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Context matters: Explicit and implicit reminders of ingroup privilege increase collective guilt among foreigners in a developing country

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Abstract

We test three ways context matters in the study of intergroup inequality: *where* participants are approached, *who* interacts with participants, and *how* researchers ask participants questions. Regarding *how*, we replicate a finding that framing intergroup inequality as outgroup disadvantage rather than ingroup privilege reduces collective guilt in a novel context. Regarding *where*, we go beyond the laboratory to test foreigners in Nepal—a country where inequality is highly salient. Regarding *who*, we had participants approached by an ingroup (foreign) experimenter or an outgroup (Nepalese) experimenter. We found an outgroup disadvantage framing reduced collective guilt relative to ingroup privilege framing, but only when delivered by an ingroup member. This highlights the importance of taking *where*, *who*, and *how* into account to fully understand the contextual nature of intergroup emotion.

128 words

Keywords: intergroup inequality, collective guilt, privilege, intergroup context

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Privilege grants powerful social groups access to unearned advantages by virtue of being born into a particular group (Kendall, 2006; McIntosh, 2012). This privilege confers a range of benefits—from financial security to superior opportunities for education and employment, power over resources and people, health and well-being, and greater freedom to choose (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012; Markus & Schwartz, 2010). No wonder then that privilege is a positive state that people strive to attain and fight to maintain (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Yet, given that privilege is inherently relational in nature (Kendall, 2006), it can also create psychological discomfort as it reminds us that others are less fortunate and that our advantaged social position may not be deserved (Case, Izzuni, & Hopkins, 2012; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006).

Because people are motivated to view their group in a positive light and rationalize its position as just and deserved (Miron et al., 2006; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006), advantaged group members will often ignore, normalize, obscure, or deny privilege (Doosje & Branscombe, 2003; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Reminders of inequality are therefore particularly aversive when they explicitly highlight the ingroup's privileged position. For example, reminders of inequality that are ingroup-focused (i.e., explained in terms of ingroup privilege) threaten one's self-image (Branscombe, 1998; Lowery, Knowles, & Undzueta, 2007), and increase feelings of collective guilt (Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008; Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Knowles & Peng, 2005; Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006), particularly when coming from an ingroup source (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006).

One way privileged group members can avoid these negative feelings is to focus on the features and structural position of disadvantaged groups (casting

inequality as “their problem”), rather than considering the structural benefits of being in a privileged group (casting inequality as “our problem”; McIntosh, 2012; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). This externalization of inequality is a default state for advantaged group members to cope with the unpleasant reality of their group’s privilege (Pratto & Stewart 2012). It is therefore often not until people are explicitly reminded that their ingroup benefits from social inequality that privileged identity is made salient and intergroup emotions and attitudes change.

In a study relevant to the present research, Powell and colleagues (2005) found that when White participants read about intergroup inequality in the United States framed in terms of White privilege, collective guilt increased and intergroup attitudes improved. This was despite the fact that White participants were not made to feel personally or collectively responsible for inequality; simply being reminded of their structurally privileged position induced feelings of “White guilt” (Iyer et al., 2003; Swim & Miller, 1999). Conversely, when inequality was framed as Black disadvantage, collective guilt was reduced and intergroup attitudes worsened.

Therefore, although awareness of ingroup privilege is an aversive experience, it can improve intergroup attitudes and willingness to take action to achieve social equality (Löwery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2011; Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, & Denney, 2010).

However, existing research on privilege has largely taken place within a context where the privileged group is the majority (e.g., White Americans), with minimal exposure to outgroups (McDermott & Samson, 2005). Although systems of privilege exist globally across transnational and cross-cultural contexts, most current privilege theory and research focuses on the United States (Case, Izzuni, & Hopkins, 2012). This leads to a limited understanding of the psychological effects of privilege,

confined to a small range of intergroup contexts. With some exceptions (e.g., Paluck, 2009; Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan, & Reicher, 2012), generalizability to non-Western contexts is rarely addressed in modern social psychological research. Would research findings on intergroup inequality be the same if not conducted in predominantly privileged, White university laboratories? To take the example of Powell and colleagues (2005), would reminders of outgroup disadvantage reduce feelings of collective guilt even if participants were in a context that made their privilege salient and inescapable?

Our goal was to test the effects of reminders of inequality in a context that highlighted and reinforced that inequality—Nepal, a developing country—rather than the usual research context of a university laboratory. The average annual income of Nepal is US\$700 (World Bank 2013), and the country is ranked 157th of 186 on the UN's Human Development Index (UNDP, 2013). This means that foreigners from developed countries, regardless of their relative individual wealth in their own country, enjoy a range of economic and social benefits over Nepalese citizens. In this research, we investigated how foreigners experienced privilege outside the boundaries of their own society, in an outgroup “space” that made intergroup inequality particularly salient.

We outline and test three aspects of intergroup context that are not often attended to in empirical investigations: *where* participants are approached matters; *who* interacts with participants matters; and *how* researchers ask them questions matters. We aimed to take each principle into consideration in our research design. In addressing *where*, we departed from the prototypical research context of a university laboratory to test participants on the streets of Nepal—a highly disadvantaged society with a low ratio of foreigners to locals. In addressing *who*, we varied the experimenter

to manipulate whether participants were approached by an ingroup member (foreign experimenter) or an outgroup member (Nepalese experimenter). In addressing *how*, we used procedures similar to those of Powell and colleagues (2005) to explicitly frame inequality in terms of ingroup privilege or outgroup disadvantage.

Beyond contributing to the literature on intergroup inequality, the present research addresses three meta-theoretical issues in social psychology. First, we align ourselves with the recent interest in direct and conceptual replications of important studies (e.g., Cesario, 2014; Simons, 2014). Accordingly, we set out to replicate findings by Powell and colleagues (2005) in a new and understudied intergroup context—inequality between developing and developed countries. In so doing, we push the theoretical boundaries of the collective guilt construct. Where traditional research in this space has investigated collective guilt in relation to acute or extended intergroup wrongdoing (e.g., Doosje & Branscombe, 2003; Doosje et al., 1998; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006), we align ourselves with researchers who conceptualize collective guilt more broadly as being experienced in relation to one's structural position rather than in relation to a specific act (e.g., Branscombe, 1998; Iyer et al., 2003; Powell et al., 2005). In a further extension, we test this conceptualization in the global arena for the first time to assess guilt experienced by foreigners about their privilege compared to citizens of a developing country.

Second, we counteract the bias in social psychology toward conducting research in laboratory settings in Westernized countries (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Third and finally, we highlight the tendency of social psychologists to ignore their own role in crafting experimental contexts. Many scientific traditions, notably sociology and political science, explicitly acknowledge the role of the researcher in directing the course, and sometimes the conclusions, of

their research. Social psychology has a history of investigating this issue empirically in the form of expectancy effects and demand characteristics (e.g., Doyen, Klein, Pichon, & Cleeremans, 2012; Rosenthal, 1994). But rarely do social psychologists consider more subtle effects of the context created by conducting experiments in the laboratory. Researchers implicitly treat the laboratory as “neutral space” rather than “ingroup space” in which participants are often in the ethnic or racial majority. Further, manipulations of the intergroup context end at the laboratory door, whereas lived experiences of changes in intergroup context (such as travel to a developing country), are immersive and harder to set aside.

The present research employed implicit and explicit reminders of inequality to investigate whether changes to context affect established findings. In line with research by Powell and colleagues (2005), we expected that an explicit outgroup disadvantage frame would reduce collective guilt and worsen intergroup attitudes relative to an ingroup privilege frame. However, we anticipated that the implicit inequality manipulation would moderate this effect. Specifically, we expected that the effect of the explicit inequality frame would be significant only when the experimenter was a fellow ingroup member. Such an effect would conceptually replicate the conditions of Powell and colleagues’ (2005) original research and fit with other work that found guilt to increase when messages of ingroup wrongdoing are delivered by ingroup sources (Doosje et al., 2006). In contrast, we expected there to be no effect of the explicit inequality manipulation when the experimenter was an outgroup member. Here we expected the experimenter’s identity to function as an implicit reminder of ingroup privilege, thus increasing collective guilt across both explicit frame conditions.

Method

Participants and Design

Eighty-three foreign visitors to Nepal took part in the experiment. Age and gender demographics were collected for a subset of the full sample ($n=41$). Sixty-one percent of the subsample was male and ages ranged from 21 to 58 ($M_{age}=33.82$, $SD=9.24$). Participants were White foreigners from developed societies including the United States, Australia, Great Britain and European nations. They were approached in public areas of Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, and invited to take part in the experiment. Public areas were chosen for data collection so that the experiment was conducted in a context of salient inequality. The experiment utilized a 2 (explicit inequality reminder: ingroup privilege vs. outgroup disadvantage) x 2 (implicit inequality reminder: ingroup vs. outgroup experimenter) design. Collective guilt and intergroup attitudes were the dependent variables. Other variables were measured in the questionnaire but are not reported here¹.

Manipulations and Measures

Explicit inequality manipulation. To manipulate the framing of inequality, questions in the survey were framed either in terms of the disadvantage of Nepalese people or the privilege of foreigners in Nepal.

Implicit inequality manipulation. Inequality was framed implicitly by varying the experimenter. In the ingroup experimenter condition, a fellow foreigner invited participants to take part in the experiment. In the outgroup experimenter condition, a Nepalese researcher invited participants to take part in the experiment. In both cases the experimenter read from the same script:

“Hi, my name is _____, I am a Nepali/Australian student doing a survey on foreigners’ experiences in Nepal. Would you be interested in participating?”

Collective guilt. Four items measured collective guilt (“When thinking about the disadvantage of Nepalese people [privilege of foreigners] I feel guilty”; “When thinking about the disadvantage of Nepalese people [privilege of foreigners] other foreigners in Nepal feel guilty”; “I am personally less disadvantaged [more privileged] than the average Nepalese person”; “Other foreigners in Nepal are personally less disadvantaged [more privileged] than the average Nepalese person”). The items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and formed a reliable scale, $\alpha=.70$.

Intergroup attitudes. Two items measured attitudes towards Nepal in general (“Overall, I have enjoyed my time in Nepal so far” and “I would be willing to visit Nepal again”). The items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were significantly correlated, $r=.50, p<.001$.

Results

A 2X2 MANOVA applied to collective guilt and intergroup attitudes revealed no significant main effects, $F_s<1.96, p_s>.147$, but a significant interaction, $F(2,76)=3.28, p=.043, \eta_p^2=.08$. Below we report the results of the univariate ANOVAs on each dependent variable.

Collective Guilt

A 2X2 ANOVA revealed no significant main effects, $F_s<2.44, p_s>.122$, but a marginal interaction, $F(1,77)=5.08, p=.087, \eta_p^2=.04$. Simple effect analyses revealed that when the experimenter was an ingroup member, reminders of outgroup disadvantage ($M=3.80, SD=1.40$) decreased guilt relative to reminders of ingroup privilege ($M=4.72, SD=1.14$), $F(1,77)=5.02, p=.028, \eta_p^2=.06$. When the experimenter was an outgroup member, collective guilt was equally high in the ingroup privilege

($M=4.67$, $SD=1.39$) and outgroup disadvantage conditions ($M=4.77$, $SD=1.18$), $F(1,77)=0.06$, $p=.815$, $\eta_p^2<.01$, see Figure 1.

Intergroup Attitudes

A 2X2 ANOVA revealed no significant main effects, $F_s<1.49$, $p_s>.226$, but a marginal interaction, $F(1,77)=3.57$, $p=.063$, $\eta_p^2=.04$. Simple effect analyses revealed that when the experimenter was an ingroup member, reminders of outgroup disadvantage ($M=5.90$, $SD=0.93$) significantly worsened intergroup attitudes relative to reminders of ingroup privilege ($M=6.45$, $SD=0.71$), $F(1,77)=4.62$, $p=.035$, $\eta_p^2=.06$. When the experimenter was an outgroup member, intergroup attitudes were equally positive in the ingroup privilege ($M=6.33$, $SD=0.72$) and outgroup disadvantage conditions ($M=6.47$, $SD=0.83$), $F(1,77)=0.29$, $p=.590$, $\eta_p^2<.01$, see Figure 2. There was no significant association between collective guilt and intergroup attitudes, $r(81)=.07$, $p=.527$, therefore we did not test for mediation.

Discussion

Returning to our contextual intergroup analysis that *where*, *who*, and *how* matters, we found that these three elements affected participants' emotions and attitudes following reminders of intergroup inequality. Regarding *how*, we conceptually replicated findings by Powell and colleagues (2005) that the framing of inequality matters. For participants from developed societies, considering inequality between developed and developing societies in terms of ingroup privilege increased feelings of collective guilt. However, this only occurred when factoring in *who* participants interacted with. When participants interacted with a member of the disadvantaged outgroup, they reported uniformly high feelings of collective guilt and positive intergroup attitudes regardless of framing. This suggests that in this context, privileged identity was no longer 'invisible'. Instead, it was made salient, reminding

participants of their advantage and increasing collective guilt. Only when the experimenter was an ingroup member did an outgroup disadvantage frame reduce collective guilt and worsen intergroup attitudes. This suggests that the presence of a single ingroup member within a larger outgroup context was sufficient to provide the means by which the problem of inequality could be externalized. This result demonstrates the strength of the psychological defense mechanisms that guard against feeling bad for one's privileged status (e.g., Lowery et al., 2011; Miron et al., 2006), which we find operate even in a context where inequality is highly salient.

Having an ingroup member present the explicit inequality frame to participants conceptually replicated the conditions of the Powell et al. (2005) study, which was conducted in a privileged Western university setting to White participants by fellow ingroup members. Yet, it was by no means 'given' that this effect would be replicated in the present context: speaking to *where*, the experiment was conducted in a place of highly visible and extreme intergroup inequality. It is therefore impressive, although disheartening, that an ingroup member framing inequality as outgroup disadvantage acted in the same way to alleviate feelings of guilt in this context as it did in research that was conducted in a privileged university setting.

Conclusions

Existing studies of privilege examine relationships between groups *within* a society. In this study we found that similar psychological processes can operate in a global intergroup context of developed and developing societies, albeit in a contextually bound way. The ability to deny privilege and associated guilt appears to rely on ingroup members being able to focus attention away from their unearned privilege. This task is made difficult by explicitly framing inequality as the result of

ingroup privilege or implicitly reminding people of their privilege through contact with underprivileged outgroup members.

Returning to our theoretical analysis, we found that *where* participants were approached, *who* approached them and *how* inequality was framed influenced emotions and attitudes in response to global intergroup inequality. This research confirms that context matters for the expression of intergroup attitudes. Intergroup researchers typically acknowledge this to be true, but rarely test whether and in what way context influences their effects. By empirically varying theoretically relevant aspects of context, intergroup researchers will be better placed to understand when context matters and, importantly, when it does not.

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Footnotes

¹The measured variables were perceived legitimacy of inequality, national identification, moral outrage, sympathy, feelings of safety, and intentions to barter with locals. Although the pattern of results was generally similar to those reported above, none of these variables showed significant interaction effects. There were significant or marginal main effects of the explicit inequality manipulation on feelings of safety ($p=.062$), moral outrage ($p=.024$), and perceived legitimacy ($p=.034$), such that participants felt less safe and more outraged and perceived less legitimacy in the outgroup disadvantage condition compared to the ingroup privilege condition. Moral outrage is sometimes used to deflect feelings of collective guilt for ingroup wrongdoing (Rothschild, Landau, Molina, Branscombe, & Sullivan, 2013), and perceived illegitimacy is associated with greater collective guilt (Miron et al., 2006), so these effects are broadly consistent with the pattern of effects on collective guilt.

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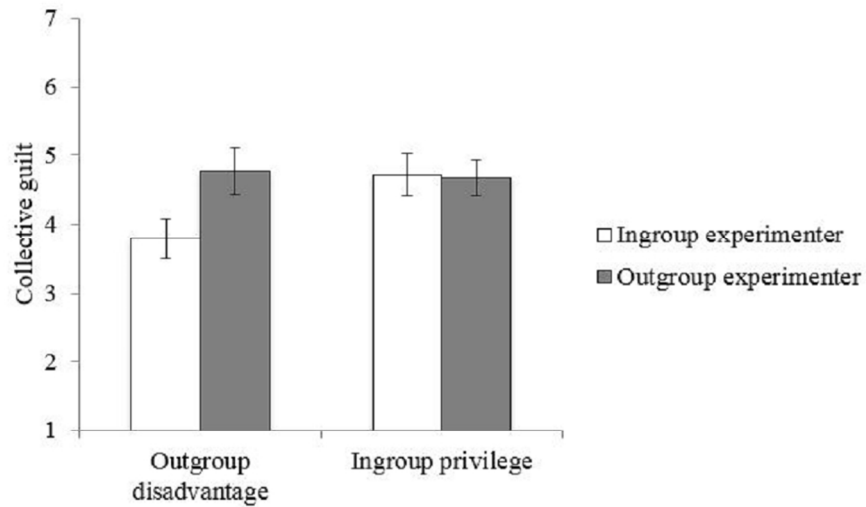


Figure 1. Effect of explicit and implicit reminders of inequality on collective guilt.

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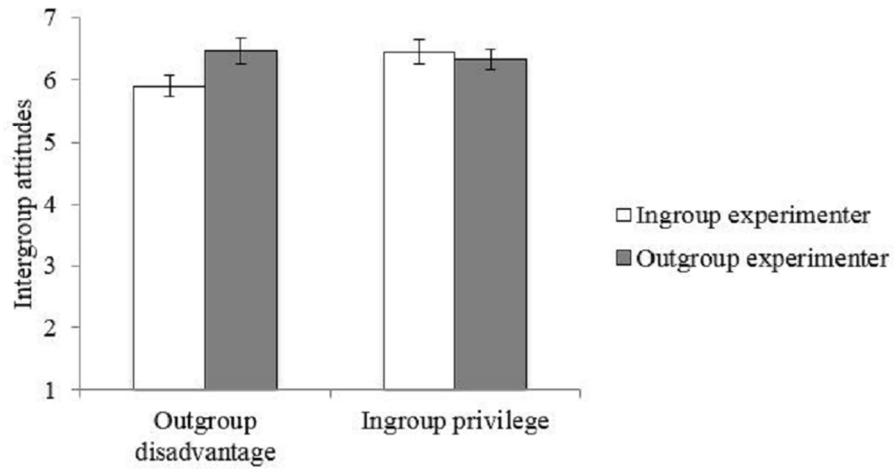


Figure 2. Effect of explicit and implicit reminders of inequality on intergroup attitudes.

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