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Abstract

Researchers have suggested that viewing social inequity as dominant-group privilege (rather than subordinate-group disadvantage) enhances dominant-group members' support for social policies aimed at lessening such inequity. However, because viewing inequity as dominant-group privilege can be damaging to dominant-group members' self-images, this perspective is frequently resisted. In the research reported here, we explored the circumstances that enhance the likelihood of dominant-group members' viewing inequity as privilege. Because social hierarchies have multiple vertical dimensions, individuals may have high status on one dimension but low status on another. We predicted that occupying a subordinate position on one dimension of social hierarchy could enhance perceptions of one's own privilege on a different dimension of hierarchy, but that this tendency would be diminished among individuals who felt they had achieved a particularly high level of success. Results from three studies that considered gender-based and race-based hierarchies in organizational settings supported our hypothesis.

Keywords

privilege, status, disadvantage, hierarchy, race, gender, social perception, racial and ethnic attitudes and relations

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To varying degrees, social inequity is a persistent characteristic of many contemporary work environments. For example, when matched on similar attributes, Whites are likely to have better job opportunities and promotions than are racial minorities, men have to circumvent fewer barriers to career advancement than do women, Protestants maintain strongholds in corporate cultures relative to Jews and Catholics, and heterosexuals benefit from more organizational entitlements than do homosexuals (see Rosette & Thompson, 2005, for a review). The historically prevailing perspective frames these various types of social inequity in organizations as emerging from discrimination: systematic biases that hinder the advancement of subordinate-group members (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Lott & Maluso, 1995). A less frequently considered perspective is that social inequity in organizations results from the systematic gains and privilege that members of dominant groups experience (e.g., Wildman, 1996).

Although these two perspectives represent different framings of the same phenomenon (i.e., relatively unfavorable organizational experiences for subordinate groups and relatively favorable organizational experiences for dominant groups), existing research has highlighted the importance of distinguishing (both theoretically and empirically) between perceptions of discrimination and perceptions of privilege (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; Swim & Miller, 1999). This distinction is important in part because privilege framing (relative to discrimination framing) has been shown to increase dominant-group members' support for policies aimed at mitigating inequity (Chow & Galak, 2012; Iyer, Colin, & Crosby, 2003; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012). Given the

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critical impact that recognition of privilege has on the motivation to rectify inequity, it is important that scholars develop a greater understanding of the antecedents of dominant-group members' perceptions of their advantaged state.

Scholars have only recently begun to directly examine the factors that promote or hinder individuals' tendencies to recognize their own privileged positions. For example, in a recent study, Lowery and his colleagues (2007) demonstrated that resistance to viewing inequity as privilege may occur because privilege framing can have a damaging effect on dominant-group members' self-concepts. However, this burgeoning area of study has yet to explore the interconnected nature of social hierarchies. In social settings, multiple dimensions of hierarchy interact and combine to form an overarching social-ranking system, and individuals may occupy differing vertical positions along different dimensions of hierarchy (e.g., Stryker & Macke, 1978). We argue that simultaneous memberships in a dominant social group on one dimension of hierarchy and a subordinate group on a different dimension may serve as an impetus to the recognition of the privilege experienced by virtue of membership in the dominant group.

In perhaps one of the most influential essays on privilege perceptions, *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh (1988), a White woman, described how her unsuccessful bid to persuade her male colleagues to incorporate women's studies into her college's curriculum led to her own personal revelation of social inequity framed as privilege. She observed that her male colleagues frequently acknowledged the disadvantage experienced by women relative to men (i.e., gender inequity framed as subordinate-group disadvantage) but did not recognize the corresponding advantage that they experienced as males (i.e., gender inequity framed as dominant-group privilege). Recognizing her male colleagues' resistance to acknowledging male privilege led McIntosh to consider that there must also be a phenomenon of racial privilege of which she was a beneficiary but had been previously disinclined to perceive (McIntosh, 1988).

Although the example of McIntosh is anecdotal, it is consistent with numerous theoretical perspectives on the multidimensional nature of social hierarchies, including status inconsistency theory (Stryker & Macke, 1978) and intersectional frameworks (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Work in this area has suggested that the psychological experience of having high status on one dimension of hierarchy and low status on another can have a broad range of effects on individuals' social perceptions. Building on these research traditions, we suggest that a more nuanced view of social hierarchies that acknowledges that individuals occupy multiple social groups simultaneously

may hold great promise for developing a better understanding of the circumstances under which individuals are inclined (or disinclined) to acknowledge their own experiences of social privilege.

We argue that occupying a subordinate position on one dimension of hierarchy enhances perceptions of an individual's own privileges (derived from dominant-group membership on a separate dimension), provided that the individual believes he or she has experienced disadvantages as a result of membership in the subordinate group. The experience of disadvantage is imperative because it draws attention to the difference between one's own experience and the privileged experience of those in the dominant group. This divergence highlights that one's own disadvantage is accompanied by others' advantages. For example, the disadvantage Peggy McIntosh experienced as a member of a subordinate gender group (i.e., women) made the privilege from which the dominant gender group (i.e., men) benefitted apparent to her. The recognition that others are privileged relative to oneself on one dimension of hierarchy can promote the recognition that, along a separate dimension, one has privilege relative to others. This notion that the experience of disadvantage initiates more complex perceptions of social hierarchies is consistent with a range of empirical findings in social psychology that have shown that subordinate groups with heightened perceptions of disadvantage perceive commonality with other subordinate groups (Sanchez, 2008), are more tolerant of stigmatized groups than are dominant groups (Galanis & Jones, 1986), and are particularly inclined to adopt contextual explanations for their experiences (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009).

However, just as there are multiple dimensions of hierarchy based on ascribed (i.e., demographic) characteristics, there are also dimensions based on achieved characteristics (Linton, 1936). We suggest that an individual's perceptions of personal success represent a boundary condition of these effects. Specifically, individuals who experience particularly high success despite membership in a subordinate group are less likely than their less successful peers to feel that they have experienced disadvantage because of their subordinate-group membership. Indeed, their very level of success can be taken as evidence that disadvantage is not necessarily associated with subordinate-group membership. Without experiencing feelings of disadvantage, they lack the motivation and perspective to actively consider the advantages that dominant-group members experience; consequently, there is little opportunity for them to identify their own parallel experience of privilege along other dimensions of hierarchy. As a result, memberships in subordinate groups are less likely to serve as catalysts for highly successful individuals' recognition of their

privileged position on a different dimension of social hierarchy.

In sum, we expected that among people who do not experience exceptionally high levels of success, membership in a subordinate group should increase perceptions of disadvantage. The contrast between one's own experience of disadvantage and dominant-group members' positive experiences (within that dimension of hierarchy) should increase the recognition that one's own disadvantage is accompanied by privilege for others. This realization that others experience privilege on one dimension of hierarchy should facilitate the recognition of one's own experience of privilege on another dimension of hierarchy.

Study 1

In Study 1, we considered the perceptions of Whites in organizational settings. We predicted that White women (who, in most organizations, occupy a subordinate gender group and a dominant racial group) would be more inclined to recognize White privilege than would White men (who, in most organizations, occupy a dominant gender group and a dominant racial group). We expected, however, that this effect would not emerge among White women and men who had relatively high levels of perceived personal success.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 282 White working professionals who were employed full-time (49% female, 51% male; mean age = 44.55 years, $SD = 12.12$) participated in this study by completing an online questionnaire in exchange for monetary compensation. In the first part of the online questionnaire, participants answered background questions about their demographics and employment. They then responded to questions that assessed their perceptions of success and White privilege in their respective work organizations.

Perceptions of White privilege. The measure of perceptions of White privilege contained the following items (adapted from Swim & Miller, 1999): "At my workplace, White people have certain advantages that racial minorities do not have"; "Status as a White person grants many unearned privileges at my workplace"; "Being White at my workplace opens many doors"; "In the workplace, White people are viewed more positively than are racial minorities"; and "I do not feel that White people have any benefits or privileges due to their race at my workplace" (reverse-scored). Responses to items were on scales anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*), and scores for all items were averaged (composite mean = 2.39, $SD = 1.12$; $\alpha = .77$).

Perceptions of success. To assess the extent to which participants perceived themselves as successful, we had them indicate their agreement with the statement "In my current occupation, I am successful." Participants rated their level of agreement, using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.09$).

Results and discussion

We tested our prediction by regressing the measure of perceived White privilege on a gender dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female), the measure of perceived success (centered), and the interaction between gender and perceived success; the interaction was significant, $b = -0.48$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$. Consistent with our predictions, results revealed that among participants who reported moderate levels of perceived success, women reported higher perceived White privilege than did men, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .01$, but this pattern was not found among participants who reported high levels of perceived success (see Fig. 1). It is important to note that although we evaluated the simple slopes at 1 standard deviation above and below the mean for perceived-success scores, the mean score was higher than the neutral score of 4 on the rating scale, $t(281) = 25.18$, $p < .0001$. Thus, participants who exhibited our predicted effect did not report feelings of failure or low levels of perceived success but, rather, moderate levels of perceived success.

Interestingly, women with high levels of perceived success reported lower levels of perceived White privilege than did men with high levels of perceived success, $b = -0.47$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .01$. This finding was not predicted but nonetheless is consistent with our theoretical rationale and with research by Frankenberg (1993), who showed that highly successful middle-class White women

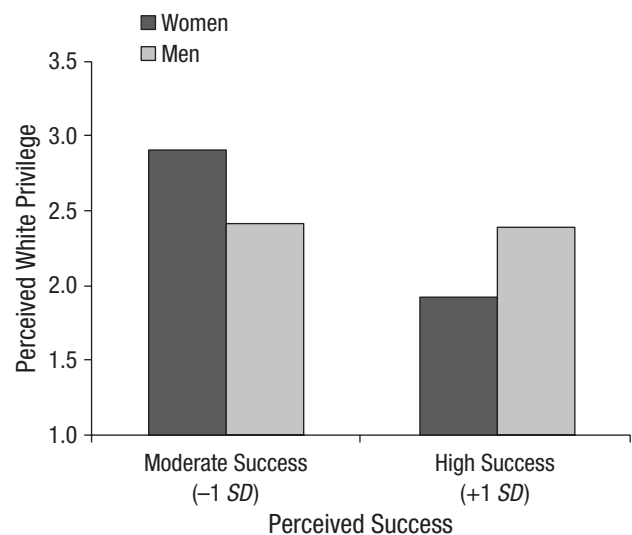


Fig. 1. Regression results from Study 1: mean levels of perceived White privilege as a function of perceived success and gender.

were not prone to acknowledge similarities between gender inequity and racial inequity. We discuss this finding in the General Discussion section.¹

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to replicate the focal interaction from Study 1 and to test the mediating roles of perceptions of gender-based disadvantage and awareness of male privilege. Specifically, we tested a three-stage mediated path in which gender predicted the experience of (gender-based) disadvantage, which increased perceptions of male privilege (i.e., gender inequity framed as dominant-group privilege), which in turn increased perceptions of White privilege (i.e., racial inequity framed as dominant-group privilege). We expected that this three-stage path would be moderated in the first stage by perceptions of success.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 71 White graduate students (53% male, 47% female) participated in this study in return for a snack while awaiting a chance to win basketball tickets (mean age = 26.48 years, $SD = 2.68$). All participants had been employed prior to attending graduate school. Participants were instructed to complete a questionnaire, to consider their status as graduate students as their occupation, and to consider their respective departments or schools as their organization. The measures for perceptions of success ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.86$) and White privilege ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.50$; $\alpha = .77$) included the same items as those used in Study 1.

Personal experience of gender disadvantage. To assess the extent to which participants felt they had experienced disadvantages because of their gender, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed that they had experienced disadvantage in their organization as a result of their gender. The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.85$).

Perceptions of male privilege. We adapted the measure of perceived White privilege to measure perceived male privilege, using the following items: “In this organization, men have certain advantages that women do not have”; “Status as a man grants many unearned privileges in this organization”; “Being a man in this organization opens many doors”; “I feel that men receive benefits due to their gender in this organization”; and “In the workplace, men are viewed more positively than are women.” Responses were measured on scales anchored with 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*), and scores for all items were averaged ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.65$; $\alpha = .95$).

Results

As in Study 1, we began by regressing the measure of perceived White privilege on a dummy variable for gender (0 = male, 1 = female), the measure of perceived success (centered), and the interaction between the two; the interaction was significant, $b = -0.94$, $SE = 0.44$, $p = .036$. Consistent with our predictions, results showed that among participants who reported moderate levels of perceived success, women reported higher levels of perceived White privilege than did men, $b = 1.35$, $SE = 0.66$, $p = .04$, but this effect was not found among participants who reported high levels of perceived success, $b = -0.53$, $SE = 0.48$, $p = .27$ (see Fig. 2).²

We next examined our three-stage moderated mediation prediction, following procedures recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007). We began by regressing the experience of gender disadvantage on the dummy variable for gender, the measure of success, and the interaction between the two. Both main effects were significant: There was a positive effect of gender, $b = 1.24$, $SE = 0.43$, $p < .01$, and a negative effect of success, $b = -0.59$, $SE = 0.26$, $p < .03$. The interaction was marginally significant, $b = -0.90$, $SE = 0.53$, $p < .10$. In support of our predictions, our results showed that women were significantly more likely to report the experience of gender disadvantage than were men, but only if they also reported a moderate level of success—moderate success: $b = 2.36$, $SE = 0.79$, $p = .003$; high success: $b = 0.56$, $SE = 0.58$, $p = .34$.

To examine the next stage in the causal path, we first regressed the measure of perceived male privilege on the dummy variable for gender and the measure of success; only gender was significant, $b = 1.03$, $SE = 0.40$, $p = .013$. In the second step, we entered the interaction between gender and perceived success, $b = -1.69$, $SE = 0.45$,

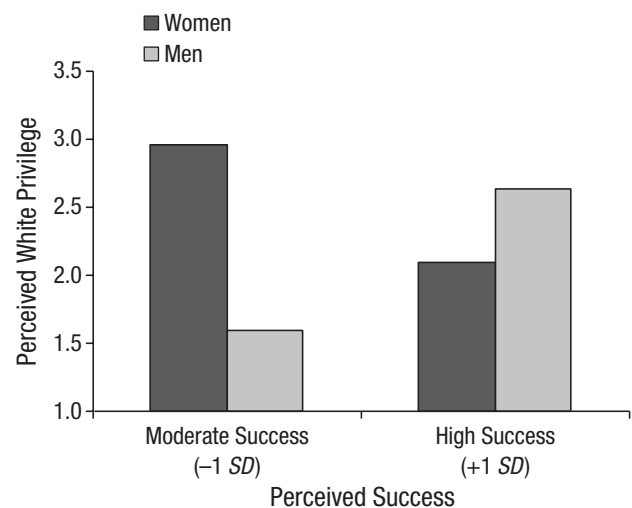


Fig. 2. Regression results from Study 2: mean levels of perceived White privilege as a function of perceived success and gender.

$p < .001$. In the third step, we entered the measure of personal experience of gender disparity, which was significant, $b = 0.70$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$, and reduced the size of the interaction, $b = -1.35$, $SE = 0.42$, $p = .002$.

To examine the third stage in the causal path, we first regressed the measure of perceptions of White privilege on the dummy variable for gender and the measure of success (neither were significant). In the second step, we entered the interaction between gender and success. In the third step, we entered the measure of perceived male privilege, which was significant, $b = 0.80$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < .001$, and reduced the interaction to nonsignificance, $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.44$, $p = .88$.

On the basis of the results of these regressions, we then used the bootstrap procedure to construct bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) to test the significance of the indirect effects at high and moderate levels of perceived success (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). We found that the indirect effect of gender on White-privilege perceptions, mediated in two steps through the personal experience of gender-based disadvantage and perceptions of male privilege, was significant for participants who reported a moderate level of success, 95% bias-corrected CI = [.26, .37], but not for participants who reported a relatively high level of success, 95% bias-corrected CI = [-.17, 1.16].

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the central finding from Study 1, further supporting our prediction that White women should be more inclined to perceive White privilege than should White men, except when they experience particularly high levels of success. The results of Study 2 also provided support for our three-stage causal path, in which the interactive effect of gender and success on perceptions of White privilege among Whites is mediated in two steps by perceptions of gender discrimination and perceptions of male privilege.

Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to consider the generalizability of our findings. Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence that holding a subordinate gender position enhances perceptions of one's own race-based privileges, except for individuals who perceive themselves as being highly successful. If this phenomenon generalizes across the various dimensions of hierarchy that are common in organizations, we would expect racial-minority men to be more inclined than White men to perceive male privilege (unless they perceive themselves to be highly successful). Moreover, we would expect this effect to be mediated by perceptions of White privilege. We tested these predictions in Study 3.

Method

A total of 145 men (44% White; 56% racial minority)³ who were employed full-time participated in this study by completing an online questionnaire in exchange for monetary compensation (mean age = 41.82 years, $SD = 10.92$). The measures of perceived male privilege ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.59$; $\alpha = .92$) and perceived White privilege ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.97$; $\alpha = .98$) in the online questionnaire were similar to those used in Studies 1 and 2. To assess perceived success, we had participants indicate their agreement with three statements: "In my current job, I am successful"; "In my current job, I am able to prosper"; and "In my current job, I am able to thrive." Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement using scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and scores for the three items were averaged (composite mean = 5.06, $SD = 1.25$; $\alpha = .89$).

Results

We tested our central prediction by regressing the measure of perceived male privilege on a dummy variable for race (0 = White, 1 = racial minority), the measure of perceived success (centered), and the interaction between the two. There was a significant main effect of race, $b = -0.97$, $SE = 0.25$, $p < .001$, and the interaction between race and perceived success was significant, $b = 0.51$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .046$. Consistent with our predictions, results showed that among participants who reported moderate levels of success, racial-minority men reported higher levels of perceived male privilege than did White men, $b = -1.48$, $SE = 0.36$, $p < .001$, but this effect did not emerge among participants with high levels of perceived success, $b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = .21$ (see Fig. 3).⁴

We next examined our moderated mediation prediction. Specifically, we expected first-stage moderated mediation, such that there would be an effect of race on perceptions of White privilege, but only among men who reported a relatively moderate level of success in their organization. We expected that this perception of White privilege would in turn have a positive effect on perceptions of male privilege.

To explore this prediction, we again used the Edwards and Lambert (2007) procedure. We began by regressing perceived White privilege on the dummy variable for race, the measure of success, and the interaction between the two. There was a significant main effect of race, $b = -1.96$, $SE = 0.29$, $p < .001$, and the interaction between race and success was significant, $b = 0.63$, $SE = 0.29$, $p = .03$. Minority men reported higher levels of perceived White privilege than did White men, but this effect was stronger among participants who reported moderate levels of success, $b = -1.48$, $SE = 0.36$, $p < .001$, than among participants who reported high levels of success,

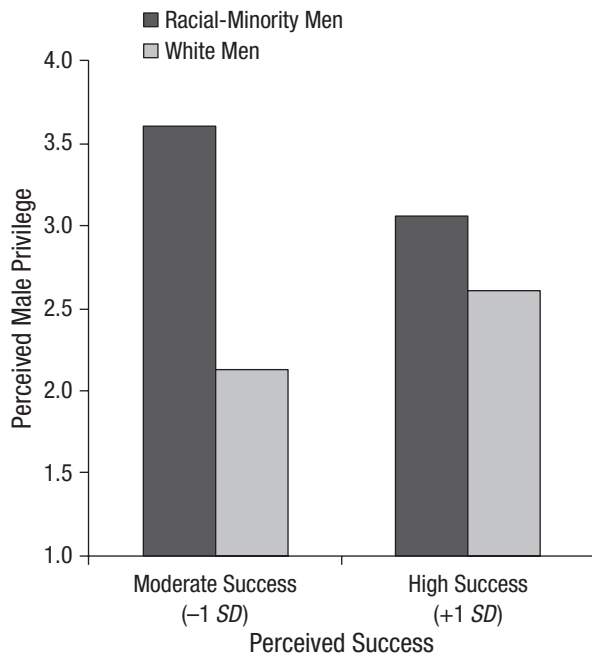


Fig. 3. Regression results for men from Study 3: mean levels of perceived male privilege as a function of perceived success and race.

$b = -1.33$, $SE = 0.41$, $p < .001$. We next regressed the measure of perceived male privilege on the dummy variable for race, the measure of success, the measure of perceived White privilege, and the interaction between success and race. The effect of perceived White privilege was significant, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$, and the size of the interaction was reduced and not significant, $b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .19$. We then used the bootstrap procedure to construct bias-corrected CIs for the indirect effects. We found that the indirect effect of race on perceived male privilege, mediated through perceived White privilege, was moderated by success, such that the indirect effect was significantly stronger for participants who reported a moderate level of success, $b = -0.77$, 95% bias-corrected CI = $[-1.33, -.33]$, than for participants who reported a high level of success, $b = -0.40$; 95% bias-corrected CI = $[-.87, -.11]$.

Discussion

The findings from Study 3 indicate that our focal phenomenon does indeed generalize beyond the effect of gender on recognition of White privilege. Specifically, we found that racial-minority men were more inclined to perceive male privilege than were White men, except when they experienced relatively high levels of success. It is important to note, however, that the mediating mechanism in this study was slightly different from that observed in Study 2. In Study 2, there was no significant effect of subordinate social group (gender) on the

mediator, awareness of dominant-group privilege (male privilege), among Whites reporting a high level of success. However, in Study 3, there was an effect of subordinate social group (race) on the mediator, awareness of dominant-group privilege (White privilege); the effect was significantly smaller for those reporting a high level of success, but it persisted. Consequently, even though there was not a significant direct effect of race on perceptions of male privilege for participants who reported high levels of success, the indirect effect through perceptions of White privilege remained.

General Discussion

Our three studies showed consistent support for our prediction: Individuals who hold a subordinate position on one dimension of social hierarchy are more likely than individuals who hold a dominant position on the same dimension to perceive their own privilege along a separate dimension of hierarchy, except when they experience a particularly high level of success. The results of the studies also support our argument that these effects are mediated by perceptions of disadvantage and by the recognition of corresponding forms of privilege. This research brings to the forefront the study of the multidimensional nature of status hierarchies in organizations, a perspective that has a long history in sociology (e.g., Stryker & Macke, 1978) and that has gained increasing importance in social psychology and organizational studies (e.g., Blader & Chen, 2012; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012; Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, in press).

In addition to the results that provide support for our predictions, two noteworthy findings also warrant consideration. First, in Study 1, highly successful White women reported lower perceptions of White privilege than did highly successful White men. Second, in Study 2, there was a positive effect of success on perceptions of White privilege among men. Although neither of these effects was replicated in our other studies, they are both consistent with a theoretical proposition that merits further investigation.

Specifically, it is possible that women who experience particularly high levels of success not only are disinclined to perceive that they have experienced disadvantage (as we predicted) but also, under certain circumstances, are more susceptible than successful men to the self-image threat posed by privilege framing. The perception of racial privilege may threaten a White individual's self-image because it can challenge the view that one's success was achieved entirely on the basis of personal merit (Lowery et al., 2007; Rosette & Thompson, 2005). Given that highly successful women frequently occupy roles and positions that are male dominated (Helfat, Harris, &

Wolfson, 2006), they may view their professional status, as well as credit granted to them for their successes, as more tenuous than that of their male peers. This sense of insecurity may heighten the self-image threat brought about by privilege framing. By contrast, highly successful men may experience less status insecurity, leading them to be somewhat less susceptible to the self-image threat of privilege framing (and therefore more inclined to perceive privilege). We believe that these possibilities merit further research.

The most critical contribution of this research is that it advances knowledge about the circumstances under which individuals recognize the existence of systems of privilege from which they themselves benefit. Making individuals aware of their own privilege activates a motivation to mitigate inequity (Chow & Galak, 2012; Iyer et al., 2003; Lowery et al., 2012), thus placing that motivation in the hands of the very people most empowered to address it (dominant-group members). The denial of privilege, on the other hand, can contribute to misunderstanding and conflict that can keep organizations from leveraging the benefits of diversity. Thus, it is critical that researchers continue to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that influence individuals' perceptions of privilege in organizations.

Author Contributions

A. S. Rosette developed the study concept and collected the data. Both A. S. Rosette and L. P. Tost contributed to the theory development, study design, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Although our theoretical model included perceived success as the moderator, we also examined gender as the moderator. We found that success had a negative effect on perceptions of White privilege among women, $b = -0.49$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .01$, whereas success had no effect on perceptions of White privilege among men, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .85$.

2. The finding from Study 1—that highly successful women reported lower levels of perceived White privilege than did highly successful men—was not replicated in Study 2. With gender as the moderator, we found no effect of success on perceptions of White privilege among women, $b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = .23$. However, we found a positive effect of success on perceptions of White privilege among men, $b = 0.52$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .053$. We discuss this finding in the General Discussion section.

3. Of the 81 racial-minority men, 33 were Asian, 25 were Black, and 23 were Hispanic. No differences (in terms of main effects or interactions) were noted among the racial-minority groups.

4. An examination of the interaction with race as a moderator revealed a marginally significant negative effect of success on perceptions of male privilege among racial-minority men, $b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .101$. There was no effect of success on perceptions of male privilege among White men, $b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .22$.

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