


Herd Invisibility: The Psychology of Racial Privilege

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Abstract

Despite overwhelming evidence of its existence, White privilege has received relatively little attention in psychological science. However, given the chronic and pervasive benefits tied to racial privilege, it stands to reason that living with such privilege affects Whites' everyday psychology. Here, we explore this psychology of privilege, connecting Whites' everyday experiences and behaviors to underlying motivations (i.e., innocence and maintenance) shaped by their privileged position in the social hierarchy. We shed light on Whites' use of strategies designed to protect their sense of innocence and, importantly, the consequences of these individual actions in aggregate. Specifically, we aim to resolve the tension between Whites' motivated blindness in response to evidence of privilege and their everyday experience of privilege as invisible. We argue that privilege is not inherently invisible; rather, Whites use cloaking strategies to address the discomfort associated with naked privilege. We further suggest that individuals acting to protect their own innocence leads to the emergence of invisibility at the societal level. A herd invisibility results, protecting both the innocence and privileges of individual Whites, but without their necessarily having to act on individual innocence or maintenance motivations.

Keywords

White privilege, racial identity, inequity, meritocracy, race, intergroup

On a visit to a slaving fort in Ghana, we were shown the original church on the property. At the entrance of the church was an opening that looked down into a pit that held slaves, so the faithful could survey their property as they entered and exited church services. This raises the question, what did the parishioners tell themselves as they sat in pews above recently enslaved human beings?

Today, we can marvel at the mental work necessary to literally walk over souls on your way to save your own. But we still live in a society that bestows vast privileges on Whites that separate them from their ethnic minority counterparts. Compared with their Black counterparts, even the poorest Whites have double the wealth and are more likely to be housed because of favorable lending, the G.I. Bill of Rights, and other policies explicitly designed to help Whites accrue capital (e.g., Katznelson, 2005). Yet, today, a *majority* of Whites claim that they suffer racial discrimination, and many Whites believe that ethnic minorities enjoy racial privileges (Cohen, Fowler, Medenica, & Rogowski, 2017; NPR, 2018; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014).

We suggest that this strained relationship with reality, while not in the same league as that of our churchgoing

ancestors, requires management of the obvious existence of racial privilege. However, privilege is often experienced as invisible to those who have it. How can this be? Here, we suggest that individual actors, motivated to maintain either positive self-regard (*innocence motive*) or privileges associated with their group's dominant status (*maintenance motive*), will engage in behaviors to cloak their privilege. As a result, invisibility emerges at the societal level and can thus protect both the privileges and the innocence of individual privileged actors—even when they do not individually engage in these protective actions.

Herd Invisibility: Individual Motivations, Aggregate Consequences

Privilege is unearned advantage derived from one's group membership, and privilege based on race is

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embedded in the foundation of the United States (Haney-López, 1996; McIntosh, 1988). Early European settlers hewed the United States from the expropriated land of native peoples, robbed labor from enslaved Africans, and enacted myriad policies and practices designed to produce racialized benefits (Baptist, 2014; Katznelson, 2005). Descendants of these settlers and newer European immigrants continue to benefit from racist policies and practices, both past and present: Black/White disparities persist in the domains of health, housing, education, employment, finances, and criminal justice, to name a few (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Katznelson, 2005). Evidence that race-based privilege persists to the present day comes close to irrefutable.

Despite overwhelming evidence of its existence, Whites' experience of privilege has received relatively little attention in psychological studies. Rather, the study of Whites' psychology—when Whiteness has been considered at all—has been dominated by the study of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). While this work has yielded important insights, it captures only an isolated component of White psychology. The idea of Whiteness, and the maintenance of the prerogatives associated with this group membership, consists of more than the willingness to discriminate against ethnic minorities. A full understanding of the experience of Whiteness requires a psychology of Whites' selves as White and benefitting from privilege, not simply their view of the "other" (Frankenberg, 1993; Knowles & Peng, 2005).

Although there is relatively little research on the psychological experience of White privilege, previous work has considered Whites' responses to evidence of White privilege (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffhauer, 2007; Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Rosette & Tost, 2013; Swim & Miller, 1999). Much of this work demonstrates the banality of privilege maintenance—how intuitively Whites engage in strategically appropriate defense of their privileged status. However, this work risks being misinterpreted as evidence that privilege is relevant only to some Whites or that the psychology of privilege is relevant only when Whites are directly challenged with evidence of privilege. Rather, a true psychology of privilege must capture the way privilege pervades the everyday experience of Whites.¹

Work outside of psychology has tackled the topic of everyday privilege. In this work, some scholars explain the apparent obliviousness of Whites by suggesting that racial privileges, and even Whiteness itself, are inherently invisible to Whites by nature of their numerical majority and normative standing (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1988). Although an elegant explanation for observed behaviors of some Whites, there is substantial evidence that Whites do have a sense of themselves as White and

an understanding of what this identity entails (Knowles & Peng, 2005; for a review, see Knowles et al., 2014). Further, a critical look at the policies from before the official inception of this country (e.g., slavery) through today (e.g., policing) makes clear that the current social and economic position of Whites reflects a long-term social project. The sheer magnitude and scale of the racial project should create immense pressure on "invisibility."

While motivated reasoning may trump invisibility theories in the context of direct evidence of privilege, the relationship between motivated blindness and everyday invisibility has not been resolved. We integrate work on Whites' responses to direct evidence of privilege and Whites' everyday experiences of privilege to demonstrate how societal-level invisibility might emerge from individuals' motivated reasoning. Specifically, we propose that considerable work is done by individuals and society to cloak racial privilege but that even those without such motivation benefit from herd invisibility.

First, Whites want to feel innocent, and the basic desire to think well of the self constrains acceptable means of maintaining dominance and the privilege it entails. This puts pressure on individuals to hide privilege and its illegitimacy from themselves. Second, Whites want to maintain privilege, and racial privileges depend on the stability of an unequal racialized social system that tends to provoke resistance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This puts pressure on individuals to hide privilege and its illegitimacy from others. Importantly, when enough individual Whites act on either of these motives, they generate societal-level invisibility. As a result, not all individual Whites need to act on innocence or maintenance motives: Herd invisibility can emerge from the aggregate of individual actions, protecting the innocence and privileges of all members of the group.

The Self: Individuals Motivated to Claim Innocence

In American society, meritocracy is the favored principle of distributive justice and hierarchy-justifying ideology (Son Hing et al., 2011). The desire to feel good about the self thus requires that outcomes are a function of effort and talent; this poses a problem if racial-group membership affects individuals' outcomes. For Whites to maintain positive self-regard, innocence demands the cloaking of racial privilege. General strategies to deny and to distance from privilege have been reviewed elsewhere, as has the role of maintenance motives in driving many of these behaviors (Knowles et al., 2014; Leach et al., 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Here, we briefly consider some of these cloaking strategies, focusing specifically on motives to protect self-regard.

Whites can cloak unearned advantage by denying it is advantageous. In one such maneuver, Whites claim that they have suffered more personal life hardships when faced with evidence of their privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2015; see also Young & Sullivan, 2016). When claiming hardships, Whites allow for the existence of White privilege among other Whites but deny personally benefitting. Importantly, these effects require only self-regard motives—Whites both with and without strong maintenance motives are concerned about innocence. For example, this work does not find that social dominance orientation nor political ideology moderates Whites' hardship claims, although concern for personal merit does (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Phillips & Lowery, 2015, 2018).

Alternatively, Whites can cloak unearned advantage by denying it is unearned. For instance, in the context of social class, we find that the privileged claim to work harder and will even expend more effort when exposed to evidence of their advantage (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Other work finds that individuals who garner a job through personal connections, as opposed to hard work, will nevertheless claim that their personal effort was responsible for their success (Belmi, Phillips, & Laurin, 2018; DiTomaso, 2013; Phillips, 2016). Given that racial privilege is propagated in part by segregated access to advantaged hiring networks (DiTomaso, 2013), the reinterpretation of such advantage as merit is all the more important. Indeed, claims of effort in

the face of privilege allow for the interpretation of systemic inequity as deserved.

The System: Herd Invisibility Protects Innocence

Critical to the everyday psychology of privilege is that innocence does not require effort on the part of every privileged person. Individual Whites are born into a society that predates their individual experiences, motivations, and behaviors. Like privilege, innocence can be enjoyed today, thanks in part to the accrual and maintenance of innocence yesterday (Haney-López, 1996; Katznelson, 2005).

We suggest that individual innocence projects infuse into broader practices, policies, and structures (see also Markus & Kitayama, 2010). When individuals work to maintain their own innocence, they shape shared social experiences, letting that innocence ripple beyond the individual. In turn, Whites benefit from herd invisibility that emerges at the societal level. We conceptualize herd invisibility by following the herd-immunity model of vaccination: When enough individuals are vaccinated, the incidence of disease is reduced for the entire population, protecting those who are not vaccinated (John & Samuel, 2000). Similarly, herd invisibility protects innocence and privileges for all Whites, even without every individual White person acting on individual innocence or maintenance motives (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Herd invisibility. When individuals act on innocence or maintenance motives, invisibility emerges in the aggregate, which protects innocence and privilege for those who do not act. (Artwork by Cathy Zhang)

In short, individual actions produce herd invisibility. For instance, Whites' victimization claims and privilege denials have social consequences in the aggregate. Individual stories of hardship may make Whites more open to the idea that Whites are indeed victims of racial disadvantage, despite the racial irrelevance of the hardships claimed. For instance, Whites may mistake economic hardship for lack of racial privilege. Indeed, Whites vastly underestimate the gulf between Whites and minorities on dimensions such as wealth and unemployment (Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017), overestimate discrimination against Whites (Cohen et al., 2017; see also Young & Sullivan, 2016), and even experience equity restoration as equity reduction (Hochschild, 2016).

As individuals, Whites also often deny privilege by focusing on disadvantage, despite the obvious syllogism inherent in racial discrimination and racial privilege (Brewer, 1999; DiTomaso, 2013). Importantly, this also frames inequity for others and hides the existence of advantage. For example, an archival study found that essentially no newspapers used an advantage frame to describe racial inequality (Chow & Bhatia, 2018). Similarly, in conversation, Whites focus on the disadvantages faced by minorities while ignoring the advantages these disadvantages imply (Chow & Bhatia, 2018; see also Lowery & Wout, 2010). Indeed, members of racially privileged groups work to avoid inequity as a conversational topic altogether (e.g., Saguy & Dovidio, 2013). And further still, the segregation that characterizes Whites' daily interactions also likely helps Whites disconnect advantage from disadvantage: Segregation makes lateral and upward comparisons with other Whites more accessible than downward comparisons with the disadvantaged (DiTomaso, 2013; see also Leach et al., 2002; Major, 1994). Thus, Whites who do not actively deny the existence of racial privilege can nevertheless be shielded by the choices and actions of others.

Similarly, individual distancing from Whiteness (Branscombe et al., 2007; Jun, Lowery, & Guillory, 2017) is an attempt to separate the self from the privilege tied to Whiteness at a societal level. But this individual distancing has consequences for others as well. For instance, Whites enforce racial-distancing norms: Whites do not teach their children about race, feel uncomfortable taking notice of race, set policies that are explicitly color blind, and punish individuals who might notice or identify with their race (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Chow & Knowles, 2016; Jun et al., 2017; McIntosh, 1988). This was not always the case; Whiteness was once proudly named and proclaimed (Haney-López, 1996). But today, Whites grow up distanced from Whiteness, without their necessarily having to actively distance themselves.

When enough individuals distance themselves from and deny the existence of racial advantages, invisibility emerges at the societal level. Similarly, when individuals deny the unearned nature of racial privilege, legitimacy emerges at the societal level. For instance, elites and intellectuals have created benign (for Whites) explanations for Whites' privileged position. Scientific racism propagates theories that allow individuals to acknowledge racial differences but attribute them to talent (for a review, see Gould, 1996). In this way, Whites need not individually make claims of effort or talent; instead, Whites must merely accept "science" to maintain innocence.

For those Whites who do not find it tasteful to make claims of essentialist superiority, ample alternative ideologies exist, again fed by individual actions. For instance, when individuals claim increased effort to counter evidence of privilege, this may suggest to themselves and others that hard work earned them their outcomes. In the aggregate, such claims likely contribute to belief in ideologies such as the Protestant work ethic—that hard work is all one needs for success—which Whites are more likely to be taught and believe than are Blacks (Cokley et al., 2007). In general, Whites can experience their achievements as a product of their choices, effort, and skill. As a result, Whites may also be more likely to experience meritocracy as the current state of affairs rather than a social aspiration (Newman, Johnston, & Lown, 2015; see also McCoy & Major, 2007).

Herd Invisibility: Consequences for Hierarchy Maintenance

Privilege is pervasive in the daily contexts and situations Whites inhabit. And yet herd invisibility provides innocence by keeping much of this everyday privilege out of sight. Herd invisibility thus creates an incentive problem for dismantling privilege: Individuals desire innocence but can achieve feelings of innocence by merely remaining neutral—declining to act on maintenance motivations—while the system of privilege persists. Indeed, individual innocence can even be presented to protect against claims of redress (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Leach et al., 2002). As a result, herd invisibility protects the self and the system: If privilege is neither beneficial nor unearned, then policies to correct it can be opposed as unfair. Innocence serves the hierarchy well.

When the desire for innocence cannot be satisfied by individual cloaking or herd invisibility, might Whites relinquish their privilege? Studies have found that when confronted with evidence that they benefit from White privilege, Whites may engage in dismantling—for instance, supporting policies specifically said to harm Whites (Leach et al., 2002; Lowery, Chow, & Randall-Crosby, 2009; Phillips & Lowery, 2015; see Knowles et al., 2014).

However, evidence suggests that Whites' commitment to such political support is likely limited; once innocence is achieved, support disappears, even if inequity persists. As long as the cover of innocence is provided, individuals can pursue advantages freely.

Consistent with this possibility, Whites' support for equity-restoring policies depends on whether they believe their privileged status is legitimate or secure (Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Jun et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2002; Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012). In another set of experiments, when given the chance to sacrifice advantages after privilege had been exposed, participants instead continued to use their advantages to achieve success (Phillips, 2016). But afterward, they claimed that their own effort had been responsible. Even while denying that the benefits were beneficial, participants refused to relinquish them.

Indeed, when we survey history, instances of powerful groups seeking equity for purely moral reasons do not tend to jump out. Rather, cost-benefit calculations appear to drive dominant group concessions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2000; Jackman, 1994; Jun et al., 2017). And yet the language of innocence remains important, helping to provide cover for the existing hierarchy. For example, the civil rights movement is taken as evidence that the United States found its moral compass. But this version of events selectively ignores evidence that a large percentage of the population fought tooth and nail against civil rights, mirroring today's resistance to the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, the "success" of the civil rights movement also reflected the geopolitical interests of the United States at the time rather than a sudden realization and correction of racial wrongs (Bell, 1980). From this perspective, the narrative surrounding the advance of civil rights, and the canonization of Martin Luther King, Jr., represent the ongoing project of creating a sense of system-level innocence.

Need for Additional Study: Privilege as Everyday Experience

As social psychologists, we are uniquely suited to consider how structural features of racial inequity interact with individual psychological features. This requires reinterpreting our current understanding of White psychology and placing additional emphasis on the situation and experience of Whiteness in future work. Indeed, many existing theories may be usefully extended to consider Whites as privileged rather than as normative.

For example, research has found subordinate groups to be especially likely to experience attributional ambiguity (Crocker & Major, 1989). However, Whites may be less likely to experience attributional ambiguity, not

because they are any less likely to experience ambiguous selection processes (e.g., favoritism) but because herd invisibility has covered that ambiguity (Brewer, 1999; DiTomaso, 2013). Similarly, the motivated separating of group and personal discrimination works as a protective mechanism employed by subordinate group members (Crosby, 1984; Major et al., 2002), but such separation of group and personal privilege protects dominant group members, too (Lowery & Wout, 2010; Major et al., 2002; Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Overall, more work is needed to characterize everyday experience and psychology of privilege.

Finally, unlike for one-off instances of inequity, restoration solutions may not be readily available for chronic racial inequity. Further, offering any restoration might risk tacit admission of a lifetime of advantage, which would then demand additional reparations. Therefore, classic levers of intervention may need to be adapted in the case of chronic, group-based privilege experiences (see Rosette & Koval, 2018). For instance, to correct the incentive problems created by herd invisibility, innocence would need to be redefined as *anti-maintenance* rather than mere neutrality. To claim innocence, individual Whites would then have to actively dismantle privilege at individual, interpersonal, and societal levels.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the psychology of privilege is particularly insidious. Maintaining innocence and resources requires Whites to refuse to acknowledge the full extent of the benefits associated with being White in America. Blinders associated with the need for innocence almost certainly limit the ability to fully accept the magnitude and consequences of racial disparities in a variety of domains, including policing, labor markets, and medical care. In a guilty world, a price must be paid for the experience of innocence; in the United States, one could argue that Whites' experience of innocence is paid for by minorities.

Recommended Reading

- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2000). (See References). An empirical article that showcases the role of group interest in motivating both hierarchy attenuating and enhancing behaviors.
- Haney-López, I. (1996). (See References). A book that reviews the legal construction of Whiteness and race in the United States.
- Knowles, E. D., Lowery, B. S., Chow, R. M., & Unzueta, M. M. (2014). (See References). A recent, comprehensive review of Whites' individual privilege-management strategies, including *deny*, *distance*, and *dismantle*.
- Leach, C. W., Snider, N., & Iyer, A. (2002). (See References). A review of the individual and social motives that spur

privileged group members' affective and behavioral responses to inequity.

Phillips, L. T., & Lowery, B. S. (2015). (See References). A representative empirical article that illustrates innocence-management techniques, including Whites' claiming hardships in order to falsely separate personal and group privilege.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Our central claims regard the effects of an environment of privilege on human psychology, not any inherent differences among groups; thus, many of the claims we make here should and indeed do apply to other privileged social groups (Branscombe, 1998; Major, 1994; Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Rosette & Tost, 2013; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016).

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