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Exploring Perceptions of Advantage and Attitudes Towards Redistribution in South Africa

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Abstract

Tackling inequalities and poverty in South Africa has proven extremely difficult and contentious. Indeed, redistribution policies are often widely criticized both by people who argue that these policies are not far-reaching and comprehensive enough and by those who argue they are not justified, too large-scale and/or ineffective, and should be scaled back. While public support amongst relatively advantaged South Africans is crucial for these redistribution policies to be enacted and maintained, interestingly, we know very little about how respective groups of "advantaged" South Africans from different ethnic groups view wealth transfers and other redistribution measures aimed at reducing the prevailing inequalities in South Africa. Drawing on a series of focus group discussions, we gain insights into perceptions of advantage and attitudes towards redistribution amongst groups of black and white "advantaged" South Africans respectively. We find that both black and white "advantaged" South Africans are reluctant to part with some of their wealth in the interests of greater economic equality, citing state corruption and extended network obligations as justification. In addition, there is a shared tendency to understate their economic advantage by identifying firmly as the middle class, thereby abrogating responsibility to the super-wealthy whilst simultaneously expressing paternalistic views towards the poor.

Keywords

economic advantage; elites; inequality; redistribution; South Africa

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1. Introduction

That the stark material inequalities that characterise contemporary South Africa are borne out of the country's settler-colonial and apartheid past is little disputed. The path dependencies of uneven capital accumulation—which have conformed to the dictates of racialized economic policy in determining beneficiation and exploitation of respective groups—have, without coincidence, shaped a South Africa where, generally, *those who have* are white and *those without* are black. Despite state-led attempts at positive discrimination in remedying the economic advantages and disadvantages of the past, and despite the efforts of a well-meaning and largely "colour-blind" developmental agenda to elevate the circumstances and prospects of South Africa's black poor, the grand chasm of inequality remains intact in South Africa.

While public support amongst relatively advantaged South Africans, which for our purposes includes all white South Africans and middle-income or affluent people of colour, is crucial for redistribution policies to be enacted and maintained, interestingly, we know very little about how economically and/or professionally relatively advantaged South Africans from different racial groups view their own advantaged position, as well as how they think about wealth transfers and other redistribution measures aimed at reducing the prevailing racial inequalities in South Africa. Over the course of a series of focus group discussions with relatively advantaged black and white South Africans, we aim to explore two things. First, we aim to explore people's views on what it means to be or seen to be "privileged" or "advantaged" in South Africa. Moreover, spurred by the notions of privilege and disadvantage—and a historical understanding of these terms that has not been materially rectified to the degree of the country's democratic legislative changes—our conversations sought to probe the notion of "advantage" amongst the *advantaged*. Particularly, we sought to understand, amongst other things, how advantaged South Africans conceive of themselves, their obligations or specific stressors that are distinct based on their privilege, and their understanding of their rights and responsibilities in the South African context. The last issue feeds to our second objective which was to disentangle people's attitudes and willingness to participate in, and contribute to, some form of wealth transfer in the interests of elevating poor South Africans.

The results of our focus groups are perhaps unsurprising but highly instructive. Both black and white "advantaged" individuals are reluctant to part with some of their wealth in the interests of greater economic equality. This shared reluctance, however, stems from divergent experiences, interpretations of the past, and ultimately different reasoning within each group. More than the economic aspect, this inquiry has provided a window into the anxieties and rationales of middle-class identity in making sense of themselves in relation to an environment of inequality. The findings will be of interest to policymakers and others who see the prospect of a socially cohesive society as being contingent on the material conditions of its people. More specifically, it will be of interest to those who identify the middle class as having a special role to play (on account of their material agency) in fomenting social cohesion broadly, and to those who track the formation of middle-class identity in a changing South Africa.

2. Dynamics of Inequality in South Africa

South Africa stands out as one of the most unequal societies around the globe and an abundance of statistical evidence supports this view. South Africa is plagued by economic inequalities on multiple dimensions: First, there is sharp inequality between the haves and the have-nots. This form of economic inequality between rich

and poor individuals and households can be referred to as "vertical inequality." Furthermore, South Africa is host to economic inequalities that are "horizontal" in nature, i.e., they exist and persist between groups that share a salient identity, such as racial or ethnic groups (Stewart, 2008). A product of centuries of colonialization and the subsequent period of apartheid, the most prominent line of horizontal inequality manifests along the divide between white and black South Africans.

According to World Bank data on the Gini coefficient, a common measure to quantify vertical income inequality, South Africa ranks last amongst all 167 countries for which data was available. What is more, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported that the top-earning 10% of the population were responsible for 51% of total incomes while 40% of the population lived below the lower national poverty line, pointing towards a large gap between the rich and the poor (IMF, 2020). Chatterjee et al. (2021) note that the wealthiest 0.01% of South Africans hold around 15% of aggregate wealth, which is more than the poorest 90% of the population. Many scholars agree that since the end of apartheid, the level of vertical inequality has not improved but—quite contrarily—has increased on both the overall level and within population groups (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Also, despite manifold policy initiatives aimed at reducing vertical inequality, David et al. (2023) show that significant portions of South African society do not perceive any improvements in inequality, which may be associated with low reported levels of social cohesion.

Above and beyond inequality between the rich and the poor, colonialization and apartheid created significant levels of racial inequality. Shortly after the end of apartheid, resulting from broad exclusion from economic participation, the black majority (76.9% of the population) earned only 35.7% of the total personal incomes while white South Africans, who accounted for just over 9% of the population at the time, earned more than 50% (Terreblanche, 2002). This also manifested in education: while in 1994, 90% of white South Africans had at least some basic education, the share amongst black South Africans was as low as 46% (Nattrass & Seekings, 2001). Even more illustratively, while 100% of the white population enjoyed electricity and piped water, access to those services amongst black South Africans was only as high as 37% and 18% respectively (Nattrass & Seekings, 2001). Even in 2007, the small white minority still owned around 90% of the land (Stewart, 2008).

The immediate post-apartheid period saw the advent of numerous policy initiatives aimed at the correction of past injustices. Many of the policy efforts of this time aimed specifically at inequalities in the labour market, with the main goal being the establishment of a framework that allowed for labour to unionize, the eradication of inhumane working conditions, and mandating larger firms to report on the representation of the different population groups (especially race and gender) and the structure of salaries. In addition to the interventions related to the labour market, an important instrument in the reduction of horizontal inequality has been the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Act since 2003, which has seen two major revisions since its inception (Burger & Jafta, 2010). An important aspect of this policy is a scorecard that captures the progress of private enterprises in multiple fields: the share of equity ownership and managerial positions held by black persons ("ownership" and "management control"), investments in special training for black employees ("skills development"), and procurement from other companies with high scores ("enterprise and supplier development"). High scores on those dimensions can give a given business advantages over others, for example in public procurement. In the context of the BBE, black refers more generally to groups that have faced past discrimination, thus including Indian South Africans, Coloureds, women, and members of other disadvantaged groups. In addition to this, Stewart (2016) notes that an array

of universalist welfare policies have benefitted black South Africans disproportionally more than whites, thus contributing to a reduction in between-group inequality.

While studies have shown that economic HIs have generally reduced between 1970 and 2012 (David et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2010), significant challenges remain. The most recent data shows that 55% of South Africa's 57 million people live in households in which the average per capita monthly income is under the upper bound poverty line of R1, 138. By comparison, the top 2% of South Africans live in households in which the average per capita monthly income falls above R19, 089 (Stewart, 2008). The policy initiatives from the previous years were not free of criticism: The BEE Act, for example, has been criticized for benefitting mainly a small black elite rather than the group as a whole (see, e.g., Freund, 2007; Mbeki, 2009; Tangri & Southall, 2008). Indeed, Stewart et al. (2010) show that between 1996 and 2001, economic inequality between wealthy black and white South Africans has reduced while it has increased amongst the poorer segments of society. Similarly, Espi et al. (2019) point towards significant inequities at the intersection of race and gender by showing that black females suffer both from a pay gap—i.e., they earn less than their white counterparts working in the same occupation—and occupational segregation.

3. Theorizing Perceptions of Inequality and Support for Redistribution

Few studies have thus far explored how widespread support for redistribution is amongst South Africans and under which circumstances they would be willing to endorse government policies aimed at the alleviation of horizontal inequality. Nyamnjoh et al. (2020) show that black South Africans are the group that is most in favour of racial restitution while white South Africans show the highest levels of opposition. Their analysis further indicates that intergroup threat, negative outgroup attitudes, and intergroup contact may be amongst the factors that drive policy attitudes. Similar results were found for issues of affirmative action and land reform (Dixon et al., 2007; Durrheim et al., 2007). These group differences may partly be attributable to self-interest effects, whereby those who expect to benefit the most from a given policy should be the most in favour of it (Roberts et al., 2011)

Apart from these few exceptions, however, research on attitudes towards horizontal forms of redistribution has been quite scarce—maybe with the exception of affirmative action in the United States—and much more literature has focused on vertical inequality. This constitutes the first lacuna we want to address in this article. Not much is known about what drives individual reactions toward group-based redistribution despite the importance of economic HIs all around the globe and in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa (see also Dixon et al., 2017).

An increasing literature in recent years has advanced the assumption that perceptions of inequality play a major role in whether one is willing to support horizontal redistribution instruments or not (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Hauser & Norton, 2017; Niehues, 2014). The underlying premise is that individuals are inequality averse and that perceiving higher levels of inequality will, all else equal, be related to higher support for redistributive policies. However, many individuals are unable to accurately assess the prevailing inequality levels in their society and thus their demand for redistribution might be based on false ideas about how specific assets are distributed. One who severely underestimates the existing inequalities should thus be more likely to reject government intervention aimed at horizontal redistribution. Studies from the American context have shown that individuals are notoriously bad at estimating racial inequality. Further,

when false assessments of inequality are rectified by giving accurate data, many individuals adjust their redistributive preferences (Becker, 2019). In the study at hand, we are interested in how advantaged South Africans perceive the severity of the existing racial inequalities.

An important aspect of how inequality is perceived is related to lay beliefs about the causes of inequality. Existing studies have shown that ideas about the causes of inequality are commonly structured along two dimensions: Some arguments emphasize structural causes of inequality, such as systemic discrimination of specific groups, while others revolve around internal characteristics of members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Previous studies have shown that individuals who perceive the causes of inequality as predominantly structural exhibit a higher demand for redistribution compared to those who emphasise internal causes, thereby shifting the blame to members of disadvantaged groups (Ramasubramanian, 2010; Reyna et al., 2006). Interestingly, in forming ideas about the causes of group inequality, individuals may be subject to biases introduced by motivated reasoning. As group membership constitutes an important aspect of one's self-concept (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), perceptions of group success or failure may be prone to misperceptions that serve to enhance or protect the status of one's group. Consequently, members of disadvantaged groups might be motivated to perceive the causes of their relative disadvantage as being external, such as systemic discrimination, while members of advantaged groups may be more likely to explain their relative advantage as a result of agentic traits of themselves and their fellow in-group members (Hewstone, 1990). Our work aims to document whether both black and white South Africans will agree on past discrimination as the main cause of today's inequality or whether their ideas about the causes of inequality will diverge.

Apart from individual perceptions of horizontal inequalities, we want to focus on how South Africans perceive and make sense of the notion of advantage. Much of the literature about attitudes towards group-based redistribution in other contexts (most notably the United States) has assumed that members of objectively advantaged groups should be less likely to support redistribution policies as they should see this as a threat to their individual or collective interest, while disadvantaged groups should show higher levels of support (Aberson, 2003; Jacobson, 1985). However, recent studies document that perceptions of group advantage often differ significantly—even within groups. For instance, increasing numbers of white Americans seem to perceive themselves as a disadvantaged group in their country (Norton & Sommers, 2011). DiTomaso et al. (2011) highlight the importance of the domestic policy environment for the emergence of this somewhat counterintuitive phenomenon. According to their study based on a series of focus group discussions, it is a widespread belief amongst members of the white middle class that unequal opportunities across gender and racial groups no longer exist in this day and age, which gives beneficiaries of affirmative action an undeserved benefit. Thus, the perception of inequities created by policies such as affirmative action may obscure the picture that is drawn by objective measures of inequality and cause members of dominant groups to see themselves as relatively disadvantaged.

This leads us to the second gap we want to address in this contribution. Little is known about how black and white South Africans perceive their group's fate beyond what statistical inequality measures tell us. We are specifically interested in the narratives that South Africans use to frame their own and their group's relative status within society, and whether white South Africans will acknowledge their privileged position or will position themselves as a group which faces discrimination now, due to the political dominance of black South Africans and the range of policies that have been adopted to reduce the prevailing inequalities.

4. Research Design and Methodology

Since the objective of this research was to understand and explore perceptions of advantage and attitudes towards redistribution amongst relatively advantaged South Africans, a key challenge lies in how we define the notion of *advantage*—and in so doing identifying the target group to be addressed by this study. The first issue here is that in many respects, *advantage* is a thinly veiled euphemism for *privilege*—a word that, to use contemporary parlance, can be particularly triggering for those it is employed to describe. In this sense, it was expedience that led us to the less emotive *advantaged* which we intended to use as a proxy for the dynamics of privilege and dispossession.

The second issue was delineating the parameters of the advantaged group. As a point of departure, we assumed that all white people are privileged notwithstanding the variation of economic status within this group. We did not test this assumption to its limits (and elected not to interview poor white South Africans) but we thought it an important methodological mechanism that would generate emotive and relevant discussion (within white groups). The second component of the *advantaged* was more difficult to identify but broadly speaking, we were looking for middle-income or affluent people of colour. While facing additional financial challenges like a "black tax"—something that does not affect their white contemporaries—this group is nevertheless comparatively financially advantaged and can leverage social and professional capital from their vantage of relative privilege.

We define the middle class based on vulnerability or rather, the (in)vulnerability to poverty as the key criterion defining middle-class status (Zizzamia et al., 2016). The notion of (in)vulnerability is drawn from a socio-political reading of the middle class that identifies this group as being especially empowered and thus possessing a degree of security that is not available to the lower class, working class, and poor. While we are sympathetic to the assumptions of (in)vulnerability in identifying a materially secure group that possesses the capacity and security to resist poverty, our own identification of the *advantaged* was far more rudimentary. This is mostly for methodological reasons. Recruiting focus groups of middle-class participants proved challenging enough without the complexity of cross-checking each participant against external data to ensure their (in)vulnerability to poverty.

As the study was intended to be exploratory, we opted for a variant of a snowballing methodology that began with identifying a key contact person who expressed interest in exploring questions of advantage and redistribution in a focus group setting. Primary targets for recruitment of these individuals included individuals participating in business chambers of commerce or finance, school governing board members, and individuals who were members of sports clubs, country clubs, and service associations such as Rotary or Lions clubs, as well as administrative staff working at local Universities.

Having identified a key contact person, we typically left the recruitment of participants to them, that is, someone who was not a stranger to those they were recruiting and whose home provided a comfortable and casual setting for the focus group discussions. We asked our focus group hosts to ensure that all the participants invited could "reasonably be considered advantaged." If they enquired further as to what we meant by this, we clarified that we were interested in those people on the "middle to upper end of the social ladder," avoiding conflating income as the sole determinant of advantage. This approach means that advantage in our study is necessarily subjective, based both on the host's perception of advantage as

well as that of invited individuals who would have to assess whether they could reasonably be considered advantaged.

For the most part, the indirect recruitment conformed with our expectations of what the advantaged looked like, with most groups comprising wealthy corporate professionals, lawyers, middle management, local government employees, and doctors, in addition to third- or fourth-generation middle-class participants (see Table 1). In a few instances, the variance of the *advantaged* became more apparent, with struggling entrepreneurs and teachers joining this group. This variance or "spectrum of advantaged," while not controlled for by the researchers, offered a window into notions of relative privilege and how this played out amongst the heterogeneous material subjectivities of this group. One unanticipated effect of the indirect recruitment was evident in the lack of generational variance in groups. This was a consequence of hosts inviting their friends and colleagues to participate. By way of example, one group was comprised of eight women in their 50s, 60s, and 70s. Another was comprised of a balanced gender mix of 20-something-year-olds, the majority of whom were young doctors.

We were initially concerned that the commonality of gender, generation, or profession, and that participants knew one another prior to the focus group, would limit the discussion or provide a distinct perspective consistent with the common denominator of each group. Instead, the shared commonality and the existing relations between participants allowed certain liberties that a focus group amongst strangers might not permit. For one, participants appeared comfortable amongst friends and acquaintances. This comfort translated into deeper, often personally compromising, reflections on the guiding questions. It also allowed a certain robustness to emerge as participants' histories or views were known to the group and might challenge a speaker who was speaking in a way that was considered to be inconsistent with their perspective. One downside of the familiarity however, although impossible to control for, was the degree to which participants withheld their views for fear of judgement from the same people who form part of their social network. While it did not appear that participants were hesitant to share their views, it was not clear whether this concern had any bearing on participants' responses.

Each focus group was deliberately kept racially homogenous. Black focus groups were facilitated by a middle-class black facilitator and equally, white focus groups were run by a middle-class white facilitator. Our insistence on racial homogeneity was in maintaining a methodological consistency with the identarian impetus for this study and the application of a "safe spaces" logic. The racially exclusive "safe space" allowed a depth to the focus group discussion that was left unobstructed by the fear of causing offense or being offended. This took different forms in both cases. Typically, in white groups, the liberty of exclusivity was experienced as freedom from the fear of being labelled a racist. In black groups, this exclusivity was experienced as freedom from the hegemony of whiteness, and black groups tended to be more vulnerable and tentative, lacking a shared understanding or common denominator that was more apparent in white groups.

Our research insights are based on insights gained from 15 focus group discussions and two individual interviews. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants by gender, age range, vocation, and where the focus group was held. In total, 91 people partook in this study. The focus groups were held in Cape Town, Knysna, Makhanda, and East London, with the researchers traveling to the Eastern Cape to gain a degree of geographical variety. A larger study would require crossing the country and certainly Johannesburg—

Table 1. Composition of the discussions by number of participants, gender, place, age range, and vocation (black and white discussants).

	No. of discussions	No. of participants		Place	Age range	Vocation of participants
		Women	Men			
People of colour	3 FGDs	12	10	East London	25–50	Doctors, young professionals, teachers, entrepreneurs
	1 FGDs	1	3	Makhanda	27–40	University administrators and music producers
	2 FGDs	2	9	Cape Town	26–47	Working professionals, finance, IT, students engaged in tertiary study
	2 interviews	1	1	Kynsna	28–45	Communications manager, mid-level management
White	1 FGDs	3	1	East London	25–32	Doctors, entrepreneur, teacher
	1 FGDs	1	3	Makhanda	35–55	Lawyers, business owners, farmers
	2 FGDs	3	5	Knysna	38–60	Management, secretary, business owners (textiles and tourism)
	5 FGDs	26	10	Cape Town	28–72	Retirees, corporate execs, developers, accountants, business owners
Subtotal						
People of colour	8	16	23			
White	9	33	19			
Total	**17**	**49**	**42**			

Note: FGDs stands for focus group discussions.

regarded as the economic heartland of South Africa and having a distinct elite identity of its own—warrants substantial attention in securing conclusive national-level findings. The majority of the sample was white, with 43% of the sample being people of colour. Similarly, just over half the sample (53%) were women, although, within white groups, men were the majority of participants, whilst the converse was true of the groups with people of colour.

5. Denial of Responsibility

In tackling questions of advantage, inequality, and redistribution, building consensus around a single issue is not easy. Yet, there was one point that almost all participants agreed on—that material redistribution imposed on the advantaged should, if anything, be a recourse of last resort. However, the reasons advanced for the abrogation of responsibility for redress differed between groups of white participants and those comprising people of colour.

Barring two groups and a handful of individual participants, the majority of white respondents did not support the principle of material redistribution in the interests of equality, nor did they support the notion of sacrifice. Those who were supportive in principle tended toward a charitable reading of the notion and felt that any compulsory mechanism that would affect their material status would be undesirable in the context of more effective solutions.

Typically, the preferred, more effective solutions proposed by these groups amounted to an externalisation of personal responsibility and the scapegoating of other institutions that have failed in their mandate to uplift South Africa's poor. Government, and notably the provision of education, was the primary target in the displacing of respondents' responsibility. As one participant put it: "If you're going to change anything in this country, its education, education, education: There's no two ways about it" (developer (w)). This view was supplemented by expressed exasperation over the disbanding of technikons and teacher training colleges and called for their re-establishment, thereby boosting the number of teachers and skilled artisans as "not everyone can go to university" (business executive (w)).

After education, tackling corruption (and in particular the institutionalised malfeasance known as "state capture") as well as doing away with market unfriendly policies like BEE were high priority issues on white respondents' lists. The side-stepping of personal responsibility, even by those participants who claimed to feel a sense of guilt for having unduly benefited from apartheid was a common theme across white groups.

One participant described her friends' feelings of guilt for having benefited from apartheid around the time of the onset of democracy in 1994 explaining:

> [In 1994], I think that most white people felt like they needed to help and help now and there was this huge feeling of *ubuntu* [but] it's just petering out because white people are going, "I pay all these taxes and it just gets scooped off by people like the Guptas and the corruption." (business owner (w))

When asked whether the wealthy, in addition to taxes, should sacrifice more to improve the lives of the poor, white participants provided historical anecdotes, cultural explanations, migratory threat, and recipients' poor financial planning skills in explaining why a personal sacrifice would be an ineffective course of action. For example, when the conversation shifted to land restitution, a participant reminded the group of how traditional leaders and "Pondo chiefs" had benefited from the colonial acquisition of land. This was met with agreement from the other participants, and it was suggested that "they" (poor black people) should seek first material assistance from "their" leaders: the chiefs and traditional leaders who too have unduly benefited from the past. Interestingly, in contrast to this view, a generational division emerged in some groups with many younger white participants describing the stifling guilt that they feel and a sense of shame that has not eroded but has rather intensified as they have come to understand the extent of the injustices that have benefited them. Rather than see the avenues for recourse close, their problem is the opposite one, and they feel overwhelmed with the many ways in which they ought to "give it all back" and, in some way, relinquish their privilege. In most instances, this conundrum becomes a nihilistic contortion without ever bearing a substantive outcome as even against this guilt, they are not ready to part freely with their assets, land, or inheritance. Interestingly, the net impact of those who are fatigued and no longer feel guilty, and those who are paralysed by their guilt, is still nil.

Like white groups, the onus of responsibility for decreasing inequality in black groups was reflected onto the state and sparingly, onto white South Africans that had benefited from the past. However, the responses of black participants sketched a highly complex relationship with wealth with almost all participants being subjected to financial pressures and expectations from immediate and extended family. "Black tax"—as described by participants—was recognised as an already existing financial burden on middle-class black participants concerning poorer people in their immediate circles and, as such, there was no enthusiasm for additional forms of material redistribution beyond existing stressors on individuals' wealth. Supporting cousins' schooling, a nephew's university degree, and aged parents were common anecdotes. Asking whether participants ought to pay more in addition to the "black tax" was largely rendered redundant for black participants. However, a few participants, especially younger black participants, were willing to entertain this idea in relation to the responsibility of white South Africans. Those who supported the idea that material redistribution should start with white people tended to be young and described how land and "the ownership of assets is not held by the people" (student (poc)). Older participants tended to be reconciliatory and conservative in response to this question and would sooner chide poorer black South Africans' lack of individual ambition and laziness for being the cause of inequality rather than an unfairness attributed to white people. This generational division was evidenced in the tension between a particular social conservatism or liberalism and was most pronounced between a group of women, all of whom were teachers. The younger women offered unambiguous views that identified white people as being variously implicated in inequality whereas the older women were reticent to implicate any one group as if that might be considered unbecoming or impolite.

6. Denial of Privilege

An interesting comparative angle between respective groups emerged through the way individuals made sense of their social status and where they were located in the socio-economic hierarchy of South Africa. The more immediate comparative frame of reference for all participants tended to be with people of the same skin colour and of the same racial community. Thus, the success and status of neighbours, colleagues, friends, and family members provided comparative markers in locating one's own position. Moving beyond the immediate markers, however, the opposing ends of this hierarchy—privilege and poverty—were by-and-large concepts that remained racialized across groups with privilege being white and poverty being black. Generally, white groups used the opportunity to position themselves within the social hierarchy of the middle class as another avenue by which to evade responsibility and relinquish personal agency. The idea of being "the-middle-of-the-middle" came up across a few groups. While understanding that they were fortunate, white participants described how they lacked the power and wealth of those above them and were unable to effect any real change, although many acknowledged too that they were not "just scraping by."

By "middling," white participants were able to shirk any acknowledgement of their special circumstances or undue privilege. This responsibility was reflected onto the higher-ranked and super-wealthy group who was said to buy 100 million Rand houses and who were perceived as never engaging in any volunteer activities. Ironically, one focus group, comprised of business leaders seated in a lavishly decorated lounge, suggested that it is this mega-wealthy group who should be made to pay more towards reducing inequality. Displacing responsibility on to a far wealthier and, what was often implied, a more reprehensible group of rich people served to diminish respondents' own agency. The powerlessness of respondents (regardless of their good intentions) was summed up by a participant. Acknowledging that "the economy sits with the whites and the

demographics sits on the other side," they went on to say, "we [white South Africans] are 4 million against 56 million, there's not a hell of a lot of influence you can have" (developer (w)).

In addition to the super-wealthy, white participants were wary of, and intimidated by, an emerging *nouveau riche*. An "old money" versus "new money" division emerged in groups as white participants described the garish displays and conspicuous consumption of what they referred to as "the black diamonds"—a colloquial and pejorative term used to describe a newly wealthy class of black elite in South Africa. One respondent described how the black "new money" made him feel uncomfortable on a recent trip back to his home city of Johannesburg. This discomfort translated into a sense of not belonging there and he left dejected. This was reflected in other groups and participants, who appeared comfortable wearing an "old money" moniker, expressed how they were intimidated by the "new money" group. Raising the spectre of the super-wealthy and the newly wealthy served again to minimize the role and agency of the white advantaged. This added complexity, while relevant, was defensively employed by participants who were evasive in responding to a question of wealth redistribution from their own material positionality.

In contrast, the responses of black participants were considerably less uniform, and while many spoke generally on behalf of "black people," these generalisations were often contradictory across groups. The majority of black participants, like their white counterparts, denied any form of privilege notwithstanding their relative financial status. One young group, having grown up middle class, acknowledged feeling a degree of privilege, but explained that they would not want people to know that they conceded this. In the main, the "black tax," historical dispossession of land, apartheid, and the idea that "whiteness" is interchangeable with "privilege," set the benchmark for a notion of advantage that was unattainable for black participants, and highlighted the inaccuracy of comparisons with the white middle class for this group. As one participant—who acknowledged some degree of financial advantage—explained:

> If you are a person of colour you can't be privileged. If you are white, you are allowed to [be] accepted in a lot of spaces. But if you think about it, how many people in your family have the same success as you? I am still helping my family to do better. I can never be privileged until everyone in my family can stand on their own. (doctor (poc))

Where white participants discussed advantage in terms of "old money" and "new money," this distinction held less relevance in black groups. In some instances, participants exhibited a particular working-class solidarity and, despite obvious material discrepancies and bourgeois aesthetics, were reluctant to identify out of this class. For others, this was balanced by a breezy and passing appreciation of the notion of having "made it," and in some instances, an open shame about not enjoying the same material identifiers of wealth as one's contemporaries. By way of example, an interview with a local government employee in the Western Cape revealed the participant's sense of inadequacy when he visited the Eastern Cape:

> When you go to the Eastern Cape, you feel so small because people there are driving German cars. If we go to social spaces, I feel like leaving my car. In the Eastern Cape, average government employees have nice perks; there you kind of feel like people are balling. (poc)

Moreover, how people describe the accomplishments of others (who were not present), rather than themselves, indicated that while a modesty associated with working-class solidarity is good, so too is the

boldness associated with "balling," a term used to denote an abundance of money, possessions, property, or other material goods. For the most part, modesty and aspiring to material success were not brought into conflict with one another as competing ideas locked in tension. Rather, participants appeared comfortable holding and expressing both positions without discomfort.

7. Guilt-Laden Paternalism

While black and white participants largely differed on the historical drivers of inequality, they found some common ground concerning their attitudes towards the poor. Both groups subscribed to popular perceptions about the poor and demonstrated a sometimes scornful and other times paternalistic view of poor South Africans. White concern about inequality was rarely understood by participants as having any empirical basis in the past. Instead, white participants explained that inequality was the result of multiple crises in the democratic era in failed affirmative action, corruption and "the Guptas," poor education, etc., and that these were the most pressing drivers of economic division. Overwhelmingly, the majority of white participants were opposed to the idea of material redistribution on this basis, as well as a deep distrust of the institutions of state and the state's capacity to allocate tax revenue.

Barring affirmative action, the above criticism had significant traction within black groups as well. Certainly, many black participants identified colonialism and apartheid as drivers of racialized inequality but many who did also cited the same drivers of inequality as their white counterparts. Many responses echoed a distrust of the government and its ability to facilitate some form of material redistribution. The notion of "black laziness" that emerged in some white groups was applied by black participants to describe poor black people and explain their circumstances. This was accompanied by tropes about the "psyche of dependence" that was attributed to all black people in white groups, and was, in its own way, utilised in black groups to stress a class division with the poor. In this way, a strong commonality between white and black groups emerged in how both described poorer South Africans.

Generally, references to the poor ranged from concerned paternalism to outright disdain. Social grant recipients were considered cunning in some white groups where it was implied that poor people were falling pregnant intentionally in order to derive more social grant support. Similarly, in one black group, participants expressed frustration with the "free hand-outs" received by those on social grants, and supported one participant's proposal that grants should only be paid "after some form of labour has been given in exchange by the recipient" (teacher (poc)). This paternalism reflected a strong class dynamic amongst black South Africans and was perhaps most tellingly outlined in a participant's reflection on her relationship with her domestic worker. Conceding that she might pay her domestic worker less than other white people, she explained, however, that she provided more tangible benefits: "We eat the same food...our contract is informal...I treat and regard her as my sister....I know where she lives, and this might not be the case with most whites" (teacher (poc)).

This dynamic was identified by a black participant in another group. Responding to a question about intra-race inequality and whether "black people who get ahead economically see themselves as better than poor blacks," the participant responded: "It happens...I am sure it happens a lot. I know sometimes that even black domestics often say 'I will rather work for a white person'" (civil servant (poc)). The respective paternalism of both black and white participants was identified in each instance by reflective and self-critical

group members—most of whom tended to be younger participants. Interestingly, against the middle-class scorn and paternalism, an alternative corollary of middle-class guilt also emerged in both black and white groups, although it found expression in divergent ways. Conceding that "we don't help each other as blacks," a black participant identified a very real class division in black South Africa. This was reiterated in another black group that, although not exonerating white peoples' historical contribution to black poverty, placed the onus of responsibility for socio-economic change on black people and bemoaned black peoples' failure to uplift poorer members of their community.

These feelings of frustration with black middle-class paternalism and a disdain for the poor translated into what self-critical black respondents described as "black guilt." Concerned that they had not done enough to uplift those around them, it was "black guilt" that led advantaged black South Africans to part with some of their wealth. It was black guilt too that, in addition to the financial need of recipients and familial expectation, could be understood as a driver behind the "black tax" that almost all black participants were subject to. Similar in name alone, it was "white guilt" that formed one of the drivers in the charitable impulses of white groups. Yet rather than a sense of guilt for not supporting "their own" or those in their community, this was a guilt that—to varying degrees—recognizes a connection between black poverty and white participants' relative advantage. For white participants however, guilt was scarcely acknowledged and for the most part, participants' charitable inclinations were motivated not by a sense of sacrifice for their advantaged status or to assuage past wrongdoings but by a confluence of philanthropic or religious values or good intent.

It is difficult to gauge at which point the "black tax" and broader black philanthropy meet scornful paternalism and the notion that "we don't help each other as blacks." While so many financially advantaged black South Africans are involved in a mechanism of material redistribution to uplift and sustain those around them, it is clear that this does not preclude a disdain for poor people and a strong sense of class division. This division forms the point at which different black middle-class identities pivot and are shaped. Feelings of shame—perhaps more readily expressed privately rather than in a group—and celebrated notions of success in balling are held in tandem with a working-class solidarity and, in other moments, a disdain for the same said working class.

8. Hollowness, "Tokenism," and Privilege

In the immediate reflections after a focus group, facilitators recorded the state of groups, the predominant feelings, and any changes in the group's cohesiveness. In black groups, participants often expressed relief and surprise that their thoughts, experiences, and feelings were reflected in the contributions of other participants. Barring the somewhat formal tension that a generational dynamic registered in groups, black focus groups concluded with constructive and supportive energy, with participants who had not known each other before, swapping phone numbers and thanking one another. This cohesiveness was evident in four of the nine white groups, where the discussion led to a sense of break-through, with the conversation flowing easily. After these groups, participants thanked one another and approached the facilitator to express how much they enjoyed a difficult conversation, or that they thought it was important to have more difficult conversations of this nature. The opposite was true for the remaining white groups which were at times tense and uncomfortable or outright confrontational, and ended without the casual chit-chat that proceeded the other four groups. Those groups where the cohesiveness between participants flat-lined were the same groups where participants could not agree on notions of privilege and the drivers of racial inequality.

Apart from a general discrepancy in group cohesiveness between white and black focus groups, a smaller sample of participants in each described similar feelings of professional insecurity, anxiety, and "hollowness" as a result of racism (in black groups) and the accusation of "white privilege" (in white groups). Responding to a question of whether black people could be privileged, a black participant explained:

> Here is my problem with accepting the label of being privileged….There are things that we can't ignore…a successful black person is always looked at negatively because it is questioned how they got to the top. They [white people] don't see it as legitimate success. (IT professional (poc))

This view was echoed in black groups in a broader expression of professional anxiety related to success and achievement that participants outlined. Particularly, participants described how they always felt that they had to prove themselves against a sometimes expressed but mostly unspoken stigma that sought to delegitimise their achievements by insinuating that every professional success was the result of affirmative action or "tokenism."

Affirmative action through BEE and racial quotas in sport are divisive talking points in South Africa that are regularly debated on radio talk shows and newspaper columns. Participant descriptions echoed much of what is described by black professionals in the public domain which identifies an unfair expectation on black professionals to work harder and achieve extraordinary heights to be able to defend themselves against the suggestion that their professional achievements are not of their own making, but rather a consequence of their skin colour. Black participants went on to describe the resultant psychological burden of this expectation and the feeling that their achievements were always hollow and would never be recognised as a result of their skill, hard work, and dedication.

The same feeling of professional hollowness, and anxiety that their achievements were the result of their skin colour and not their skill, was echoed by some early-career professional white participants. A white group in their late 20s and early 30s and on the cusp of their careers did not deny their own privilege and how they had been advantaged by the past, although they cautioned against essentialising history. This group took issue with a popular, and what they described as an unhelpful discourse around privilege which they felt demonised success and invalidated their personal achievements:

> I don't feel like being described as privileged is necessarily helpful. I know it and I don't think it accomplishes anything. (professional (w))

> To me, the tone and the aim of the conversation is really important. If someone describes me as privileged in a discussion about our past and with a commitment to understanding each other and working towards a shared, better future, it elicits engagement from me, even though it is difficult. But if the point is to attack me, I would prefer to disengage and prefer not to be part of that type of conversation. (professional (w))

> What bothers me about the recent discourse on privilege in South Africa is that, for me, as a white man, any success I have in my life feels hollow. If I succeed, there will always be whispers that it is a result of my privilege, and if I fail, no one cares. Any victory would be a hollow victory. I would never be able to bask in glory, even though I worked for it. (professional (w))

These participants did not want to be made to feel bad for doing well. They held both an acknowledgement of privilege and a refusal to let it contradict their own achievements. This same group thought that a compulsory contribution that singled out white people would constitute a step too far, yet they spoke earnestly of their intentions to support charities, NGOs, and their domestic workers' children if they became financially successful in their careers. The participants recognized their advantage, and that inequality is a grave problem in South Africa. However, they did not see themselves as part of a problem but wanted to be seen as part of the solution. They described how they were willing to help to redistribute advantage, but not at the cost of their own hopes and futures, and were unwilling to give their money to the state or have to do so through extended taxes. They recognized the contradiction inherent in this position.

A popular meme on social media, highlighting the inequality of the gender pay gap and the lack of racial transformation in business, encouraged (women and black) people to "carry yourself with the confidence of a mediocre white man." It was a humorous jibe intended to identify an evident enough truth: that mediocre white men are a common commodity in the working world; are full of unwavering confidence in their own ability born of their privilege and entitlement and suffer little to no professional anxiety, and no sense of inadequacy or "imposter syndrome" as a result. It is the consequence of some celestial cynicism that the accusation of "privilege"—the very foundation of mediocre white confidence—has, in being identified, had the converse effect on some white people, registering an inadequacy and "hollowness" in their professional achievements. This hollowness is comparable to the psychological burden faced by many black professionals as a result of the racist stigma attached to their own successes. If both phenomena are to persist, the prevalence of professional inadequacy and anxiety in South Africa can be expected to increase.

9. Conclusion

"Black guilt," "white guilt," and "hollowness" are experiences of deep inadequacy for the black and white middle class. Stemming from very different material drivers and reflecting divergent subjective realities, it is nevertheless somewhat uncanny that both groups can experience very similar feelings of professional inadequacy or feel a comparable sense of guilt in relation to the poor, but for different reasons. In fact, what is perhaps one of the more surprising aspects to emerge from this work is the similarity of attitudes between White and Black participants who, despite oftentimes quite different reasonings and certainly different life trajectories, were united in their denial of their own privilege, their rejection of redistribution as a productive way forward, and in their shared feelings of guilt and anxiety about how they might be perceived.

Whilst it was clear that notions of poverty and privilege, the two extremes of the distribution as it were, remained racialised in the minds of participants, perceptions of the severity of inequality across all focus groups were limited by the tendency of participants to make within-group comparisons rather than between-group comparisons of their own socio-economic position relative to others. In making sense of their own socio-economic position, white participants typically positioned themselves as part of the middle class, thereby transferring responsibility for redress of inequality elsewhere, either to the super-wealthy (typically White) or to the newly wealthy (typically Black). Similarly, the majority of black participants denied any form of privilege notwithstanding their relative financial status, citing historical dispossession, current material family obligations, and privilege as being synonymous with whiteness as reasons to deny privilege.

A strong commonality between white and black groups also emerged through how both described the drivers of inequality. Whilst black participants were more likely to identify colonialism and apartheid as historical drivers of racialized inequality, conversations did not typically dwell on these factors but shifted quickly to contemporary external factors, such as corruption, a failing education system, and counter-productive affirmative action policies. There was a lot of agreement on these matters amongst black and white participants, with relatively less attention or importance being attached to the legacy effects of apartheid and colonialism.

Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that most participants were opposed to the idea of material redistribution, with most participants expressing a deep distrust of the institutions of the state and the state's capacity to allocate tax revenue. Without the intergenerational wealth transfer and capital accumulation over generations that has cemented the middle-class status of white South Africans, the middle-class status of black South Africans is vulnerable and precarious. Moreover, this group faces additional financial demands on their resources in supporting family and those within their immediate circles through "black tax." However, probing for a proclivity towards material redistribution amongst this group revealed a complex and unclear set of dynamics that inform black middle-class identity in relation to wealth and the poor. This dynamic can be identified as a tension that demands a strong generational, familial, and working-class solidarity on the one hand that is in tension with a particular paternalism in relation to the poor, the resultant corollary of "black guilt," and a celebration of success and abundance and the openly expressed aspiration to achieve "baller" status.

Discounting the "hollowness" described in one white group, the contributions of white participants affirm much of the existing literature on White identity in South Africa. Cast against the recent efforts by young black students to rectify the narrative on inequality and dispossession in South Africa, the responses of white participants represent a hardening of white identity and a reticence to engage with this phenomenon. While there are some, generally younger, white professionals who recognize the veracity of calls for economic justice, they too are unwilling to part with their wealth in the interests of broader equality and they are not unaware of the inherent contradiction therein. For the majority of white participants however, the hardening of middle-class white identity around notions of "middling," paternalism and suspicion of the poor, and the scapegoating of all but one's own role or history, enable a certain "willed denialism" (Steyn, 2012) and the ability to claim a powerful sense of victimhood (Msimang, 2016). Victimhood and denial form a concerning and heady concoction that feeds into a growing normalization of ethno-nationalism and the global resurgence of white supremacy in sympathetic administrations.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The original audio recordings from the focus groups are held by the authors in a secure data storage facility. Any requests to access the data should be made to the corresponding author.

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