RACIAL AND GENDER PRIVILEGE AWARENESS:
IS PERVERSIVE INDIVIDUALISM IN THE UNITED STATES A MAJOR
ROADBLOCK?

A Thesis

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Abstract

RACIAL AND GENDER PRIVILEGE AWARENESS: IS PERVASIVE INDIVIDUALISM IN THE UNITED STATES A MAJOR ROADBLOCK?

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Why is racial and gender privilege such a difficult concept for Americans to accept? This research proposes that individualism in the United States has contributed significantly to resistance to the idea of racial and gender privilege. Past research has consistently shown that white people and males feel as though their hard work is being challenged when presented with the idea of privilege (Farrough 2003; Gallager 2003). While there have been many studies on privilege and how people react to the idea of privilege, they have almost exclusively been done qualitatively. The present research attempts to measure the effect of individualism on one’s ability to recognize privilege. The General Social Survey (GSS) asks several questions that can be interpreted to measure one’s level of privilege awareness and individualism. Logistic regression analysis of the 2012 GSS data reveals that individualism, as well as race, are predictive of one’s awareness of racial privilege. However, there were not any significant variables that predicted awareness of Gender Privilege. This may be the result of somewhat subjective measures of the Dependent variables (Racial and Gender Privilege Awareness) and the Independent
variables (Individualism), thus showing the need for better measures and more quantitative privilege research.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Ellen Berg

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my dog Smokey. He was diagnosed with cancer as I was finishing, and I am not sure he will still be alive when I graduate. You have been the best friend a guy could ever have. I will miss you more than words can say.
I do not think anyone achieves anything without some help from someone, or something (as illustrated by the topic I chose). That being said, there are several people that helped me as I navigated through this process. I would like to thank Professor Ellen Berg for all of her support, starting in undergrad and continuing on through my completion of the Master’s program. You are truly the best teacher I have ever seen. You have a way of explaining things that makes them easy to understand, you are energetic and engaging, and you are really funny sometimes! You have a gift for teaching that serves as a true inspiration for me moving forward as a teacher. To Jackie Carrigan, who not only helped me complete this thesis, but also introduced me to two of my favorite books, The Meritocracy Myth and Outliers (again, influencing this topic). To Todd Migliaccio, who approached me when I was a returning student at age 38, just focusing on finally finishing my Bachelor’s degree. He is the one who told me I should consider graduate school. It sounds like such a simple thing, but I am not sure I would have done this without that nudge from you, so thank you!

Last, but unequivocally not least, thank you to my wife Dana. Your unwavering support throughout my journey going back to school has been unbelievable. You have had to work harder because I was a student and never once made me feel anything but supported. You pushed me to pursue my goals and have sacrificed to make it happen.
You did all of this while we raised two children! You are the most amazing person I know and I am so lucky to have you in my life.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Recent events in the United States have revealed the existence of strong racial tension within our society. Along with this tension, polarized views regarding social inequality, racial discrimination, and possible solutions are widespread (Robinson 2009). Exposing the depths of gender and racial privilege can help to bridge the gap between the two sides, but understanding why people are resistant or unable to see privilege can provide a much deeper understanding of inequality in the United States. Research has shown that social inequality has grown over the last several decades, but the ability to recognize it has diminished (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Can individualistic beliefs, or subscribing ideologically to the assumption of the “self-made man” help explain someone’s level of awareness that gender and racial privileges exist? This meritocracy-based ideology has been built into the fabric of the United States’ culture from its beginnings and may provide insight as to why racial and gender privilege are difficult concepts for Americans to accept.

One of the major obstacles to increased awareness of privilege is dismantling the idea of living in a meritocratic society. While that may sound like a relatively simple concept to break down, it goes against a fundamental idea socialized into Americans from an early age. It can also contribute to feelings of helplessness or defensiveness for men, women, whites, and people of color, to accept that one doesn’t necessarily decide the entirety of their fate (Gallagher 2003; Stewart et al. 2012). The present study explores
the meritocracy-based ideology of Americans as a possible predictor for lack of, or resistance to, privilege awareness.

Research and theories on individualism have primarily been divided into two related, yet distinctly different, forms. There is the concept of individualism that focuses on concern for the individual as opposed to the collective, as described by Tocqueville’s (1840) *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville provides an interesting criticism of American democracy, where he warns about the dangers of despotism, despite the common understanding that democracy itself translates into a government of the people. This provides a unique understanding of individualism in America, to think we are so busy concerning ourselves with equality, individual rights, and material gain through free market that we actually lose our ability to govern ourselves. According to Tocqueville, the result is a society that places the individual above the collective. This type of individualism is not the direct focus of this research, but still merits serious consideration in the context of how individualistic thought formed in the United States. The shaping of our democracy, as described by Tocqueville, places the individual in a perceived position of importance in society, thus contributing to other types of individualism.

The second type of individualism, which is the primary focus of this research, is when one ideologically subscribes to the idea of the “self-made man”, or believes the individual is mostly responsible for their condition. This type of ideology assumes social structures and social influences are secondary, or non-consequential, when compared to the actions of the individual. In sociology we are taught to situate the individual in an ancillary position when explaining social and human conditions, almost to the extreme of
discrediting individual agency at times. “Individualism implies a sense of respect for the integrity and dignity of the individual person and a belief in the efficacy of the individual’s action” (Bellah 1985: 30). Individualism can be described as placing primary value on the individual to explain behavior or characteristics. This concept can be applied to almost all aspects of life, such as achievement or failure in school, business, relationships, and personal life.

The primary goal of this research is to determine if someone’s measured level of belief in individualism can predict their level of privilege awareness. Even as a social science researcher, it can be challenging to unveil the depths of privilege. What exactly does it mean and how does it manifested itself, in society and in people’s lived experiences? The truth is that it is everywhere around us in our daily lives and we are either unable, or choose, not to notice or pay attention. For example, a white male, or even just a white person for the purposes of this initial discussion, can navigate through life with a basic trust others do not have. As a patron of a store or restaurant, it is assumed their business is legitimate and non-threatening. When they speak about something, of almost any subject, their thoughts are considered their own and not the thoughts of all white people. If at any time there is a situation that may not go the way they need it to go, by showing up in person they can only help their chances. More generally, they will usually be given the benefit of the doubt in most situations. These are just a few, in a long list of things one can expect from going through life as a white person. The same types of things can be associated with gender privilege, and as with McIntosh’s (1988) list of white privileges, they are typically taken for granted or
normalized as people navigate through life. So why don’t people typically see this is happening? This research attempts to answer that question by looking at data from the 2012 General Social Survey, specifically questions that measured levels of privilege awareness and individualism, to see if being more individualistic translates into more or less privilege awareness.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

*Individualism in the United States*

Individualism has historically been, and continues to be, a way of life in the United States, where very little consideration is given to the potential effects it has on American’s entire way of thinking. Theories on America’s individualism are varied throughout history, but the United States has been the focal point of most past research on this subject (Bellah 1985; Bobo 1991; Giddens 1971 a; Giddens 1971 b; Tocqueville 1840).

With varying theories of individualism within sociology, perhaps none exemplify its inadequacies better than C. Wright Mills. His concept of the sociological imagination offers a philosophical approach to thinking that places the individual in equal standing with the social while examining our world. He writes, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both (Mills 1959: 3). For Mills, the acknowledgement of social conditions and their influence on social actions are mandatory precursors for understanding history. He speaks of the false consciousness of the individual that becomes wrapped up in the confusion of their daily existence (Mills 1959). Central to the discipline of sociology, the Sociological Imagination is being able to associate
social and historical context to individual conditions or experiences (Mills 1959). For example, someone losing their job would typically be attributed to some sort of individual failure, when in fact, society-wide forces may have played an important role. If the unemployment rate of the United States, or even a more local community, were at an all-time low, then one losing their job is rooted in political and economic constructs of society. Still yet, success or failure in the United States usually correlated with the individual.

There are many explanations for why Americans subscribe to the belief in individualism. Some have attributed American individualism to the formation of our democracy and the emphasis placed on individual freedoms and liberties (Tocqueville 1840). In reference to the American government Alexis Tocqueville wrote, “That providence has given to every human being the degree of reason necessary to direct himself in the affairs which interest him exclusively: such is the grand maxim upon which the civil and political society rests in the United States” (Tocqueville 1840: 501). Tocqueville’s argument presents the irony of American citizens being granted freedoms that influence individual pursuits to the extent that we give way to an invisible hand that slowly takes over and controls, with more power than a classically defined aristocracy.

For Tocqueville, he explains American individualism by highlighting the flaws in our individual pursuits. He felt that the United States’ citizens were more concerned with money and material gain than any other country in the world (Tocqueville 1959). For most Americans, I do not think they recognize the deficiencies in individualistic pursuits. It has become a way of life that is valued and sacred, giving every citizen the false
consciousness they alone are responsible for their rise or fall. This is particularly true for whites in America, who typically attribute the success they have over diverse populations to individual effort (Gallagher 2003). The result being a culture of intolerance, where failure is seen as a function of individual deficiency, meaning the individual must assume blame for any failed expectation or behavior (Gallagher 2003).

Other theories trace individualism to American capitalism, questioning what causes people in capitalistic societies to behave the way they do. This approach focuses on why Americans are constantly concerned with growth, profit, consumption, and unrelenting achievement. For Max Weber, his explanation of this was that capitalism is rooted in religious beliefs dating back to the 15th and 16th century, when people began to believe they could have an individual relationship with God (Weber 1905). Additionally, the way to fulfill their obligation to god was to prove themselves through hard work and sacrifice (Weber 1905). This period of time marks a paradigm shift in the way people think about themselves in a broader context. Instead of viewing yourself from the perspective of a member of a community first, now it is up to you individually to decide your fate.

As capitalism moved west, Weber felt this religiously motivated practice of hard work would give way to a more economic and profit-based motivation (Weber 1905). Weber highlighted the ways in which Benjamin Franklin emphasized the Protestant Ethic in a different way. Preaching that time is money and the value of maintaining good credit, Franklin would lay the foundation for the American work ethic that accentuated individual character as the backbone of success or failure. Weber’s ideas are an
interesting concept to consider when discussing individualism. Capitalism has created a world based on consumption, driving people to pursue material gains, and define their existence based on an individual comparison to the material possession of others (Merskin 1998).

Emile Durkheim also provided a unique perspective on individuals in society, specifically concerning himself with the division of labor and the way it affects social solidarity. For Durkheim, during times of what he called “mechanical solidarity”, the collective conscious is strong (Durkheim 1893). His reference to mechanical solidarity refers to times when there was a low division of labor in society, and everyone's interests were closely tied together. He felt this was important because there was a moral collective fabric of society, where we were able to regulate ourselves better based on our social solidarity (Durkheim 1893). As the division of labor grew high, corresponding with migration to urban life, the collective conscious of society gets weaker as individuals take on more specialized tasks in the workforce. (Durkheim 1893).

Since measuring collective conscious can be an ambiguous practice, Durkheim used laws as a means of examining the strength or weakness of a society's solidarity. If laws were seen as more repressive, with harsher punishments, then that was a reflection of a society with shared moral ideals (Durkheim 1893). Violations of those laws were viewed collectively by society as a direct challenge to the shared belief system. He believed that as society moved to a more complex
division of labor, the collective conscious grew weaker as individuals had different interests and sentiments. This provides yet another interesting understanding on the formation of individualism in the United States. It does seem that the further we progress as a society, with technology and labor becoming more specialized, the more people tend to lose concern for the greater good of society as a whole. I think this may be a product of population growth as well. The larger our population grows, the harder it is to understand what is best for everyone, due to the inconsistency regarding the needs and wants of mass amounts of people.

Even Durkheim's concept of Anomie deals with the disconnection from the rest of society, due to low moral regulation and individualism, resulting from a high division of labor (Durkheim 1897). His fear was that a society that emphasizes individualism runs the risk of its members losing sight of what is or isn't acceptable behavior. It seems clear that Durkheim believed that there is a genuine concern about people becoming so individualized that they lose their connection with the rest of society, which is an interesting concept to consider while thinking about tolerance and empathy for someone that hasn't achieved the American ideal.

Additionally tied up in the American sense of individualism, was the entire premise and ideals that surrounded the conquering of the American frontier. There is a tendency in American culture to accentuate the extraordinary accomplishments of individuals, particularly when faced with seemingly insurmountable barriers. One of the most important foundations to this ideology was the migration West of American society.
Fredrick Jackson Turner’s *The Frontier in American History* provided a detailed account of how specific sets of ideals and principles guided those who were able to survive the harshness of frontier life in the name of conquest. In reference to opportunity awaiting on the frontier he writes, “Here were mill sites, town sites, transportation lines, banking centers, openings in the law, in politics – all the varied chances for advancement afforded in a rapidly developing society where everything was open to him who knew how to seize the opportunity” (Turner 1921: 272). The idea that an individual could decide his or her own fate is deeply trenched into the fabric of American culture. Success and failure, under this type of ideology would be the result of nothing less than an individual’s strengths or shortcomings.

The values cherished by the pioneers carried with them the belief that individuals should be allowed to prosper and develop with as little interference as possible (Turner 1921). This line of thinking puts concern for the greater good secondary to concern for the individual, while also rationalizing that those who don’t live up to the standard will be left behind. It also perpetuated the idea that any injustice or oppression that someone experienced would be negligible if that individual had what it took to succeed. In this way, the American Frontier provided a justification for looking down upon anyone who continued to struggle, regardless of the hardships they suffered. Despite the fact this rampant individualism led to expansive private ownership and domination from the industrial world, the focus remained centered around the success of the few and ignored the domination of the masses. “But it did not demand equality of condition, for there was abundance of natural resources and the belief that the self-made man had a right to his
success in the free competition which western life afforded, was as prominent in their thought as was democracy” (Turner 1921: 303). For Turner it was clear individualism played a key role in the formation of the United States, while also providing the foundation for which its democracy would operate.

Robert Bellah provided his own unique perspective on individualism in the United States by taking into account many of the same considerations as Tocqueville. He focused on certain aspects of American democracy and populism to examine the ways in which individualism can hamper long-term political or revolutionary pursuits. Much like Tocqueville’s critique of American’s declining engagement in political affairs, Bellah (1985) highlighted the ways in which Americans enter into political action generally to serve an individual need rather than a collective one. This type of motivation makes it harder to sustain a political movement because the focus is always changing. As demonstrated by past research, the general motivations behind political opinions in our country are most often centered on some sort of individualistic need (Esarey, Salmon, and Barrilleaux 2012). If someone favors progressive taxation legislation, it is usually because they fall below the proposed limit (Esarey et al. 2012). Similarly, if someone is against a new freeway route it is might be because of its proximity to their residence. At times it can feel like Americans have become casually accustomed to ignoring the influence of larger social conditions on individual life. Past research has shown that one of the challenges facing the United States moving forward is getting its citizens to shift their focus from the individual to the collective (Micheletti and Stolle 2015).
Bellah’s (1985) *Habits of the Heart* reveals the insidious nature of individualism in the United States, specifically as it relates to our civic and personal lives. He writes, “We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious” (p. 142). It is an important distinction to make, that individualism in the United States is not a trend in behavior, but a way of life and a prized approach to thinking. Like Weber, Bellah felt Benjamin Franklin played a key role in the growth of individualism in American citizens. There was so much consideration given to creating a society where the individual could flourish, the larger social context was difficult to see (Bellah 1985). As he points out, there was a feeling among a large number of people in the late 1800s that society would be just fine with people pursuing their individual interests, and the greater social good would automatically emerge (Bellah 1985). This ideology continues to be a central aspect of political debate today.

Bellah gave insight to the structural flaws in society created when pervasive individualism exists. In many ways, he used Tocqueville’s framework to develop his ideas and theories on the consciousness of Americans. Both men considered American individualism to be a non-sustaining practice, where eventually the principles of freedom that guided the formation of our society would give way to an invisible dominance. Tocqueville (1840) wrote, “there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and
hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands” (p. 884)

More contemporary theories on individualism have addressed something left out by theorists such as Bellah and Tocqueville, who generalized individualism in the United States to the majority of citizens. Bobo (1991) argued that extreme individualism is more limited to those who hold positions of power, or at the very least perceive themselves to be on the beneficial side of individual pursuits (Bobo 1991). Bobo (1991) argues specifically, economic individualism is a hegemonic value in the United States, because those who fundamentally hold more of a social responsibility based ideology tend to be people of low socioeconomic backgrounds, and/or those who have very little political influence. Bobo’s (1991) further research showed higher education is negatively associated with feelings of social responsibility for whites, but does not affect these feelings for blacks.

Additional results from Bobo’s (1991) study reveal the extent to which stratification influences beliefs about social responsibility. Lower household income translated into greater belief in social responsibility (Bobo 1991). Ironically, the findings on education’s influence show those with higher education have greater awareness of the existence of social inequality (Bobo 1991). The message appears to be that those with higher education acknowledge the existence of inequality, but fail to feel socially responsible for changing it.

To consider individualism from the standpoint of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, one has to take into account the effects and the causes of it at the same time.
For Bourdieu (1994), there is a definitive interplay between structure and agency. Social structures in the United States may have contributed to the development of individualism, but those structures were also created through the actions of people. Our individualism creates the culture, or the culture creates the individualism? According to Bourdieu (1994), both of them interact hand in hand with each other to create the “habitus” of our society.

Bourdieu’s theories on habitus, structure, and agency are important to consider when attempting to figure out whether individualism in the United States can be changed. On one hand, you might say if enough individuals change their way of thinking and focus more on structural influences and the collective good, then surely the ideology of our society would have to follow suit. On the other hand, I think Bourdieu would argue structure has too much influence on agency to ever allow for real change. Specifically, structure has determined the distribution of capital in society, which ultimately affects the habitus of everyone to some degree.

Perhaps the tendency of Americans to focus on the individual first when it comes to almost any social or human condition is why we have struggled so much with understanding racial and gender privilege. Moreover, under this type of ideology, any circumstance or characteristic that positions itself on the periphery of the individual are considered to be ancillary causes of success or failure.
Privilege Awareness

Understanding privilege is more complex than one would think. Commonly, we are taught to understand disadvantages that certain groups may have and the implications of such. To understand privilege, is to recognize its natural correlation to disadvantage (McIntosh 1988). Social movements in the United States have been largely centered on helping those who are disadvantaged, without consideration of the ways that some gain advantage at the expense of others (McIntosh 1988). Additionally, McIntosh (1988) described the tendency of whites and men to help women and people of color “be more like them”, assuming there is some sort of natural/normalness to being white or male. Even if aware of privilege, it is much easier and more comfortable to help someone gain something, than to diminish one’s own condition or resources.

Racial Privilege Awareness

Understanding privilege can be a difficult task, mainly because the notion of privilege can be applied to so many aspects of the human condition. Race and gender only scratch the surface of the many types of privileges people hold. While attempting to measure one’s awareness of privilege, white privilege has been the focal point of most researchers.

Pervasive denial and avoidance are common themes found in research on white privilege. For example, Gallagher (2003) found the mere mention of white privilege
typically evokes a feeling among whites that someone is challenging their hard work, determination, and education. This is despite the fact that the white privilege perspective is meant to be considered as an additive causal explanation of success and not an absolute or exhaustive account of one’s circumstances. In other words, it is not to say that one may or may not work hard, but only to suggest hard work does not tell the whole story. Yet, when white people are asked to consider white privilege, they often feel personally attacked and overwhelmed (Boatwright-Horowitz, Moraccini, and Harps-Logan 2012).

A particular aspect of white privilege that can be challenging to accept is the idea that not only are the accomplishments of people of color being “down-scored” by society in the presence of privilege, but also the accomplishments of whites are being “up-scored”. For example, if someone is given an exam that is culturally biased to favor whites, the exam score for whites is not representative of their pure knowledge of the subject, but only of their knowledge of the subject as seen from the white perspective. As one of the pioneers on privilege studies, Peggy McIntosh (2012) has emphasized the importance of understanding disadvantage, and privilege, when studying power dynamics in the United States. Her argument is that arbitrarily recognized achievements are just as relevant as disadvantage, and in fact correlate each other. Past research on student evaluations of their college professors revealed that white professors receive considerably higher scores than minority professors when teaching sensitive social matters such as race and ethnicity or social inequality (Messner 2000). The primary explanation for this, as determined by analysis of the evaluations, is students see white professors as objective
and fair-minded until they prove otherwise, while contrarily minority professors are seen as having an agenda or possibly a chip on their shoulder (Messner 2000). This is consistent with the Boatwright-Horowitz et al. (2012) findings that white students are uncomfortable learning about social inequality and feel less threatened hearing it from another white person.

The presence of white privilege in the education system is multi-layered and problematic on many levels. Even the structure of landscapes on college campuses and public spaces helps to reproduce the white narrative. A recent study on college campus monuments and memorials at the University of Georgia revealed that institutions use their landscapes to tell history through a selective lens (Inwood and Martin 2008). This is typically done by highlighting the victories of the civil rights era, or other racially charged time periods, and ignoring the struggles or graphic realities of history. Certainly memorializing a struggle or defeat is unlikely, but telling a more nuanced or comprehensive account of some events could avoid misperception. The nature of these landscapes contributes to the false-perception of the elimination of racism, thus helping to perpetuate white privilege. The selective lens used to create the landscapes is the same type of lens people use to mask the unequal access to resources in our society.

On a more fundamental level, the education system is seen as a place where people can gain knowledge about the world and prepare themselves for the workforce. Rarely examined is the way the education system contributes to the success of privileged groups by legitimating white knowledge and subjugating alternative knowledge. Harding (2004) examined the concept of “God Trick”, showing there is an assumption of absolute
objectivity or truth when it comes to what is taught in schools. This assumption doesn’t take into account how large sectors of society have been excluded from either participating in the production of knowledge, or they have participated and been ignored by the dominant institutions. White men from a middle or upper class background have the luxury of assuming knowledge to be universal, approaching it similarly to the way they approach race in general. While class may play a role is this phenomenon, the class-based structure of the United States is heavily racialized (Martinot 2000).

Understanding the salience of different identities, particularly racial, can help illuminate resistance people have to acknowledging white privilege. Past studies have indicated when someone feels their status as a white person is a central part of their identity, they are less likely to be comfortable with the consideration of white privilege (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Schiffhauer 2007; Stewart et al. 2012). Of course one of the consequences or benefits afforded to whites is they do not have to, but instead can choose, when to think about their race (Case 2012). A white man can consider most things they see in society as being universal. They don’t have to think about their race and can rest assured their perspective will be taken into account and represented. In this way, whites acknowledge race only when it benefits them to do so. Racial salience does contribute to one’s level of resistance to privilege awareness, but the negative effect of challenging the belief we live in a meritocracy has been a much more common theme in past research (Farrough 2003; Gallager 2003). Nonetheless, non-consciousness of whiteness is an important consideration as well as the role of media in perpetuating it.
The way the media contributes to white privilege cannot be underestimated. As exhibited in Messner’s (2000) study of college professors, students have an image in their mind about what a professor is supposed to look like. This is heavily influenced by the repeated images and representations shown by mass media. One of the things that can be counted on by white people is they will almost always be able to see role models that look like them in almost every desirable profession (Stewart et al. 2012). As Pierre Bourdieu’s (1994) concept of habitus revealed, there is a habitus for white people operating to insure privilege. Those whites who decide to challenge the white habitus risk losing some of their privilege. For instance, a white person that dresses in hip-hop clothing or gets multiple tattoos. They can be seen as deviant and risk losing some of their racial privilege by not maintaining the domante image of what a white person is supposed to look like (Berberick 2013). Viewing this from a purely class-based perspective ignores the implicit racialization of class in America (Martinot 2000). Media helps establish and maintain the meanings attached to appearance, race, sex, and class (Brea and Stevens-Watkins 2013).

In some cases, dominant images or representations of minorities can actually contribute to privilege for white people by hiding the reality of social inequalities. The presidential election of Barack Obama was one of these cases. The racism that exists in today’s society can most easily be described as “colorblind” racism, where the effects can be more damaging than the overt racism of the Jim Crow era (Bonilla-Silva 2014). It operates under the surface and more subtly, but contributes to the whitewashing of white-privilege by deceiving people into thinking racism is a thing of the past. For many
Americans, the 2008 election symbolized the culmination of the end of racism in America (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Interestingly, Barack Obama used (or didn’t use) media representations to help himself in the 2008 and 2012 elections. By not presenting himself as “too black”, he was able to take advantage of the benefits that the white habitus can bring, despite not actually being white himself. For instance, he did not appear on Black Entertainment Television (BET) until after his first six months in office. Additionally, research has shown that Obama referenced race in the first half of his first term in office less than any president since 1961 (Bonilla-Silva 2014). These findings show the powerful influence of media images or representations on public perception and that minorities can actually assume some aspects of privilege by retreating from their racial identity.

For some whites who have awareness of, and acknowledge the presence of white privilege, there can be consequences in the larger society. Arguing privilege exists for whites historically has been taken as being “traitorous” to your race (Baily 1998; Bonilla-Silva 2014). This most likely goes back to the idea of diminishing someone’s accomplishment or hard work. People have a hard time dealing with the idea that something might have helped them that they didn’t earn. Discourse among whites has the potential to hit a “brick wall” because it can be interpreted as meaning white people are given what they have and didn’t earn it through hard work. One can certainly understand the defensive nature of their response. As McIntosh (1988) described, people are generally cognizant of disadvantages people hold, while remaining resistant to
accepting privilege. For McIntosh, the challenge of being “accountable” once privilege is acknowledged has contributed greatly to its suppression.

Taking a slightly alternative look at white privilege, in some ways calling it white privilege detracts from the true nature of the phenomenon. For example, the use of the term white privilege makes people think about advantages and non-achieved benefits white people receive. The focus becomes considering how someone might benefit “because” they are white. As Fields’ (2012) *Racecraft* points out, it is a mistake to associate the privilege as happening “because” someone is white. Society attaches meanings to racial identities, and those meanings operationalize privilege. The same thing can be said for racial discrimination happening to someone “because” they are black. This infers there is indeed some characteristic of being black that causes people to discriminate against them, instead of acknowledging that socially constructed meanings of what it is to be black have created the consequences. These types of social constructions are necessary to understand in order to realize power, oppression, and subjugation are the real objective realities at play.

Fields’ argument highlights the way language is key to shaping our understanding of a given situation or social condition. For example, past research on minority college professors revealed that minority professors are more likely to be addressed by their first name, thus mediating their accomplishments or status in the classroom (Messner 2000).

As part of the dominant discourse in the United States, judging people individually, based on merit, helps to hide white privilege and places the individual separate from the larger social structures that contribute to their life chances (Farrough
How can Americans accept or acknowledge white privilege when the core of our values places the individual at the forefront of our minds when we evaluate achievement? Individualism in the United States has created a false consciousness for its citizens (and non-citizens), that they alone are responsible for their rise or fall (Tocqueville 1840).

With so much history surrounding American’s individualistic ideology, it is easy to see why the concept of white privilege is met with so much resistance and defensiveness. Not to mention, admitting you are contributing to the subordination of others through your actions and your use of white privilege can be a hard pill to swallow. Some research has suggested people fail to recognize they are subordinating others (Collins 2003). Alternatively, other studies have shown people are in denial about their contribution to minority oppression because it gives them a sense of helplessness (Gallagher 2003; Stewart et al. 2012). This is certainly something I have struggled with as well. How does one perpetuate the problem by taking advantage of white privilege? Or more importantly, how does one not take advantage of white privilege?

It becomes easy to rationalize utilizing white privilege because it doesn’t usually present itself as definitive in any one situation. Measuring one’s level of awareness is difficult and generally requires some coaxing. This may be why research on privilege has typically been done qualitatively, using discussion groups or interviews. The disadvantage to that methodology, in my opinion, is people may be less likely to reveal their true feelings when being interviewed or discussing a clearly defined sensitive social topic. The advantage of survey questions is they can more subtly gauge someone’s level of awareness, without directly approaching the topic.
Gender Privilege Awareness

Gender privilege operates much the same way racial privilege does. Research on gender, such as West and Zimmerman’s (1987) work, described how “doing gender” perpetuates the gendered order of society, but also maintains men’s and women’s hierarchal positions. Just like whiteness, masculinity and male perspective has been normalized in our culture. Men experience certain advantages in society, some most notably in the workforce, such as pay level, wage growth, and opportunity for promotion (Budig 2002). The advantage men receive in the workforce spans across all types of positions, whether traditionally male dominated, female dominated, or balanced (Bielby and Baron 1986; Budig 2002).

The list of male privileges is too long to exhaustively cover, but goes well beyond the workforce. Men can purchase a car and are more likely to receive fair treatment. Men’s clothing is typically designed to be comfortable, reinforce status, or both. Men can choose to be sexually active with multiple partners without fear of social judgment, and in fact can experience praise. The male voice will typically not be disregarded because of gender and is generally seen as more objective or reasonable. These are just a few of the many male privileges that exist in Western culture, which may pale in comparison to say, Middle-Eastern culture, but offer additional challenges because of the way they typically operate under the surface and go unnoticed. In certain instances, women reproduce male privilege without realizing it. As shown in a study of predominately female-led student political organizations, once male members enter the
organization they are typically given greater responsibility sooner and more often than their female counterparts (Kolb 2007). They are also forgiven more easily for mistakes and poor behavior than women in the group (Kolb 2007).

Research on gender privilege awareness also tends to parallel racial privilege awareness. For example, Pleasants’ (2011) study of male students enrolled in women’s study courses revealed that men initially respond defensively when hearing about male privilege. Much like Boatwright-Horowitz et al.’s. (2012) study on racial privilege awareness showed, students will usually try to disassociate themselves from the “other” oppressors, saying they are not “like them”. In some cases, research has shown men will rationalize gender privilege by citing progress made (Pleasants 2011). Ultimately the rationalization may be a result of feelings of frustration that exist among men, that they are not able to easily recognize a solution to gender privilege (Pleasants 2011).

Regardless of the frustrations men feel, it remains important to make people aware of gender privilege. Research shows once men become of aware of gender privilege, they develop greater concern for women’s rights (Case 2007). Additionally, greater gender privilege awareness typically translates into increased racial privilege awareness and increased support for affirmative action policies (Case 2007).

*Intersectional Perspective*

It is not just being white or male that places people in advantaged situations. We should not make the mistake of ignoring the intersectional perspective, where sexual
orientation, and class can converge with race and gender to place many people on uneven playing fields. Racial and gendered privilege is certainly pervasive in our society, but are only two aspects of the privilege dynamic people struggle with recognizing.

Heterosexual privilege, class privilege, and appearance privilege are important considerations. Since McIntosh (1988) published her article on white privilege and the “white knapsack”, there has been a lot of attention given to the intersectionality of privilege. It is no longer seen as a condition or benefit only white men receive. As one of the pioneers on intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins (2003) found that white feminist commonly fail to see their own white privilege as they focus on gender oppression. Even for white males, it is not enough to acknowledge the benefits of being white and male, one must see that one’s class, sexual orientation, use of language, style of clothing, and countless other things operate to afford or diminish privilege for them.

On the basic level, consider the way adolescent boys value athletic ability and how that translates into privilege to those who are successful in sport. An athletic boy can count on making his way through school with plenty of friends, little to no bullying, and basic comfort and confidence in the classroom. Contrarily, an athletically-challenged boy may experience isolation, bullying, and stress in the classroom. Would most people consider that athleticism might contribute to one’s ability to learn? Privilege operates on so many levels in society that nobody is either privileged or disadvantaged, but instead their privilege adds, subtracts, or multiplies depending on the context of their situation (McIntosh 2012).
Methodological Approaches to Privilege Awareness Research

From a methodological standpoint, almost all of the prior research on privilege has been done qualitatively. For example, Stewart et al. (2012) interviewed white college students, evaluated their response to questions and the differences in answers when made aware of white privilege prior to the interview. Other research has used focus groups to determine how the media perpetuates the idea that racism is mostly dead in America (Gallagher 2003). Discovering how college students perceived and interpreted landscape monuments was done using a combination of interviews and focus groups (Inwood and Martin 2008). The aim of the present research is to attempt to add to this body of knowledge by measuring privilege awareness quantitatively, using survey questions that capture an individual’s level of awareness. Another goal of this research is to not only provide additional insight into privilege awareness, but also do so with a largely representative sample.

As demonstrated by the literature, one of the most common reoccurring themes has been resistance to discovering or learning about privilege because of the idea it challenges someone’s hard work or individual achievement. Perhaps studying privilege from the standpoint of individualism will provide greater insight and direction, not only for future research, but social progression as a whole.
Hypothesis

Based on the above discussion, I hypothesize the following:

H₁: The more individualistic someone is, the less aware they are of racial privilege.

H₂: The more individualistic someone is, the less aware they are of gender privilege.
CHAPTER 3
DATA AND METHODS

Individualism presents challenges regarding measurement, because of the
different aspects or definitions of what exactly individualism means. Research on
privilege awareness and individualism together also pose challenges. They are very
similar concepts, that can tend to overlap, but they do contain distinct differences. While
both seem to capture whether or not someone believes they decide their own fate and are
not affected by social conditions, privilege awareness is more focused on the ascribed
human condition, even though socially constructed, whereas individualism deals with
belief in the achieved human condition. More specifically, being aware of privilege is
about understanding the effects of socially constructed meanings attached to race and/or
gender, and how that affects someone’s life experience. Individualism is about believing
the degree to which life experience is or is not affected by someone’s effort.

Sample Description

The present study uses data from the 2012 General Social Survey. The aim of this
research is to determine whether one’s level of privilege awareness can be predicted by
one’s level of individualism. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a random survey with
a standard questionnaire that is collected biannually and was started in 1972. The GSS is
obtained by the National Opinion Research Center and the sample was drawn
independently from English and Spanish-speaking Americans. The selected sample is
only representative of the adult population of the United States. Respondents were not
selected if they were living in institutional arrangements within the United States. In the year of the survey (2012), 2506 people participated completed the questionnaire. The method used for collection of the data involved an interview that typically lasted about one and a half hours, though sometimes surveys are completed by phone. There were 29 data files merged together to allow for analysis of the data (NORC 2011). Data for this study only includes the 2012 data set. While studies on privilege awareness have typically used qualitative methods involving interviews or focus groups, the GSS was used to allow for generalizability.

**Dependent Variables**

**Racial Privilege Awareness**

Information about racial privilege awareness was gathered from the GSS 2012, using two questions. Specifically the survey asked, “On the average (Blacks/African-Americans) have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people. Do you think these differences are ... Mainly due to discrimination” (RACEDIF1)? Response options for this question were “Yes” and “No”. Additionally, “Don’t Know” and “refused” were response options that were removed from the data. Additionally the survey asked, “Do you think the differences are...Because most (Blacks/African Americans) don’t have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty” (RACEDIF3)? Both of these questions were recoded so that a score of “0” was given if the respondent answered “no” to both questions. A score of “1” was given if the respondent answered yes to one or
both of the questions, thus showing some awareness of privilege. To respond “yes” to at least one of these questions shows that the respondent has an understanding of the existence of discrimination, lack of access to resources, or both, for African Americans in society. To respond “no” to both questions means the respondent does not believe that discrimination or lack of access to resources exist for African Americans.

Gender Privilege Awareness

Gender privilege awareness was gathered from the 2012 GSS using one question. Specifically, the survey asked, “What do you think the chances are these days that a woman won't get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified man gets one instead (DIFCAFFW). Is this very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely these days?” Response options for this question were, “very likely”, “somewhat likely”, “somewhat unlikely”, and “very unlikely”. Additionally, “no opinion”, “Don’t Know”, and “refused” were response options that were removed from the data. This question was recoded to that a score of “0” was given if the respondent answered “somewhat unlikely or very unlikely”. A score of “1” was given if the respondent answered “very likely or somewhat likely”, thus showing awareness of gender privilege. Someone that answered “very likely” or “somewhat likely”, is showing an understanding that a woman’s experience can differ from a man’s, based on gender. Answering “very unlikely” or “somewhat unlikely”, means that the respondent feels women’s experience is not different from men’s, based on gender.
Independent Variable

Individualism

As a measure of individualism, one question was used. The survey asked, “Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important” (GETAHEAD)? Response options for this question were, “Hard work most important”, “Hard work and luck equally important”, and “Luck or help from others most important”. Additionally, “don’t know” and “refused” were response options that were removed from the data. This question was recoded so that a score of “0” was given if the respondent answered “hard work and luck equally important or luck or help from others most important”. A score of “1” was given if the respondent answered “hard work most important”, thus showing individualism. By answering “hard work most important”, the respondent is showing a belief that one’s effort has the most influence on life chances. An answer of “hard work and luck equally important” or “luck and help from others most important”, the respondent is showing a belief that factors outside of someone’s individual effort affect life chances.
Control Variables

Education

Education (EDUC) was measured by asking, “What is the highest grade in elementary school or high school that you finished and got credit for?” Response options are listed 0-20. Follow up questions were asked regarding high school diplomas and years of college. Specifically, the survey asked, “if answered 9-12 years, did you ever get a high school diploma or GED certificate?” Additionally, the survey asked, “did you complete one or more years of college for credit, not including schooling such as business college, technical, or vocational school?”

Income

Income (INCOME06) was measured by asking, “In which of these groups did your total family income, from all sources, fall last year -- 2011 -- before taxes, that is? Responses were ordinal A-Y, beginning with $1,000-2,999, all the way up to $130,000-149,999, and ending with $150,000 or more.

Race

Race (RACECEN1) was measured by asking, “What is your race? Indicate one or more races that you consider yourself to be. The response options were White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander, Some Other Race, and Don’t know/Refused. This
variable was recoded so that “0” represented whites and “1” represented non-whites (all other races).

**Age**

Age (LabelDOB) was measured by asking, “What is your date of birth”?

**Gender**

Gender (SEX) was measured by asking, “Select gender of chosen respondent”

**Analysis**

The GSS quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS statistics software. Descriptive statistics were produced for all variables. Logistic regression was used to analyze the effect of individualism on the dependent variable “racial privilege awareness”, with control variables. The same logistic regression was used to analyze the effect of individualism on the dependent variable “gender privilege awareness”, with control variables.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Sample Demographics for 2012 GSS

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the 2012 GSS survey. Among the demographic variables, the mean age of the respondents is 48.19 years. The sample is 44.9% male and 55.1% female. The racial demographic is 74.8% white and 25.2% non-white. The mean years of education completed for survey respondents is 13.53 and the mean total family income for 2011 was $30,000-$34,999.

Among the univariate statistics for survey respondents, 43.1% of them report “no racial privilege awareness”, having answered “no” to both questions measuring racial privilege awareness. The sample shows 56.9% of the respondents report “racial privilege awareness”, having answered “yes” to one or both of the questions measuring racial privilege awareness. The data also shows that 31.1% of respondents report “no gender privilege awareness”, while 68.9% of respondents show “gender privilege awareness”. Additionally, the survey results show that 30.1% of the respondents are “not individualistic” (they answered hard work or luck equally important or luck most important for getting ahead), while 69.9% of the respondents are “individualistic” (they answered hard work most important for getting ahead).
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for 2012 General Social Survey (GSS).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Racial Privilege Awareness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows No Racial Privilege Awareness</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows (at least) Some Racial Privilege Awareness</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Privilege Awareness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows No Gender Privilege Awareness</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows (at least) Some Gender Privilege Awareness</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not individualistic</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>48.19</td>
<td>17.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education, total years completed</strong></td>
<td>13.53</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Family Income (2011)</strong></td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>($30,000-$34,999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Measured on a 25 category scale, beginning with under $1,000 to $150,000 or above)
Multivariate Analyses

The Nagelkerke R square for Table 2 indicates that the regression model explains 4.4% of the variance. The number of cases included in the model is 533. The purpose of the analysis was to determine if being individualistic predicts the odds of being aware of racial privilege. As seen in Table 2, the logistic regression model predicts the odds of being aware of racial privilege (dependent variable). The independent variable used in the model was the measure of individualism (belief of how someone gets ahead). Control variables in the model include education, income, race, age, and sex. Table 2 shows that being individualistic and being non-white are significant predictors of racial privilege awareness. This was determined by taking the variables that showed significance (<.05) and using the Exponential (B) score and subtracting 1 (example .668 – 1 = .333 or 33%). The odds of being aware of racial privilege are 33% lower for those who hold individualistic beliefs. The odds of being aware of racial privilege increases by 46% for those that are non-white, controlling for all other variables in the model.
Table 2. Logistic Regression Model for Racial Privilege Awareness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being Individualistic</td>
<td>.668*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>.542**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.977</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=533 total
Chi-Square = 17.867

*p<.05, **p<.01
In the Gender Privilege awareness model, the purpose of the analysis was to determine if being individualistic predicts the odds of being aware of gender privilege. The logistic regression model was used to predict the odds of being aware of gender privilege (dependent variable). The independent variable used in the model was the measure of individualism (how someone gets ahead). Control variables in the model include education, income, race, age, and sex.

None of the variables in the model were significant (<.05). Being individualistic was not a significant predictor of the odds of being aware of gender privilege. Even sex was not a significant predictor of the odds of being aware of gender privilege.
The aim of this study was to determine if someone’s awareness of racial and gender privilege can be predicted by whether or not they are individualistic. There was a common theme among previous research in the areas of racial and gender privilege that showed people felt as though their hard work was being challenged when presented with the idea of privilege (Boatwright-Horowitz et al. 2012; Farough 2003; Gallagher 2003; Pleasants 2011). Based on those findings, I hypothesized that those who are individualistic will be less aware of racial and gender privilege. The rationale being that those who ideologically subscribe to the “self-made man” belief would be less likely to think about and accept privilege.

The results show that being individualistic is associated with greater odds of being aware of racial privilege. This correlates with past research on racial privilege, which showed people feel their hard work is being challenged when presented with the idea of privilege (Gallagher 2003). Since previous research on privilege awareness has almost always been done qualitatively, it is difficult to make a direct comparison with the current study. Previous research has mostly focused on how people react to the notion of privilege (Boatwright-Horowitz et al. 2012).

In the current study, results showed that non-whites have greater odds of being aware of racial privilege than whites. This finding makes sense, given that whites have shown a propensity toward denial when it comes to privilege (Gallagher 2003). Since
whites are the beneficiaries of racial privilege in most situations, it is not surprising why they are less likely to acknowledge it.

It was somewhat surprising to see that none of the other control variables of education, income, age, and sex were significant predictors of racial privilege awareness. Past studies revealed that racial salience influences one’s ability to recognize privilege (Branscombe et al. 2007; Stewart et al. 2012), but the General Social Survey does not measure the strength of identities people hold.

None of the variables used to predict gender privilege awareness were significant. I hypothesized that those who were individualistic would be less aware of gender privilege. This was not supported by the current research. It is very surprising that sex was not significant, given that women experience the disadvantage of gender privilege. Perhaps this indicates that gender privilege operates more “under the surface” than racial privilege. I think that could certainly be said with regards to media attention.

Strengths and Limitations

The strongest aspect of the current research is that it provides a unique analysis and discussion of privilege and approaches it from a rarely used methodology in privilege studies. The importance of this type of research is to try to understand, more specifically, why privilege awareness is such a sensitive topic in the United States and what the cause is, beyond racism or sexism. While individualism and privilege both deal with a measurement of how people believe someone gets ahead in life, I was unable to find any past research that considers the two concepts together. Additionally, using the GSS
allows for strong generalizability, something that eludes previous qualitative research in this area.

There are several limitations of the current research, which is to be expected when addressing something for the first time. The largest limitation is measurement of my independent and dependent variables. The questions selected from the GSS to measure individualism and privilege awareness were not as precise as they needed to be. Addressing the issue of measurement validity, it is unclear the degree to which individualism and privilege awareness were measured. The face validity of the measures are somewhat weak, since questions like “what do you think the chance that a woman won’t get a job or promotion while and equally or less qualified man gets one instead” do seem to measure some level of gender privilege awareness, but may also be capturing other unintended concepts. The content validity of this measure could be better as well, since it does not capture other aspects of gender privilege, such as social stigmas that women experience, etc. Finally, the discriminant validity of the measures could be stronger, since the individualism measurement and the privilege measurements need to be more distinct to accurately explore the relationships.

These limitations show the need for better survey measurement of privilege awareness and individualism. Future quantitative research needs to be focused on developing questions that measure the nuances of privilege awareness, as well as the varying levels of awareness that people may have. The same is true for individualism. There are different degrees to which someone may be individualistic. For instance,
someone may feel that getting ahead in the workplace is a pure function of working hard, but still acknowledge that some people have a harder time getting a job in the first place.

Developing a series of questions for racial and gender privilege awareness, as well as individualism would give a clearer view of how the concepts differ, as well as the various aspects of each one. If it is true that Americans struggle to acknowledge privilege partly because of a long history of meritocracy-based ideology, then it seems reasonable to think that understanding this could help white people and men to see their McIntosh (1988) knapsack.

The sociological importance of this type of research is to further our understanding of privilege, which might improve race relations in the United States. For racial and gender privilege to be reduced or eliminated, white people and men need to become aware of its existence and understand how it can be mediated. Just with regards to racial privilege, perhaps Peggy McIntosh’s (2012) use of white privilege metaphors provides the clearest potential solution for whites. She describes white privilege as “a bank account which I was given at birth, and did not ask for, but which I can spend down in the interest of social justice. And because it is white privilege it will automatically refill even after I spend it down” (McIntosh 2012; 196). The point being that whites have less to lose than minorities when fighting for equality. What needs to be considered is the way that cashing in on white privilege contributes to its acceptance in society. In this way, it can and should be challenged more by whites on a daily basis. This can be an often overlooked strategy for dealing with social inequality, as once stated by an African American author and economist from U.C. Berkeley, “we will have moved a step forward
when white people feel as angry, outraged, and animated as black people about discrimination in this country” (Malveaux 1991). There is no reason to think that the same thing doesn’t apply to gender privilege.

Because everyone more or less falls somewhere within the privilege scale, teaching students at a young age about types of advantages people hold needs to become part of the mainstream curriculum. Approaching it from a purely racial or gendered perspective creates too much tension and defensiveness and fails to illuminate the way everyone experiences some level of privilege. Once that basic understanding is created, I think the natural progression is a more heightened awareness of race and gender privilege and the power dynamics that accompany them. In addition, informing people of privilege associated with their citizenship status or relationship to the United States seems particularly important in today’s society, where immigration reform and politics serve to hide white privilege on a different level. Finally, dismantling the meritocracy-based ideology of Americans is critical for improving both the understanding of privilege and race relations moving forward.

Regardless of the methodology used, future research in this area needs to focus on the social psychological damage that privilege does to those who don’t have it, and the social psychological challenges of making people aware of privilege, without invoking feelings of guilt or helplessness. By taking into account the potential psychological damage and mental exhaustion that can occur when someone goes through life having to prove themselves on so many basic levels, we might be better able to mediate some of this effect. If someone goes through life under the cloud of constant mistrust, disrespect,
and a general lack of validation, it is not reasonable to expect those individuals to be able to navigate society with the same levels of success as those who do not experience the same thing. Similarly, if people are generally unaware or unwilling to acknowledge privilege because of feelings of guilt, it is not reasonable to expect privilege dynamics to ever change. Some research has shown that making people aware of certain types of privilege can lead to more concern for social justice as a whole (Case 2007), making privilege research an important part of our social evolution.
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