

Journal of Experimental Psychology: General

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Erin Cooley, Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi, Ryan F. Lei, and William Cipolli, III

Online First Publication, April 29, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0000605>

CITATION

Cooley, E., Brown-Iannuzzi, J. L., Lei, R. F., & Cipolli, W., III (2019, April 29). Complex Intersections of Race and Class: Among Social Liberals, Learning About White Privilege Reduces Sympathy, Increases Blame, and Decreases External Attributions for White People Struggling With Poverty. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0000605>

Complex Intersections of Race and Class: Among Social Liberals, Learning About White Privilege Reduces Sympathy, Increases Blame, and Decreases External Attributions for White People Struggling With Poverty

Erin Cooley
Colgate University

Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi
University of Kentucky

Ryan F. Lei
New York University

William Cipolli III
Colgate University

White privilege lessons are sometimes used to increase awareness of racism. However, little research has investigated the consequences of these lessons. Across 2 studies ($N = 1,189$), we hypothesized that White privilege lessons may both highlight structural privilege based on race, and simultaneously decrease sympathy for other challenges some White people endure (e.g., poverty)—especially among social liberals who may be particularly receptive to structural explanations of inequality. Indeed, both studies revealed that while social liberals were overall more sympathetic to poor people than social conservatives, reading about White privilege decreased their sympathy for a poor White (vs. Black) person. Moreover, these shifts in sympathy were associated with greater punishment/blame and fewer external attributions for a poor White person's plight. We conclude that, among social liberals, White privilege lessons may increase beliefs that poor White people have failed to take advantage of their racial privilege—leading to negative social evaluations.

Keywords: poverty, racial and ethnic attitudes and relations, attribution, individual differences

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0000605.supp>

Lessons about White privilege have been increasingly used to highlight how the United States is structured to advantage White people (Case & Rios, 2017; McIntosh, 1988). These lessons ask people to think about how the history of racial discrimination in the United States has created systematic gaps in wealth and opportunity between racial minorities and White people (Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017). Frequently, the goal of these lessons is to help people realize the advantages White people receive based on race alone—a factor outside of an individual's control.

If the goal of these lessons is to increase sympathy for people who are marginalized due to their race, then the focus of White

privilege lessons may, at times, have unintended consequences. In particular, lessons about White privilege often focus solely on the advantage an *average* White person has. That is, compared to people of other races/ethnicities, the average White person is more likely to have increased inherited wealth, more economic opportunities, and better educational opportunities (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2016). However, this does not mean that *every* White person is equally advantaged. Thus, while privileges such as “If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live” (McIntosh, 1988) might apply to the average White person, they certainly would not apply to every White person—especially not a poor White person.

In the present paper we propose that White privilege lessons may lead some people to see a hierarchy in which Whiteness is always privileged to the same degree irrespective of individual-level variability, such as growing up in an impoverished situation. In particular, because social liberals are already attuned to the idea that there are social structures and systems in the United States that advantage certain racial groups (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), we expect that social liberals might be less sensitive to the *average* versus *every* distinction. If so, then lessons of White privilege could lead to reduced sympathy for poor White people among social liberals. Of note, because discomfort with inequality and concern for harm/fairness (both factors that should increase

Erin Cooley, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Colgate University; Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi, Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky; Ryan F. Lei, Department of Psychology, New York University; William Cipolli III, Department of Mathematics, Colgate University.

The authors have not disseminated the ideas or data appearing in this article in any public setting to date. Data and syntax files for this article are available on the Center for Open Science (<https://osf.io/72avr/>).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Erin Cooley, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Colgate University, 111C Olin Hall, 13 Oak Drive, Hamilton, NY 13346. E-mail: ecooley@colgate.edu

receptiveness to White privilege lessons) are central to social liberalism in particular (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), we expect these predicted effects to be tied specifically to social (rather than economic) liberalism.

Background

In general, people are more likely to think that poor = Black than poor = White (Brown-Iannuzzi, Cooley, Mckee, & Hyden, 2019; Cooley, Brown-Iannuzzi, & Boudreau, 2019; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Freeman, Penner, Saperstein, Scheutz, & Ambady, 2011; Kunstman, Plant, & Deska, 2016; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017). For example, when people imagine a welfare recipient, on average they tend to imagine a Black person (Brown-Iannuzzi, Dotsch, Cooley, & Payne, 2017). However, even when people are explicitly asked to think about the counterstereotypical image of a poor person—a poor White person—the results reveal a noteworthy pattern as well. For example, people take longer to classify poor White people as “White” on a racial categorization task and less readily recall having seen low- (vs. high-) class White people (Kunstman et al., 2016). Moreover, slurs of “White trash” or “cracker” (Wray, 2006) indicate that poor White people experience derogation from others—perhaps as a result of not fitting stereotypes of their racial category that include being successful and privileged (Kunstman et al., 2016).

Why might lessons of White privilege exacerbate negative impressions of poor Whites? One possibility is that perceivers implicitly play the “oppression Olympics”—that is, they draw upon default hierarchies of groups in order to mentally rank who is worst off and prioritize one group over other groups (Beale, 1979; Hancock, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Thus, engaging in activities that focus exclusively on White people’s racial privileges may implicitly convey that a White person who is struggling from low social class nonetheless has means derived from their racial identity they can use to succeed. As a result, if a White (vs. Black) person is perceived as facing economic challenges, these challenges may be more likely to be interpreted as stemming from internal (e.g., laziness) rather than external (e.g., lack of opportunity) factors.

Critically, there is reason to believe that White privilege lessons might be especially likely to have these consequences among social liberals. In particular, one main way that social liberals differ from social conservatives is that social liberals are less accepting of the presence of inequality (Jost et al., 2009; Napier & Jost, 2008) and are more concerned with harm/fairness generally (Graham et al., 2009). As a result, social liberals may be particularly reactive to the idea that systems of racism lead to privilege for White people in society (i.e., White privilege; Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Stern & Axt, 2018). If so, making White privilege salient may lead social liberals to experience less sympathy for, and perceive a poor White person as more to blame for their poverty, than a comparable poor Black person.

Of note, whether such a consequence is perceived as aligned with the goal of White privilege lessons is likely to depend heavily on the values and ideology of the individual. Thus, our intent is not to make a statement about whether the predicted consequences for attitudes toward poor White people are good or bad. Instead, we simply hope to provide data that illuminate what the consequences of these lessons are.

Overview of Present Research

The present research investigates whether learning about White privilege leads social liberals to express less sympathy for a poor White person compared to a poor Black person. If so, this may lead to a greater tendency to blame/punish a poor White person. Further, this punishment may be rationalized by fewer external attributions for their plight (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Heider, 1958; Weiner, Osborne, & Rudolph, 2011). We tested these hypotheses across two highly powered studies ($N = 1,189$). In Study 1, all participants were given a brief lesson on White privilege. Then, in a purported “second study,” participants were presented with a brief vignette about a poor White (vs. Black) person. We hypothesized that liberals (vs. conservatives) would experience less sympathy for a poor White (vs. Black) individual and would punish a poor White individual more as rationalized by fewer external attributions for their life circumstances. In Study 2, we replicated these effects and demonstrated that they only emerged when people learned about White privilege, but not after a control exercise. Together these findings cannot speak to whether White privilege lessons are “good” or “bad.” Instead, they simply provide insight into the distinct effects that these lessons may have on sympathy for poor White and Black people depending on participants’ political orientation.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether reading about White privilege may lead to reduced sympathy toward a poor White (vs. Black) person for those who are more socially liberal as opposed to socially conservative. We further hypothesized that reduced sympathy toward a poor White person may lead to more blame for their poverty, which may be, in turn, associated with making fewer external attributions for the poor person’s life circumstances (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Haidt, 2001). Together these predictions suggest a serial moderated mediation model by which the perceived race of a poor person interacts with perceivers’ social political ideology (X) to predict sympathy ($M1$), leading to shifts in blame/punishment ($M2$) as justified by fewer external attributions (Y) for a poor White (vs. Black) person’s impoverished state.

Method

Power and participants. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) indicated that we would need at least 250 participants to have adequate power ($1-\beta = .80$) to detect a small-to-medium effect. We recruited 500 participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk to ensure adequate power. Due to the increasing concern of robots taking studies on Mturk, we included two screening questions (captchas) that are simple for humans to answer correctly and difficult for robots to answer correctly. Incorrect responses on these items were never compiled into our dataset. For the exact wording of the screening questions, please see the online supplementary materials. These screening items were included in both

studies reported in this article. Our final sample was 484 people¹ (215 men, 262 women, 2 gender nonbinary, 5 no response) who were an average of 33 years of age ($SD = 9.96$) with a median education level of a 4-year college degree. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 73.8% White, 13.6% Black or African American, 14.5% Hispanic or Latino, 5.6% Asian, 2.7% Native American or Pacific Islanders, and 9.9% Other. Finally, participants were, on average, very close to the scale midpoint labeled “in the middle” on our 7-point social political ideology scale ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.89$). This study and the following study were both ethically approved by the corresponding author’s Institutional Review Board.

Procedure. After completing the informed consent, participants were told they would complete two (ostensibly) unrelated studies. The first study was described as a brief reading and thought exercise. Participants read the following:

In America, there is a long history of White people having more power than other racial groups (e.g., Black people). Although many people think of racial inequality as decreasing, there are still privileges that are experienced by White Americans that are not true for other racial groups. For example, in her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” Peggy McIntosh, PhD, lists different privileges that she experiences as a White person living in America.

Next, participants read four privileges taken from Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) work: “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time;” “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented;” “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group;” and “I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.” Participants then were asked to list two privileges that White people experience in America. After this exercise, participants were directed to what was described as the second study.

In the second study, participants learned that the researchers were developing a magazine column that would provide brief glimpses into the lives of regular people living in New York City. Participants learned they would read one randomly selected “snapshot” of a person living in NYC and would be asked to report their reactions to this person. All participants then read the following about a man named Kevin. Critically, participants were randomly assigned to learn that Kevin was either White or Black:

Kevin, a White [Black] American living in New York City, would say his life has been defined by poverty. As a child, Kevin was raised by a single mom who struggled to balance several part-time jobs simply to pay the bills. Most winters, they had no heat; and, it was a daily question whether they would have enough to eat. In late 2016, Kevin began to receive welfare assistance. Since then, he has not applied for any jobs and instead has cycled between jail cells, shelters, emergency rooms and the streets. Although Kevin would like to be financially independent, he doesn’t feel he has the skills or ability to obtain a well-paying job.

Next, we asked participants to rate Kevin on several dimensions. To measure sympathy, participants reported the degree to which they felt “sympathy” and “compassion” for Kevin, and

the degree to which they did “not feel bad” (reverse-scored) for Kevin on 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 100 (*strongly agree*) scales. To measure blame/punishment participants used the same scales to report the degree to which they agreed with the following items: “I think Kevin should be punished for his behavior;” “I think Kevin is fully responsible for his situation;” “Kevin is to blame for his situation;” and “Kevin does not deserve to be penalized for his behavior” (reverse-scored). Finally, to measure external attributions for Kevin’s circumstances, participants used the same scales to respond to the following statements: “Kevin is in the situation he is in because of his own decision-making (reverse-scored);” “Kevin is in the situation he is in because of circumstances outside of his control;” “Kevin could not have easily avoided his situation;” and “Kevin could not have changed his situation even if he tried.”

Participants concluded with demographic information including their level of social liberalism: “Please indicate your political identity on social issues (e.g., abortion, gun rights, gay rights)” (1 = *strongly liberal*; 4 = *in the middle*; 7 = *strongly conservative*). We reverse-scored this item in analyses so that higher values meant more socially liberal views. Previous research indicates that such single-item scales are reliable and have good predictive validity (Jost, 2006; Napier & Jost, 2008). In order to demonstrate the specificity of social liberalism, we also measured economic liberalism using a parallel item: “Please indicate your political identity on economic issues (e.g., taxation, government spending)” (1 = *strongly liberal*; 4 = *in the middle*; 7 = *strongly conservative*). Please see online supplementary materials for analyses using economic political ideology. Importantly, and consistent with our hypotheses, the results indicate that 1) our reported models do not replicate when we look at economic (rather than social) political ideology as a moderator and 2) our reported models remain unchanged when we control for economic political ideology.

Given our interest in attitudes toward a poor person who varied in race, participants also responded to measures of internal motivations to respond without racial prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) and explicit racial bias so that these could be added as control variables in our analyses. Explicit bias was measured directly (see Axt, 2018) with a feeling thermometer toward a variety of social groups (Black people, White people, Hispanic people, Asian people, and Black-White Biracial people). Our main interest was in differences in felt coldness toward Black people versus White people given that these are the two racial groups we focus on in our studies.

Finally, we included several exploratory individual-difference scales. In particular, participants reported general attitudes toward wealth redistribution on five items (e.g., “how do you feel about raising federal income taxes for people who make more than \$200,000 per year to benefit public programs for low income individuals?”), Social Dominance Orientation (Ho et al., 2015), Symbolic Racism (Sears & Henry, 2003), and the importance of

¹ For both Study 1 and 2, deviation from the recruited sample reflects an issue of the recruitment software and is completely outside of the control of the researchers. Data and syntax for both studies are available at the following link: <https://osf.io/72avt/>

their racial identity to the self (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). None of these individual difference scales moderated our findings (see online supplementary materials for analyses).

Results

Preliminary analyses. Because some participants learned that Kevin was Black and some learned he was White, we controlled for explicit racial prejudice and internal motivations to respond without prejudice in the following analyses.² Explicit prejudice was calculated by taking a difference score of coldness toward Black people and coldness toward White people on the feeling thermometer such that higher values indicate more coldness toward Black people ($M = .21$, $SD = 23.31$). We then standardized this variable for analyses. Internal motivations to respond without prejudice (*IMS*) were calculated according to scale norms ($M = 80.60$, $SD = 19.97$; Cronbach's alpha = .83) and then standardized. We also calculated sympathy toward Kevin ($M = 62.57$, $SD = 23.96$; Cronbach's alpha = .80), desire to punish/blame Kevin ($M = 47.18$, $SD = 23.08$; Cronbach's alpha = .77), and external attributions for Kevin's life circumstances ($M = 41.62$, $SD = 20.83$; Cronbach's alpha = .77; see Table 1 for correlations among key dependent measures).

Primary analyses. To test our central hypotheses, we conducted a one-way (Kevin's race: Black vs. White) MANOVA predicting reported sympathy for Kevin as well as external attributions for his plight. Participants' social political ideology was standardized and added as a predictor along with our predicted Kevin's race x social political ideology interaction. Results revealed a main effect of social political ideology, $F(2, 469) = 11.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, and a marginal effect of Kevin's race, $F(2, 469) = 2.52$, $p = .081$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. As can be seen in Table 1, the significant main effect for social political ideology reflected that as the degree of participants' social liberalism increased so did their reported sympathy and their tendency to make external attributions for the poor person's plight. Such findings are consistent with research indicating that social liberals tend to have a greater motivation to experience empathy (Hasson, Tamir, Brahm, Cohrs, & Halperin, 2018), and also tend to attribute inequality to systems rather than individual merit (Napier & Jost, 2008). Critically, these main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction of Kevin's race x social political ideology, $F(2, 469) = 4.22$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Specifically, the results revealed a significant interaction effect when predicting sympathy, $F(1, 470) = 5.47$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and when predicting external attributions, $F(1, 470) = 7.03$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Thus, we next probed these two-way interactions separately for each outcome (i.e., sympathy and external attributions) before testing our hypothesized moderated mediation model.

Sympathy for Kevin. To better understand the pattern of effects indicated by the significant Kevin's race x social political ideology interaction when predicting sympathy, we examined the effect of the Kevin's race separately among people high and low on our social political ideology measure using the PROCESS macro and 10,000 bootstrapped resamples (Model 1; Hayes, 2013). As a reminder, the mean value on the social political ideology scale was quite close to the scale point labeled "in the middle (4)" on the 7-point scale ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.89$) and the anchors were "strongly conservative" to "strongly liberal." Thus, when we test

results at high (+1 *SD*) and low (−1 *SD*) levels of social political ideology, we are effectively looking at responses of liberals versus conservatives. This analysis revealed a significant effect of Kevin's race on sympathy among social liberals, $b = -10.23$, $t = -3.44$, $p = .0006$, 95% CI [−16.07, −4.39], but not among social conservatives, $b = .32$, $t = .11$, $p = .915$, 95% CI [−5.52, 6.15]. In particular, social liberals showed significantly less sympathy for Kevin when he was described as White ($M = 61.14$) as compared to Black ($M = 70.75$), while social conservatives showed no difference in sympathy for Kevin when he was described as White ($M = 59.75$) or Black ($M = 59.51$; see Figure 1).

However, because there was no control condition in this study, we cannot know whether the White privilege lesson caused the observed differences in sympathy based on Kevin's race (i.e., White vs. Black) among social liberals. Moreover, we should note that social liberals were not *less* sympathetic to the poor White person than social conservatives. Rather, social liberals expressed comparable levels of sympathy toward the White person as social conservatives, $b = .37$, $t = .24$, $p = .808$, 95% CI [−2.62, 3.37], and significantly more sympathy for the poor Black person than social conservatives, $b = 5.64$, $t = 3.68$, $p = .0003$, 95% CI [2.63, 8.65].

External attributions. To better understand the pattern of effects indicated by the significant Kevin's race x social political ideology interaction when predicting external attributions, we next probed this interaction among people high (+1 *SD*) and low (−1 *SD*) on our social political ideology variable using the PROCESS macro and 10,000 bootstrapped resamples (Model 1; Hayes, 2013). As predicted, there was a significant effect of Kevin's race on external attributions among social liberals, $b = -7.30$, $t = -2.78$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [−12.45, −2.15], but not among social conservatives, $b = 2.55$, $t = .97$, $p = .331$, 95% CI [−2.60, 7.70]. In particular, social liberals showed significantly fewer external attributions for Kevin's impoverished circumstances when he was described as White ($M = 42.68$) as compared to Black ($M = 50.01$). In contrast, social conservatives showed no difference in external attributions for Kevin when he was described as White ($M = 38.29$) or Black ($M = 35.77$; Figure 2).

Again, we should also note that, as compared to social conservatives, social liberals made comparable levels of external attributions for a poor White person, $b = 2.20$, $t = 1.63$, $p = .103$, 95% CI [−.45, 4.84], and significantly more external attributions for a poor Black person, $b = 7.12$, $t = 5.27$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [4.47, 9.78]. Thus, although social liberals endorsed fewer external attributions for a poor White person than a poor Black person; they tended to make more external attributions than social conservatives.

Moderated mediation analysis. Finally, we tested our hypothesized serial moderated mediation model (Model 86; Hayes, 2013). This model enabled us to test whether the Kevin's race by social political ideology interaction (*X*) predicted less sympathy (*M1*) toward Kevin when he was White (vs. Black) among those who identified as socially liberal (as discussed previously) which

² If we do not include these control variables in both Studies, the pattern of results remain consistent with what is reported in this article, although some effects become marginal in Study 1 (see online supplementary materials).

Table 1
Correlations Among Key Dependent Variables in Study 1

	Liberalism	Sympathy	Punishment/ blame	External attributions	Explicit bias	IMS
Liberalism	—					
Sympathy	.19***	—				
Punishment/blame	-.22***	-.53***	—			
External attributions	.24***	.51***	-.64***	—		
Explicit bias	-.32***	-.21***	.14**	-.13**	—	
IMS	.21***	.23***	-.09	.06	-.40***	—

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

then led to increased blame/punishment ($M2$), and fewer external attributions for Kevin’s plight (Y). Results were consistent with this model. In particular, there was a significant overall moderated mediation effect, $b = -1.10$, 95% CI $[-2.14, -.22]$, driven by a significant indirect effect among social liberals, $b = -2.13$, 95% CI $[-3.62, -.85]$ (see Figure 3 top panel), but not social conservatives, $b = .06$, 95% CI $[-1.18, 1.39]$ (see Figure 3 bottom panel).

Discussion

Study 1 reveals that, after reading about White privilege, social liberals reported less sympathy for, and more punishment/blame, toward a poor White (vs. Black) person. Moreover, these patterns held even when controlling for motivations to respond without prejudice and explicit prejudice toward Black people and were distinct to social liberalism (but not economic liberalism; see online supplementary materials for those analyses). Given that social liberals tend to be more uncomfortable with structural inequality and more supportive of social change (Jost et al., 2009), they may be particularly reactive to White privilege lessons. However, because all participants learned about White privilege (i.e., there was no control condition), we cannot be sure that the pattern of results are due to the White privilege lesson. Likewise, even if results are due to the White privilege lesson, we cannot tell whether social liberals are showing greater sympathy toward Black people after reading about White privilege, or less toward a White person. In our next study, we included a control condition to clarify these remaining questions.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate and extend Study 1 findings. Critically, in Study 2 we added in a control condition in which

participants did not read about White privilege. Among those in the White privilege condition, we expected to replicate Study 1 findings. In contrast, in the control condition, we expected social liberals to express more sympathy for a struggling, poor person regardless of race. Such a finding would be consistent with research linking social liberalism to greater motivations for empathy (Hasson et al., 2018). Together these results would indicate that backlash toward poor White people in Study 1 are caused by reading about White privilege rather than a general predisposition of socially liberal people to sympathize more with Black versus White people.

Method

Participants. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 software (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that we would need at least 550 participants to have adequate power ($1-\beta = .80$) to detect a small-to-medium effect.³ We recruited 650 participants through Mturk to ensure adequate power. This resulted in a total of 660 participants, but 10 did not complete our measure of social liberalism. Because this variable was included in all analyses, these 10 people were not included in our dataset. Our final sample was 650 people (253 men, 393 women, 4 not gender binary) who were, on average, 33 years of age ($SD = 12.10$) with a median education level of a 2-year college degree. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 68.8% White, 16.0% Black or African American, 12.8% Hispanic or Latino, 9.1% Asian, 2.0% Native American or Pacific Islanders, and 8.9% Other. Finally, as in Study 1, participants were, on average, very close to the scale midpoint labeled “in the middle” on our 7-point social political ideology scale ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.81$).

Procedure. The procedure for Study 2 was the same as Study 1 except for the inclusion of a control condition. Thus, Study 2 had a 2 (Kevin’s race: Black vs. White) \times 2 (lesson: White privilege vs. control exercise) design. The White privilege condition was identical to Study 1. The control condition, which did not appear in Study 1, was the same format as the White privilege condition but was on the topic of the benefits of routines rather than the privileges of being White. In particular, participants in the control condition read the following:

In America, there is a long history of people developing routines as a part of their days. Although many people find routine boring, there are advantages to developing routine that can help people be more pro-

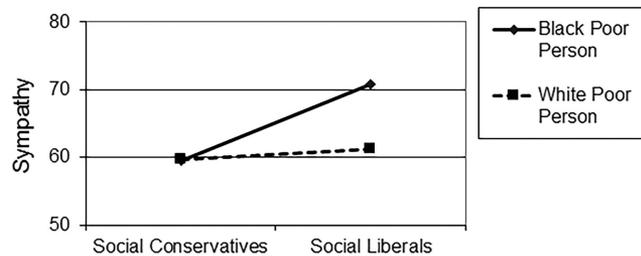


Figure 1. Significant Kevin’s race by social political ideology (plotted at $\pm 1 SD$) interaction on reported sympathy for Kevin.

³ Required sample size was bigger in Study 2 because we were now predicting a three-way, rather than a two-way, interaction.

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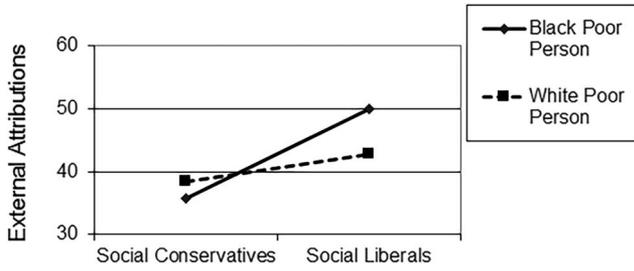


Figure 2. Significant Kevin's race by social political ideology (plotted at ± 1 SD) interaction on external attributions for Kevin's poverty.

ductive. For example, in her essay, "Routine and Productivity" Dawn McIntosh, PhD, lists different advantages that routine can provide.

Next, participants read four benefits of routine ("Making plans for one's day can help people achieve small goals on the path to larger goals;" "Routine, for some people, can reduce anxiety caused by having to make last minute decisions;" "It takes mental energy to shift tasks, thus, planning to focus on a particular task for a couple of hours can maximize energy efficiency;" and "People who go to bed at the same time every night tend to have an easier time falling asleep at night"). Participants were then asked to list two routines that they have in their own lives.

After this exercise, participants were directed to what was described as the second study. Identical to Study 1, participants then read about Kevin who was explicitly described as either White or Black based on random assignment. The remainder of the

study was identical to Study 1, although we dropped attitudes about welfare policy.

Results

Preliminary analyses. As in Study 1, we controlled for explicit racial prejudice and internal motivations to respond without prejudice in the following analyses given our interest in attitudes toward a Black or White poor person. Similar to Study 1, explicit prejudice was calculated by taking a difference score of coldness toward Black people and coldness toward White people on the feeling thermometer such that higher values indicate more coldness toward Black people ($M = -1.59$, $SD = 23.16$) and then standardizing that variable. IMS was calculated according to scale norms ($M = 80.93$, $SD = 18.29$; Cronbach's alpha = .77) and standardized. We also calculated sympathy ($M = 63.91$, $SD = 25.39$; Cronbach's alpha = .83), desire to punish/blame ($M = 46.54$, $SD = 21.87$; Cronbach's alpha = .69), and external attributions ($M = 41.13$, $SD = 20.43$; Cronbach's alpha = .74) as in Study 1 (see Table 2 for correlations among key dependent measures).

Main analyses. First, we conducted a 2 (lesson: White privilege vs. control exercise) \times 2 (Kevin's race: Black vs. White) ANCOVA predicting sympathy for Kevin. Participants' social political ideology was standardized and added as an additional predictor, along with all two-way interactions, and the predicted three-way interaction. Results revealed two main effects, a two-way interaction, and the predicted three-way interaction. In particular, there was a main effect of social political ideology on sympathy, $F(1, 640) = 36.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and a main effect of Kevin's race, $F(1, 640) = 16.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As

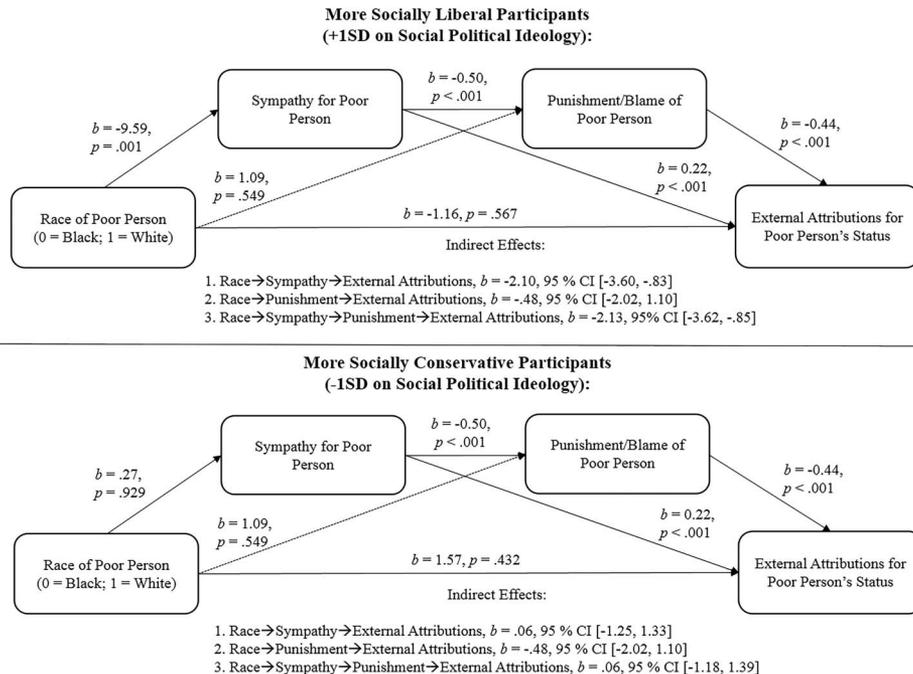


Figure 3. The significant moderated mediation was driven by significant serial indirect effect among social liberals (top panel), but not social conservatives (bottom panel).

Table 2
Correlations for Key Dependent Variables in Study 2

	Liberalism	Sympathy	Punishment/ blame	External attributions	Explicit bias	IMS
Liberalism	—					
Sympathy	.29***	—				
Punishment/blame	-.31***	-.53***	—			
External attributions	.34***	.51***	-.58***	—		
Explicit bias	-.20***	-.11**	.16***	-.09*	—	
IMS	.27***	.25***	-.14***	.09*	-.24***	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

can be seen in Table 2, the main effect for social political ideology reflected that people who reported higher values on the scale (i.e., people higher in social liberalism) also reported greater sympathy overall—consistent with Study 1. The main effect of Kevin’s race indicated that people reported less sympathy for Kevin when he was White (coded as 1) versus Black (coded as 0). There was also a statistically significant two-way interaction of White privilege lesson by social political ideology, $F(1, 640) = 5.05, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Finally, this two-way interaction was qualified by the predicted White privilege lesson x Kevin’s race x social political ideology three-way interaction, $F(1, 640) = 6.72, p = .010, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Given this, we next probed this three-way interaction using the PROCESS macro for SPSS and 10,000 bootstrapped resamples (Model 3; Hayes, 2013). Again, as in Study 1, when we test results at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) values on this scale (which had anchors of “strongly conservative” and “strongly liberal”), we are effectively testing the pattern of effects for social liberals as compared to social conservatives.

First, we probed the significant three-way interaction by examining the two-way interaction of Kevin’s race x social political ideology separately by privilege condition. Consistent with hypotheses, there was a significant two-way interaction between Kevin’s race and political ideology for participants in the privilege condition, $b = -6.95, p = .009$, but not among those in the control condition, $b = 2.66, p = .303$ (see Figure 4). In particular, in the control condition, there was just a general tendency for social liberals to report greater sympathy regardless of Kevin’s race (see Figure 4 right panel) consistent with recent work linking liberalism to motivations for empathy (Hasson et al., 2018). However, the significant two-way interaction in the privilege condition indicated that, among social liberals, participants reported significantly less sympathy for a poor White person ($M = 59.69$) as compared to a poor Black person ($M = 76.08$; see Figure 4 left panel), $b = -16.39, t = -4.52, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} [-23.51, -9.28]$. In

contrast, among those in the privilege condition who were social conservatives, participants reported no difference in sympathy toward a poor White person ($M = 58.99$) and a poor Black person ($M = 61.48$), $b = -2.49, t = -.64, p = .521, 95\% \text{ CI} [-10.08, 5.11]$. Critically, this pattern of findings indicates that reduced sympathy for a poor White person versus a poor Black person (as also observed in Study 1) were driven by reading about White privilege.

A second way to break down the three-way interaction is to examine the White privilege x Kevin’s race interaction separately by people high and low in social political ideology (see Figure 5). This analysis revealed a significant interaction among social liberals, $b = -13.48, p = .010$ (see Figure 5 left panel), but not social conservatives, $b = 5.74, p = .275$ (see Figure 5 right panel). Critically, among social liberals, those who read about White privilege reported significantly less sympathy for Kevin when he was described as White ($M = 59.69$) as compared to Black ($M = 76.08$), $b = -16.39, t = -4.52, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI} [-23.51, -9.28]$. However, among social liberals in the control condition, there was no difference in sympathy for Kevin whether he was White ($M = 70.63$) or Black ($M = 73.54$), $b = -2.91, t = -.77, p = .440, 95\% \text{ CI} [-10.33, 4.50]$. This indicates that, among social liberals, the effect of learning about White privilege is to decrease sympathy for poor White people rather than to increase sympathy for poor Black people.

A final way to probe the significant three-way interaction when predicting sympathy is to examine the White privilege x social political ideology interaction separately for those who read about a poor Black person as compared to those who read about a poor White person (see Figure 6). This analysis revealed a significant White privilege x social political ideology interaction, among those who read about a poor White person, $b = -8.98, p < .001$ (see Figure 6 left panel), but not among those who read about a poor Black person, $b = .63, p = .805$ (see Figure 6 right panel). Thus, we next examined the significant two-way interaction

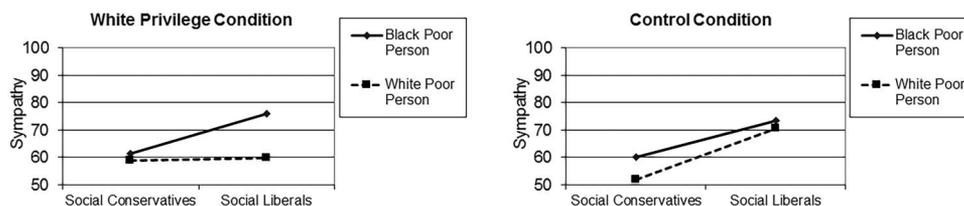


Figure 4. Significant Kevin’s race by social political ideology interaction predicting sympathy among those in the White privilege condition (left panel), but not those in the control condition (right panel).

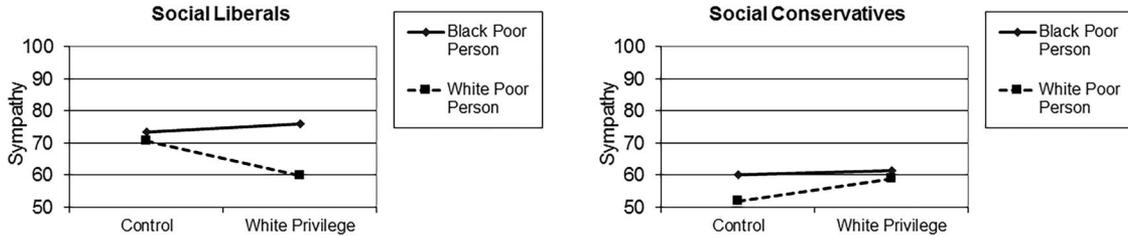


Figure 5. Significant White privilege \times Kevin's race interaction predicting sympathy among social liberals (left panel) but not social conservatives (right panel).

among those who read about a poor White person. This analysis revealed that among social liberals, the White privilege lesson led to significantly less sympathy for a poor White person ($M = 59.69$) than the control condition ($M = 70.63$), $b = -10.94$, $t = -2.86$, $p = .004$, 95% CI $[-18.45, -3.44]$. In contrast, among social conservatives there was no difference in sympathy for a poor White person after a White privilege lesson ($M = 51.97$) versus control ($M = 58.99$), $b = 7.02$, $t = 1.87$, $p = .063$, 95% CI $[-.37, 14.41]$. Again, these patterns indicate that a White privilege intervention is influencing sympathy felt toward poor White people rather than sympathy felt toward poor Black people—at least among social liberals.

Moderated mediation replicating study 1. Finally, we examined our hypothesis that the serial moderated mediation model from Study 1 would only hold among those in the White privilege, but not control, conditions. Indeed, this is exactly what we found. Among those in the White privilege condition, results replicated Study 1 findings (see Figure 7). In particular, there was a significant overall moderated mediation effect, $b = -1.25$, 95% CI $[-2.52, -.18]$, from the Kevin's race by social political ideology interaction (X) to expressed sympathy ($M1$), which was inversely associated with desire to punish/blame ($M2$); finally, more punishment/blame was associated with fewer external attributions for Kevin's behavior (Y). Again, this overall moderated mediation effect was driven by a significant conditional moderated mediation effect among social liberals, $b = -3.07$, 95% CI $[-4.97, -1.51]$ (see Figure 7 top panel), but not social conservatives, $b = -.58$, 95% CI $[-2.22, .97]$ (see Figure 7 bottom panel).

In contrast, among those in the control condition these patterns did not hold. In particular there was no significant moderated mediation effect, $b = .47$, 95% CI $[-.42, 1.43]$ (see online supplementary materials for full model results).

Discussion

Study 2 replicates and extends Study 1 by linking a White (vs. Black) poor person to decreased sympathy, greater punishment/

blame, and fewer external attributions—but only among those who learned about White privilege and identified as social liberals. Together with Study 1, this indicates that learning about White privilege has more of an impact on social liberals than social conservatives. Critically, however, the lesson did not seem to affect attitudes by increasing sensitivity to the challenges of poor Black people; instead, the lesson reduced sympathy for poor White people as compared to the control exercise.

General Discussion

Across two highly powered studies, we find that learning about privilege based on race may sometimes lead to reduced sympathy for White people experiencing poverty. In particular, social liberals, who tend to explain inequality through systems of oppression (Jost et al., 2009), may be particularly receptive to thinking about systematic privileges experienced by White people (Hennes et al., 2012; Stern & Axt, 2018). As a result, social liberals who think about White privilege (vs. control) may become more likely to blame poor White people for their poverty. However, we should also note that learning about White privilege did not make liberals feel *less* sympathetic toward poor Whites than conservatives, but rather less sympathetic than they may have otherwise been (see Figure 6).

One plausible interpretation of these findings (given that our samples were composed of mostly White people) is that White people, may feel negatively toward poor White people, as opposed to rich White people, because they negatively represent the in-group (Kunstman et al., 2016). Indeed, recent research indicates that poor White people can be ostracized by other White people (Kunstman et al., 2016). Similarly, the status incongruity hypothesis, contends that people who are counterstereotypical of their race or gender—especially in terms of status expectations—are likely to experience backlash due to system justification motivations (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, & Phelan, 2012). Thus, it is possible that lessons about White privilege make low status White people seem particularly

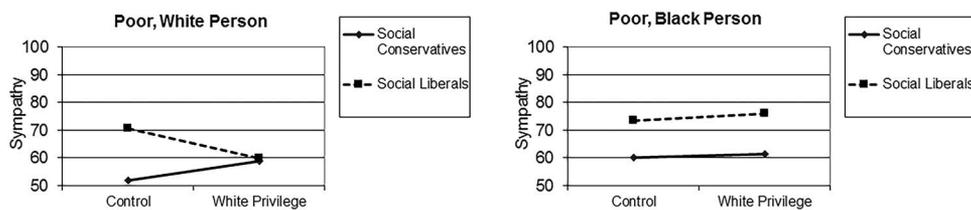


Figure 6. Significant White privilege \times political ideology interaction predicting sympathy toward a poor White person (left panel) but not a poor Black person (right panel).

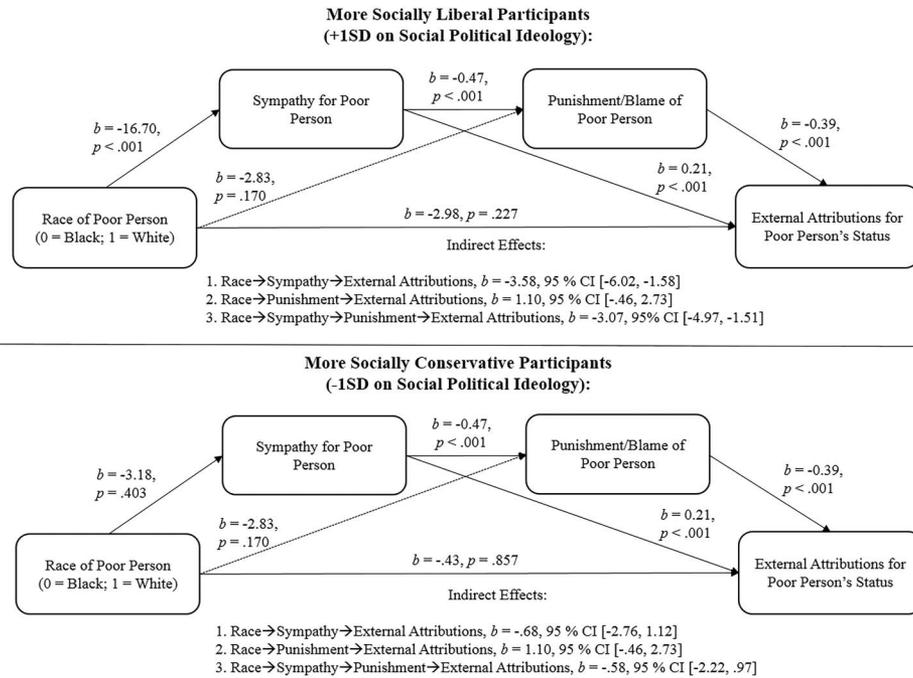


Figure 7. The significant moderated mediation effect in the White Privilege condition was driven by a significant serial indirect effect among social liberals (top panel), but not social conservatives (bottom panel), replicating Study 1 patterns.

incongruous with status stereotypes of their race driving the observed backlash toward poor White people. Future research could directly manipulate status to examine whether the current pattern of findings is restricted to low (but not high) status White people.

Importantly, although our data find that learning about White privilege can decrease social liberals' sympathy for a White person suffering from poverty, we think it is important to emphasize that these data cannot, and do not, speak to perceived racism toward White people (i.e., reverse racism claims; Norton & Sommers, 2011). In order to adequately investigate the presence or absence of reverse racism, researchers would first need to agree upon a definition of reverse racism, determine a metric by which to measure reverse racism, and utilize a randomized control trial design among a nationally representative sample to investigate the presence or absence of reverse racism when learning about White privilege. The goal of the current data was to investigate the possibility of a psychological mechanism which may lead to lack of sympathy for a poor White person under certain conditions. Thus, these data do not address reverse racism.

Relatedly, political ideology is likely to shape one's views about whether it is appropriate to sometimes show a preference for Black people over White people. For example, debates over affirmative action garner much of their passion because some see such policies as making amends for centuries of racial oppression, while others see these policies as discrimination toward White people (Swim & Miller, 1999). Similarly, some may view the present findings as demonstrating the important role of White privilege lessons in teaching people about how Whiteness is structurally advantaged; others may view these same findings as demonstrating that White privilege lessons lead people to discount the hard-

ships experienced by White people. Because these nuances are a matter of interpretation, the present data cannot resolve them. Instead, these data are simply another source of information. As such, this work will hopefully fuel productive dialogues about complex sources of conflict (i.e., the intersections of race and class) in an increasingly politically polarized United States (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

The present data also provide an interesting caveat to how we think about the central differences between conservative and liberal ideologies. As mentioned before, social conservatives are often considered to be more accepting of social inequality than social liberals (Jost et al., 2009). One reason for this difference is that conservatives seem to justify the presence of inequality by making internal, and meritocratic, attributions for people's success (i.e., hard work and perseverance) rather than focusing on external factors (i.e., systems of advantage/disadvantage; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). However, in the present research, we find that when social liberals are led to focus on racial inequality that this can increase their endorsement of meritocratic explanations for White poverty. This caveat is important because it suggests that social liberals may utilize a similar psychological process—justifying inequality—when they learn about White privilege lessons and think about a poor White person.

Future Directions and Limitations

In the present work, we chose to focus on lessons about privilege based on race given the widespread use of these interventions as a method to reduce social inequality. However, future research should examine the generalizability of these effects. For example,

it would be interesting to test whether emphasizing any form of group-based privilege (e.g., gender) might lead to reduced sympathy for people who benefit from that privilege but struggle in another domain (such as social class). Given that a defining feature of social liberalism is to reject social inequality, we expect that social liberals would be more reactive to any intervention that highlights systematic privilege. Thus, learning about privilege associated with being a man (vs. a control exercise) might lead social liberals to express significantly less sympathy for a poor man (vs. a poor woman). Likewise, it is possible that merely making race salient, even without directly mentioning racial privilege, might lead to similar effects as we found here. Such a finding would be particularly likely if the concept of “race” is tightly bound with the concept of “privilege” in the minds of social liberals. Future research should test these ideas directly.

One potential limitation of the present work is that we did not use a manipulation check to assure that people who read about a poor Black versus a poor White person perceived that person as Black versus White respectively. Our reason for not including a manipulation check was to avoid highlighting our hypotheses about the role of recipient race on sympathy and blame for the person’s poverty (see Hauser, Ellsworth, & Gonzalez, 2018). However, given that people often imagine Black people when they imagine poor people (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017), it is possible that some participants read that the person was poor and then relied on their stereotypical representations of what poor looks like rather than attending to our description of the person’s race. Although the pattern of effects was consistent with our predictions (suggesting that our manipulation of race was having the anticipated effects), future research could include a manipulation check to more definitively rule out alternative explanations.

Finally, in this article, we chose to focus on a single-item measure of social liberalism/conservatism given research indicating that this simple scale captures two key underlying aspects of ideology well: 1) support for the status-quo/tradition versus support for social change and 2) a tendency to accept versus reject social inequality (Jost et al., 2009). Moreover, this single-item measure has demonstrated good test–retest reliability and good predictive validity in previous research (Jost, 2006; Napier & Jost, 2008). Finally, by also measuring economic liberalism/conservatism, we were able to demonstrate that the predicted effects were distinct to social, but not economic, liberalism/conservatism consistent with our theoretical perspective (see online supplementary materials). However, future research could examine whether there might be a better way to assess political ideology beyond these single-item scales.

Research in Context

The present work adds to an emerging body of literature indicating that the intersections of identities, and especially race and class (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019; Cooley et al., 2019; Gilens, 1995; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017), are immensely complicated. For example, recent work indicates that people implicitly and explicitly associate being poor with being Black and being White with being wealthy (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2019). And, these racialized class assumptions can lead racial prejudice to influence attitudes toward wealth redistribution

(Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2017). Here, we extend upon this work to suggest that beliefs that White = wealthy/privilege may also have important effects on how people perceive White people who struggle due to poverty. In particular, we find that, under certain conditions, poor White (vs. Black) people may receive less sympathy because their status diverges from the privileged status of their racial group. Future research should explore whether poor White people are aware of these social nuances, and, if so, whether decreased sympathy coupled with fewer external attributions for poverty predict greater distress among poor White people (vs. poor racial minorities). Such a possibility might help us to understand recent data that suggest that poor White people exhibit more distress and less resilience than poor Black people in the face of poverty (Graham, 2017; Graham & Pinto, 2017). Together, this line of work might help to explain why poor White Americans seem to feel disenfranchised or forgotten by well-off others (Vance & Vance, 2016), despite the fact that they face fewer structural barriers to ascending social class (Badger et al., 2018).

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Received October 6, 2018

Revision received February 21, 2019

Accepted March 1, 2019 ■