

I Ain't No Fortunate One: On the Motivated Denial of Class Privilege

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Invisibility makes privilege powerful. Especially when it remains unexposed, privilege perpetuates inequity by giving unearned advantages to certain groups over others. However, recent social movements (e.g., Occupy) attempt to expose class-based privilege, threatening its invisibility. Across 8 experiments, we show that beneficiaries of class privilege respond to such exposure by increasing their claims of personal hardships and hard work, to cover privilege in a veneer of meritocracy. Experiments 1a–c show that when people are provided evidence of their own class privilege, they claim to have suffered more personal life hardships. Experiment 2 suggests that these claims are driven in part by threats to self-regard. Experiment 3 finds that such self-defense is motivated specifically by a desire to attribute positive outcomes to the self (i.e., sense of personal merit). When given the chance to first bolster their sense of personal merit, those benefitting from privilege no longer claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege. Experiments 4 and 5 further suggest self-concerns are at play: only self-relevant privilege evokes defensive responses, and self-affirmation reduces hardship claims more than does system-affirmation. Finally, Experiment 6 suggests that people claim hardships because they believe these imply personal merit on their part. Preventing the privileged from claiming hardship leads them to claim increased effort in the workplace and to increase effort on a difficult task. Overall, results suggest that even when those benefitting from class privileges are confronted with evidence of their “invisible knapsack,” ideologies of personal merit help them cover the privileges of class once again.

Keywords: inequality / inequity, social class, privilege, competitive victimhood, meritocracy

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It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son, son.


It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one . . .

—from “Fortunate Son” by Credence Clearwater Revival

Although social class pervades our everyday lives (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), for many in the United States, class feels invisible. For instance, Americans are consistently inaccurate when categorizing themselves and others in terms of class (Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011; see also Cruces, Perez-Truglia, & Tetaz, 2013). In fact, one-third of those with annual incomes greater than \$150,000 (the

top 5% in the United States) self-identify as middle-class rather than upper-class (Pew Research Center, 2008, 2015). Further, class segregation increasingly characterizes Americans' daily lives, with the wealthy especially less likely to interact with those of different class backgrounds (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014). Additionally, compared with people in many other countries, Americans are less likely to experience class-consciousness or to believe class matters for their daily experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2008, 2015).

However, the effects of social class on outcomes and opportunities are stark. While some of these social class gaps might be described as inequalities (e.g., different outcomes), many of these gaps are better characterized as inequities (e.g., outcomes disproportionate to inputs). For instance, while those in the top 10% of household incomes can purchase more luxury goods than those with less income, those in the top 10% also receive better health care outcomes and education opportunities than their lower class peers, even when served by the same institutions (Elo, 2009; Reardon, 2011). Students whose parents have a college degree are more likely to succeed in college, even when their academic skills are otherwise the same as first-generation students' (Ishitani, 2006; Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2020). Furthermore, those who come from elite university backgrounds are more likely than their equally qualified state university peers to secure prestigious

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jobs (Collins, 2019; Rivera, 2015). In short, social class provides privilege: those at the upper end of the income and education distributions garner unearned advantages, based on their class status alone.¹

The relative invisibility of social class may allow those benefitting from class privilege to experience their privilege as earned, rather than inequitable. For instance, inequitable health and education outcomes can be claimed as the result of better habits and superior intelligence, rather than inequitable access (see also Belmi, Neale, Reiff, & Ulfe, 2020). University admission and selection for prestigious positions can be claimed as evidence of personal effort, rather than evidence of inequitable legacy status, monetary donations, and network connections (see also Varsity Blues scandal; Grusky, Hall, & Markus, 2019). As long as unearned advantages that facilitated success remain cloaked, privileged individuals can experience such achievements as definitive evidence of personal merit. Invisibility allows those benefitting from their social class status to claim positive outcomes as evidence of merit, when outcomes were in fact catalyzed by class privilege.

While research has explored the causes and consequences of such social class gaps, little work has considered how the class privileged think about class-based inequity. However, the invisibility of these privileges is increasingly threatened. For instance, social movements across the globe (e.g., ¡Evade! protests in Chile; Yellow Vest movement in France; Occupy movement worldwide), focus explicitly on the loopholes and get-out-of-jail free cards enjoyed by those in the upper classes (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). Indeed, populist political movements around the world have focused on the unearned benefits of the social class elite, whether stemming from education credentials, income, occupation, or family name.

Here, we theorize that evidence of class privilege threatens self-regard for those benefitting from such privilege, because it challenges their belief that they have earned their outcomes. We hypothesize that, in response to evidence they benefit from class privilege, individuals will claim to have suffered greater life hardships and to have put forth more effort, to protect their self-regard. Our predictions suggest that individuals have a lay theory of privilege that equate it with the absence of effort and assume it is incompatible with hardship. Logically, however, neither of these are true; one can work incredibly hard or suffer significant hardships *and* benefit from privilege relative to others. In the present work, we aim to offer insight into individuals' understanding of class privilege.

Social Class Inequity: Exploring Class as Privilege

The psychological study of social class has boomed in recent years (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens et al., 2014), documenting and explaining how class differences affect people's models of self (Phillips et al., 2020; Piff, 2014), intergroup behavior (Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Côté et al., 2013; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013), and cognition and decision-making (Belmi et al., 2020; Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012), among other phenomena. However, while recent work has expanded scientific understanding of the psychological consequences of social class, there is relatively less work on people's awareness of their own social class and their management of this information (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, &

Richeson, 2017; Martin & Côté, 2019). Especially neglected in psychological study has been the experience of those in the upper class and how they regard their class status.

One perspective common in other social sciences (e.g., Fiske & Markus, 2012; Rivera, 2015), but relatively less clear in psychology, is the theorizing of social class as a dimension of *inequity*, rather than *inequality*. Recent forays into the area suggest that people may be both aware and threatened by the idea that class privilege confers unearned benefits; that is, social class can be associated in individuals' mind with inequity, rather than just inequality. For instance, those from wealthier backgrounds downplay their upper-class status when they want to get along with someone from a lower-class background (Côté et al., 2017; Swencionis & Fiske, 2018). Furthermore, those most committed to the ideology of merit work to legitimize social class differences the most (Chow & Galak, 2012; Major et al., 2002; McCoy & Major, 2007). These findings dovetail with work in the intergroup and justice literatures, which have explored responses to different forms of inequity. Thus, these literatures provide instructive models for the study of class inequity. As we review below, together these literatures suggest that beneficiaries of class privilege should be threatened when that privilege is exposed.

Intergroup Perspectives on Inequity

Work from an intergroup perspective finds that privileged group members respond defensively to evidence that their group benefits from inequity (Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). For instance, after learning about unfair group advantages, Whites and men increase claims that their groups in fact suffer discrimination (Norton & Sommers, 2011; Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe, & Rothschild, 2012; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014; see also Branscombe, 1998; Phillips & Lowery, 2015; Rosette & Tost, 2013). Indeed, this work suggests that much of the "invisibility" of race and gender inequity is in fact the result of privileged group members' motivated efforts to cover inequity (Knowles et al., 2014; McIntosh, 1989; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Further, work from intergroup literatures finds that the framing of group inequity shapes defensive responses. For example, when Whites' or men's advantaged status is explicitly revealed, they are more likely to take either defensive or corrective action, than when the same inequity is framed in terms of racial minorities' or women's disadvantage (Knowles et al., 2014). Advantage-framed inequity likely increases the sense of personal relevance to those benefitting from inequity, thus heightening engagement responses (Lowery & Wout, 2010; Tropp & Barlow, 2018).

The bulk of the work on group inequity explains these responses as motivated by different forms of threat: threats to the group's esteem (group esteem-threat), to the group's power (dominance-threat), or to the stability of the system (system-threat; for reviews, see Knowles et al., 2014; Rosette & Koval, 2018; see also

¹ Privilege associated with group membership extends to all members of the group; for example, although minorities and women might suffer racial and gender disadvantages, members of the upper class continue to benefit from *class* privilege regardless of their race or gender (McIntosh, 1989; see also Phillips & Lowery, 2015, 2018). That is, the presence of class privilege must be assessed by comparing two people of different social class status who are otherwise the same along nonclass dimensions (see also Rosette & Tost, 2013).

Branscombe, 1998; Iyer, Leach, & Pedersen, 2004; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). For instance, when evidence of unearned outcomes threatens Whites' group image, they respond by endorsing modern racist beliefs (group esteem-threat; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007). By trying to legitimize their advantages, group members can counteract collective guilt and restore group pride (e.g., Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008). Similarly, work using a social dominance theory lens shows that when Whites' dominance is threatened by evidence of unearned advantage, they engage in strategic defense meant to stabilize the group's dominant position in the hierarchy (dominance-threat; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Jun, Lowery, & Guillory, 2017). Furthermore, work from system justification theory shows that when the legitimacy of the system is called into question, people defend the status quo to bolster their sense of stability (system-threat; Jost & Major, 2001; Kraus & Callaghan, 2014).

Together, these findings suggest that to the extent class *inequality* is experienced as group *inequity*, those benefitting from class privilege should feel threatened. In turn, they should respond by trying to undermine and cover evidence that their positive outcomes are undeserved.

Alternative Perspectives on Inequity

Social class inequity differs from race and gender inequity in at least one important way: social class does not engender strong ingroup identification in U.S. contexts. Social class can depend on several indicators, including education and income, which provides more degrees of freedom in self-definition than do current understandings of race and gender (although these too are evolving; Cohen, Shin, Liu, Ondish, & Kraus, 2017). This allows for greater flexibility in class categorization, thus making class groups less entitative. As described, previous work finds that privilege defense is provoked by concern for group esteem or group dominance, but this work focuses on race and gender inequity. In comparison, the relative lack of entitativity for social class groups might mean that individuals privileged by class are less susceptible to threats linked to their group than are those advantaged by race or gender (Knowles et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that members of advantaged groups also experience individual threat associated with privilege. For instance, even when collective threat is evoked, one defensive maneuver used by Whites is to deny *personal* benefit, while acknowledging unearned group benefit, thus protecting the self rather than the collective (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Additionally, when racial inequity is specifically framed as individual inequity—precluding distancing from the group as a defensive technique—Whites are especially likely to make individual reparations (Rosette & Koval, 2018).

Together, this work shows that when facing evidence of their privilege, people are likely managing *both* self-regard and group related concerns (R.M. Brown & Craig, 2019; Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Rosette & Tost, 2013). Beyond the desire for positive group esteem and secure group dominance, the desire for positive self-regard is also powerful. As a result, even without strong group identity, those benefitting from class privilege should experience evidence of their privilege as threatening to the self.

Self-Regard Shaped by Meritocracy

In present American contexts, meritocracy shapes the foundations of self-regard. Meritocracy requires that resources are allocated based on internal, relevant factors, and specifically *not* factors like group membership, parental status, or personal connections (Belmi, Phillips, Laurin, & Engstrom, 2020; Son Hing et al., 2011; Tomova Shakur & Phillips, 2020). Many Americans believe meritocracy both should be and is the rule by which social goods are distributed (Son Hing et al., 2011). This widespread acceptance of the ideology of meritocracy links self-regard to the belief that to deserve an outcome, individuals must have earned it (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Hastorf, Schneider, & Polefka, 1970; Jost & Kay, 2010; Knowles et al., 2014; McCoy & Major, 2007; Steele, 1988; Weiner, 1993).

If threats to self-regard, rooted in the ideology of meritocracy, are central to the experience of class privilege, then perspectives on inequity from justice literatures should be especially relevant. In comparison to intergroup work on inequity, justice perspectives on inequity often focus explicitly on the individual level. For instance, work on equity theory has classically demonstrated that people respond defensively to evidence that they *individually* benefit from unearned advantages (e.g., Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). The unfairness of inequity can increase uncertainty, and ultimately threaten individuals' sense that they deserve their outcomes (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). As such, inequity threatens self-regard. Thus, we theorize that people experience evidence of their unearned class advantages as a threat to the self.

We further suggest that evidence of class privilege will threaten self-regard via a threat to people's *sense of merit*—the belief that they have put in personal effort and hard work, and, thus, deserve positive self-regard (see “meritocratic threat”; Knowles et al., 2014). Evidence of class privilege demonstrates that many life outcomes are determined by factors not attributable to individuals' efforts alone, but are caused in part by systemic inequities that privilege some over others. Flying in the face of meritocratic prescriptions, evidence of privilege threatens recipients' self-regard by calling into question whether they deserve their successes (Iyer et al., 2004; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Miron et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Supporting this view, previous work has found that Whites who care deeply about merit are most threatened by evidence of racial privilege (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Knowles et al., 2014; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). All together, we suggest that when class privileges are exposed, those benefitting from class privilege should move to defend their sense of personal merit against this evidence of undeserved outcomes, in an attempt to protect their self-regard.

Merit Maneuvers to Restore Self-Regard

We expect the nature of the threat to self-regard should shape which defensive responses people use: responses to evidence of class privilege should be tailored to restoring a sense of personal merit. As such, the class privileged may rely specifically on merit relevant symbols to cover their privilege again. For example, one way to try to attenuate the existence of the tailwinds of advantage is to focus on the headwinds of hardship (see also competitive

victimhood; Young & Sullivan, 2016).² Claiming hardships may offer a path to restoring personal merit: the more people overcame en route to success, the more they might claim they deserved their success (Feather, 1992, 1999). For instance, classic work on attribution theory shows that people often exaggerate the difficulty of their tasks, in an attempt to make their success seem more attributable to personal effort (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; see also Branscombe, 1998; Davidai & Gilovich, 2016; Zuckerman, 1979). We suggest that those benefitting from class privilege may make similar attempts, claiming more life hardships when confronted with evidence of their privilege.

Indeed, previous work has found that Whites claim personal hardships (Phillips & Lowery, 2015) and that men engage in competitive victimhood (Sullivan et al., 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016), in response to evidence of racial or gender privilege. However, this work has not considered the case of social class, nor has it resolved the mechanisms underlying personal hardship claims. Whereas previous theorizing has demonstrated the utility of claiming that success required one to surmount obstacles, it has often been taken for granted that said obstacles were in some way relevant to the outcomes themselves (Feather, 1992, 1999; see also self-handicapping, Jones & Berglas, 1978). For instance, if the science test was difficult, then acing it is all the more impressive; but if the weather was especially harsh outside, this does not make stellar test performance any better. While previous work has demonstrated that people may be erroneous about the *degree* of hardship, and motivated to exaggerate, they often select *relevant* hardships. Here, however, we do not expect that people will parry privilege by claiming that their wealth made their success less likely. Rather, those benefitting from class privilege will use claims of even irrelevant life hardship in an attempt to suggest that they deserve their outcomes.

We suggest that this defensive strategy depends especially on the ideology of meritocracy. For instance, people may believe that hardship implies an increased role of personal merit in achieving outcomes; claiming *hardship* may become a convenient way to indirectly claim hard *work* and, thus, deserving. In fact, people judge others to be more moral when they have suffered more hardship, even when these hardships were irrelevant to the task at hand, or actually reduced moral success (Olivola, 2011; Schauberg & Mullen, 2017; Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011). To the extent people believe that hardship connotes personal merit, their own hardships might be used to imply they are a merited, and thus good, person. In short, because Americans support meritocratic ideals, personal responsibility for outcomes is likely especially important to positive self-regard; in turn, they may claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege.

Current Research

Making privilege visible forces beneficiaries to face their unearned advantages, and as a result, manage the implications for their experience of self. Thus, we first hypothesize that being exposed to evidence that they benefit from class privilege will lead individuals to claim more personal life hardships (Experiments 1a–c). Second, we hypothesize that such claims are motivated, at least in part, by self-concerns (Experiment 2). Third, we hypothesize that privilege provokes self-defense specifically because of meritocratic ideals that permeate American society. Thus, if people

have the chance to bolster their sense of personal merit in response to evidence of privilege, they should be less motivated to claim hardships (Experiment 3). Likewise, if evidence of privilege does not implicate the self or if the self is affirmed, then people should not need to make defensive claims (Experiments 4 and 5). Lastly, though we do not have a strong prediction regarding whether claims of hardship have the intended consequence, we test the possibility that claiming hardships in response to evidence of privilege may indeed be restorative, leading people to feel less need to claim or demonstrate their own effort (Experiment 6).

Hypothesis 1: Evidence of class privilege threatens self-regard, thus evoking self-defensive claims (hardship, effort).

Hypothesis 2: Evidence of class privilege specifically threatens individuals' sense of personal merit.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals use personal hardships in an attempt to restore personal merit.

We seek to make three contributions with this work. First, we explore social class as a dimension of inequity, and probe whether those benefitting respond defensively to evidence of class inequity. In doing so, we hope to bridge emerging psychological literatures on social class and intergroup inequity, which have as yet remained fairly separate (see also Kraus, Onyeador, Daumeyer, Rucker, & Richeson, 2019).

Second, we extend previous work on hardship and competitive victimhood claims among a variety of groups by exploring the motivational mechanisms behind these claims. Specifically, we spotlight concern for self-regard, as compared with concerns for group esteem, group dominance, or the system. While we expect that individuals benefitting from any kind of unearned advantage will engage in the self-defensive process we have described, evidence of social class privilege should be less likely to evoke collective threat than would race or gender; as such, class privilege serves as a useful context in which to test self-regard as motivating privilege defense. We suggest that evidence of class privilege will threaten the self, thus evoking self-defensive claims.

Third, we consider the specific techniques those benefitting from class privilege use to mask inequity, focusing on their reliance on symbols of merit (hardships and effort) as useful cover. Rather than relying on claims about the group or system in an effort to deflect claims of privilege (cf. Knowles et al., 2014), beneficiaries of privilege might claim that they personally have suffered hardship or worked hard.

Analytic Approach

Our hypotheses focus on concepts of meritocracy and social class formulated for a U.S. cultural context. Thus, we restricted all

² Of course, this ignores the reality that others live through the same hardships without the aid of unearned advantages associated with membership in a privileged group (e.g., McIntosh, 1989). And, although positive outcomes in the face of hardship may imply the existence of personal merit, they may just as strongly imply the existence of *privilege*: class advantage makes hardships easier to overcome (e.g., better access to care leads to better recovery from injury; Whitehead, 1992). Therefore, hardship claims are perhaps an ironic and illogical defense against evidence of privilege.

samples to adult U.S. citizens. We also specified social class requirements to ensure participants met the study-relevant definition of class privilege, as detailed in each study description. For all laboratory mass-testing studies, we removed participants who did not meet these demographic requirements before analysis. For all Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) studies, we used prescreening to ensure that participants met our demographic requirements; we also included relevant demographic questions at the end of each study, with the specific goal of ensuring that those who represented themselves as meeting the prescreen requirements did indeed meet these requirements. Those who misrepresented themselves were removed before analysis. Further, we always removed duplicate participants and incomplete observations before analysis.

In early studies, our stopping rules were the end of the present mass-testing session or when the MTurk study was complete (i.e., stated recruitment goal was met). Mass-testing sessions were offered at different times over the course of the academic year, and via different department pools; as a result, mass-testing recruitment totals ranged from 89–140 participants. In later studies, we followed evolving norms to ensure appropriate power. For MTurk, we simply increased our recruitment, aiming for approximately 50 participants per cell in one-way designs, and 100 per cell in two-way designs. In mass-testing sessions, if the appropriate sample was not achieved at the end of the first session, we continued the study in subsequent sessions; we stopped at the end of the session in which appropriate sample size was achieved.

We describe our specific hypotheses and variables within each study. We also include information on additional tests of our manipulations and manipulation checks where relevant. We give a fulsome account of our analyses, which means that we report both hypothesized and unexpected results.

Experiments 1a–c

We explored whether individuals claim increased life hardships in response to information that they benefit from class-based privileges. Although social class can be measured in many ways, a defining component is degree of access to scarce resources.³ Many class theorists find education to be the most reliable social class indicator, in part because education offers access to other critical, classed resources, such as more prestigious occupations and larger incomes (see Stephens et al., 2014). Education brings with it many class privileges: for example, networking and employment benefits tied to status of the school, rather than qualifications (Collins, 2019; Rivera, 2015). Therefore, we utilized the status of the educational institution that participants attend to manipulate evidence of class-based privilege. We present both Experiment 1a and its replications, Experiments 1b and 1c, together.

Method

Participants. Experiment 1a: 139 adult student volunteers from an elite West Coast university (top five ranking internationally; U.S. News and World Report, 2016) completed the survey in an online mass-testing session (65% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.42$, $SD = 4.93$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 40% Asian-American, 34% European-American, 10% African-American, 9% Other, and 7% Latino-American.

Experiment 1b: 89 adult student volunteers from an elite West Coast university participated in an in-lab mass-testing session (58% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.33$, $SD = 2.68$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 35% European-American, 23% Asian-American, 15% Latino-American, 14% African-American, 13% Other, and 1% Native American.

Experiment 1c: 197 adult student volunteers from an elite East Coast business school (top five ranking nationally; U.S. News and World Report, 2016) completed the survey during in-lab mass-testing sessions (48% female; age range 18–22 years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 49% Asian-American, 22% European-American, 12% Other, 11% Latino-American, and 6% African-American.

Procedure. Participants first read one of two or three randomly assigned Privilege statements. Afterward, participants completed questions measuring life hardships. Participants later completed demographic measures.

Independent variable. *Privilege* was manipulated by changing participants' exposure to privilege information experiment 1a, participants were in one of three conditions: No Privilege, Inequality, or Class Privilege. Those in the No Privilege condition ($n_{1a} = 50$) were simply asked to "Please click continue."

Those in the Class Privilege condition ($n_{1a} = 44$) read (adapted from Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012):

In the past several decades, Americans have given considerable attention to matters of inequality. Despite increased attention to the issue, most social scientists agree that inequities based on class persist. For example, students from elite universities enjoy advantages that go beyond what would be expected based on differences in skills or intelligence; these advantages are based on the name of their university alone. Students from elite universities are unfairly advantaged throughout their lives in the domains of housing, health care, jobs, and more.

We also included a third condition to test whether being made aware of inequality itself (regardless of personal implications) leads people to think they have more hardships. Those in the Inequality condition read ($n_{1a} = 45$):

In the past several decades, Americans have given considerable attention to matters of inequality. Inequality is increasingly in the forefront of public discussion, media, and journalism. Opinions, from the extent of inequality to best practices and approaches, vary widely.

In Experiments 1b–c, participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege or Class Privilege. Those in the No Privilege condition ($n_{1b} = 40$; $n_{1c} = 100$) only read instructions that the

³ Social class is traditionally defined using income, occupational prestige, and education, relative to others in a particular context (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). In social psychology, some work focuses especially on cultural imprinting or habitus models—what is the effect of social class background on psychological functioning (Stephens et al., 2014)? Other work focuses on current rank and resources (Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013; Shah et al., 2012)—what is the effect of current social class on psychological functioning? Here, we aim to explore how social class inequity is experienced by those currently benefitting from the inequity (i.e., unearned advantages, or privilege). To do so, we focus on current social class, as opposed to social class background. We use a variety of income, prestige, and education indicators to sample participants who are currently benefitting from social class privileges.

survey would be about “Inequality in America.” Those in the Class Privilege condition ($n_{1b} = 49$; $n_{1c} = 97$) additionally read the same Class Privilege statement from Experiment 1a, except that in Experiment 1c, “elite university” was replaced with “elite business school.”

Dependent variable. *Life Hardships* was measured with five items (e.g., “My life has been full of hardships;” $\alpha_{1a} = .88$; Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results and Discussion

Experiment 1a. As hypothesized, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference by privilege condition for life hardships, $F(2, 136) = 3.80, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Planned contrasts revealed that those in the No Privilege and Inequality conditions did not differ in life hardships, $t(136) = 1.29, p = .19, 95\%$ confidence interval (CI) $[-.17, .82]$. However, participants in these conditions did differ from those in the Class Privilege condition, $t(136) = 2.39, p = .024, d = .44, 95\%$ CI $[.09, .97]$. Specifically, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.02$) claimed more life hardships than did those in the Inequality ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.30$) or No Privilege conditions ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.30$).

Experiment 1b. As hypothesized, a two-sided t test showed that those in the Class Privilege condition claimed more life hardships ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.32$) than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.13$), $t(87) = 2.26, p = .026, d = .48, 95\%$ CI $[.05, .91]$.

Experiment 1c. Replicating Experiments 1a–b, we again found a significant difference by privilege condition for life hardships, this time with a different population. A two-sided t test revealed a significant difference by privilege for life hardships, $t(195) = 2.17, p = .03, d = .31, 95\%$ CI $[.04, .73]$. Those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.34$) claimed more life hardships than did those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.14$). Overall, these results suggest that people claim more life hardships when given evidence of their class privilege.

Experiment 2

We have theorized that hardship claims are a defensive response motivated by self-concerns: evidence of privilege threatens people’s self-regard, and so they may try to exaggerate hardships they have faced in an attempt to bolster their self-regard. In Experiment 2, we probed whether self-esteem would explain the relationship between evidence of privilege and hardship claims.

Method

Participants. Two hundred two adult student volunteers from an elite East Coast university completed the survey online in exchange for payment (78% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.17, SD = 6.06$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 45% Asian-American, 31% European-American, 14% Other, 7% Latino-American, and 3% African-American.

Procedure. Participants first read one of two randomly assigned Privilege statements. Participants completed questions mea-

suring life hardships, then self-esteem, and then later completed demographic measures.

Independent variables. *Privilege* was manipulated by changing participants’ exposure to privilege information, following Experiments 1b–c. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n = 95$) or Class Privilege ($n = 107$).

Dependent variables. *Life Hardships* was measured as in Experiment 1a.

Self-Esteem was measured using the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Participants rated the extent to which they had high self-esteem on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Results

Unexpectedly, we found no effect of privilege condition on life hardships, $t(200) = -1.48, p = .14, 95\%$ CI $[-.59, .08]$. However, as expected, we did find a significant difference by privilege condition on self-esteem, $t(198) = -2.10, p = .036, d = .30, 95\%$ CI $[-.99, -.03]$, such that those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 5.52, SD = 1.78$) reported lower self-esteem than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 6.03, SD = 1.65$).

Given indirect effects may exist in the absence of total effects (Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011), we probed for the hypothesized indirect effect of privilege condition on life hardships, through self-esteem. We found evidence for our hypothesized effect, *average causal mediation effect* = .10, 95% CI $[.01, .22]$, $p = .03$. Specifically, privilege condition reduced self-esteem, $b = -.26, SE = .12, t(197) = -2.10, p = .036$, and reduced self-esteem was in turn associated with increased life hardship claims, $b = -.19, SE = .05, t(197) = -4.03, p < .001$.

Discussion

While we did not find the expected total effect in Experiment 2, we nevertheless found the hypothesized indirect effect: evidence of privilege threatened individuals’ self-esteem, which in turn related to increased hardship claims. This suggests participants’ self-regard may be motivating their hardship claims. Whereas thinking about personal hardships is usually an aversive experience in and of itself (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008), in the face of evidence of privilege, people may feel that life hardships are a useful counterevidence, thus protecting their sense of merit and ultimately their self-regard.

Considered together, results across the four experiments presented thus far suggest that people claim more life hardships in response to evidence of their own class privilege. Our results dovetail with recent conceptual replications in other contexts (e.g., racial privilege in Britain and the United States; R.M. Brown & Craig, 2019; Murdoch & McAloney-Kocaman, 2019), further suggesting privilege can provoke hardship claims.

Here, we have further theorized that privilege threatens not just the self generally, but specifically sense of personal merit. We suggest sense of personal merit is likely tied to positive self-regard in U.S. contexts, thus evoking self-defense when personal merit is challenged. In Experiment 3, we explore threat to personal merit specifically as a motivator of self-defensive reactions to evidence of privilege.

Experiment 3

We suggest that, in response to evidence of privilege, people may claim hardships in particular because they believe that hardships imply evidence of personal merit. However, if people's need for personal merit (i.e., making internal attributions for positive life outcomes) is satisfied in some other way, they should feel less need to claim hardships. Thus, in Experiment 3, we used a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) \times 2 (Personal Merit: High, Low) design.

Method

Participants. Four hundred thirty-four adult student volunteers from an elite West Coast university completed the survey during in-lab mass testing sessions.⁴

Procedure. Participants first read one of two randomly assigned Privilege statements. Participants then responded to one of two randomly assigned Personal Merit prompts. Then participants completed questions measuring life hardships, and demographic information.

Independent variables. *Privilege* was manipulated using the same method used in Experiment 1b. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n = 224$) or Class Privilege condition ($n = 210$).

Personal Merit was manipulated by offering participants one of two open-ended response activities. In the High Personal Merit condition, participants were asked to write about a time they had done something "by yourself or on your own" ($n = 220$). In the Low Personal Merit condition, participants were asked to write about a time they had done something "with outside help or with assistance" ($n = 214$).⁵

Dependent variable. *Life Hardships* was the same as in Experiment 1a.

Results

A two-way ANOVA revealed no main effects of privilege, $F(1, 430) = 1.07, p = .30$, nor personal merit, $F(1, 430) = .34, p = .56$, on life hardships. However, as hypothesized, we found a significant Privilege \times Personal Merit interaction on life hardships, $F(1, 430) = 4.81, p = .028, \eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 1).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the Low Personal Merit condition, we replicated the result from Experiments 1a–c: those in the Class Privilege condition claimed significantly more life hardships ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.32$) than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.19$), $t(430) = 2.30, p = .02, d = .31, 95\% \text{ CI } [.06, .72]$. In contrast, among participants in the High Personal Merit condition, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.17$) did not differ from those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 3.74, SD = 1.23$), $t(430) = -.79, p = .43, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.45, .19]$. Decomposed differently, among those in the Class Privilege condition, participants in the Low Personal Merit condition reported more personal hardships than those in the High Personal Merit condition, $t(430) = -1.98, p = .05, d = .27, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.67, -.002]$. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, there was no difference in hardship claims as a function of personal merit, $t(430) = 1.11, p = .26, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.14, .50]$.

Discussion

Experiment 3 suggests that people's need for personal merit—their desire to make internal attributions for success—motivates their life hardship claims.⁶ When people could report an accomplishment achieved on their own, as compared to one achieved with external assistance, they claimed fewer life hardships in response to evidence of class privilege. While writing about *any* personal accomplishment could be seen as a general affirmation (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), we find that only those writing about an accomplishment achieved *alone* claimed fewer hardships in the face of evidence of class privilege. That is, the key difference was whether the accomplishment was achieved via personal merit or with outside support. When people's need to feel personally responsible for success is already satisfied, they no longer claim hardships in response to evidence of class privilege.

Thus, Experiment 3 provides further evidence that revealing privilege threatens people's self-regard specifically by impugning their sense of personal merit, which motivates them to claim hardships. In Experiment 4, we explore this motivation further by testing whether people claim increased personal effort when faced with evidence of self-relevant (vs. not self-relevant) privilege.

Experiment 4

We have suggested that evidence of privilege threatens people's sense of personal merit, which motivates them to claim increased life hardships. If this is the case, then people may also attempt to increase this sense of merit via means other than hardships. For instance, people may claim to have worked harder and expended more effort as an attempt to increase their sense of having caused their own outcomes.

However, such self-defensive claims should only occur when evidence of privilege is personally relevant. Simply reading about the existence of privilege for groups that do not implicate the self, much like reading about class inequality in general in Experiment 1a, should not threaten people's sense of having earned their own outcomes.

⁴ Citizenship, race, and gender information was available for only some of the participants. Where identifiable, all non-U.S. citizens were excluded. Because of survey randomization within the mass-testing session, 59 had participated in a survey that also manipulated privilege before participating in the current experiment and were excluded.

⁵ In a separate experiment, we tested the effect of the Personal Merit manipulation. In an in-lab mass-testing session ($N=140$), compared with those in the Low Personal Merit ($n = 43; M = 4.49, SD = .94$) and Control ($n = 53; M = 4.53, SD = .92$) conditions, participants in the High Personal Merit condition ($n = 44; M = 4.86, SD = .76$) reported having more personal merit than others (see scale in online supplemental materials), $t(137) = 2.17, p = .03, d = .37, 95\% \text{ CI } [.01, .22]$. Low Personal Merit and Control conditions were not significantly different, $t(137) = .19, p = .85, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.16, .19]$. (Planned contrasts: Low Personal Merit = -1 , Control = -1 , High Personal Merit = 2 ; Low Personal Merit = -1 , Control = 1 , High Personal Merit = 0).

⁶ In a series of supplemental studies, we probe this logic further. We also find that manipulating merit (versus luck) mindset moderates hardship claims in response to privilege (Online Supplemental Materials Experiment 1); that sense of personal merit may relate to hardships when evidence of privilege is exposed, but not otherwise (Online Supplemental Materials Experiments 1c–2); and that personal affirmations reduce hardship claims more so than social affirmations (Online Supplemental Materials Experiment 5).

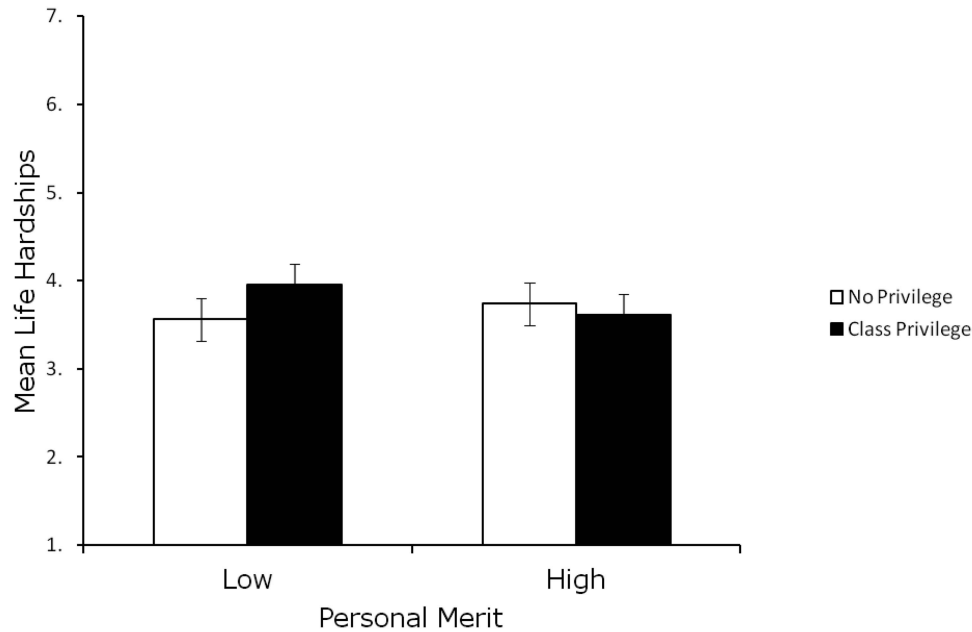


Figure 1. Personal Merit \times Privilege interaction on life hardships (Experiment 3). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

In Experiment 4, we further tested whether the effect of evidence of class privilege on self-defensive claims generalizes to privileges based on income. We used a new manipulation of evidence of class privilege, this time evoking the unearned benefits associated with high incomes, rather than with elite universities, and we recruited adults from across the United States, rather than students. We tested our hypothesis using a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) \times 2 (Group Membership: Top 10%, Bottom 90%) design.

Method

Participants. We recruited 381 adult volunteers, who were paid \$.50 each, from a national online subject pool (MTurk). Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not report having incomes consistent with prescreen requirements, leaving a final $N = 348$. All participants were currently employed adult U.S. citizens who self-identified as having an annual household income between \$75,000 (inclusive) and \$100,000 (48% female; $M_{age} = 34.28$, $SD = 10.23$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 77% European-American, 7% African-American, 6% Asian-American, 6% Other, and 4% Latino-American.

Procedure. Participants completed demographic information first and were only able to continue if they met income, employment, age, and citizenship requirements. Next, participants read one of two randomly assigned Privilege prompts, followed by one of two randomly assigned Group Membership prompts. Then participants completed job effort questions, and demographic questions confirming their initially reported information.

Independent variables. *Privilege* was manipulated by changing participants' exposure to privilege information. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n = 176$) or Class

Privilege condition ($n = 172$). Those in the Class Privilege condition read:

In the past several decades, Americans have given considerable attention to matters of inequality. Despite increased attention to the issue, most social scientists agree that inequities based on class persist. For example, people from households in the top 10% of incomes are considered wealthy in America. This wealthy status lets them enjoy advantages that go beyond what would be expected based on differences in skills or hard work; these advantages are based on their wealthy status alone. People from households in the top 10% are unfairly advantaged throughout their lives in the domains of housing, health care, jobs, and more.

Those in the No Privilege condition only read instructions that the survey would be about "Inequality in America."

Group Membership was manipulated by providing participants one of two randomly selected bell-curve graphics. In the Top 10% condition ($n = 166$), participants saw a graphic indicating that that households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more were in the top 10% of incomes, and were told "Income distributions indicate that households making more than \$75,000 are in the top 10% of incomes in America." As such, and given our prescreening recruitment, participants were led to believe they were in the top 10% of incomes. In the Bottom 90% condition ($n = 182$), participants instead saw a graphic and accompanying text indicating that households with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more were in the top 10% of incomes. As such, participants were led to believe they were in the bottom 90% of incomes.

Dependent variable. *Job Effort* was measured with 10 items (e.g., "Few people put in more hours weekly than I do"; "When I work, I really exert myself to the fullest"; $\alpha = .89$; S.P. Brown & Leigh, 1996). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or

disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

A two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of privilege information, $F(1, 344) = 5.21, p = .02$, but no effect of group membership, $F(1, 344) = .24, p = .63$, on job effort. We found a marginal interaction, $F(1, 344) = 2.94, p = .087, \eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 2).

We hypothesized that those led to believe both that they were in the top 10% of income earners, and that those in the top 10% benefit from privilege, would report more job effort than those in the other three cells. To probe this hypothesized pattern further, we decomposed the interaction despite it being marginal. Among those in the Top 10% condition, participants in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 5.03, SD = .93$) reported significantly *more* job effort than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.02$), $t(344) = 2.80, p = .005, d = .45, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .38]$. In contrast, among those in the Bottom 90% condition, those in the Class Privilege and No Privilege conditions did not differ, $t(344) = .45, p = .65, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.11, .18]$. Decomposed differently, there was no effect of group membership in either the No Privilege, $t(344) = -1.55, p = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.27, .03]$, nor Class Privilege conditions, $t(344) = .88, p = .38, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.08, .22]$.

Finally, to conduct a clearer test of our specific hypothesis, we created three orthogonal planned contrasts: (a) comparing Class Privilege, Bottom 90% to No Privilege, Bottom 90%; (b) comparing both Bottom 90% conditions to No Privilege, Top 10%; and (c) comparing Class Privilege, Top 10% to all other conditions. Using these contrasts, we regressed job effort on our condition factor. As predicted, results revealed that the third contrast was significant, $t(344) = 2.00, p = .046, d = .26, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.004, .52]$. Those in the Top 10% condition who were exposed to evidence of

privilege reported significantly more job effort than did participants in the other three conditions ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.04$). Neither the first contrast, $t(344) = -1.55, p = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.54, .06]$, nor second contrast, $t(344) = 1.44, p = .15, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.07, .44]$, was significant.

Discussion

Building on Experiments 2 and 3, Experiment 4 provides evidence that revealing privilege threatens people's self-regard: those exposed to evidence of class privilege claimed to work harder at their jobs, but only when the evidence was self-relevant. However, the two-way interaction was only marginal ($p = .087$), so our interpretation here relies on investigation of the simple and planned contrasts. These analyses suggest that people do not claim to work harder at their jobs when given evidence of other groups' privilege. Thus, dovetailing with Experiment 1a, people's defensive claims do not seem to be motivated by general evidence of inequity. Similarly, absent evidence of class privilege, believing one's income to be inside or outside the top 10% did not affect effort claims. Rather, people claim increased effort at work only when given evidence that they benefit from class privilege.

Experiment 5

We have emphasized that self-regard is threatened by evidence of privilege; privilege suggests one did not earn outcomes meritocratically. As a result, people are motivated to defend their personal merit. Evidence from Experiments 2–4 suggests such self-concerns are at play. However, it is also possible that evidence of privilege threatens the system, and people's defensive responses are motivated by a concern for system protection.

Evidence of privilege likely stokes multiple threats: it can be dangerous to recognize privilege, for fear of the removal of

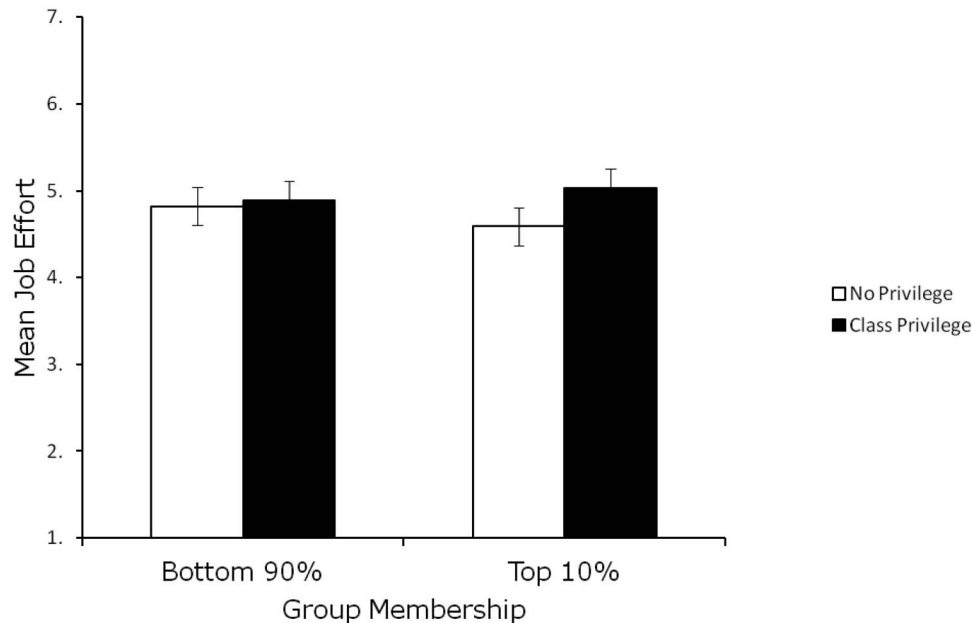


Figure 2. Group Membership \times Privilege interaction on job effort (Experiment 4). Error bars $\pm 2 \text{ SE}$.

such benefits; it can be distressing to acknowledge inequities, for fear of undermining the legitimacy of the system; and it can be uncomfortable to benefit from illegitimate inequities, for fear of sacrificing self-regard. As a result, when faced with knowledge of their privilege, people likely have multiple goals. They may want to justify the system (system-defense), but they likely *also* want to feel good about their life outcomes and their selves (self-defense). That is, we suggest people should be motivated to protect their good feelings about their life outcomes, not only the security of the system offering those outcomes.

To probe more specifically whether evidence of privilege provokes self- and/or system-defense, Experiment 5 tested the effects of self-versus system-affirmation on hardship claims. We used a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) \times 3 (Affirmation: Self, System, None) design. Further, in Experiment 5 we tested the effect of hardship claims on belief in personal privilege. If hardship claims are motivated by a desire to protect the self from evidence of class privilege, then an increase in these claims may coincide with a reluctance to recognize personal privilege.

Method

Participants. We recruited 590 adult volunteers from a national online subject pool (MTurk) to achieve approximately 100 participants per cell in this 3 \times 2 design. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not later report having incomes consistent with the prescreen requirement, leaving a final $N = 541$ (57% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.94$, $SD = 10.76$ years). Participants were paid \$1.50 each, and were adult U.S. citizens who self-identified as having a household income of more than \$100,000 annually, and who had not participated in the previous experiments. Participant racial backgrounds were: 80% European-American, 8% Asian-American, 8% Other, 4% African-American, and 1% Native American.

Procedure. Participants completed demographic information first and were only able to continue if they met prescreen requirements. Participants then read one of three randomly assigned Affirmation prompts. Next, participants completed one of two randomly assigned Privilege prompts. Then participants completed the measures of hardships and belief in personal privilege, and finally demographic questions confirming their initially reported information.

Independent variables. *Affirmation* was manipulated by offering participants one of three open-ended response activities. First, participants in the No Affirmation condition were asked to simply click continue ($n = 181$).

Second, we used a self-affirmation to manipulate need for self-defense. If self-concerns are driving hardship claims in response to evidence of class privilege, then self-affirmation should reduce these claims by bolstering people against self-threat (Critcher & Dunning, 2015; Steele, 1988). We modeled the self-affirmation manipulation to match the system-affirmation manipulation (see below) as closely as possible. As such, participants in the Self-Affirmation condition were told “People often have both moral strengths and weaknesses,” then were asked to reflect on and list two “personal moral strengths” ($n = 188$).

Third, following Laurin, Kay, Gaucher, and Shepherd (2009), we used a system-affirmation to manipulate need for system-

defense. If system concerns are driving hardship claims, then system-affirmation should reduce such claims (Laurin et al., 2009). Those in the System-Affirmation condition were told “Societies often have both moral strengths and weaknesses,” then were asked to reflect on and list two “society moral strengths” ($n = 172$).

Privilege was manipulated using a method similar to that of Experiment 4. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n = 269$) or Class Privilege ($n = 272$). Those in the Class Privilege condition saw a bell-curve graphic showing that incomes of \$100,000 or more were in the top 10% of incomes (i.e., the income range we recruited from in our prescreen), and they read a prompt describing the unearned privileges of the top 10% as in Experiment 4. Those in the No Privilege condition only read instructions that the survey would be about “Inequality in America.”

Dependent variables. *Life Hardships* was measured as in Experiment 1a.

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 my income status”; $\alpha = .73$) with 7-point response scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Following previous research (Phillips & Lowery, 2015), life hardships and belief in personal privilege were somewhat correlated, $r = -.33$, $p < .001$.

Results

Unlike in Experiments 1a–4, political ideology (measured in demographics; 1 = *extremely conservative*, 7 = *extremely liberal*) was a significant moderator in Experiment 5, perhaps because participants completed this study during a presidential election. Therefore, we include and discuss the role of political ideology in the following analyses.

We coded privilege using a linear contrast (No Privilege = -1 , Class Privilege = 1). We coded affirmation using both a linear contrast (System Affirmation = -1 , No Affirmation = 0 , Self Affirmation = 1) and a quadratic contrast (System Affirmation = 1 , No Affirmation = -2 , Self Affirmation = 1).

Life Hardships. Specifically, we expected evidence of privilege to increase hardship claims in the No Affirmation condition, and we expected this effect to disappear or even reverse in the Self-Affirmation condition. We were agnostic regarding the System-Affirmation condition.

We regressed life hardships on privilege, affirmation, their interaction, and political ideology (centered). We found significant main effects of privilege, $b = -.10$, $SE = .05$, $t(534) = -2.03$, $p = .04$, and political ideology, $b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $t(534) = -2.49$, $p = .01$, which were qualified by a marginally significant quadratic contrast interaction of privilege and affirmation, $b = -.07$, $SE = .04$, $t(534) = -1.92$, $p = .055$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 3). The linear contrast interaction of privilege and affirmation was not significant, $b = -.01$, $SE = .06$, $t(534) = -.13$, $p = .90$.

Decomposing the quadratic contrast interaction revealed that, unexpectedly, among participants in the No Affirmation condition, there was no effect of privilege on hardship claims, $t(534) = .40$,

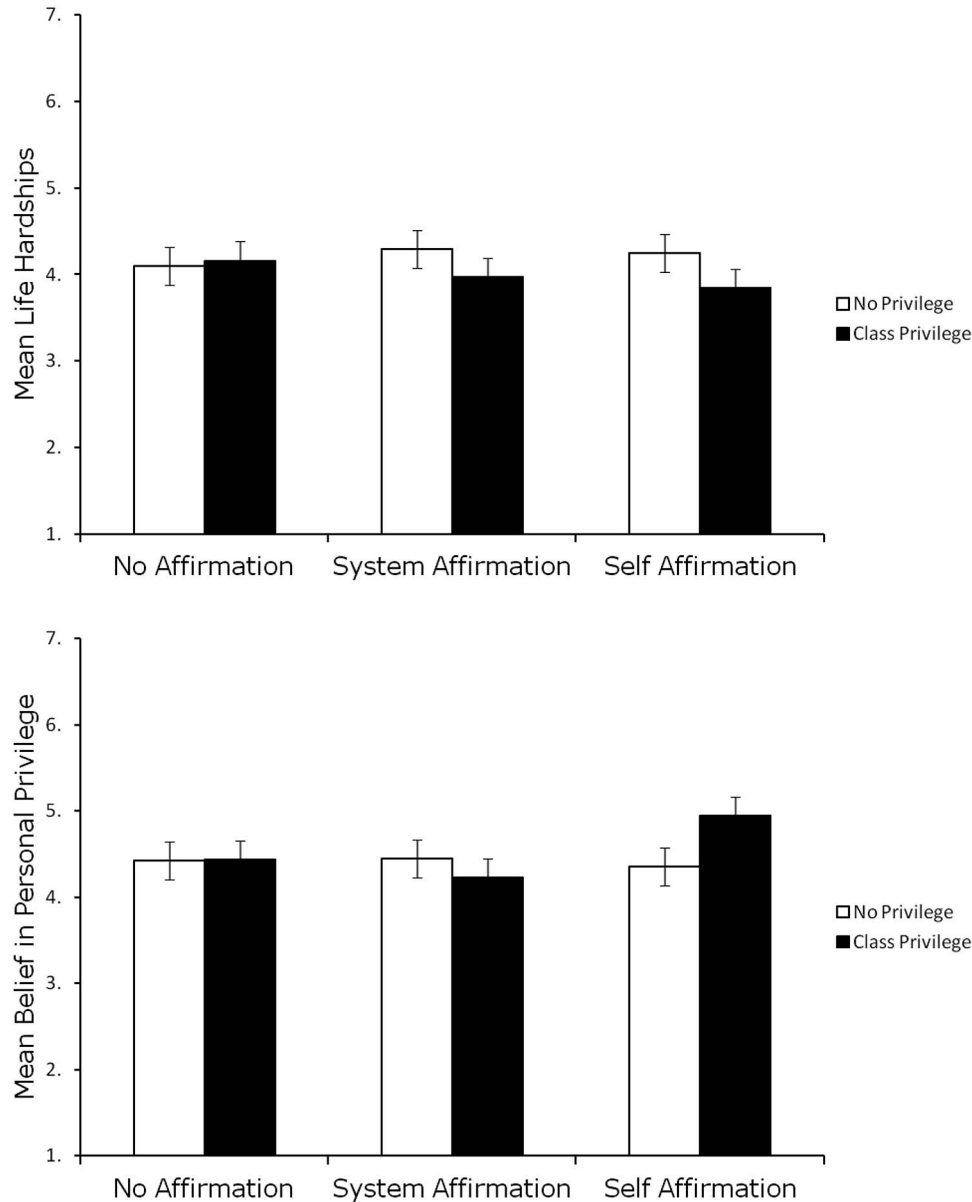


Figure 3. Affirmation \times Privilege interaction on life hardships, belief in personal privilege (Experiment 5). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

$p = .69$.⁷ However, as expected, among participants in the Self-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.20$) claimed significantly fewer life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(534) = -2.09$, $p = .04$, $d = .33$, 95% CI $[-.52, .004]$. Among participants in the System-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.18$) claimed marginally fewer life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(534) = -1.82$, $p = .07$, $d = .26$, 95% CI $[-.67, .05]$.

Belief in personal privilege. We expected similar patterns as above, such that privilege should diminish belief in personal privilege in the No Affirmation condition, but that this effect should

disappear or reverse in the Self-Affirmation condition. We were agnostic regarding the System-Affirmation condition.

⁷ We additionally found a significant three-way interaction of privilege, affirmation, and political ideology on life hardships, $b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $t(529) = 2.35$, $p = .02$. The pattern was such that, in the No Affirmation condition, privilege condition affected conservatives' life hardship claims in response to evidence of privilege more than liberals' claims: conservatives (centered variable $< .36$) claimed more life hardships in the Class Privilege condition than the No Privilege condition (replicating the expected effect), while liberals ($> .36$) did not. In the Self- and System-Affirmation conditions, political ideology did not moderate the effect of privilege on hardship claims.

We regressed belief in personal privilege on privilege, affirmation, their interaction, and political ideology (centered). We found significant main effects of affirmation (linear contrast), $b = .16$, $SE = .07$, $t(534) = 2.26$, $p = .02$, and political ideology, $b = .26$, $SE = .03$, $t(534) = 7.66$, $p < .001$, which were qualified by a significant linear contrast interaction of privilege and affirmation, $b = .15$, $SE = .07$, $t(534) = 2.06$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 3). The quadratic contrast interaction of privilege and affirmation was not significant, $b = .04$, $SE = .04$, $t(534) = .92$, $p = .36$.

Decomposing the linear contrast interaction revealed that there was no effect of privilege in the No Affirmation condition, $t(534) = -.35$, $p = .73$. However, as expected, among participants in the Self-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.25$) reported significantly *more* belief in personal privilege than those in the No Privilege condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(534) = 2.28$, $p = .02$, $d = .43$, 95% CI [.19, .95]. There was no effect of privilege among those in the System-Affirmation condition, $t(534) = -.67$, $p = .50$.

Decomposed differently, among those in the Class Privilege condition, participants in the Self-Affirmation condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.25$) reported significantly *more* belief in personal privilege than those in the No Affirmation condition ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.52$), $t(534) = 2.17$, $p = .03$, $d = .36$, 95% CI [.10, .90], and those in the System-Affirmation condition ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(534) = 3.00$, $p = .003$, $d = .54$, 95% CI [.30, 1.12]. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Self-Affirmation condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.40$) did not differ from those in the No Affirmation ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(534) = .14$, $p = .89$, and System-Affirmation conditions ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.48$), $t(534) = .48$, $p = .63$.

Discussion

Experiment 5 offers interesting but mixed results. While we do find that the effect of evidence of class privilege on hardship claims and belief in personal privilege is significantly different in the Self-Affirmation condition than in the No Affirmation condition, the pattern deviates in part from what we predicted. Unexpectedly, privilege in the No Affirmation condition did not relate to hardship claims or belief in personal privilege, while as expected, privilege in the Self-Affirmation condition did relate to diminished hardship claims and increased belief in personal privilege.

Unlike the other experiments, here we find that the main effect of evidence of privilege on life hardships (in the No Affirmation condition) is moderated by political ideology: conservatives claimed hardships in response to evidence of class privilege, showing the pattern we expected, but liberals did not (see Footnote 7, online supplemental materials). Given that we do not find such political ideology moderations in our other studies, it is possible that the presidential election season (during which this study was run) temporarily amplified effects of political ideology. Alternatively, this result suggests the idea of class privilege, like many beliefs and behaviors (Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislun, & Sherman, 2016), may be becoming politicized, such that evidence of personally benefitting from class privilege is more widely accepted among liberals than conservatives. Future work might delve into the politicization of privilege acknowledgment further. To the

extent that specific ideologies make acknowledging privilege a path to positive self-regard, then acknowledgment—and possibly efforts to reduce privilege—may increase.

Following Experiments 2–4, the pattern of results in Experiment 5 suggests that life hardships claims may be related, at least in part, to self-concerns. When self-affirmed, the class privileged reported fewer life hardships when given evidence of privilege, and when system-affirmed, they reported marginally fewer life hardships. However, only when *self*-affirmed did the class privileged also report higher belief in personal privilege. This suggests that while hardship claims may be motivated by both self- and system-defense, alleviating self-threat specifically may open the door to privilege acknowledgment. In contrast, these results suggest that reducing system-threat may motivate people to legitimize the privilege they have (i.e., denying personal privilege exists without claiming hardships). Future work might explore the unique downstream consequences of each motive.

All together, the results of Experiment 5 build on those of Experiments 2–4, suggesting that self-concerns are at least one factor that may motivate the privileged to claim hardships. Further, these hardship claims may help people dissociate evidence of privilege from their personal selves. Together with our previous results, this suggests that when faced with evidence of their own privilege, people make claims (hardships, effort) that they believe may help them bolster their sense of merit. However, why claim hardships in particular? Our results thus far suggest that people may believe hardships will imply personal merit and internal attributions. In Experiment 6, we explore this logic further by manipulating perceptions of life hardship.

Experiment 6

We have suggested that people's desire to bolster their sense of merit, and thus their self-regard, leads them to claim hardships in response to evidence of class privilege. To the extent people believe that having faced hardships required effort and hard work, then they may feel that claiming hardship will help them augment internal attribution for success. If people are unable to claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege, they should want to capitalize on any alternative means to claim personal merit, such as claiming additional effort at work or even expending additional effort on a task. However, if people *are* able to claim hardships in the face of privilege, then they should feel less need to demonstrate additional effort on a task. We tested this possibility in Experiment 6, using a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) \times 2 (Life Hardships: Easy Life, Hard Life) design.

Pilot

First, we conducted a pilot study ($N = 121$), testing whether people would *claim* to work harder at their jobs in response to evidence of privilege (job effort measure from Experiment 4; see online supplemental materials for additional details). Using a 2 \times 2 design, we manipulated both self-perceived life hardships (Easy Life vs. Hard Life) and evidence of privilege (Class Privilege vs. No Privilege), and found evidence for our hypothesized effect. Specifically, a two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of either privilege, $F(1, 117) = 1.65$, $p = .20$, or life

hardships, $F(1, 117) = .17, p = .67$, on job effort. However, as expected, we found a significant interaction of privilege and life hardships on job effort, $F(1, 117) = 6.16, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ (see Figure 4).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among those in the Class Privilege condition, participants in the Easy Life condition ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.06$) claimed significantly more job effort than those in the Hard Life condition ($M = 4.55, SD = 1.11$), $t(117) = 2.05, p = .04, d = .54, 95\% CI [.02, 1.16]$. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Easy Life condition ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.17$) did not differ from those in the Hard Life condition ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.06$), $t(117) = -1.46, p = .14, 95\% CI [-.99, .15]$. Decomposed differently, among participants in the Easy Life condition, those in the Class Privilege condition claimed significantly more job effort than those in the No Privilege condition, $t(117) = 2.69, p = .008, d = .68, 95\% CI [.20, 1.33]$. In contrast, among participants in the Hard Life condition, those in the Class Privilege and No Privilege conditions did not differ in job effort claims, $t(117) = -.84, p = .40, 95\% CI [-.82, .33]$. We then turned to a full experiment, probing whether individuals would not merely claim, but actually *expend* additional effort in response to evidence of privilege.

Method

Participants. We recruited 320 adult volunteers, who were paid \$1.00 each, from a national online subject pool (MTurk). All participants were adult U.S. citizens who self-identified as having a household income of more than \$100,000 annually, and who had not participated in the previous experiments. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not report having incomes consistent with prescreen requirements. We took care to specifically remind participants not to use outside assistance (e.g., Internet search,

friend) on the puzzle task, to protect the validity of interpreting time spent on the task as an indicator of effort. In addition to this instruction, we also included a question after the task was complete that allowed participants to honestly state whether they had used outside assistance, while assuring them they would be paid in full regardless. Forty-four used outside assistance, and were excluded, leaving a final $N = 226$ (56% female; $M_{age} = 34.42, SD = 10.70$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 80% European-American, 8% Asian-American, 8% Other, 4% African-American, and 1% Native American.

Procedure. Participants completed demographic information first and were only able to continue if they met prescreen requirements. Next, participants completed one of two randomly assigned Hardship tasks. Then, participants read one of two randomly assigned Privilege prompts. Finally, participants completed a word puzzle task.

Independent variables. *Life Hardships* were manipulated by offering participants one of two open-ended response activities. Following ease-of-retrieval paradigms (Schwarz et al., 1991; Weingarten & Hutchinson, 2018), we manipulated how many life hardships participants felt they had by changing how many hardships participants were asked to list. Participants should find it difficult to list many hardships, in turn making them believe their lives have been relatively easy. Participants should find it easy to list few hardships, in turn making them believe their lives have been relatively hard. Hardships were not required to be tied to class nor even have impeded success, which would be required to counter the existence of privilege; rather, the mere presence of any hardships may make people think they worked hard and, thus, bolster their sense of merit.

In the Easy Life condition, participants were asked to “please list any hardships and/or obstacles that you have faced or currently face” and were then presented with 15 spaces ($n = 111$). In the



Figure 4. Life Hardships \times Privilege interaction on job effort (Experiment 6 pilot). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

Hard Life condition, participants were presented only two spaces ($n = 115$).⁸

Privilege was manipulated as in Experiment 5. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n = 106$) or Class Privilege condition ($n = 120$).

Dependent variables. *Task Effort* was measured by averaging the time participants spent in seconds across 10 extremely difficult word puzzles, which required participants to unscramble nine letters to form a single English word (e.g., uplyoanmr = pulmonary). Participants were asked to try as hard as they could on the task and were told they could work as long as they wanted on the puzzles.

Results

A two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of either privilege, $F(1, 222) = .63, p = .43$, or life hardships, $F(1, 222) = .001, p = .98$, on task effort. However, as hypothesized, we found a significant interaction of privilege and life hardships on task effort, $F(1, 222) = 4.79, p = .029, \eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 5).

Following the pilot, and among those in the Class Privilege condition, we expected more persistence in the Easy Life condition than in the Hard Life condition. Among those in the Easy Life condition, we expected more persistence in the Class Privilege condition than in the No Privilege condition. We were agnostic as to the remaining simple effects.

Among those in the Class Privilege condition, participants in the Easy Life condition ($M = 48.79, SD = 42.69$) did not differ from those in the Hard Life condition ($M = 39.64, SD = 27.80$), $t(222) = 1.48, p = .14, 95\% CI [-3.03, 21.34]$, although the pattern was consistent with our predictions. Among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Easy Life condition ($M = 42.42, SD = 29.16$) did not differ from those in the Hard Life condition ($M = 53.00, SD = 34.44$), $t(222) = -1.61, p = .11, 95\% CI [-23.52, 2.36]$. Decomposed differently, among participants in the Easy Life condition, those in the Class Privilege condition did not differ from those in the No Privilege condition, $t(222) = .99, p = .32, 95\% CI [-6.25, 18.99]$, although the pattern was in the expected direction. Finally, among participants in the Hard Life condition, those in the Class Privilege condition persisted significantly less than did those in the No Privilege condition, $t(222) = -2.11, p = .036, d = .43, 95\% CI [-25.87, -.85]$.

Discussion

Experiment 6 and the associated pilot study provide further evidence that privilege threatens people's self-regard by impugning their sense of merit. Our results also suggest that life hardship claims may help protect people's sense of merit when exposed to evidence of privilege. When people felt they could not claim a hard life, they claimed more effort and even persisted longer on an effort-based task when exposed to evidence of their own class privilege. That is, people behaved in ways that may help them bolster their sense of merit. However, when first able to claim a difficult life, people no longer behaved in this manner. Together with our previous results, this suggests that people claim hardships because they believe such claims will help bolster their sense of merit when faced with evidence of their own privilege.

General Discussion

Social class fundamentally shapes outcomes and opportunities (Kraus, 2015; Shah et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2014). However, many people, in the United States especially, seem to remain in the dark about the critical role of class in their daily experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Despite subjective experiences of classlessness among many Americans, class privileges in reality give a hand up to the economic and social elite. Such "invisibility" is maintained in part by justifying ideologies, like meritocracy, that suggest people earned their various lots in life (Hochschild, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; McCoy & Major, 2007; Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015; Savani & Rattan, 2012; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). As a result, this invisibility not only protects privilege, but also the privileged, by letting people claim ignorance of or deny the unearned nature of their advantages (McIntosh, 1989; Phillips & Lowery, 2018).

Here, we show that even when class privilege is made visible, beneficiaries rely on ideologies and symbols of meritocracy to cloak their privilege once again. We find evidence that the desire for personal merit, to maintain positive self-regard, motivates these responses. For instance, when people are self-affirmed, provided an acceptable alternative theory of success (e.g., good luck; online supplemental materials), or have bolstered their sense of personal merit, they no longer claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege. Further, restricting people's ability to claim hardship leads them to respond to evidence of privilege by claiming more effort at work or even working harder on a difficult task. All together, these results suggest that evidence of class privilege poses a threat to personal merit, and that people claim hardship to restore their self-regard.

Motivated Perceptions of Hardship and Invisibility

We show that, in the face of evidence of class privilege, participants associate life hardship with merit and ultimately self-regard (see also Experiment 1c, online supplemental materials). However,

⁸ In two separate experiments, we tested the effect of the self-perceived Life Hardships manipulation. First, given the manipulation is based on ease-of-retrieval paradigms, we tested whether the Easy Life condition task (list 15 hardships) was indeed considered more difficult by participants than the Hard Life condition task (list two hardships). In an in-lab mass-testing session ($N = 96$), those in the Easy Life condition ($n = 48; M = 3.53, SD = 1.64$) reported that the task was more difficult (two items, e.g., "I had trouble coming up with enough hardships"; 7-point scale *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*; $r = .84$) than did those in the Hard Life condition ($n = 48; M = 2.64, SD = 1.61$), $t(94) = 2.70, p = .008, d = .55, 95\% CI [.24, 1.56]$. Second, we tested whether our manipulations affected participants' views of their own lives as having been hard. We recruited 100 participants from MTurk. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, leaving a final $N = 95$. Compared with those in the Hard Life condition ($n = 49; M = 3.63, SD = 1.18$), those in the Easy Life condition ($n = 46; M = 3.17, SD = 1.16$) reported having marginally fewer hardships than others (four items, e.g., "I have had more hardships than most other people in society" reversed; 7-point scale *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .81$), $t(93) = 1.91, p = .059, d = .39, 95\% CI [-.02, .94]$. Similarly, compared with those in the Hard Life condition ($M = 4.19, SD = .89$), those in the Easy Life condition ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.17$) reported experiencing less negative impact from hardships (three items, e.g., "How difficult have the hardships made your life?"; 7-point scale *not at all* to *extremely*; $\alpha = .68$), $t(93) = 2.15, p = .03, d = .44, 95\% CI [.04, .88]$.

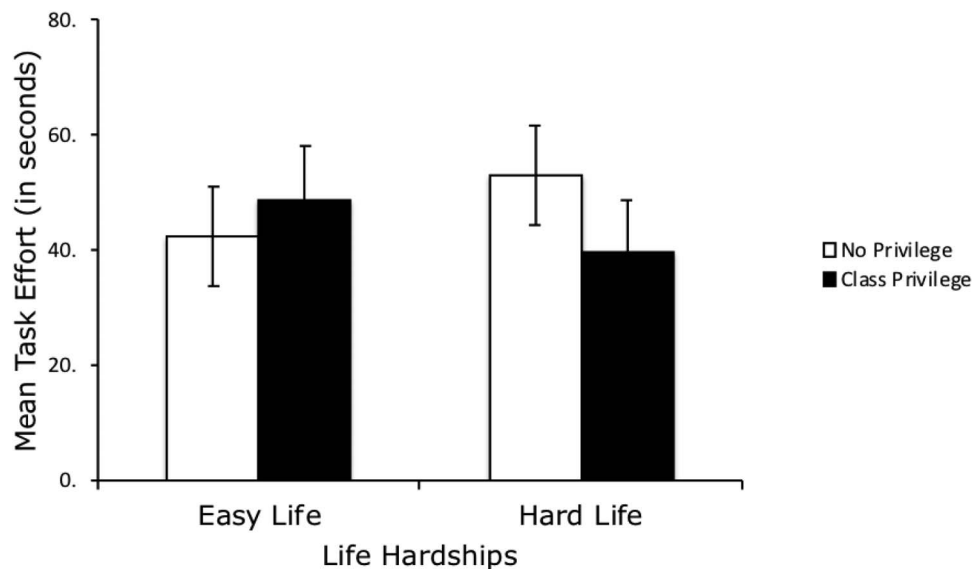


Figure 5. Life Hardships \times Privilege interaction on task effort (Experiment 6). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

the lay beliefs supporting this association should be probed further. An attributional perspective suggests that people may feel that running against the headwinds of hardship counterbalances the tailwinds of privilege, thus restoring their sense of merit. Supporting this interpretation, our results suggest that participants' self-defensive hardship claims do not emphasize the number or kind of hardships, but rather focuses on the impact of these hardships on life outcomes (Footnote 8). A related possibility is that people are motivated to believe that privilege entails nothing but ease and, thus, that the existence of any hardship implies the absence of privilege. Another possibility is that people may use hardship to claim karmic deserving: I have suffered and, therefore, I am deserving (Schaumburg & Mullen, 2017; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). For instance, personal merit ideologies at the bedrock of U.S. society may romanticize hard work and the struggles involved in achieving the "American dream" (e.g., rags-to-riches stories; Wakslak et al., 2007). However, in the process of this romanticization, *hardship* rather than *hard work* may become a currency of self-regard (see also Schaumburg & Mullen, 2017). Future work should explore these possible lay beliefs further.

In general, our results suggest people are particularly solipsistic when thinking about privilege, reporting hardships that are irrelevant to both one's membership in a privileged group, and the group's benefitting from privilege. Having experienced divorce, for example, does not mitigate having benefitting from legacy admission; and yet, our participants act as if it does. In fact, privilege is powerful not only because it protects people from experiencing hardship, but also because when hardship does arise, privilege helps overcome hardship itself (e.g., Sandefur, 2008; Stephens et al., 2014; Whitehead, 1992).

More work also should be done to consider how individuals generate perceptions of increased life hardships. Social comparison processes are a likely candidate (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). For instance, when reading about privilege, beneficiaries may restrict their reference group to the ingroup, rather than including outgroups (as is required for assessing group-based privilege).

That is, people may be claiming "for my group, I have had hardship," then erroneously using this claim to deny the role of group-based privilege in their lives (which would require "compared to the outgroup, my ingroup has had hardships;" cf. competitive victimhood, Sullivan et al., 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016). Such strategic social comparison may underlie related findings that Whites and men reference either disadvantages associated with their nonprivileged identities, or successful members of disadvantaged groups, to counter evidence of privilege (R.M. Brown & Craig, 2019; Phillips & Lowery, 2015; Rosette & Tost, 2013).

Privilege is necessarily a relative comparison within a specific dimension (e.g., class, race, or gender). In the case of race or gender, individuals should be compared with their Einsteinian twins, who differ only by race or gender. However, this conception of privilege, reflected in previous empirical work, depends on clear lines of demarcation among groups on the dimension (e.g., men vs. women, Whites vs. Blacks). In the case of social class, social comparison may be further muddled by the lack of discrete class groups. For instance, people may shift not only their reference group, but also the standards of group membership, as when those from higher social class backgrounds claim middle-class status (Cruces et al., 2013; DeMott, 1990; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Rampell, 2011). Specific evidence of privilege—for example, benefitting from legacy admission—may be a useful way to enforce the relevant social comparison.

Further, the nature of privilege awareness and responses may vary across different dimensions of difference (e.g., Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011). For instance, our findings suggest that defensive claims should result whenever class privilege concerns arise; however, it is likely that such concerns are more easily evoked the higher one is on the social class spectrum, or the more robust the evidence of unearned privilege is. For example, even the poorest in the United States benefit from global inequities that favor them over impoverished counterparts in other countries. However, within a U.S. context, such individuals likely inhabit the disadvantaged position in their most frequent social comparisons.

In addition, social class is likely experienced as relatively malleable compared with race and gender; more potential for mobility exists, and people often believe class is even more malleable than it is (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; OECD, 2018). As such, evidence of class-based privileges may feel less threatening than privilege associated with less fluid group boundaries.

We have discussed privilege as generally invisible to those who benefit from it, which adds to its potency; difficult-to-notice and easy-to-deny are not qualities that foster discovery. However, the nature of this invisibility needs further exploration. For example, while we and others find that denying the existence of privilege can be a useful tool for protecting self-regard (DiTomaso, 2013; Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006; Lowery et al., 2007), we do not assess whether such denials mean people *do not* acknowledge privilege, or whether they *do* acknowledge privilege and are trying to reduce its visibility to themselves or to others (for discussion, see Knowles et al., 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1989; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). It is possible that, among those chronically on the privileged side of social comparisons, the defensive psychology we demonstrate may become more automatic or generalized, thus contributing to “invisibility” (see also Davidai & Gilovich, 2016). On the whole, our results suggest motivated processes lead people to attempt to cover their own privilege when it is made visible, whether they are consciously aware of this process or not.

The (Il)logic of Merit

The ideology of meritocracy is woven deeply into the cultural fabric of the United States. The very “American dream” that attracts and attaches so many to the United States suggests that if one works hard enough, they can succeed, no matter their class or social background (Hochschild, 1996). As a result, systemic inequity is a tricky subject for U.S. psyches: while most subscribe to meritocratic ideologies that abhor such inequity, many also benefit from inequities. As they attempt to resolve this tension, we find that the class privileged specifically claim hardship and effort—symbols of merit—thus covering privilege in a cloak of meritocracy. This fits with existing work showing that the well-off rely especially on ideologies of meritocracy, and its associates like the Protestant work ethic and bootstrapping beliefs, to emphasize personal responsibility for class mobility (Brandt, 2013; Hochschild, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kraus, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Kunstman, Plant, & Deska, 2016; McCoy & Major, 2007; O’Brien & Major, 2005). Likewise, people often lean on the logic of personal choice to justify class differences and minimize corrective distribution (Chow & Galak, 2012; Savani & Rattan, 2012).

In a context so steeped in meritocratic ideology, being responsible for success offers a sense of deservingness, moral legitimacy, and ultimately self-regard. For instance, recent work has described meritocratic threat as a threat to self-regard: to claim positive self-regard, people in meritocratic contexts need to attribute outcomes to themselves (Knowles et al., 2014). Specifically, “personal merit” has been theorized as principally about proportionality, and deservingness is a way to assess individuals vis-à-vis this proportionality; if my inputs merit my outcomes, then I am de-

serving and, therefore, good (Adams, 1965; Feather, 1992, 1999; McCoy & Major, 2007).

However, the pressures of this context may induce decoupling or slippage: evidence of effort may boost positive self-regard even when these merits are *disconnected* from outcomes themselves (cf. Alicke, 2000; Feather, 1999; Schaumberg & Mullen, 2017). If so, people may also care about “personal merit” as an absolute measure of effort and talent: if I have many merits, then I am good (see also implicit Protestantism; Uhlmann et al., 2011). For example, we find that participants exposed to evidence of their privilege exert more effort on a puzzle task, even though such efforts do not retroactively justify benefitting from class-based advantages. This decoupling of inputs and outcomes may also explain why our participants seem reluctant to defensively reframe privilege as luck (Online Supplemental Materials Experiment 1); by reframing positive outcomes as luck, participants may give up their claims to personal merit and, thus, self-regard.

Further, different research literatures have treated the psychology of merit with different emphases. Attribution theory perspectives have found that internal attributions for positive outcomes are associated with feelings of self-worth and deservingness (Alicke, 2000; Feather, 1992, 1999, 2002; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Steele, 1988). Other work emphasizes the role of personal control in making internal attributions valuable (Hastorf et al., 1970; Kelley, 1973; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Ross, 1977; Weiner, 1993; Zuckerman, 1979). Meanwhile, equity theory perspectives focus on proportionality (Adams, 1965). More research is needed to capture the slippery nature of merit: do people want to feel control over their outcomes, deserving of their outcomes, or prove they are hardworking and competent independent of any outcomes?

Self- and System-Maintenance

Our results suggest it is unpleasant to think of oneself as the beneficiary of privilege especially within meritocratic systems, which strongly proscribe against such benefits. Individuals’ talents and effort, not their demographic status, should cause their outcomes (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Miron et al., 2006; Son Hing et al., 2011). As such, evidence of privilege may activate not only self-defense goals, but also system-defense goals (Iyer et al., 2004; Miron et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). For instance, we find that both self-affirmation *and* system-affirmation reduced individuals’ defensive claims of hardship in response to evidence of their benefitting from class privilege (Experiment 5). These results suggest that defensive claims may serve both self- and system-defense goals: for instance, claiming hardship or effort may be useful for convincing not only the self, but also third parties, that unearned advantage does not exist.

While our evidence suggests people genuinely believe their lives to have been harder when they make hardship claims, it is also possible that people lie about hardships when serving system-defense goals. For instance, in Experiment 5, those in the system-affirmation condition reduced hardship claims but *maintained* denials of personal privilege; only self-affirmation increased acknowledgment of personally benefitting from privilege. Thus, while we offer evidence that hardship claims relate to self-regard, hardship claims may offer other protections as well.

To the extent individuals change their beliefs about the adversity in their lives, their policy preferences may also change. For in-

stance, when Whites deny *personally* benefiting from privilege, they reduce their support for affirmative action policies (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Attributing advantaged outcomes more to personal merit to parry evidence of such advantage might also lead people to attribute *disadvantage* more to individual choice and lack of merit. When people believe choice plays a role in life outcomes (e.g., internal attributions for poverty), they are less supportive of redistributive policies (Applebaum, 2001; Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Bryan, Dweck, Ross, Kay, & Mislavsky, 2009; McCoy & Major, 2007; Savani & Rattan, 2012). In this way, the individual psychological needs of those benefitting from privilege may not only contribute to maintenance of self-regard, but indirectly contribute to maintenance of systems of inequity as well (Phillips & Lowery, 2018).

Future work should continue to explore the trade-offs between system, group, and personal defense. For instance, focusing on how people manage self-concerns in light of evidence of privilege, rather than group or system concerns alone, may illuminate new routes to reducing defensive reactions. By leveraging people's desire to maintain their sense of personal merit, their concerns about their material outcomes may be overcome and they may be more open to dismantling privilege, rather than defending, denying, or distancing (Knowles et al., 2014; Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Rosette & Koval, 2018). At the same time, these different goals may activate simultaneously, and either conflict or amplify. For instance, our results dovetail with previous work that suggests the privileged may defensively create a false separation between personal and group privilege (cf. Crosby, 1984; Phillips & Lowery, 2015). In this way, individuals might maintain self-regard even within a system they recognize is illegitimate. By pointing out the ways in which one is not "a fortunate son," challenges to personal moral legitimacy may be brushed aside, while systemic group privilege and its benefits can persist.

Conclusion

Calls to expand our understanding of the psychology of inequality and inequity have been met with studies especially focused on the disadvantaged—important and historically understudied groups. However, members of the upper class and other dominant groups are in positions of great power, which might amplify the effects of their behavior on inequity. Indeed, privileged positioning in social hierarchies can create its own psychology; as such, exploring this psychology of privilege may enrich our understanding of inequity. What happens when we expose members of the privileged classes to evidence of that privilege? We find that even in response to direct evidence of the "invisible knapsack," the ideology of meritocracy motivates people to claim hardship, potentially blinding themselves and others to the privileges of class. In this way, people may legitimize social class inequity as mere inequality: they address the discomfort associated with naked privilege, by cloaking it with the fig leaf of hardship.

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