

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

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Abstract

Invisibility makes privilege powerful. Privilege, when it remains unexposed, perpetuates intergroup inequality by giving unearned advantages to certain groups. However, recent social movements (e.g., Occupy protests) attempt to expose class-based privilege, threatening its invisibility. Across nine experiments, we show that the class privileged respond to evidence of privilege with self-defensive reactions. Experiments 1a-c show that when people are provided evidence of their own class privilege, they claim to have suffered more personal life hardships. Experiments 2-3 show that such claims are driven especially by self-concerns: self-affirmation reduces hardship claims more than does system-affirmation, and only self-relevant privilege evokes defensive responses. Experiments 4-5 find 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 an alternative to merit as a theory of success (e.g., luck), the privileged no longer claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege; manipulating sense of personal merit also eliminates hardship claims. Finally, Experiments 6a and 6b provide evidence that people claim hardships because they believe these imply personal merit on their part. We show that preventing the privileged from claiming hardship leads them to claim increased effort in the workplace and to increase effort on a difficult task. Results suggest that even when the upper class are confronted with visible evidence of their “invisible knapsack” of privileges, ideologies of personal merit help them cover the privileges of class once again.

Keywords: intergroup inequality/inequity, social class, privilege/advantage, hierarchy, attribution, merit

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

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, 2015; Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), for many Americans, class is 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, 1/3 of those with annual incomes greater than \$150,000 (the top 5% of incomes) self-identify as middle-class (Pew Research Center, 2008). Class segregation increasingly characterizes Americans' daily lives, with the wealthy especially less likely to interact with those of different class backgrounds (Bischoff & Reardon, 2014). And compared to people in other societies, Americans are less likely to experience class-consciousness or to think class matters for their daily experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2008).

However, the effects of social class on outcomes and opportunities are stark. And, while some 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 may be more able to purchase luxury goods, they also receive better health care outcomes (Elo, 2009) and education opportunities (Reardon, 2011) than their lower class peers, even in the same institutions. People whose parents have a college degree are more likely to succeed in college, even when their academic skills

were otherwise the same (Ishitani, 2006; Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2018). And those who come from elite university backgrounds are more likely than their equally qualified state university peers to secure prestigious jobs (Rivera, 2015). In short, social class provides privilege: those at the upper end of the income and education distributions garner unearned advantage, based on their class status alone.¹

What's more, 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. University admission and selection for prestigious positions can be claimed as evidence of personal effort, rather than evidence of inequitable legacy status and network connections. As long as unearned advantages that facilitated success remain cloaked (e.g., legacy status, access), privileged individuals can experience such achievements as definitive evidence of personal merit. Invisibility allows people in the upper classes to claim, as badges of merit, positive outcomes that 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 such class-based inequity. However, the invisibility of these class privileges is increasingly threatened. For instance, recent movements like the Occupy protests, focus explicitly on the loopholes and get-out-of-jail free

¹Importantly, 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). That is, the presence of class privilege must be assessed by comparing two people of different class backgrounds who are otherwise the same along non-class dimensions (see also Rosette & Tost, 2013).

cards enjoyed exclusively by those in the upper classes (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). What happens when class privileges are made visible?

Here, we theorize that evidence of class privilege threatens people's self-regard, because it challenges their belief that they have earned their outcomes. Therefore, to protect this belief, the class privileged will claim to have suffered greater life hardships and to have put forth more effort. All together, we suggest that those benefitting from class privilege will be motivated to protect their self-regard, and specifically will use symbols tied to meritocracy – hardship and hard work - to hide their privilege.

Social Class Inequity: Exploring Class as Privilege

The psychological study of social class has boomed in recent years (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), documenting and explaining how class differences affect people's models of self (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2018; Piff, 2014), intergroup behavior (Belmi & Laurin, 2015; Côté et al., 2013; Gray & Kish-Gephardt, 2013), and cognition and decision-making (Shah et al., 2012), among other psychological 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 et al., 2017). Especially neglected in psychological study has been the experience of the upper class and how they regard their class status.

One perspective common in other social sciences, but relatively less clear in psychology, is the theorizing of social class as a dimension of *inequity*, rather than *inequality* (e.g., Fiske & Markus, 2012; Rivera, 2015). Are members of the upper class aware of themselves as benefitting from class inequity? And what happens when the class privileged are made aware of these

benefits? Recent forays into the area suggest that those from upper classes might be threatened by the idea that they benefit from unearned privilege. For instance, those from wealthier backgrounds downplay their high-class status when that want to get along with someone from a lower-class background (Côté et al., 2017; Swencionis & Fiske, 2018). And, those most committed to the ideology of merit legitimize social class inequality the most (McCoy & Major, 2007; Major et al., 2002). These findings are similar to results from studies in the intergroup and justice literatures, which suggests that these literatures provide instructive models for the study of class inequity. As we review below, together these literatures suggest that the class privileged should be threatened by evidence of their privilege, if this evidence is made visible.

Intergroup Perspectives on Inequity

Work from an intergroup perspective finds that privileged group members respond defensively to evidence of inequity (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014). 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).

The bulk of the work on group inequity explains responses to inequity as motivated by different forms of threat: threats to the groups’ esteem (esteem-threat), the groups’ power (positional-threat), or to the stability of the system (system-threat; for reviews, see Knowles et al., 2014; Rosette & Koval, 2017; see also Branscombe, 1998; Iyer, Leach, & Pederson, 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 (esteem-threat; Branscombe, Schmitt, Schiffhauer, 2006). 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 the Whites' dominance is threatened by advantage exposure, they engage in strategic defense meant to stabilize the groups' position in the hierarchy (positional-threat; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Jun, Lowery, & Guillory, 2016). And, 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).

Further, this work finds that the framing of group inequity shapes defensive responses. For example, when Whites' or men's advantaged status is explicitly called out, they are more likely to take action, than when the same inequity is framed in terms of ethnic minorities' or women's disadvantage (Knowles et al., 2014). To the extent class *inequality* is experienced as class *inequity*, those benefitting from class privilege should feel threatened, and 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 American contexts. Social class can depend on several indicators, including education and income, which provides more degrees of freedom in self-definition than do the typical understandings of race and gender (Cohen et al., 2017). This allows for greater flexibility in class categorization, and thus class groups are less

entitative. Because previous work, focused especially on race and gender inequity, shows that privilege defense is provoked by concern for group esteem or group dominance, the relative lack of entitativity might mean that the class privileged are less susceptible to threats linked to their group than those advantaged along other social dimensions (Knowles et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2012).

Even if there is little sensitivity to collective threat among the upper class, there is reason to believe these members of advantaged groups also experience individual-level threat associated with privilege. For instance, even when collective threat is evoked, one defensive maneuver employed by Whites is to deny *personal* benefit, thus protecting the self rather than the collective (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). And, when racial inequity is specifically framed as individual inequity – precluding distancing as a defensive technique – Whites are especially likely to make individual reparations (Rosette & Koval, 2017). Together, this work shows that when facing evidence of their privilege, people are likely managing *both* self-regard and hierarchy related concerns (Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Rosette & Tost, 2013). And, beyond the desire for positive group esteem and secure group positioning, the desire for positive self-regard is also powerful. As a result, even without strong group identity, the class privileged should experience evidence of their privilege as threatening to the self.

In 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, 2018; Son Hing et al, 2011). And, many Americans believe meritocracy both should be and is the basis of society (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 & Sedkides, 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 perspective taken on inequity in the justice literature 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 individual's 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 be especially threatening 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, Leach, & Pederson, 2004; Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Supporting this view, previous work has found that those who care deeply about merit are most threatened by evidence of racial privilege (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Lowery,

Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; Knowles et al., 2014). All together, we suggest that when class privileges are exposed, the class privileged should move to defend their sense of personal merit against this evidence of undeserved outcomes, thus protecting their self-regard.

Merit Maneuvers to Restore Self-Regard

We expect the nature of the threat to self-regard should shape which defensive responses the class privileged will use: their defensive responses should be tailored to restoring their sense of personal merit. As such, the class privileged may rely specifically on the 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 hardships.² Claiming hardships may thus offer a path to restoring personal merit: the more people overcame en route to success, the more they can 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 due to personal effort (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997; see also Branscombe, 1998; Zuckerman, 1979; cf. Davidai & Gilovich, 2016). We suggest that the privileged might engage in a similar process, 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. But this work has not

²Of 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 advantages make 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.

considered the case of social class, nor has it explored the mechanisms behind personal hardship claims. Further, while previous theorizing has demonstrated the utility of claiming that success required one to surmount obstacles (Feather, 1992, 1999; Berglas & Jones, 1978), it has been often been taken for granted that said obstacles were in some way relevant to the outcomes themselves. For instance, if the 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, as the logic of self-handicapping might predict. Rather, the privileged will use claims of even irrelevant life hardship to suggest they deserve their outcomes.

We suggest that this defensive strategy depends especially on the ideology of meritocracy. For instance, hardship can imply 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 success (Olivola, 2011; Schaumberg & Mullen, 2017). To the extent people believe that hardship connotes personal merit, their own hardships can imply they are a good person. In short, because Americans support meritocratic ideals, they believe personal responsibility for outcomes is especially important to positive self-regard; in turn, they may turn to the strategy of claiming hardships in response to evidence of privilege.

Current Research

Making privilege visible forces the privileged to face their unearned advantage, and as a result, manage the implications for their experience of self. We suggest that the class privileged will highlight hardships that they have suffered, in an attempt to downplay the role of unearned advantages in their successes. 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. Evidence of privilege suggests one has benefitted from unearned advantage, making it difficult to maintain a positive view of self (e.g., Knowles & Lowery, 2012). However, if the self is first affirmed (Experiment 2), then people should not be threatened and defensive claims of hardship should not be necessary. Similarly, if evidence of privilege does not implicate the self, then people should not need to make defensive claims (Experiment 3).

Third, we hypothesize that privilege provokes self-defense specifically due to meritocratic ideals that permeate American society: individuals' talents and effort, not their class status, should cause their outcomes (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Son Hing et al., 2011). Thus, if people are provided ideologies that license alternative attributions for life outcomes (e.g. good luck), then privilege should not pose a threat to self-regard, and hardships should not be claimed (Experiment 4). Further, 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 5).

Finally, we hypothesize that people claim hardships in part to imply personal merit. Therefore, claiming hardships in response to evidence of privilege should be restorative, leading people to feel less need to claim or demonstrate their own effort (Experiments 6a and 6b).

Hypothesis 1: Evidence of class privilege threatens self-regard, thus evoking self-defensive claims (hardship, effort; Experiments 1a-3).

Hypothesis 2: Evidence of class privilege specifically threatens individuals' sense of personal merit (Experiments 1b-c; 4-5).

Hypothesis 3: Individual use personal hardships to restore personal merit (Experiments 1b-c; 5-6b).

We seek to make a few contributions with this work. First, we explore social class as a dimension of inequity, and probe whether the class privileged respond defensively to evidence of class inequity. Second, we capitalize on the differences between social class and race/gender to spotlight an important motive driving inequity defense: concern for personal merit, as compared to concerns for group esteem, group position, or the system. Here, we suggest that evidence of class privilege will threaten the self, thus evoking self-defensive claims.

Third, we extend previous work on hardship claims among other privileged groups by exploring the motivational mechanisms behind these claims. Fourth, we consider the specific techniques the class privileged use to cover 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), the class privileged might claim that they personally have suffered hardship or worked hard. As a result, these claims should bolster individual's sense of merit, allowing them to cover privilege once again.

Analytic Approach

Methodological norms were changing rapidly as we pursued the current research. To provide clarity and transparency, we summarize our analytic approach here.

Our hypotheses focus on concepts of meritocracy and social class formulated for an American cultural context. Thus, we restricted all 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 mass-testing studies, we removed participants who did not meet these demographic requirements before analysis. For all Mechanical Turk studies, we used pre-screening to ensure that participants met our demographic requirements. However, 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 pre-screen requirements did indeed meet these requirements. Those who misrepresented themselves were removed before analysis. Further, we always removed repeat participants and incomplete observations before analysis.

In early studies, our stopping rules were the end of present mass-testing session or when the Mechanical Turk study was complete. 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 Mechanical Turk, 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 relevant variables within each study. We also include information on additional tests of our manipulations and manipulation checks where

relevant. Importantly, we give a fulsome account of our analyses, which means that we report both hypothesized and unexpected results.

Experiment 1a

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 access to scarce resources. 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 Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). And, education brings with it many class privileges: for example, networking benefits tied to status of the school alone. Further, education itself particularly elite education. We therefore utilize the status of the educational institution that participants attend to manipulate evidence of class-based privilege.

Method

Participants. 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; age $M=21.42$, $SD=4.93$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 40% Asian/Asian-American, 34% White/European-American, 10% Black/African-American, 9% Other, and 7% Latino/Latino-American.

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

Independent Variable.

Privilege was manipulated by changing participants' exposure to privilege information. Participants were in one of three conditions: No Privilege, Inequality, or Class Privilege. Those in the No Privilege condition ($n=50$) were simply asked to "Please click continue."

Those in the Class Privilege condition ($n=44$) 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, healthcare, 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 ($n=45$):

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.

Dependent Variable.

Life Hardships was measured with 5 items ("My life has been full of hardships;" "There have been many struggles I have suffered;" "My life has had many obstacles;" "My life has been

easy;" and "I have had many difficulties in life that I could not overcome;" $\alpha=.88$). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

Results and Discussion

As hypothesized, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference by privilege 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, $t(136)=1.29, p=.19, 95\% \text{ C.I. } [-.17, .82]$. However, participants in these conditions did differ from those in the Class Privilege condition, $t(136)=2.39, p=.02, d=.44, 95\% \text{ C.I. } [.09, .97]$. 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 ($M=3.60, SD=1.30$). Overall, these results suggest that people claim more life hardships when given evidence of their class privilege.

Experiment 1b

We sought to replicate Experiment 1a using a sample from a different university. Further, we have theorized that hardship claims are a defensive response motivated by self-concerns: evidence of privilege threatens people's sense of merit, and so they may try to exaggerate hardships they have faced in an attempt to bolster their merit. Thus, we might expect that when individuals claim hardship in response to evidence of privilege, this should protect their sense of merit. In Experiment 1b, we probed whether life hardship claims would relate to individuals' personal sense of merit.

Method

Participants. 197 adult student volunteers from an elite East Coast business school (top five ranking internationally; 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/Asian-American, 22% White/European-American, 12% Other, 11% Latino/Latino-American, and 6% Black/African-American.

Procedure. Participants first read one of two randomly assigned Privilege statements. Participants completed questions measuring life hardships, then sense of personal merit, and then later completed demographic measures.

Independent Variables.

Privilege was manipulated by changing participants' exposure to privilege information. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege or Class Privilege. Those in the No Privilege condition ($n=100$) only read instructions that the survey would be about "Inequality in America." Those in the Class Privilege condition ($n=97$) additionally read the privilege prompt from Experiment 1a, except that "elite university" was replaced with "elite business school".

Dependent Variables.

Life Hardships was measured as in Experiment 1a.

Sense of Personal Merit was measured with 4 items ("Compared to most, I have a lot more personal merit", "I put in less effort than others" reversed, "I work harder than most other people", and "I am less talented and skilled than most other people" reversed; $\alpha=.51$). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

Results

As hypothesized, a two-sided t-test revealed a significant difference by privilege for life hardships, $t(195)=2.17$, $p=.03$, $d=.31$, 95% C.I. [.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 ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.14$).

Life hardships and sense of personal merit were not correlated, $r=.08$, $p=.24$, and privilege had no main effect on sense of personal merit, $t(195)=.57$, $p=.57$, 95% C.I. [-.20, .36]. However, we regressed privilege, sense of personal merit (centered), and their interaction on life hardships, and found a significant interaction effect, $b=.23$, $SE=.09$, $t(193)=2.56$, $p=.01$. As hypothesized, decomposing the interaction using floodlight analysis revealed that, privilege exerted a significant effect on life hardships when sense of merit scores were > 4.66 ($> -.07$ centered). However, among participants with a relatively weaker sense of personal merit (scores < 4.66), there was no effect of privilege on life hardships. Decomposed differently, among those in the Class Privilege condition, life hardship was positively associated with sense of personal merit, $b=.31$, $SE=.12$, $t(193)=2.57$, $p=.01$. Among those in the No Privilege condition, life hardship was unrelated to sense of personal merit, $b=-.14$, $SE=.13$, $t(193)=-1.08$, $p=.28$.

Discussion

Overall, Experiment 1b replicates Experiment 1a, providing additional evidence that people claim more life hardships when their class privilege is exposed. Further, these results suggest participants' sense of merit may be protected by their hardship claims: in the context of privilege, hardship became positively related to people's sense of personal merit. 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, life hardships

may help individuals counter evidence that privilege has helped them along in life, thus protecting their sense of merit and ultimately their self-regard.

Experiment 1c

We hypothesized that increased claims of life hardships in response to evidence of privilege is motivated by self-concerns: information about privilege is threatening to the self in part because it undermines people's sense of personal merit. Thus, as we have suggested, people may claim increased hardships in order to augment their personal attributions for success. This suggests that individual differences in commitment to the belief that one is responsible for one's own outcomes should moderate claims of hardships. Those that have stronger commitments to personal attributions should be more threatened by evidence of privilege (e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987; Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000), and thus more motivated to claim hardships in response. Capitalizing on individual differences in attributional tendencies, we tested this hypothesis using a between-subjects design in Experiment 1c.

Method

Participants. 89 adult student volunteers from an elite West Coast university participated in an in-lab mass-testing session (58% female; Age $M=20.33$, $SD=2.68$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 35% White/European-American, 23% Asian/Asian-American, 15% Latino/Latino-American, 14% Black/African-American, 13% Other, and 1% Native.

Procedure. Participants first read one of two randomly assigned Privilege statements. Then participants completed questions measuring life hardships and commitment to personal attribution (counterbalanced). Participants later completed demographic measures.

Independent and Measured Variables.

Privilege was manipulated by changing exposure to privilege information. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege or Class Privilege. Those in the No Privilege condition ($n=40$) only read instructions that the survey would be about “Inequality in America.” Those in the Class Privilege condition ($n=49$) additionally read the same manipulation statement from Experiment 1.

Commitment to Personal Attributions was measured with 12 items (e.g., “Whether or not I get to be a success depends mostly on my ability;” $\alpha=.74$; adapted from Levenson, 1981). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate more commitment to personal attribution.

Dependent Variable.

Life Hardships was measured as in Experiment 1a.

Results

Life hardships and commitment to personal attributions were not correlated, $r=.05$, $p=.63$. There was also no significant main effect of privilege nor of counterbalancing on commitment to personal attributions, $p's>.44$. We regressed life hardships on privilege, commitment to personal attributions (centered), and their interaction. Replicating Experiments 1a and 1b, we again found a significant main effect of privilege on life hardships. Those in the Class Privilege condition claimed more life hardships ($M=4.16$, $SD=1.32$) than those in the No Privilege condition ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.13$), $b=.30$, $SE=.14$, $t(84)=2.21$, $p=.03$, $d=.49$.

Unexpectedly, we did not find a significant interaction between privilege and commitment to personal attributions, $b=.17$, $SE=.26$, $t(84)=.65$, $p=.52$. However, we did find an unexpected moderation: a significant three-way interaction of privilege, commitment to personal

attributions, and counterbalance, $b = -.60$, $SE = .26$, $t(80) = -2.35$, $p = .02$. The main effect of privilege persisted, $b = .30$, $SE = .13$, $t(80) = 2.27$, $p = .03$, and no other main effects or interactions were significant.

To decompose this three-way interaction, we first explored participants who had completed the life hardship measure *before* reporting their commitment to personal attributions. As predicted, the privilege X commitment to personal attributions two-way interaction was significant, $b = .84$, $SE = .37$, $t(80) = 2.26$, $p = .03$. Using floodlight analysis, we found that privilege exerted a significant effect on life hardships when commitment to personal attributions scores were > 4.28 ($> -.03$ centered). However, among participants with relatively weaker commitment to personal attributions (scores < 4.28), there was no effect of privilege on life hardships. Decomposed differently, among those in the Class Privilege condition, commitment to personal attributions was significantly and positively related to life hardships, $b = 1.23$, $SE = .55$, $t(80) = 2.23$, $p = .03$. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, commitment to personal attributions was not related to life hardships, $p = .37$.

Second, we explored participants who had completed the life hardship measure *after* reporting their commitment to personal attributions. The privilege X commitment to personal attributions interaction was not significant, $p = .30$.

Discussion

Experiment 1c replicated the effect found in Experiments 1a and 1b: exposing people's privilege led them to increase their claims of life hardship. Furthermore, Experiment 1c extends our findings, demonstrating that life hardships are, at least in part, motivated by attributional beliefs about life outcomes. People who are less committed to personal attributions do not claim life hardships in direct response to evidence that they benefit from privilege. We also found an

unexpected, but intriguing, effect of counterbalancing order: participants committed to personal attributions evidently needed to either claim hardship, *or* state their commitment to such attributions. Although unexpected, this pattern is consistent with the possibility that endorsing the importance of personal attributions might work as a self-affirmation; in turn, people may no longer feel the need to claim hardships, because the self has been affirmed. We further explore this possibility in Experiment 2.

Experiment 2

We have emphasized that self-regard is threatened by evidence of privilege; privilege suggests one did not earn outcomes meritocratically, and thus people are motivated to defend their personal merit. Experiments 1b and 1c suggests such self-concerns are at play, since hardships relate to individual differences in sense of personal merit and commitment to personal attributions. 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 such benefits, but it is also 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 want to feel good about the system that provided positive life outcomes and protect the privileges they enjoy (system-defense), but they likely *also* want to feel good about those life outcomes and their selves (self-defense). In short, people should be motivated to protect their good feelings about their life outcomes, not only the security of those outcomes.

To probe more specifically whether evidence of privilege provokes self- and/or system-defense, Experiment 2 tests the effects of self- vs. system-affirmation on hardship claims. We

use a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) x 3 (Affirmation: Self, System, No Affirmation) design. Further, in Experiment 2 we test 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 privilege, then an increase in these claims may indicate a reluctance to recognize personal privilege.

Finally, in Experiment 2, we further test whether the effect of class privilege on hardship generalizes to class privilege based on income. We use a new manipulation of evidence of class privilege, this time evoking the elite status associated with high incomes, rather than with elite universities, and we recruit adults from across America, rather than students.

Method

Participants. We recruited 590 adult volunteers from a national online subject pool (Amazon's Mechanical Turk) to achieve approximately 100 participants per cell in this 3x2 design. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not later report having incomes consistent with pre-screen requirement, leaving a final $N=541$ (57% female; age $M=35.94$, $SD=10.76$ 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% White/European-American, 8% Asian/Asian-American, 8% Other, 4% Black/African-American, and 1% Native American.

Procedure. Participants completed demographic information first and were only able to continue if they met pre-screen 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.

Privilege was manipulated by changing participants' exposure to privilege information. 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 \$100,000 or more were in the top 10% of incomes, and they 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 making \$100,000 or more are in the top 10% of incomes and 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, healthcare, jobs, and more.

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

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 employed a self-affirmation to manipulate need for self-defense. If self-concerns are driving hardship claims in the face of evidence of privilege, then self-affirmation should reduce these claims by bolstering people against threat (Crichton & Dunning, 2015; Steele, 1988). 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, & Shepard (2009), we employed 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” ($n=172$).

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 social class”; $\alpha=.73$) 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-c, political ideology was a significant moderator in Experiment 2, perhaps due to participants completing this study during a presidential election. We therefore 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. 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, $b=-.07$, $SE=.04$, $t(534)=-1.92$, $p=.055$, $\eta_p^2=.05$ (see Figure 1). The linear contrast interaction of privilege and affirmation was not significant, $b=-.01$, $SE=.06$, $t(534)=-.13$, $p=.90$.

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the Self-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition claimed significantly *fewer* life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition, $t(534)=-2.09$, $p=.04$. Among participants in the System-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition claimed marginally fewer life hardships than those in the No Privilege condition, $t(534)=-1.82$, $p=.07$. Unexpectedly, among participants in the No Affirmation condition, there was no effect of privilege, $t(534)=.40$, $p=.69$.³

Belief in Personal Privilege. 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, $b=.26$, $SE=.03$, $t(534)=7.66$, $p<.001$. While the interaction of privilege and affirmation (quadratic contrast) was not significant, $b=.04$, $SE=.04$, $t(534)=.92$, $p=.36$, we found a significant

³We additionally found a significant three-way interaction of privilege, affirmation, and political ideology on life hardships, $b=.10$, $SE=.04$, $t(529)=2.35$, $p=.02$. In the No Affirmation condition, privilege condition affected conservatives' life hardship claims more than liberals' claims: conservatives claimed more life hardships in the Class Privilege condition, while liberals did not. In the Self- and System-Affirmation conditions, political ideology did not moderate the effect of privilege. Given that we do not find such political moderations in our other studies, including those run after Experiment 2, it is possible that the presidential election season context temporarily amplified effects of political ideology on a broader range of beliefs and behaviors (see also Twenge, Honeycutt, Prislin, & Sherman, 2016).

interaction of privilege and affirmation (linear contrast), $b=.15$, $SE=.07$, $t(534)=2.06$, $p=.04$, $\eta_p^2=.05$ (see Figure 1).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the Self-Affirmation condition, those in the Class Privilege condition reported significantly *more* belief in personal privilege than those in the No Privilege condition, $t(534)=2.28$, $p=.02$. There was no effect of privilege condition in either the System-Affirmation condition, $t(534)=-.67$, $p=.50$, or the No Affirmation condition, $t(534)=.19$, $p=.85$.

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 ($M=4.44$, $SD=1.52$), $t(534)=2.42$, $p=.02$, and than those in the System-Affirmation condition ($M=4.23$, $SD=1.42$), $t(534)=3.28$, $p=.001$. 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 ($M=4.45$, $SD=1.48$), $t(534)=-.37$, $p=.71$.

Discussion

Experiment 2 extends our findings, suggesting that people claim more life hardships due at least in part to self-concerns evoked by evidence of privilege. When self-affirmed, the class privileged report fewer life hardships when given evidence of privilege, and when system-affirmed, they report marginally fewer life hardships. However, only when *self*-affirmed do the class privileged also report higher belief in personal privilege. This suggests that while hardship claims may play a role in both self- and system-defense, alleviating self-threat may open the door to privilege acknowledgment. In contrast, these results suggest reducing system-threat may help people legitimize the privilege they have.

Unlike in the other experiments, we find that the main effect of evidence of privilege on life hardships (in the No Affirmation condition) is moderated by political ideology: conservatives claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege, while liberals do not (see Footnote 1). This result suggests the idea of class privilege, like many beliefs and behaviors (Twenge et al., 2016), is becoming politicized, such that evidence of personally benefitting from class privilege is more widely accepted among liberals than conservatives. However, in experiments run after Experiment 2, we do not find this political effect, which suggests the moderation may have been due to a temporarily heightened political climate. 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 acknowledgement – and possibly efforts to reduce privilege – may increase as well.

All together, the results of Experiment 2 build on those of Experiments 1a-c, suggesting that self-concerns motivate the privileged to claim hardships. Further, these hardships may help the privileged dissociate privilege from their personal selves. In Experiment 3, 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 3

We have suggested that 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 in order to increase their sense of having caused their own outcomes.

However, defensive claims of hardship or hard work 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 inequality in general in Experiment 1a, should not threaten people's sense of having earned their own outcomes. We test this hypothesis in Experiment 3, using a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) x 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 (Amazon's Mechanical Turk). Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not report having incomes consistent with pre-screen requirements, leaving a final $N=348$. All participants were currently employed adult U.S. citizens who self-identified as having an annual household income of \$75,000 or above, but below \$100,000 (48% female; age $M=34.28$, $SD=10.23$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 77% White/European-American, 7% Black/African-American, 6% Asian/Asian-American, 6% Other, and 4% Latino/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 using a method similar to that of Experiment 2. 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, healthcare, 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”. In the Bottom 90% condition ($n=182$), participants instead saw a graphic and accompanying text indicating that households making \$100,000 or more were in the top 10% of incomes.

Dependent Variable.

Job Effort was measured with ten items (e.g., “Few people put in more hours weekly than I do”; “When I work, I really exert myself to the fullest”; $\alpha=.89$; Brown & Leigh, 1996). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point Likert 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. There was no interaction, $F(1, 344)=2.94$, $p=.09$.

However, we had 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. As such, we decomposed the interaction despite it being marginal in order to probe for this specific pattern. In line with our hypothesis, we created three orthogonal planned contrasts: 1) comparing Class Privilege, Bottom 90% to No Privilege, Bottom 90%; 2) comparing both Bottom 90% conditions to No Privilege, Top 10%; and, 3) comparing Class Privilege, Top 10% to all other conditions.

We regressed job effort on our condition factor with the reported contrasts. As predicted, results revealed that the third contrast was significant, $t(344)=2.00$, $p=.046$, $d=.26$, 95% C.I. [- .004, .52]. Those in the Top 10% condition who were exposed to evidence of privilege reported significantly more job effort ($M=5.03$, $SD=.93$) than did participants in the other three conditions ($M=4.77$, $SD=1.04$; see Figure 2). Neither the first contrast $t(344)=-1.55$, $p=.12$, 95% C.I. [- .54, .06], nor second contrast $t(344)=1.44$, $p=.15$, 95% C.I. [- .07, .44] were significant.

Discussion

Experiment 3 provides further indication that evidence of privilege threatens people's sense of having caused their own positive outcomes: people exposed to evidence of privilege claim to work harder at their jobs. Importantly, people do not claim to work harder at their jobs when given evidence of privilege for groups of which they are not members. This suggests evidence of privilege does not lead people to claim more effort at work due to privilege implying the existence of a more competitive world in general. Similarly, absent evidence of privilege, membership inside or outside the top 10% of incomes did not affect effort claims. Rather, people claim increased effort at work only when they face evidence that they benefit from privilege.

We have further theorized that privilege threatens not just the self generally, but specifically the sense of personal merit. In American society, the sense of personal merit is generally tied to positive self-regard, thus evoking self-defense when personal merit is challenged. In the following experiments we explore the role of personal merit specifically as driving self-defensive reactions to evidence of privilege.

Experiment 4

We have theorized that the ideology of merit makes evidence of privilege especially threatening to the privileged. Such ideologies direct how attributions and outcomes relate to one's self-regard. For instance, when merit is the accepted route to success, personal effort or skill are necessary for positive self-regard. In this context, evidence of privilege should threaten self-regard, and lead to increased hardship claims. However, when *luck* is the accepted route to success, personal effort or skill are no longer necessary for positive self-regard. Thus, privilege should not be threatening and hardships no longer claimed.

Previous work has found that luck or random chance can be threatening to existential meaning, often by reducing feelings of personal security or control (Landau, Kay, & Whitson,

2015). However, from an attribution theory perspective, luck can be bolstering: in the context of harm or failure, luck allows people to protect self-regard by denying personal responsibility for negative outcomes (Feather, 2002). And, research has found that focusing people on luck can increase their willingness to acknowledge external contributors to outcomes (Bryan, Dweck, Ross, Kay, & Mislavsky, 2009). Given ample evidence that privilege information threatens self-regard, we suggest that luck should provide a helpful alibi for individuals seeking to escape responsibility from over-benefitting. Indeed, refocusing people on luck may allow the privileged to have their self-regard (disconnecting positive self-regard from internal attributions) and keep their privileges too (enjoy benefits as the result of mere good fortune).

Thus, we hypothesize that when people are asked to focus on the role that good luck plays in success, evidence of privilege should be less threatening to their sense of merit, and thus fewer hardships will be claimed. Experiment 4 tests this hypothesis using a 2 (Privilege: Class Privilege, No Privilege) x 2 (Theory of Success: Merit, Luck) design.

Method

Participants. 105 adult student volunteers from an elite university completed the survey during an in-lab mass testing session (62% female; age $M=20.31$, $SD=2.57$ years). Participants racial backgrounds were: 32% White/European-American, 27% Asian/Asian-American, 23% Other, 12% Latino/Latino-American, and 6% Black/African-American.

Procedure. Participants first read one of two randomly assigned Privilege statements. Participants then responded to one of two randomly assigned biased questionnaire scales (Theory of Success condition). Afterward, participants received a link to a second survey. Upon entering the second survey, they were given instructions to think about their childhood for a survey about

childhood memories. Participants completed questions measuring life hardships, and demographic information.

Independent Variables.

Privilege was manipulated using the same method employed in Experiment 1b.

Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege ($n=54$) or Class Privilege condition ($n=51$).

Theory of Success was manipulated with biased scales that encouraged participants' agreement with one of two different theories of success: Merit or Luck. The scales asked participants to rate agreement with different claims about what determines success in society. Both scales were biased such that all items encouraged strong endorsement, which participants rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), and both scales have been used in previous research to activate either "merit" or "luck" schemas (Bryan et al., 2009).

In the Merit condition ($n=58$), participants were asked to respond to 7 items, e.g. "Having the self-discipline to buckle down and work, even when you don't feel like it, is one of the most important factors in determining how well you do" ($\alpha=.78$). Those in the Luck condition ($n=47$) were asked to respond to 7 items, e.g. "It takes more than just hard work to get into a top university; it also takes some good luck and the support of those around us." ($\alpha=.77$).

As intended, both biased questionnaires elicited high agreement (Merit: $M=4.02$, $SD=.60$; Luck: $M=4.49$, $SD=.45$), suggesting that each condition successfully encouraged the endorsement of the corresponding mindset.

Dependent Variable.

Life Hardships was the same as in Experiment 1a.

Results

Above, we reported the generally high agreement with both Merit and Luck questionnaires; there was also no significant effect of privilege condition on endorsement of either merit, $t(45)=-1.10$, $p=.28$, or luck beliefs, $t(56)=.56$, $p=.57$.

A two-way ANOVA revealed no main effects of privilege, $F(1, 101)=1.48$, $p=.22$, or theory of success, $F(1, 101)=.09$, $p=.76$, on life hardships. However, as hypothesized, we observed a significant interaction between privilege and theory of success on life hardships, $F(1, 101)=7.28$, $p=.008$, $\eta_p^2=.07$ (see Figure 3).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, when participants were exposed to a Merit theory of success, we replicated our result from Experiment 1: those in the Class Privilege condition claimed significantly more life hardships ($M=3.91$, $SD=.95$) than those in the No Privilege condition ($M=3.08$, $SD=1.37$), $t(101)=2.65$, $p=.01$, $d=.72$, 95% C.I. [.21, 1.46]. In contrast, among participants exposed to a Luck theory of success, those in the Class Privilege condition ($M=3.36$, $SD=.94$) did not differ in claimed hardships from those in the No Privilege condition ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.31$), $t(101)=-1.2$, $p=.21$, 95% C.I. [-1.12, .26]. Decomposed differently, among those in the Class Privilege condition, those in the Merit condition perceived marginally more life hardships than those in the Luck condition, $t(101)=1.69$, $p=.09$, $d=.49$, 95% C.I. [-.10, 1.21]. Among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Luck condition claimed more hardships than those in the Merit condition, $t(101)=-2.12$, $p=.04$, $d=.62$, 95% C.I. [-1.37, -.05].

Discussion

Experiment 4 suggests that the ideology of merit in part motivates the privileged to claim life hardships when given evidence of their privilege. Merit is considered the default theory of

success in America; thus, replicating earlier experiments, we find that people focused on merit claim more hardships when exposed to evidence of privilege. However, when we first focused people on an alternative theory of success – good luck – they no longer claim life hardships in response to evidence of privilege. That is, when luck is responsible for life outcomes, privilege is less threatening – it can be experienced as good fortune instead.

These results also offer a quandary: if simply focusing on luck alleviates the threat of privilege to self-regard, then why not focus on luck spontaneously, instead of claiming hardships? It is possible that the ideology of merit is so deeply engrained, that people need an active nudge towards thinking about luck. Here, following Bryan et al., 2009, we actively manipulated participants' mindsets by offering them luck-affirming statements nearly impossible to disagree with. Further limiting the likelihood of spontaneity, people may be resistant to thinking in terms of luck due to existential threat (Landau et al., 2015). At the same time, attribution theory has documented ample spontaneous claims of bad luck in order to parry the threat of personal failure (e.g., Feick & Rhodewalt, 1997). But privilege may also be particularly tricky in this sense: privilege is not merely random good luck, but systematic inequity. This systematic nature of privilege risks existential guilt among the privileged, akin to survival guilt among survivors (Montada, Schmitt, & Dalbert, 1996). As a result, individuals may be especially motivated to claim desert of outcomes, rather than claim good fortune, and thus require more active priming to adopt a luck mindset. In general, the flexibility versus rigidity of merit ideologies may be a particularly interesting avenue for future research.

In sum, we hypothesized that increased claims of life hardships in response to evidence of privilege is motivated by the desire for self-regard: information about privilege is threatening to the self in part because it undermines people's sense of deserving. Thus, people may claim

increased hardships in order to augment their personal attributions for success. Experiment 4 provides initial evidence that individuals claim hardships because of this imperative tied to the ideology meritocracy. In the face of privilege, meritocracy motivates people to augment internal factors as causes for their success, and they feel that claiming hardships accomplishes this task. Experiment 5 provides a more direct test of this hypothesis.

Experiment 5

We suggest that people claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege in order to augment their sense of having earned their positive outcomes in life in part because people use hardships to imply evidence of personal effort and merit. However, if people's need to feel personal responsibility for their positive life outcomes is satisfied in some other way, they should feel less need to use hardships to bolster their sense of personal merit. Thus, in Experiment 5, we use a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) x 2 (Personal Merit: High, Low) design.

Method

Participants. 434 adult student volunteers from an elite university completed the survey during in-lab mass testing sessions (z-scored).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.

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

Privilege was manipulated using the same method employed 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, $F(1, 430)=1.07$, $p=.30$, or personal merit, $F(1, 430)=.34$, $p=.56$, on life hardships. However, as hypothesized, we found a significant privilege by personal merit interaction on life hardships, $F(1, 430)=4.81$, $p=.03$, $\eta_p^2=.01$ (see Figure 4).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among participants in the Low Personal Merit condition, we replicated the result from Experiments 1 and 2: those in the Class Privilege condition claimed significantly more life hardships ($M=3.95$, $SD=1.32$) than those in the No

⁵In a separate experiment, we tested the effect of the Personal Merit manipulation. In an in-lab mass-testing session ($N=140$), compared to 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 Experiment 1b), $t(137)=2.17$, $p=.03$, $d=.37$, 95% C.I. [.01, .22]. Low Personal Merit and Control condition were not significantly different, $t(137)=.19$, $p=.85$, $d=.03$, 95% C.I. [-.16, .19]. (Planned contrasts Low Personal Merit = -1, Control = 1, High Personal Merit = 1; Low Personal Merit = -1, Control = -1, High Personal Merit = 2).

Privilege condition ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.19$), $t(430)=2.30$, $p=.02$, $d=.32$, 95% C.I. [.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% C.I. [-.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% C.I. [-.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% C.I. [-.14, .50].

Discussion

Experiment 5 suggests that life hardship claims are driven by people's need to make internal attributions for success. When people are given an opportunity to write about an accomplishment they achieved on their own, they claim fewer life hardships in response to evidence of privilege than when they are asked to write about external contributors to their accomplishments. While writing about any personal accomplishment could be seen as a general affirmation (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), diminished hardship claims in the face of privilege evidence occurred only for those writing about an accomplishment achieved *alone*. That is, the key difference was whether that 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 privilege.

Experiment 5 provides further evidence that privilege threatens people's internal attributions for success and motivates them to make claims to bolster such attributions. Together with our previous results, this suggests that people make claims (hardships, effort) that may help

them bolster their sense of merit when faced with evidence of their own privilege. That is, people claim hardships due to the threat to personal merit posed by evidence of privilege. But why claim hardships in particular? Experiments 1a-5 further imply that people may think hardships imply personal merit and internal attributions. In Experiments 6a and 6b, we explore this logic further by manipulating life hardship itself.

Experiments 6a and 6b

We have suggested that people claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege in order to increase their sense of personally having caused their positive life outcomes. If people believe that having faced hardships required effort and hard work, claims of hardship should 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 test this link in Experiments 6a and 6b, using a 2 (Class Privilege, No Privilege) x 2 (Life Hardships: Easy Life, Hard Life) design. We present methods and results for both Experiments 6a and 6b together.

Method

Participants. We recruited adult volunteers, who were paid \$1.00 each, from a national online subject pool (Amazon's Mechanical Turk). 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 experiment.⁶

⁶We were wary of overusing our limited online pool of participants who met the income requirement, and so we recruited only 130 for Experiment 6a. However, norms regarding sample

In Experiment 6a, all participants were employed. We recruited 130 participants; repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not report having incomes consistent with pre-screen requirements, leaving a final $N=121$ (43% female; age $M=36.03$, $SD=10.94$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 80% White/European-American, 10% Asian/Asian-American, 5% Latino/Latino-American, 2% Black/African-American, and 2% Other.

In Experiment 6b, we recruited 320 participants. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, as were those who did not report having incomes consistent with pre-screen requirements. We took care to specifically remind participants not to use outside assistance (e.g., internet search, friend) on the puzzle task, in order 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 regardless be paid in full. Forty-four used outside assistance, and were excluded, leaving a final $N=226$ (56% female; age $M=34.42$, $SD=10.70$ years). Participant racial backgrounds were: 80% White/European-American, 8% Asian/Asian-American, 8% Other, 4% Black/African-American, and 1% Native American.

Procedure. Participants completed demographic information first and were only able to continue if they met pre-screen requirements. In Experiment 6a, participants then read one of two randomly assigned Privilege prompts. Next, participants completed one of two randomly assigned Hardship tasks. Then participants completed the job effort measure, and demographic questions confirming their initially reported information.

size were quickly changing at the time, and suggested we would need to increase sample size in future studies. Therefore, we recruited 320 in Experiment 6b.

In Experiment 6b, after demographics, participants completed one of two randomly assigned Hardship tasks. Next, participants read one of two randomly assigned Privilege prompts. Then participants completed a word puzzle task.

Independent Variables.

Privilege was manipulated as in Experiment 2. Participants were in one of two conditions: No Privilege (6a $n=61$; 6b $n=106$) or Class Privilege condition (6a $n=60$; 6b $n=120$).

Life Hardships were manipulated by offering participants one of two open-ended response activities. Following ease-of-retrieval paradigms (Schwarz et al, 1991), we manipulated how many 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. Importantly, hardships may need not 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 Experiment 6a, in the Easy Life condition, participants were asked to “please list 12 hardships and/or obstacles that you have faced or currently face” and were then presented with 12 spaces ($n=62$). In the Hard Life condition, participants were presented only 2 spaces ($n=59$). In Experiment 6b, 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 Hard Life condition, participants were presented only 2 spaces ($n=115$).⁷

Dependent Variables.

Experiment 6a: Job Effort was measured as in Experiment 3.

Experiment 6b: Task Effort was measured by averaging the time participants spent in seconds across ten very 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

Experiment 6a. 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,

⁷In two separate experiments, we tested the effect of the 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 2 hardships). In an in-lab mass-testing session ($N=98$), those in the Easy Life condition (list 15 hardships; $n=48$; $M=3.53, SD=1.64$) reported that the task was more difficult (2 items, e.g., “I had trouble coming up with enough hardships”; 7-point scale Strongly Disagree- Strongly Agree; $r=.84$) than did those in the Hard Life condition (list 2 hardships; $n=48$; $M=2.64, SD=1.61$), $t(94)=2.70, p=.008, d=.55$, 95% C.I. [.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 Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Repeat and incomplete observations were removed, leaving a final $N=96$. Compared to those in the Hard Life condition (list 2 hardships; $n=49$; $M=3.63, SD=1.18$), those in the Easy Life condition (list 15 hardships; $n=46$; $M=3.17, SD=1.16$) reported having fewer hardships than others (4 items, e.g., “I have had more hardships than most other people in society” reversed; 7-point scale Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree; $\alpha=.81$), $t(93)=1.91, p=.059, d=.39$, 95% C.I. [-.02, .94]. Similarly, compared to 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 (3 items, e.g., “How difficult have the hardships made your life?”; 7-point scale Not At All - Extremely; $\alpha=.68$), $t(93)=2.15, p=.03, d=.44$, 95% C.I. [.04, .88].

as hypothesized, 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 5).

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% C.I. [.02, 1.16]. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Easy Life condition ($M=4.38, SD=1.17$) claimed somewhat less job effort than those in the Hard Life condition ($M=4.80, SD=1.06$), $t(117)=-1.46, p=.14$, 95% C.I. [-.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, $t(117)=2.69, p=.008, d=.70$, 95% C.I. [.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% C.I. [-.82, .33].

Experiment 6b. A two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of either privilege, $F(1, 222)=.63, p=.42$, or life hardships, $F(1, 222)=.001, p=.97$, on task effort. However, as hypothesized, we found a significant interaction of privilege and life hardships on task effort, $F(1, 222)=4.79, p=.03, \eta_p^2=.02$ (see Figure 6).

Decomposing the interaction revealed that, among those in the Class Privilege condition, participants in the Easy Life condition ($M=48.79, SD=42.69$) persisted somewhat more than those in the Hard Life condition ($M=39.64, SD=27.80$), $t(222)=1.48, p=.14$, 95% C.I. [-3.03, 21.34]. In contrast, among those in the No Privilege condition, those in the Easy Life condition ($M=42.42, SD=29.16$) persisted somewhat less than did those in the Hard Life condition ($M=53.00, SD=34.44$), $t(222)=-1.61, p=.10$, 95% C.I. [-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% C.I. [-6.25, 18.99].

However, among participants in the Hard Life condition, those in the Class Privilege condition persisted significantly less than did those in the No Privilege condition, $t(222)=-2.11$, $p=.04$, $d=.40$, 95% C.I. [-25.87, -.85].

Discussion

Experiments 6a and 6b provide further evidence that privilege threatens people's internal attributions for success. Our results further suggest that life hardship claims help people increase their sense of internal attributions when exposed to evidence of privilege. When people are able to claim only few life hardships, they claim more effort and even persist longer on an effort-based task when exposed to evidence of privilege. That is, people behave in ways that may help them bolster their sense of merit (e.g., claim effort, persist longer) when faced with evidence of their own privilege. But when first able to claim many life hardships, people no longer behave in this manner. Together with our previous results, this suggests that people claim hardships to help bolster their senses of merit when faced with evidence of their own privilege.

General Discussion

Like other dimensions of social hierarchy, class affects outcomes in important ways, including creating different likelihoods of success (Kraus, 2015; Piff, 2014; Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). But many people seem to remain in the dark about the critical role of class in their daily experiences (Stephens & Kraus, 2012). Despite the common subjective experiences of classlessness, class privilege in reality gives 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 (Hoschild, 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 the unearned nature of their advantages (McIntosh, 1988; Phillips & Lowery, 2018).

However, our work shows that even when privilege is made visible, the advantaged rely on ideologies and symbols of meritocracy to cloak their privilege once again. We find that the desire for personal merit, in order to maintain positive self-regard, drives these responses. For instance, when people are self-affirmed, are provided an acceptable alternative theory of success (e.g., good luck), or have bolstered their sense of personal merit, they no longer claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege; 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, our work suggests people claim hardships in response to evidence of privilege because this evidence threatens their sense of merit; in turn, they use hardship to imply personal effort and thus restore their sense of merit.

Self- and System-Maintenance

We provide evidence that in response to privilege, the advantaged do not necessarily address privilege itself, but may change their perceptions of their own lives and outcomes – a previously unexamined response that may target personal legitimacy more than system legitimacy (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Major, 2001; Knowles et al., 2014). For instance, in Experiment 2 we find that the privileged accept personally benefitting from privilege only when first self-affirmed. This dovetails with previous work that suggests the privileged may defensively create a false separation between personal and group privilege (Phillips & Lowery,

2015; cf. Crosby, 1982). In this way, individuals might feel personally legitimate even within a system they recognize is illegitimate.

Indeed, our results suggest it is unpleasant to think of oneself as the beneficiary of inequity especially because meritocratic ideologies strongly proscribe against such benefits. But evidence of such non-meritocratic benefits likely call into question not only the self, but also the system (Iyer, Leach, & Pederson, 2004; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In Experiment 2, self-affirmation paired with evidence of privilege both reduced claims of hardship and increased belief in personal privilege; but, system-affirmation marginally reduced claims of hardship as well. These results suggest that attempts to bolster personal merit may directly serve both self- *and* system-defense goals: for instance, claiming hardship or effort may be useful for convincing third parties that privilege does not exist. The result would be that self and system are maintained, and likely group-esteem and group-position as well.

Peoples' claims that they have lived through more adversity may therefore have both individual and social consequences. One important result of individuals changing their beliefs about the adversity in their lives may be changes in policy preferences. For instance, when Whites deny *personally* benefiting from privilege, they reduce their support for affirmative action policies (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Bolstering their own sense of personal merit in order to parry advantage might also lead the privileged to attribute *disadvantage* more to individual choice and lack of merit. And, when people believe choice plays a role in life outcomes, they are less supportive of redistributive policies due in part to people's increased beliefs in internal attributions for poverty and other inequalities (Appelbaum, 2001; Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Bryan et al., 2009; McCoy & Major, 2007; Savani & Rattan, 2012). In

this way, the individual psychological needs of the privileged may not only contribute to self-maintenance, but indirectly contribute to system-maintenance 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 may illuminate new routes to reducing defensive reactions. By leveraging people's desire to maintain their sense of personal merit, their concerns about outcome security 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, 2017). On the other hand, by pointing out the ways in which one is not "a fortunate son", challenges to the legitimacy of one's positive life outcomes may also be brushed aside, while the privilege itself can persist.

Invisibility

We have discussed privilege as generally invisible to those who have it, which adds to its potency: difficult-to-notice and easy-to-deny are not qualities that often contribute to discovery. However, the nature of this invisibility needs further exploration. For example, while we and others find that denying the existence of privilege is a useful tool for protecting self-regard (DiTomaso, 2013; Leach, Iyer, & Pederson, 2006; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007), we do not assess whether such denials mean people *do not* see the privilege, or whether they *do* see the privilege but are trying to reduce its visibility to themselves or to others (for discussion, see Knowles et al., 2014; Frankenberg, 1994; McIntosh, 1988; Phillips & Lowery, 2018).

A related question is whether covering claims (e.g., hardship, effort) are unique among the privileged, or appear anyone in whom we can evoke the concern that they have benefitted. Importantly, privilege is necessarily a relative comparison within a specific domain. In the case

of race or gender, individuals should be compared to their hypothetical Einsteinian twins, who differ only by race or gender. In the case of social class, evidence of privilege may be muddled by the lack of discrete class groups. As a result, class privilege may be better characterized by the frequency of holding a privileged position. For example, even the poorest Americans benefit from global inequities that favor them over impoverished counterparts in other countries. However, within an American context, such individuals likely inhabit the disadvantaged position in their most frequent social comparisons.

Thus, the nature of privilege awareness and responses may vary across differently positioned groups (e.g., Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimmons 2011). For instance, our findings suggest that defensive claims should result whenever 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. Among those chronically on the privileged side of social comparisons, the defensive psychology we demonstrate may become more automatic or overgeneralized due to chronic use, thus contributing to “invisibility”.

Social class is also relatively malleable as compared to race and gender: at least, the potential for mobility exists, and Americans believe class is even more malleable than it is (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; OECD, 2010). This may make class privilege even easier to cover under the auspices of merit. Specific evidence of privilege – e.g., benefitting from legacy admission – may be a useful way to enforce the relevant social comparison. On the whole, our results suggest motivated processes lead people to attempt to cloak their own privilege when it is made visible, whether they are consciously aware of this process or not.

The (II)logic of Merit

The ideology of meritocracy is woven deeply into the cultural fabric of American society. The very “American dream” that attracts and attaches so many to America suggests that if one works hard enough, they can succeed, no matter their class or background (Hochschild, 1996). As a result, systemic inequity is a tricky subject for American psyches: while most Americans subscribe to meritocratic ideologies that abhor such inequity, many also benefit from inequities. To resolve this tension, we find that the class privileged specifically claim hardship and effort because these are symbols of merit: they help cover 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; Hoschild, 1996; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kraus, 2016; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Kraus, Piff & Keltner, 2009; Kuntsman, Plant, & Deska, 2016; McCoy & Major, 2006; O’Brien & Major, 2005). Indeed, Americans generally tend to lean on the logic of personal choice to justify class differences and minimize redistribution (Chow & Galak, 2012; Savani & Rattan, 2012).

In a context so interleaved with meritocracy ideology, being responsible for success offers a sense of deserving, moral legitimacy, and ultimately self-regard. 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). That is, “personal merit” has been theorized as principally about proportionality: if my inputs merit my outcomes, then I am deserving, and therefore good (Adams, 1965; McCoy & Major, 2007). Deservingness is a way to assess individuals vis-à-vis their inputs and outcomes (Feather, 1992, 1999). But, 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 cause or justify benefitting from elite connections. This decoupling of inputs and outcomes may also explain why our participants seem reluctant to spontaneously frame privilege as merely luck: by reframing outcomes as luck, participants may give up their claims to personal merit, and thus self-regard, that their privileged outcomes alone imply.

Further still, personal merit ideologies at the bedrock of American society may romanticize hard work and the struggles involved in achieving the “American dream” (e.g., rags-to-riches stories; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). But in the process of this romanticization, *hardship* rather than hard *work* may become a currency of self-regard (see also Schaumburg & Mullen, 2017). For instance, we find that individuals use claims of hardship to bolster their sense of personal merit (e.g., Experiments 1b, 6a, 6b); however, the hardships participants report are broad and generally not relevant to class privilege itself. Having experienced divorce, for example, does not mitigate having benefitted from legacy admission; and yet, our participants act as if it does. In fact, this is in part why privilege is so pernicious and powerful: privilege not only protects people from experiencing hardship, but also when hardship does arise, privilege helps overcome hardship itself (e.g., Sandefur, 2008; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014; Whitehead, 1992).

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). Attribution theory perspectives have found that internal attributions are associated with feelings of self-worth and deservingness (Adams, 1965; Alicke, 2000; Alicke & Govorun,

2005; Feather, 1992, 1999, 2002; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Steele, 1988). Meanwhile, equity theory perspectives focus on proportionality, and still other work emphasizes the role of personal control, rather than merit per se, in making internal attributions valuable (Hastorf, Schneider, & Polefka, 1970; Kelley, 1973; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Ross, 1977; Weiner, 1993; Zuckerman, 1979). More research is needed to capture the slippery nature of merit: is it that people want to feel control over their outcomes, deserving of their outcomes, or proof they are hardworking independent of any outcomes? Our results imply that people may strategically and self-servingly decouple the requirements of meritocracy (see also Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005; Belmi, Phillips, & Laurin, 2018).

Motivated Perceptions of Hardship

Our results suggest that the hardships people claim when faced with evidence of privilege are not different in number or kind, but rather are different in impact – the hardships have affected their lives more (Footnote 7). However, more work needs to be done to consider the processes by which individuals generate perceptions of increased life hardships. Social comparison processes may play an important role in creating these perceptions (Alicke, 2000); when reading about privilege, one's reference group may become more restricted to the in-group alone, rather than more inclusive of out-groups (as is the required comparison for determining privilege). Thus, when asked to report life hardships, people may be saying “for my group, I have had hardship,” then using this perception to erroneously deny the role of privilege in their lives (which would require “compared to the out-group, my in-group has had hardships;” c.f. Sullivan et al., 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016). Such strategic social comparison may underlie related findings that Whites and men reference disadvantages associated with their non-privileged identities, or successful members of disadvantaged groups, to counter evidence of

privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2015; Rosette & Tost, 2013). In general, our results suggest people are particularly solipsistic when thinking about privilege, focusing on hardships that do not relate to the privileged group-membership, and do not relate to the appropriate outgroup comparison.

The implied meaning of hardship should also be probed further. We find evidence that, in the face of evidence of privilege, participants associate life hardship with sense of merit (Experiments 1b and 1c): the presence of hardships or “headwinds” may not imply that privilege or tailwinds are absent, but people may feel that running against the headwinds evens things out, thus restoring their sense of merit. A related possibility is that people mistakenly (or are motivated to) believe privilege entails nothing but ease, and thus that any hardship is evidence that no privilege exists. Similarly, the standards of ease, or even of group-membership, may also shift; for example, those from higher social class backgrounds often claim middle-class status, possibly because they strategically shift the standards of “privileged” or of “higher class” (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, & Tetaz, 2013; DeMott, 1990; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Rampell, 2011). People may even be claiming hardship to justify some form of karmic deserving: I have suffered, and therefore I am deserving (Schaumberg & Mullen, 2017; Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). Thus, while we offer evidence that hardship relates to sense of personal merit (Experiments 1c, 6a, 6b), it may be that hardship offers other protections as well. Future work should explore these distinctions further.

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. But members of the upper class and other dominant groups are in positions of great power, which might amplify the effects of their own motivations and psychology on

others. Indeed, privileged positioning in social hierarchies likely creates 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? Even in response to direct evidence of the “invisible knapsack”, the ideology of meritocracy motivates people to claim hardship, potentially blinding themselves and others again 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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Figure 1.

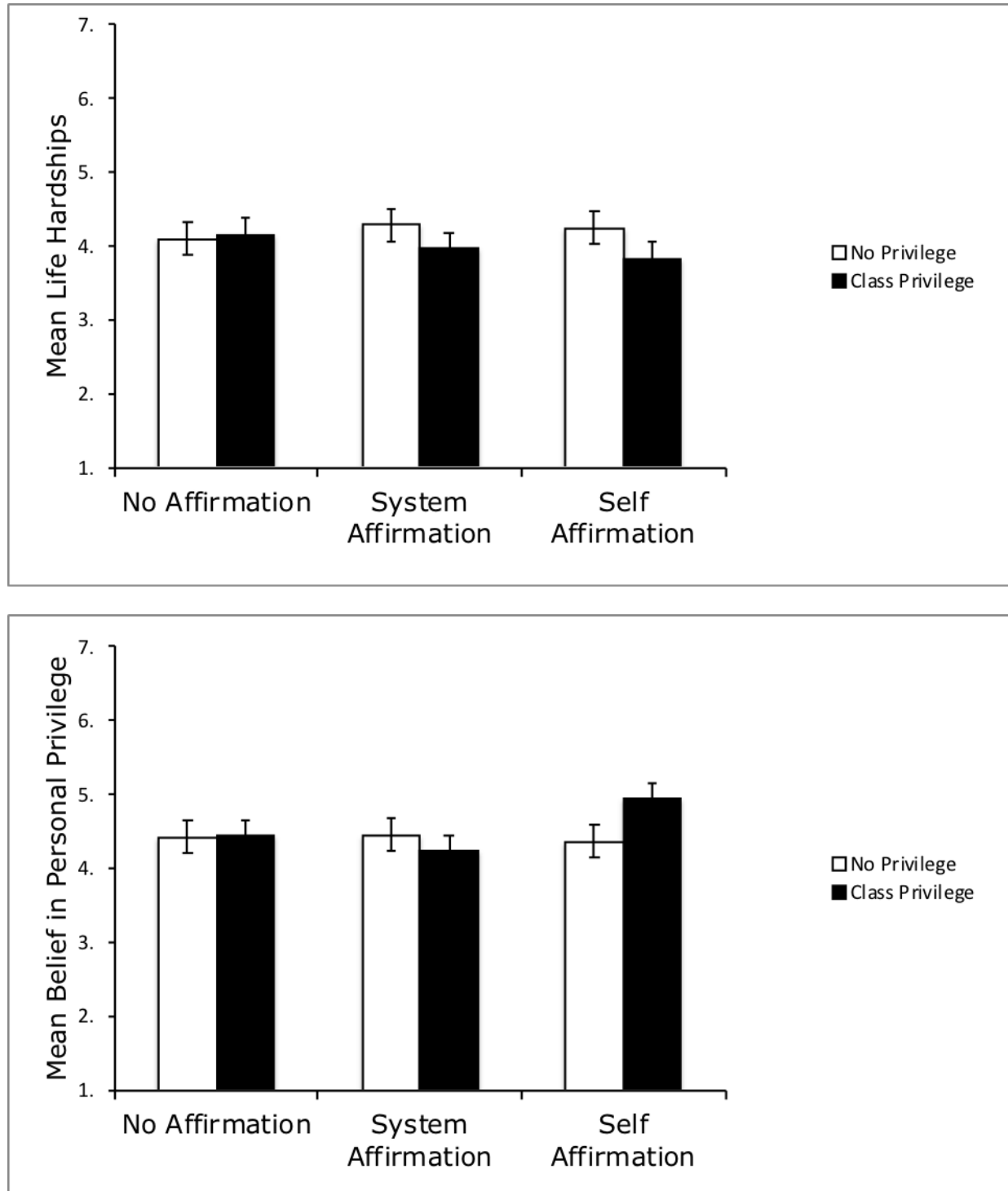


Figure 1. Affirmation X Privilege interaction on life hardships, belief in personal privilege

(Experiment 2). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

Figure 2.

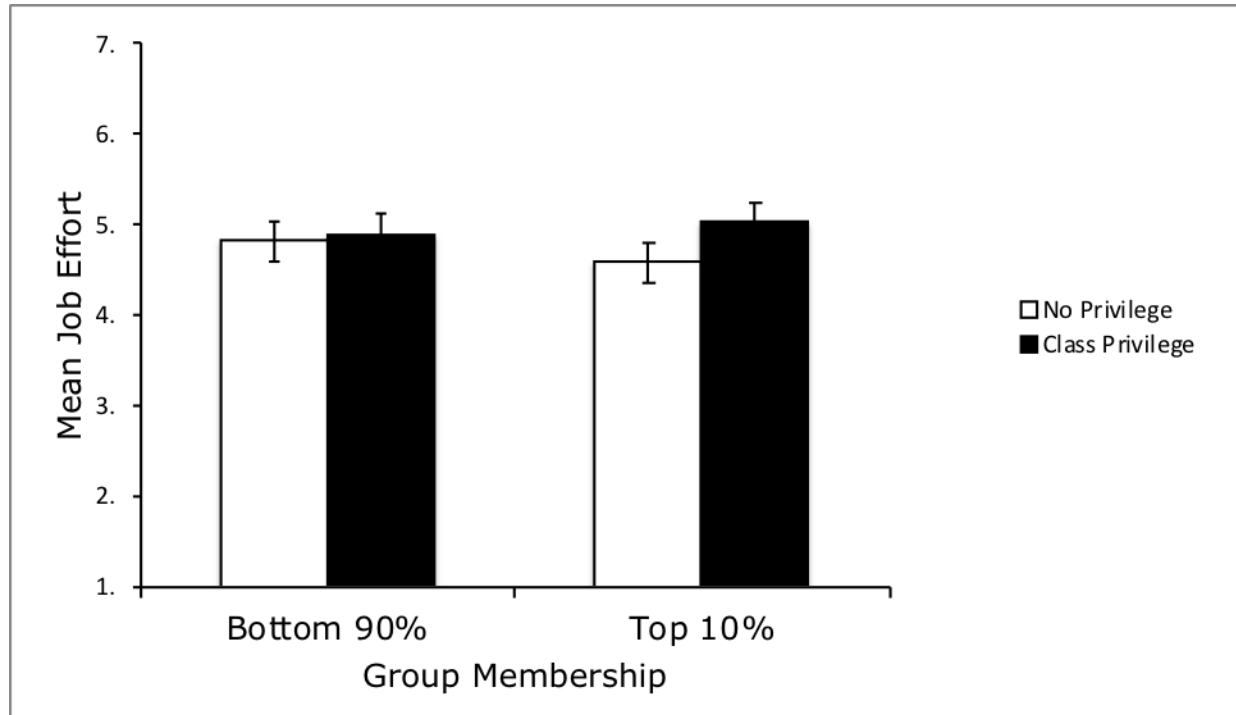


Figure 2. Group Membership X Privilege interaction on effort (Experiment 3). Error bars ± 2 SE.

Figure 3.

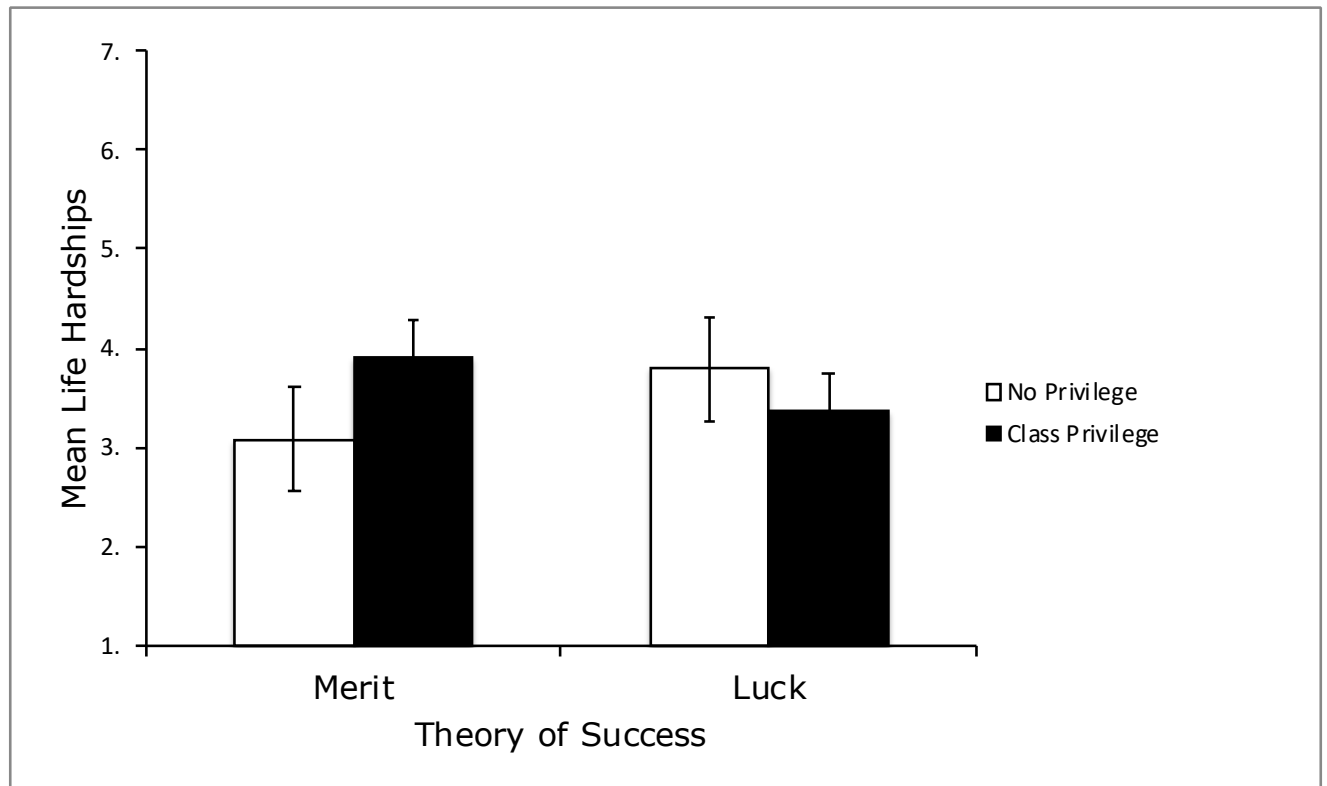


Figure 3. Theory of Success X Privilege interaction on life hardships (Experiment 4). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

Figure 4.

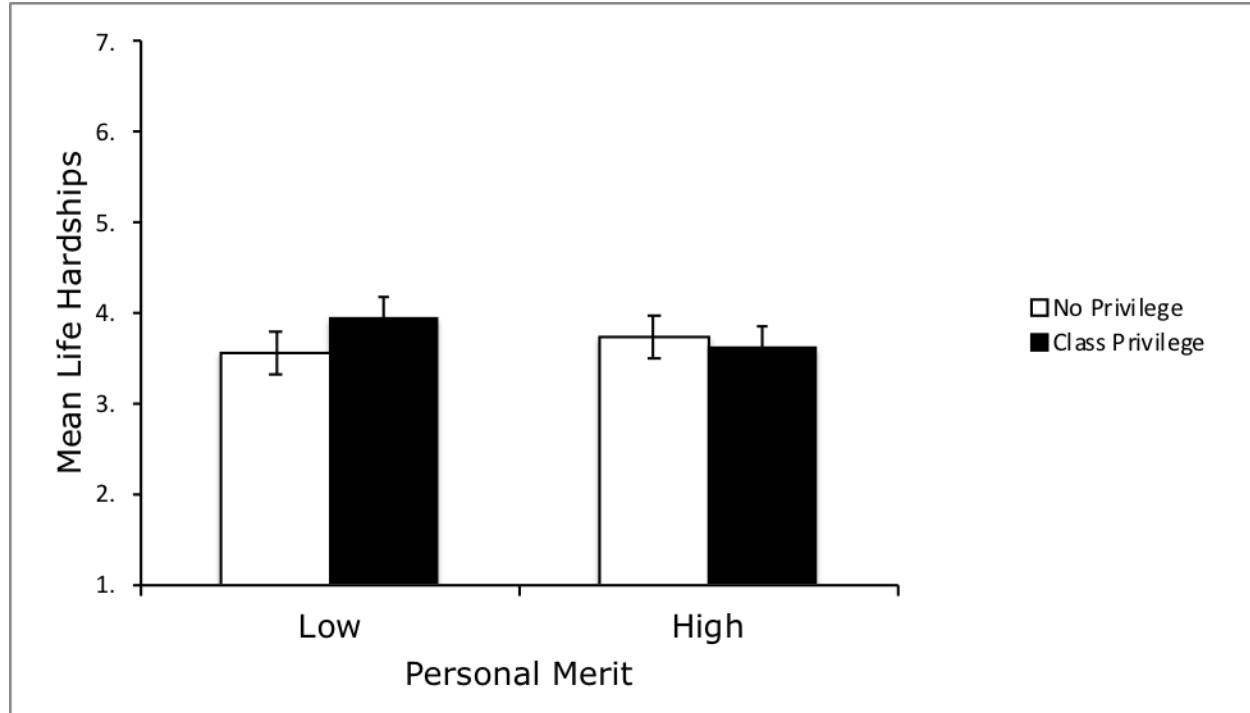


Figure 4. Personal Merit X Privilege interaction on life hardships (Experiment 5). Error bars $\pm 2 SE$.

Figure 5.

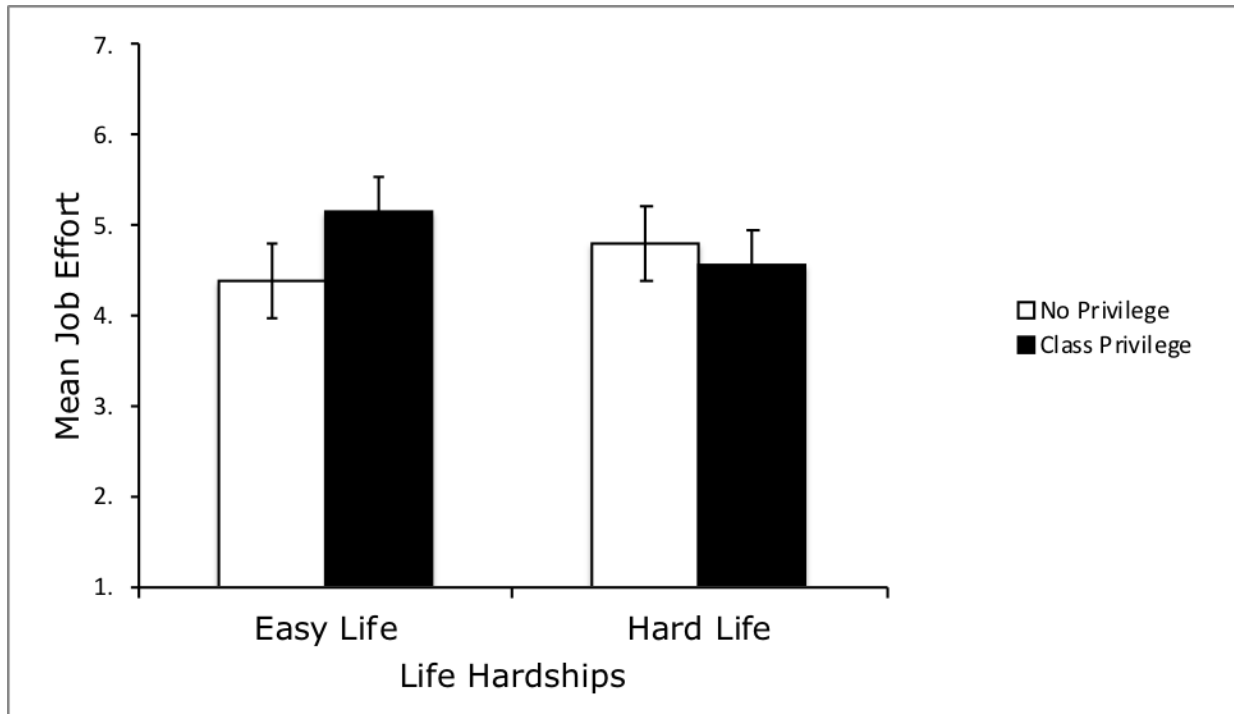


Figure 5. Life Hardships X Privilege interaction on job effort (Experiment 6a). Error bars ± 2 SE.

Figure 6.

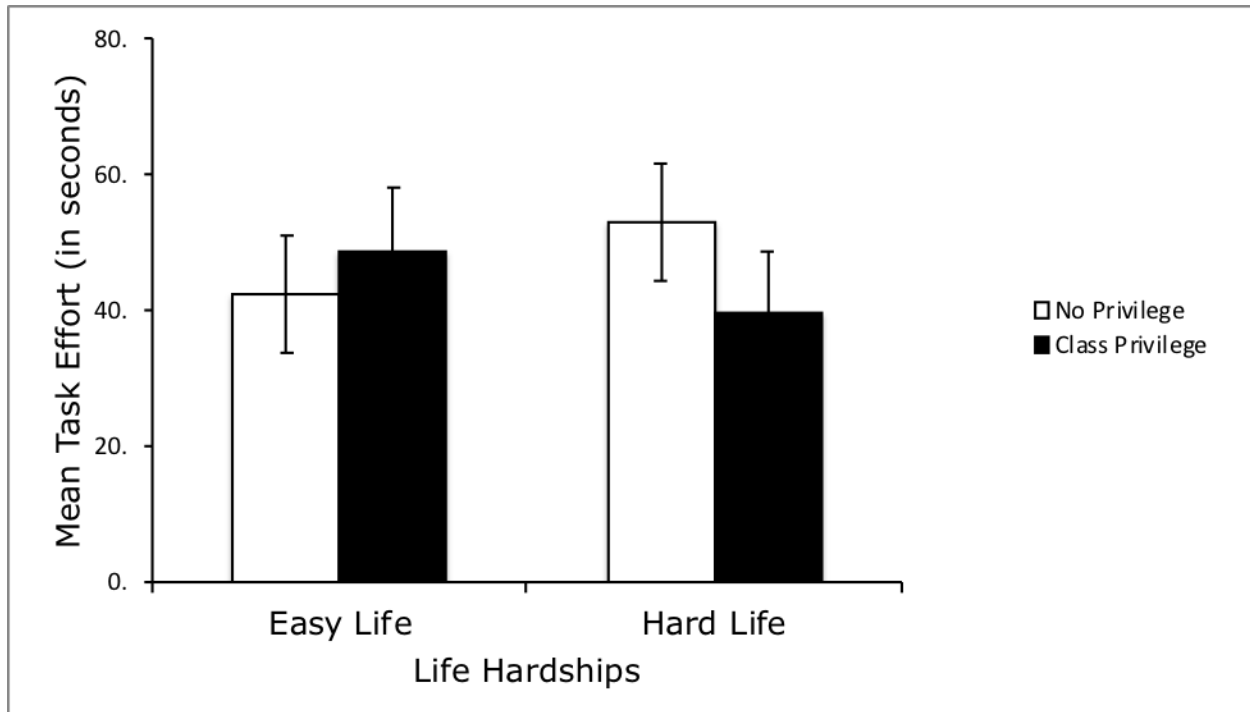


Figure 6. Life Hardships X Privilege interaction on task effort (Experiment 6b). Error bars ± 2 SE.