions measuring life hardships, belief in personal privilege, and affirmative action support, along with filler items about their childhood and adult life (as in Experiment 1a). Finally, participants completed demographic information.

<sup>3</sup> In the Affirmation condition, 64% of participants selected "relations with family and friends" as their most important value. Value selection did not differ between the White Privilege and No Privilege conditions,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.09$ ,  $p > .29$ .

<sup>4</sup> We recruited 500 participants. We included an additional control condition "Non-Affirmation" in which participants wrote why their 9th ranked value may be important to *someone else*. Recent work has suggested potential problems with this control technique (e.g., Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010; Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Given our hypotheses regard comparisons between Affirmation and Control, we report only participants from the Affirmation or Control conditions in the main text. Results persist when Non-Affirmation is included; please see supplementary online material for additional detail.



#### 4.1.3. Measures

*Belief in White privilege* was measured as in Experiment 1a ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

*Life hardships* was measured as in Experiment 1a ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

*Belief in personal privilege* was measured using three items (“I have had some advantages in my life”; “Some of my success has been due to privilege”; and “I have probably benefitted from being White”;  $\alpha = .73$ ) with 7-point response scales (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

*Affirmative action support* was measured using five items that discussed different styles of affirmative action policies (e.g., “A ‘tie-breaker’ policy in which a minority applicant is selected over a White applicant when the two applicants are equally qualified”; “A policy through which minority group members can receive supplemental training to prepare them for the selection process. However, minority group status is not considered at the hiring stage”;  $\alpha = .75$ ; Lowery et al., 2007) with 7-point response scales (1 = Strongly Oppose; 7 = Strongly Support).

#### 4.2. Results

See Table 3 for means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables, and Table 4 for means and standard deviations of variables by condition.

##### 4.2.1. Life hardships

We regressed life hardships on affirmation, privilege, and their interaction. There were no main effects of either affirmation,  $F(3, 230) = .33$ ,  $p > .56$ , or privilege,  $F(3, 230) = .17$ ,  $p > .68$ , on life hardship claims. However, as hypothesized, the privilege and affirmation manipulations significantly interacted to predict life hardships,  $F(3, 230) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ .

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the White Privilege condition, participants who were first affirmed claimed marginally fewer hardships than those who were not affirmed,  $t(230) = -1.82$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $d = .35$ , 95% CI  $[-.89, .04]$ . Among participants in the No Privilege condition, there was no significant difference in life hardships between those who were affirmed and those who were not affirmed,  $t(230) = .99$ ,  $p > .32$ , 95% CI  $[-.22, .68]$ .

Replicating effects from Experiments 1a and 1b, among participants in the Control condition, those exposed to evidence of privilege claimed marginally more life hardships than those not exposed to evidence of privilege,  $t(230) = 1.65$ ,  $p = .10$ ,  $d = .29$ , 95% CI  $[-.07, .80]$ . Among participants in the Affirmation condition, there was no significant difference in life hardships between those exposed to evidence of privilege and those not exposed,  $t(230) = -1.20$ ,  $p > .23$ , 95% CI  $[-.77, .19]$ .

##### 4.2.2. Belief in personal privilege

We regressed belief in personal privilege on affirmation, privilege, and their interaction. There were no main effects of either affirmation,  $F(3, 230) = .96$ ,  $p > .32$ , or privilege,  $F(3, 230) = .04$ ,  $p > .83$ , on belief in personal privilege. However, the privilege and affirmation manipulations marginally interacted to predict belief in personal privilege,  $F(3,$

230) = 3.12,  $p = .079$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , which mirrored the general pattern of the interaction on life hardships.

As hypothesized, decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the White Privilege condition, participants who were first affirmed expressed significantly higher belief in personal privilege than did those who were not affirmed,  $t(230) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = .35$ , 95% CI  $[-.03, .92]$ . Among participants in the No Privilege condition, there was no significant difference in belief in personal privilege between those who were affirmed and those who were not affirmed,  $t(230) = -.54$ ,  $p > .59$ , 95% CI  $[-.55, .31]$ .

Among participants in the Control condition, there was no difference in belief in personal privilege between those exposed and those not exposed to evidence of privilege,  $t(230) = -1.34$ ,  $p > .18$ , 95% CI  $[-.71, .14]$ . There was also no difference among participants in the Affirmation condition,  $t(230) = 1.17$ ,  $p > .24$ , 95% CI  $[-.19, .75]$ .

##### 4.2.3. Affirmative action support

We regressed affirmative action support on affirmation, privilege, and their interaction. There were no main effects of either affirmation,  $F(3, 230) = .02$ ,  $p > .88$ , or privilege,  $F(3, 230) = .01$ ,  $p > .93$ , on affirmative action support. There was no interactive effect,  $F(3, 230) = 1.80$ ,  $p > .18$ .

##### 4.2.4. Belief in White privilege

We regressed belief in White privilege on affirmation, privilege, and their interaction. Replicating Experiments 1a and 1b, there were no main effects of either affirmation,  $F(3, 230) = .16$ ,  $p > .69$ , or privilege,  $F(3, 230) = .00$ ,  $p > .99$ , on belief in White privilege. There was also no interactive effect,  $F(3, 230) = .85$ ,  $p > .35$ .

##### 4.2.5. Path analysis and mediation model

Belief in White privilege correlated highly with both belief in personal privilege and affirmative action support, and belief in White privilege has been shown to affect affirmative action support (Lowery et al., 2007). Therefore, we control for this variable throughout the following analyses, although results persist without this control.

We hypothesized that affirmation and privilege would interact to influence life hardships, which in turn would influence belief in personal privilege, which would influence affirmative action support. Although there was no direct interactive effect of our conditions on affirmative action support, indirect effects may exist in the absence of direct effects, particularly when they involve multiple steps or predictors (Hayes, 2009; Kenny & Judd, 2014). Thus, we fitted several models using a RAM path method in the OpenMx package for R (Neale et al., 2015).

First, we treated our data as a single group (no participants had missing data) and fitted a model that included a deviance-score interaction term for privilege and affirmation conditions (Kline & Dunn, 2000). We specified our hypothesized model using unidirectional paths to test the indirect effect of interest: privilege  $\times$  affirmation  $\rightarrow$  life hardships  $\rightarrow$  belief in personal privilege  $\rightarrow$  affirmative action support (see Fig. 1). We also included unidirectional paths from belief in White privilege (as a control variable) to belief in personal privilege and to affirmative action support, to see whether belief in personal privilege exerts an effect on affirmative action support above and beyond belief in White privilege. Finally, we allowed the error of each variable to vary freely.

Results demonstrated that our model did not differ significantly from the data,  $\chi^2(5) = 7.28$ ,  $p = .20$ , indicating good fit. In addition, three other indexes also indicated good fit: RMSEA = .04, 95% CI  $[-.00, .12]$ ; CFI = .99; TLI = .98 (see Fig. 1). However, a model that reversed the positions of life hardships and belief in personal privilege differed significantly from the data, suggesting poor fit,  $\chi^2(5) = 15.12$ ,  $p = .01$ .

We further explored the specific path coefficients in our primary model of interest. We found that the interaction of affirmation and privilege was negatively associated with life hardships,  $b = -.16$ ,  $SE = .08$ , 95% CI  $[-.32, -.002]$ . In turn, life hardships was negatively associated with belief in personal privilege,  $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.24,$

**Table 3**  
Variable means, standard deviations, and correlations (Experiment 2).

Variable	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Correlations ( <i>r</i> ): 1 2 3		
1. Life hardships	4.16 (1.25)	–		
2. Belief in personal privilege	4.29 (1.22)	–.24**	–	
3. Affirmative action support	4.19 (1.40)	–.05	.44**	–
4. Belief in White privilege	3.33 (1.12)	–.13*	.66**	.45**

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**  
Variable means and standard deviations by condition (Experiment 2).

Condition	Control		Affirmation	
	No Privilege	White Privilege	No Privilege	White Privilege
<i>Variable</i>				
1. Life hardships	4.02 (1.39)	4.38 (1.07)	4.24 (1.18)	3.95 (1.34)
2. Belief in personal privilege	4.37 (1.22)	4.08 (1.21)	4.25 (1.11)	4.53 (1.33)
3. Affirmation action support	3.40 (1.17)	3.24 (1.08)	3.23 (1.53)	3.46 (1.13)
4. Belief in White privilege	4.33 (1.48)	4.08 (1.30)	4.17 (1.53)	4.27 (1.63)

Mean (Standard Deviation).

–.06]. Finally, belief in personal privilege was positively associated with affirmative action support,  $b = .22$ ,  $SE = .07$ , 95% CI [.09, .36].<sup>5</sup>

We supplemented our path analysis by using mediation tests to assess the specific indirect paths we predicted within our model. We have hypothesized that Whites may use claims of hardship to help them deny having personally benefitted from privilege. Supporting this claim, we found that the interactive effect of affirmation and privilege on belief in personal privilege was mediated by life hardships, 95% CI [.002, .06] (5000 bootstraps; PROCESS, Hayes, 2013).

Further, we have suggested that belief in personal privilege should influence support for affirmative action policies: believing that group privilege does not extend to one personally should harden one against redistribution. Supporting this hypothesis, we found a marginal indirect effect of affirmation and privilege on affirmative action support via belief in personal privilege, 95% CI [–.002, .06]. However, there was no significant indirect effect of affirmation and privilege on affirmative action support via life hardships, 95% CI [–.03, .02], which suggests increased claims of life hardship alone does not affect policy support. Rather, life hardships may affect policy support to the extent such hardship claims affect belief that group privilege extends to oneself personally. Supporting this hypothesis, we found a significant two-step indirect effect of affirmation and privilege on affirmative action support via life hardships then via belief in personal privilege, 95% CI [.001, .02].

#### 4.3. Discussion

Experiment 2 extended our findings, suggesting that people claim more life hardships in response to evidence of in-group privilege because such information is threatening to their sense of self. When self-affirmed, Whites no longer responded to evidence of privilege by claiming more life hardships; in fact, affirmation reversed this effect, leading Whites to claim fewer life hardships when exposed to evidence of privilege. Furthermore, Whites' claims of life hardships mediated their denials of personal privilege, supporting our hypothesis that hardship claims help people deny they personally benefit from privilege – that White privilege extends to themselves. Importantly, these denials of personal privilege were in turn associated with diminished support for affirmative action policies – policies that could help alleviate racial inequity.

#### 5. Internal meta-analysis

To test the robustness of our primary effects, we conducted an internal meta-analysis, comparing life hardships between the No Privilege and White Privilege conditions across all three experiments ( $N = 313$ ). We first  $z$ -scored life hardships for each participant within each experiment. We then combined this data across all three experiments,

<sup>5</sup> In a multigroup approach (Lomax, 1983), we allowed the privilege-to-life hardships path to vary across the two affirmation groups (Control, Affirmation), which significantly improved model fit compared to a model constraining these paths to equality,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .046$ . In the Control condition, privilege was positively associated with life hardships,  $b = .18$ ,  $SE = .11$ , 95% CI [–.04, .40], but this relationship was negative in the Affirmation condition,  $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .12$ , 95% CI [–.38, .09].

taking only the scores for those in the Control condition in Experiment 2. Results revealed that, across all three experiments, those in the White Privilege condition ( $n = 168$ ,  $M = .18$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) claimed more life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition ( $n = 145$ ,  $M = -.20$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $t(311) = 3.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .39$ , 95% CI [.16, .60]. An inverse variance meta-analytic approach revealed similar results, with those in the White Privilege condition claiming more life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition,  $z = 3.00$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = .34$ , 95% CI [.12, .57]. Additionally, we found no difference in belief in White privilege for those in the White Privilege condition ( $M = -.02$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) compared to those in the No Privilege condition ( $M = .02$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $p > .69$ , 95% CI [–.27, .18]. Again, an inverse variance approach revealed similar results,  $z = -.39$ ,  $p > .69$ ,  $d = -.04$ , 95% CI [–.27, .18]. Those exposed to evidence of privilege claimed more life hardships than those who were not exposed to evidence of privilege, despite no differences in beliefs about the existence of White privilege for the group generally.

#### 6. General discussion

Three experiments provide evidence that Whites claim increased life hardships when exposed to evidence of racial privilege, that these claims are motivated by threat to self, and that these claims help Whites deny that racial privilege extends to themselves. We found that claiming hardships helps individuals discount the role of systemic privilege in their *personal* lives, despite accepting that *group*-level privilege exists. Importantly, this discounting of personal privilege is ultimately associated with diminished support for affirmative action policies – policies that could help reduce privilege and increase racial equity.

Expanding inequality and changing demographics have helped put evidence of racial privilege in the spotlight of social and political debate (e.g., Blow, 2014; Santora & Fisher, 2014). Policy interventions and awareness campaigns have been promoted, and yet, negative backlash among Whites persists. For instance, Whites often believe they are discriminated against, sometimes believing they suffer even more discrimination than Blacks (Norton & Sommers, 2011; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). As we show, such backlash often references personal hardships Whites have faced as individuals, and the risks of such backlash include reduced support for policies intended to alleviate racial inequity.

Our work suggests that privilege reduction efforts might need to focus not only on convincing or educating advantaged group members about privilege, but also on reducing the feelings of self-threat this information induces. Another approach may be to address cognitive fallacies and misunderstandings of privilege: privilege requires a comparison to someone of another group membership with the same life circumstances. The existence of hardships does not reduce racial privilege, since racial privilege entails comparison to someone of a different race with equivalent hardships. People may erroneously think privilege entails complete ease in life and that the presence of any hardships denotes an absence of privilege. Future work should explore ways to correct these fallacies.

Our work further reveals the motivated nature of hardship claims in response to evidence of privilege, as supported by the fact that self-affirmation reverses Whites' hardship claims. While we focus on threat

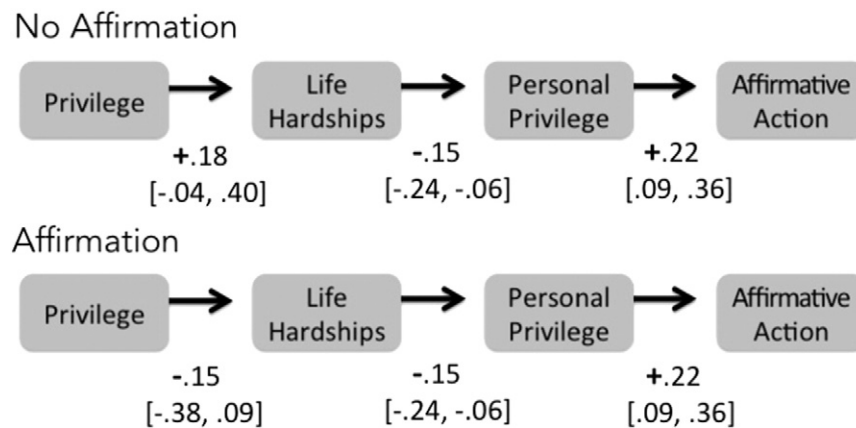


Fig. 1. Path analysis model (Experiment 2). *b* and 95% confidence intervals.

to self here, it is also possible that threat to social structure, including the racial hierarchy, also motivates hardship claims. For instance, Whites may claim increased hardships to maintain not only a positive sense of self, but also the material benefits associated with racial privilege. Whites' claims of hardship might also serve to legitimize the racial advantages they enjoy, and thereby justify a system that benefits their group.

Our results suggest that people may distinguish between group and personal privilege. However, we found these variables to correlate; in fact, it seems a prerequisite to believe some existence of group-level privilege in order to believe that privilege extends to oneself. And, although people may be able to strategically separate group from personal privilege beliefs, it does not mean this is always the case. Future work should further explore the nature of this relationship, and how it manifests across outcomes, such as group versus personal hardships or support for group-relevant versus personally-relevant policies (cf. Crosby, 1984; Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990).

We do not find that exposure to evidence of group privilege increases Whites' belief in group privilege. We suggest that Whites may be declining to report higher levels of belief in group privilege when exposed to evidence of such privilege in order to manage the threat of privilege. Just as reporting diminished belief after exposure to evidence is a form of privilege denial, so too might the insensitivity of Whites' reports of group privilege reflect privilege denial. We find that Whites manage evidence of privilege by denying personal-level privilege, but future work should continue to explore the processes and moderators underlying Whites' denials of both group-level and personal-level privilege.

The current work demonstrates that individuals exhibit a previously unknown response to evidence that they benefit from group inequity: people may accept that in-group privilege exists, but change their perceptions of their own lives in order to deny the role of systemic advantages in their success. In particular, when provided evidence that their group has benefitted from privilege, Whites suggest that they have instead suffered the hard-knock life by claiming increased personal life hardships. This may serve to bolster their sense of legitimacy and reduce the negative attributional implications of privilege (e.g., Feather, 1992; Knowles & Lowery, 2012). Such a response has the potential to erode acknowledgement of racial inequity, and support for policies designed to reduce such inequity. To successfully address inequity, understanding the privileged is likely as important as understanding the underprivileged.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.06.008>.

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