Redneck or White Trash? The Influence of Labeling on Perceptions of White Subgroups

by

Tyler Chase Knowles
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Abstract

This research explored stereotypes associated with labels for White people: whites, white trash, and redneck. It also examined how these labels affect attitudes toward white subgroups. Participants described whites as dominant, elite, middle-class, and privileged. Rednecks and white trash were described with stereotypically negative characteristics, such as poor and uneducated. White trash were more likely to be characterized as dirty than rednecks, whereas rednecks were more likely to be characterized as prejudiced and country/Southern than white trash. Furthermore, I found that whites were perceived most positively, followed by rednecks, and white trash were perceived most negatively. Participants exposed to the labels white trash and redneck were less likely to endorse mainstream values than participants exposed to the label whites. These findings demonstrate that labels, such as white trash and redneck, negatively influence perceptions of low-status whites. Specifically, the labels white trash and redneck may be used to elicit classist and prejudiced views of low-status whites.
Redneck or White Trash? The Influence of Labeling on Perceptions of White Subgroups

“Drag a $100 bill through a trailer park and there's no telling what you'll find.”

-James Carville

In 1991, Arkansas state employee Paula Jones accused Bill Clinton of sexual harassment (“The Clinton,” 2015). James Carville, a prominent figure of the Democratic party, responded with the above comment that implied Jones lived in a trailer park and that her accusation was an attempt to make money (“The Clinton,” 2015). Living in a trailer home and being money-hungry are both stereotypes of white trash (Adkins, 2011; Hays, 2013), so it was clear that Carville was portraying Jones as white trash to tarnish her character in an effort to dismiss her claims against Clinton. Whereas Jones’s case was ultimately dismissed, Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky was readily accepted (Froomkin, 1998). Lewinsky, who was well educated and a White House intern (Leen, 1998), ultimately received considerable celebrity status and was invited to give a TED Talk (Lewinsky, 2015). Thus, Carville’s statement and the subsequent media attack on Jones, as opposed to Lewinsky, demonstrate mainstream prejudice against low-status white individuals and the potential impact of labels, such as white trash, on perceptions of individuals’ character.

In the current research, I explore the characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions of three labels used to describe white individuals: whites, white trash, and redneck. I
examine whether the characteristics used to describe these three labels differ. I assess perceptions of white groups labeled using these terms, and I explore the labels’ effect on participants’ endorsement of mainstream ideals.

**High Status Whites’ Social and Physical Distancing from Low Status Whites**

Before Carville attempted to slander Jones’s name, Clinton argued that he had never met Jones (Thompson, 2015). Clinton and Carville’s statements were efforts to both socially and physically distance Clinton from Jones. These tactics are not rare, as mainstream white individuals socially and physically distance themselves from poor whites (Kunstman, Plant, and Deska, 2016).

Kunstman, Plant, and Deska (2016) found that white participants reported low-socioeconomic (SES) whites as greater social threats (i.e. agreed more strongly that “poor white people in America threaten the general status of Americans.”) than low-SES blacks. Participants also reported greater discomfort during social interactions with low-SES whites than other social groups. Furthermore, they opted to sit further away from low SES-whites than high-SES whites or low-SES blacks. This social and physical distancing is a reflection of mainstream white individuals’ desire to differentiate themselves from low-status white individuals. Just as Carville used labeling to discredit Jones and distance her from Clinton, the use of labels to describe low-status white individuals may embody this stigmatization and social/physical distancing of low-status white individuals by mainstream white individuals.

**The Influence of Labeling**

Language influences individual’s perceptions and attitudes toward different behaviors and groups. For instance, labels can influence people’s willingness to
support government spending and attitudes toward social groups (Hall, Phillips, and Townsend, 2014; Smith, 1987).

**Government spending.** Smith (1987) found that people are more likely to support greater government spending on “assistance for the poor” and the “unemployed” than they are to support “welfare.” Similarly, there is more support for government spending on “dealing with drug addiction” than on “drug rehabilitation” (Rasinski, 1989). These findings suggest that while some statements are essentially synonymous, subtle changes in wording can influence individuals’ perceptions. These changes may also influence perceptions of members of particular social groups, such as low-status white individuals.

**Social groups.** Applying labels to individuals of various backgrounds influences perceptions of those individuals (Hall et al., 2014). For instance, white people perceive *Blacks* and *African Americans* differently, and popular media argues that the term *illegal immigrant* is more dehumanizing than *undocumented immigrant* (Hall et al.; Sullivan, 2012; Vargas, 2012). Terms used to describe low-income individuals, such as *white trash* and *redneck*, may similarly influence perceptions of those individuals, as I elaborate below.

Hall et al. (2014) found that individuals labeled *Black* were perceived more negatively than individuals labeled *African American*. White participants used more negative characteristics to describe *Blacks* than *African Americans*. Furthermore, white participants were given a profile of a male labeled either *Black* or *African American* and reported what they expected the male’s salary or job to be. Participants associated the Black male with a lower salary, occupational position, and education
attainment level than the African American male. These findings suggest that different labels used to characterize a social group elicit different perceptions, and this may hold true for terms used to identify members of other social groups, such as immigrants and low-status white individuals.

The findings of Hall et al. (2014) similarly inform the media discourse around terms used to describe immigrants. For example, in 2012, Jose Antonio Vargas, journalist and founder of Define American, called for The New York Times to move away from using the term, illegal immigrant (Sullivan, 2012). He argued that the term was “disparaging and inaccurate,” because it defines the immigrant based on his or her legal status (Sullivan, 2012; Vargas, 2012). Furthermore, the results of a survey conducted by ABC/Univision demonstrated that immigrants perceived the term to be “offensive and dehumanizing” (Heston, 2012). As a result, The Associated Press moved away form using the term illegal immigrant and toward terms like undocumented immigrant (Costantini, 2013), and The New York Times encouraged writers to find alternative labels when discussing immigrants (Colford, 2013; Haughty, 2013; Plants, 2013). This debate around the influence of the term illegal on immigrants suggests that there may be a similar influence of the terms used to describe low-status white individuals, particularly white trash, given that trash may be dehumanizing.

Film director John Waters once claimed that white trash is “the last racist thing you can say and get away with” (Wray, 2013: 251). Waters was suggesting that white trash was a racialized term that elicits prejudice toward a particular white subgroup. However, Waters claimed that white trash was the last racist term,
suggesting that other terms used to describe low-status white groups, such as redneck, are not perceived as negatively as white trash. While redneck and white trash are often used interchangeably, Waters suggests that there may be different stereotypes associated with the two terms, and Davies (2010) and Hartigan’s (2005) findings suggest that he may be correct in his assessment of white trash as especially prejudiced. Thus, it is important to explore how these labels may influence perceptions of white subgroups, particularly low-status white groups.

As reviewed, labels can negatively influence perceptions of individuals (Hall et al., 2014; Phelan, 1997). However, research has yet to explore how labels, such as white, white trash, and redneck, may similarly influence perceptions of white subgroups. These labels may differentially shape perceptions of white individuals: particularly low-status white individuals.

**Characterizing Whites, Redneck, and White Trash**

In order to understand why attitudes may differ toward individuals who are labeled white, redneck, or white trash, it is important to understand the differences in characteristics associated with each label. Whiteness is often associated with middle-class status (Morris, 2005), as white individuals enjoy greater access to wealth and power than other racial groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Thus, the general term used to refer to white individuals, whites, is associated with middle-class status (Morris, 2005). However, not all white individuals are middle-class. Low-SES white individuals that deviate from mainstream, middle-class white individuals are often referred to as redneck or white trash, which are stigmatized terms used to distinguish mainstream white individuals from poor white individuals (Wray, 2006).
The label *redneck* was originally used to describe a farmer whose neck was red from sunburn after working in the field all day (Cassidy & Hall, 1985). As a result, the origin of this label stems from hard work and is associated with productivity. However, the stereotypes associated with *redneck* today deviate from the origin of the term, as *redneck* is now stereotypically defined as uneducated, dirty, prejudiced, and morally deficit (Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Redneck, 2016).

Unlike *redneck*, which was originally used to reflect someone who worked hard, the label *white trash* was originally used to describe a filthy, lazy, poor white person (Wray, 2006). *White trash* people today are still largely characterized as dirty, lazy, uneducated, poor, and immoral (Davies, 2010; Hartigan, 2005; Shirley, 2010; Wray, 2006).

**Comparing Whites, Rednecks, and White Trash**

*Whites versus redneck/white trash.* While high-status white individuals, *whites*, are stereotypically wealthier and more educated than racial minorities (Morris, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) low-status white individuals, *rednecks and white trash*, are stereotyped for deviating from this traditional perception of *whites* (Wray, 2006; Hartigan, 2005). Both *redneck* and *white trash* are characterized by similar stereotypes, such as uneducated, prejudiced, and poor (Hartigan, 2005; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002).

The stereotypes associated with *white trash* and *redneck* are important to understand in analyzing perceptions of these groups as these stereotypes historically have justified prejudice against low-status white individuals. For instance, the Eugenics movement of the early twentieth century was largely supported by a popular
belief that the genes of low-status white individuals were contaminating the gene pool and negatively impacting society (Wray, 2006). As a result, the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924 was passed to allow involuntary sterilization of low-status white women to prevent the reproduction of “bad genes” (Wray, 2006).

**Redneck versus white trash.** While both *redneck* and *white trash* signify poor white individuals, there appear to be subtle differences in characterization of the terms. Furthermore, there is a difference between how rednecks characterize themselves and how mainstream white individuals characterize them (Davies, 2010; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002).

Mainstream white individuals characterize rednecks as racist, offensive, uneducated, and inbred (Hartigan, 2005; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Redneck, 2016). However, self-identified rednecks argue that they are not racist and that white trash people are instead racist (Davies, 2010). This distinction is important because if people labeled redneck are perceived to be offensive and racist (Hartigan, 2005), then this label may cause rednecks to be derogated.

Furthermore, self-identified rednecks pride themselves in their Southern identity and their endorsement of mainstream values such as cleanliness, hard work, family, and marriage in order to further distance themselves from white trash (Davies, 2010). Both mainstream white individuals and self-identified rednecks characterize white trash as lazier, dirtier, and more immoral than themselves (Davies, 2010; Hartigan, 2013; Shirley, 2010). Mainstream white individuals and self-identified rednecks also use white trash to describe a white subgroup with the lowest social standing (Davies, 2010; Hartigan, 2013). As a result, white trash may be perceived
most negatively as individuals labeled *white trash* serve a crucial role of being the bottom of a white social hierarchy: specifying *redneck* and *whites* as socially superior (Hartigan, 2013).

Researchers agree that groups characterized as *rednecks* are more moral, clean, hardworking, and Southern than *white trash* (Davies, 2010; Hartigan, 2005; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). However, this literature conflicts in the characterization of *rednecks* as more educated, open-minded, family oriented, and wealthier than *white trash* (Davies, 2010; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Redneck, 2016). Thus, my research aims to explore these conflicting findings of past literature by assessing whether the differences in characteristics used to describe *white trash* and *redneck* are based on the aforementioned characterizations.

In conclusion, the labels used to describe different white groups, *whites*, *redneck*, and *white trash*, may negatively influence perceptions of low-status white subgroups. While the characteristics associated with *whites* are largely positive (middle-class, privileged, etc.), the characteristics associated with *redneck* and *white trash* are negative. *Redneck* and *white trash* are similar in that they are used to distinguish low-status white individuals from traditional, middle-class white individuals (*whites*), but there are differences in how they are stereotyped: *white trash* are expected to be seen as dirtier than *rednecks* and *rednecks* as more Southern than *white trash*. These differences in characteristics between *redneck* and *white trash* may cause *white trash* to be perceived as the white group with the lowest social standing.
Current Research

The current research explored perceptions of white individuals based on three different labels used to describe white subgroups. First, I examined the characteristics used to describe three labels: white, white trash, and redneck. Then, I analyzed attitudes toward individuals described as one of these three labels. Finally, I explored whether reflecting on one of these three labels influenced white people’s endorsement of traditional values.

Characteristics. I analyzed the characteristics associated with each of three labels: whites, redneks, and white trash. I hypothesized that whites would generally be characterized as middle-class and privileged (Morris, 2005). I also hypothesized that both white trash and redneck would be characterized as uneducated and poor (Hartigan, 2005; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). I expected that white trash would be characterized as dirtier and lazier than rednecks, whereas rednecks would be characterized as Southern more often than white trash (Davies, 2010).

The influence of labeling on attitudes. I assessed attitudes toward the three labels. I expected whites to be characterized positively. On the other hand, because I hypothesized that the characteristics of white trash and rednecks to be generally negative, I expected that attitudes toward these groups would be negative. Lastly, I expected that white trash would be perceived more negatively than rednecks.

Endorsement of mainstream values. Finally, I tested whether exposure to the labels white trash and redneck would influence white participants’ endorsement of mainstream values. The mainstream public perceives characteristics such as educational attainment, strong familial ties, and cleanliness/hygiene as ideals (Hoy,
1995; Wilson, 1996). *White trash* and *redneck* are often characterized as deviating from these mainstream ideals. As a result, I expected that exposure to the labels *redneck* and *white trash* would cause participants to decrease support for mainstream values relative to those exposed to *whites*.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 151 White Americans (54.4% female; age: \( M = 35.24, SD = 11.87 \)) who were recruited from Turk Prime in exchange for $.50. I asked brief demographics before allowing participants to continue with the study to ensure that only US born, self-identified whites could participate. After removing four participants for failing attention checks (not selecting a specific response when asked), 147 participants remained. The demographic questions and all other measures can be seen in Appendix A.

**Procedure and Measures**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: *white trash*, *rednecks*, and *whites*, and they were asked to list characteristics and report attitudes toward the group to which they were assigned. Finally, participants reported how much they personally endorse mainstream values.

**Characteristics.** Each participant was asked to generate a list of characteristics associated with one of the three labels (i.e. “What characteristics come to mind when you think about *white trash/rednecks/whites*?”). Two independent coders then categorized each participant’s response.
Redneck or White Trash?

Coding procedure. Two independent coders, blind to condition, analyzed responses. The coders characterized the responses into fourteen categories that reflect the stereotypes associated with one of the three identity groups. These characteristics come from the stereotypes derived from previous literature (i.e. “uneducated,” “dirty,” “racist”) as well as a few stereotypes that became apparent after examining responses (i.e. “overweight,” “country”) (Hartigan, 2005; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002). Three additional categories were included that reflect common characteristics of whites (privilege, majority, dominant) making a total of seventeen characteristics. Characteristics that did not fall into these categories were coded as “other,” and were not included in analyses. See Table 1 below for all categories and sample characteristics.

Percent reported. Each response was coded as either 0-no or 1-yes for the presence of a characteristic within a given response, regardless of how many times the characteristic appeared. For instance, if a participant reported that white trash were uneducated and dumb, it would be coded as 1 for the category “education.” The percent reported was calculated by adding the total number of times each category appeared within a given condition (white, white trash, or redneck) and then divided by the number of participants in that condition.

Percentage of agreement. In order to assess reliability for qualitative coding between two coders, I used percentage of agreement, which is the most frequently used measure of validity (Smith, 2000). The percentage of agreement in this study was high: 96.59% for white trash condition, 94.63% for redneck condition, and 88.89% for the white condition.
Attitudes toward identity groups. Participants reported their attitudes toward groups that were labeled as whites, white trash, or rednecks. Attitudes were measured using a feeling thermometer with a scale of 0-100 ($M = 51.83$, $SD = 33.59$), with 0 reflecting very negative feelings and 100 reflecting very positive feelings toward the group.

Endorsement of mainstream values. Participants were then asked to rate their agreement on a scale of 1-7 for each of nineteen statements assessing endorsements of traditional values. ($M = 4.64$, $SD = .94$). These mainstream values reflect the same traditional values that white trash and redneck are stereotyped as deviating from (i.e. education, hard work, strong family ties). Three of the statements come from previous research testing endorsement of values (Bennett, Choi, & Papandrea, 2007; Hojat et al., 2000). Sample statements include: (a) “Education is necessary to be successful,” (b) “It is important to have a clean home,” (c) “It is important for children to have a mother and a father,” (d) “Violence is never acceptable,” and (e) “Illegal drug use is harmful to society.” Responses to all nineteen questions were averaged to create a mean composite score for endorsement of mainstream values ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = .94$).

Results

Characteristics

Whites versus redneck/white trash. The characteristics used to describe whites differed from those used to describe white trash and rednecks. The most common characteristics used to describe whites were “privileged” (appeared in 12% of descriptions of whites), “majority” (14%), and “smart” (17%). These
characteristics were not used a single time to describe *white trash* or *rednecks*. *White trash* and *rednecks*, instead, were characterized with negative characteristics, such as “stupid,” “poor parenting,” and “violent.”

**White trash versus redneck.** While *white trash* and *redneck* were described similarly with terms such as poor, uneducated, and lazy, there were some differences in their characterization. See Table 1.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Examples for White Trash and Redneck</th>
<th>% White Trash</th>
<th>% Redneck</th>
<th>Examples for Whites</th>
<th>% White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>“uneducated” “stupidity”</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>“smart”</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness*</td>
<td>“Dirty Clothes,” “messy”</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>“lots of kids” “poor parenting”</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>“family-oriented”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes</td>
<td>“Cigs”</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>“binge drinking”</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>“love craft beer”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal Drugs</td>
<td>“meth drugs” “guns” “beat their wives”</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>“Aggressive”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudiced*</td>
<td>“racist” “bigot”</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>“poor” “low income”</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>“wealthy”</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>“lazy”</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>“hardworking”</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>“sluts” “tight clothing”</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>“overweight”</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>“fat”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country/Rural*</td>
<td>“country” “rural”</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>“suburban”</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern*</td>
<td>“Southern”</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>“in the South”</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>“privileged”</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>“historic majority”</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>“dominant”</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * signifies a significant difference (p < .05) in characterization across redneck and white trash conditions.
Participants described *white trash* as dirty more often than they characterized *rednecks* as dirty $\chi^2(1) = 17.36, p < .001$. Participants were more likely to describe *rednecks* as racist, $\chi^2(1) = 4.57, p = .03$, country, $\chi^2(1) = 8.09, p = .04$, and Southern, $\chi^2(1) = 6.36, p = .01$, than they were to characterize *white trash* that way.

**Attitudes Toward the Different Groups**

A one-way ANOVA assessed differences in attitudes toward groups. The omnibus test was significant, $F(2,144) = 60.95, p < .0001, \omega = .67$. I examined specific comparisons using the LSD post-hoc correction. Attitudes toward *white trash* ($M = 25.2, SD = 26.3$) were more negative than attitudes toward *rednecks* ($M = 40.6, SD = 31$), $p = .005$. Attitudes toward *whites* ($M = 78.6, SD = 17$) were more positive than they were toward *rednecks*, $p < .0001$ and *white trash*, $p < .0001$. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Warmth Toward Groups*

Note: Error bars represent standard error of the mean.
Endorsement of Traditional Values

A one-way ANOVA examined whether endorsement of traditional values varied by condition. The omnibus test was significant, \( F(2,144) = 3.33, p = .039, \omega = .18 \). I examined specific comparisons using the LSD post-hoc correction. Respondents endorsed traditional values less in the white trash condition (\( M = 4.49, SD = .93 \)) than in the whites (\( M = 4.88, SD = 1 \)) condition, \( p = .042 \). Respondents were also less likely to endorse traditional values in the redneck condition (\( M = 4.47, SD = .82 \)) than in the whites condition, \( p = .024 \). There were no differences between the white trash (\( M = 4.49, SD = .93 \)) and redneck (\( M = 4.47, SD = .82 \)) conditions, \( p = .953 \). See Figure 2.

Discussion

This study revealed that white trash and rednecks are perceived more negatively than whites, suggesting that white subgroups are perceived differently.
Stereotypical characteristics of *whites* were positive and focused on high social status markers, such as being middle-class and hardworking. On the other hand, characteristics of *white trash* and *rednecks* were negative and focused on low social status markers, such as being uneducated. These findings support my hypothesis that *redneck* and *white trash* labels are similarly characterized as deviant from mainstream qualities, such as being educated and having a high-status job.

This research further supported my hypothesis that the characterization of *white trash* and *redneck* were similar in some areas (such as being poor and uneducated), while they deviated in other areas (cleanliness and geographic region). *White trash* were more likely to be characterized as dirty than *rednecks*, and *rednecks* were more likely to be characterized as Southern, country, and prejudiced than *white trash*. However, my findings did not align with the original depiction of *redneck* as hardworking (Cassidy & Hall, 1985); lack of productivity appeared in 8% of the responses in both the *white trash* and *redneck* conditions.

The feeling thermometer measure also supported my hypothesis that *white trash* and *rednecks* are viewed more negatively than *whites* by White Americans. Furthermore, *rednecks* were perceived more favorably than *white trash*. Also consistent with hypotheses, participants reported lower endorsement of mainstream values in the *white trash* and *redneck* conditions relative to the *whites* condition.

**Limitations and Further Directions**

While the results are consistent with hypotheses, they are not without limitations. I collected data from a wide sample of participants across the US. Participants’ geographical location may have influenced their perceptions of these
labels. Because *rednecks* are described as Southern, Southern participants may have perceived this term more favorably than non-Southern participants. Future studies could control for this regional difference to determine whether my results hold for participants who reside in the American South.

Similarly, my sample included participants of various socioeconomic backgrounds, and participants’ socioeconomic status (SES) may have influenced their perceptions of labels used to describe low-status white groups. For example, low-SES white individuals may feel more favorably toward these groups than middle or high-SES white individuals. Future studies could ask participants to report their own SES and control for this to determine whether it affects results.

Furthermore, this study used white participants and did not measure perceptions of low-status individuals by non-white groups. Future studies could examine a more racially diverse sample.

**Implications**

This research informs the literature on the influence of labeling on perceptions of social groups. As predicted, labels used to describe low-status white individuals negatively influenced perceptions of those individuals. As a result, the negative stereotypes used to describe *white trash* and *redneck* may serve to justify a classist and prejudiced perception toward poor whites. For example, the portrayal of low-status whites as “lazy” and “uneducated” may justify their lower class status and thus justify a prejudiced perception of this group. As a result, elite white individuals can justify their own higher social standing without feeling compelled to minimize social inequality.
The characterization of *rednecks* as prejudiced and biased may rationalize intolerance toward *rednecks*. Similarly, the characterization of *white trash* as dirty may elicit more negative attitudes toward this group, as cleanliness is positively related to perceptions of morality (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006). This perception of *white trash* as dirty and thus immoral may rationalize ostracizing groups identified as *white trash*.

These findings are important given the present day use of the terms *white trash* and *redneck*. Steven Avery, the focus of Netflix’s hit documentary series, *Making a Murderer*, was wrongfully convicted of rape and spent eighteen years in prison. This tragedy may have been a result of Avery’s low-status, as his community viewed him and his family as *white trash* (Donahue, 2016; Benincasa, 2016). Additionally, Damien Echols was wrongfully convicted of the molestation and murder of three young boys, and he argues that this occurred because he was perceived as *white trash* (Ramsey, 2012). The wrongful conviction of these two men based on their low-status suggests that the negative connotations associated with low-status white group labels, such as *white trash* and *redneck*, can have severe consequences. Similarly, these findings support my hypothesis that labeling Paula Jones *white trash* may have led media outlets and the public to distrust her allegations against Clinton.

**Conclusion**

Overall, I found that white participants characterized *whites* positively and *rednecks* and *white trash* negatively. Similarly, white participants perceived white groups labeled *whites* more favorably than white groups labeled *white trash* or
redneck. The terms *white trash* and *redneck* are largely used to describe low-status groups. These groups are associated with negative characteristics and seen as deviant from traditional values, which may justify classist and prejudiced attitudes toward low-status white groups.
References


Appendix A

AMAZON MTurk Hit Description- One study
“Perceptions of White Trash”

In this research, you will first respond to a short demographic questionnaire. Your responses will determine whether or not you qualify for the study.

In the study, you will be asked to list characteristics that you associate with a term. It should take less than 10 minutes to complete the entire hit.

This study is to be accessed through a separate link. Please open the link in a separate tab in your browser and answer the brief selection questions. If you qualify, complete the study. You will be given a confirmation code to verify your work at the end, which you will enter below.

Please enter the code you were given: _______________

(NOTE: The link will be included after the study is programmed.)
Screening measures:

1. What is your gender?  
   _____ Female  
   _____ Male  
   _____ Other

2. What is your age?  
   ____________

3. Were you born in the United States?  
   a.) Yes  
   b.) No (Please specify your country of origin ________)

Logic Skip for 3b:  
How long have you lived in the U.S?

4. When it comes to politics, do you usually consider yourself to be liberal, conservative, or moderate? Please use the scale to indicate your response.  

   0-----------------1-----------------2-----------------3-----------------4-----------------5-----------------6

Very Liberal

Moderate

Very Conservative

5. When it comes to religion, how do you identify?  
   _____ Christian  
   _____ Muslim  
   _____ Jewish  
   _____ Buddhist  
   _____ Hindu  
   _____ Sikh  
   _____ Other: ____________

6. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?  
   _____ Elementary school  
   _____ Some high school  
   _____ High school diploma or equivalent  
   _____ Some college  
   _____ 2-year college degree  
   _____ 4-year college degree  
   _____ Masters degree/ advanced certificate  
   _____ Ph.D., MD, JD or other advanced professional degree

6. What is your race/ethnicity? (anyone not identifying as White/European American will be excluded from the study)  
   _____ Black/African American  
   _____ Asian/Asian American  
   _____ Latino/Hispanic American  
   _____ Native American/American Indian
_____ White/European American
_____ Arab/Middle Eastern American
_____ Other (Please Specify________________)

7. Please list your state of residence. ____________

8. How long have you lived here? ____________
You have qualified for participation.

Consent Form

I state that I am over 18 years of age and agree to participate in this research being conducted by Chase Knowles and Professor Clara Wilkins of the Wesleyan University Psychology Department.

If I consent, I will be asked to list characteristics associated with terms used to refer to social groups. The risks associated with participating in this research are no more than those encountered in everyday life.

If I consent, I understand that researchers do not have access to any of my personal information connected to my MTurk worker number. I understand that only group-level data will be reported, and that my individual response will not be identified in any publication of the results.

I understand that signing this consent form is voluntary and I am free to discontinue at any time and to not answer any questions.

I understand that I will receive $.50 for participation in the study described above. Even if I chose not to answer every question, I must proceed to the end of the survey to receive the relevant code to enter into MTurk for compensation.

Finally, I understand that if I have any comments, questions, or concerns following the experiment, I may contact Chase Knowles (tknowles@wesleyan.edu) or Dr. Clara Wilkins (clwilkins@wesleyan.edu). If I have any complaints about the experiment or questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact Dr. Andrea Patalano, Chair of the Wesleyan Psychology Department (860-685-2310).

_____ I agree to continue with the survey
_____ I do NOT wish to continue with the survey
Instructions: Please use the following scales to rate how much you agree or disagree with the statement given. Please respond with your initial gut response. There are no right or wrong answers.

Status Legitimizing Beliefs
1. America is a just society where differences in status between groups reflect actual group differences.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

2. Differences in status between different groups are fair.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

3. Differences in status between different groups are the result of injustice.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

4. It is unfair that certain groups have poorer living conditions than others groups.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

5. America is an open society where individuals of any group can achieve higher status.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

6. Advancement in American society is possible for all individuals.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree                              Strongly Agree

White Trash Condition:
1. What characteristics come to mind when you think about “white trash”?

2. How do you feel about white trash?

   0-----10-----20-----30-----40-----50-----60-----70-----80-----90-----100
   Very
   Cold
   Warm

3. We want to ensure that you are paying attention. Please choose the option, “A.”
   1. A
   2. B
   3. C

**Rednecks Condition:**

1. What characteristics come to mind when you think about “rednecks”?

2. How do you feel about “rednecks”?

   0-----10-----20-----30-----40-----50-----60-----70-----80-----90-----100
   Very
   Cold
   Warm

3. We want to ensure that you are paying attention. Please choose the option, “A.”
   1. A
   2. B
   3. C

**Whites Condition:**

1. What characteristics come to mind when you think about “whites”?

2. How do you feel about “whites”?

   0-----10-----20-----30-----40-----50-----60-----70-----80-----90-----100
   Very
   Cold
   Warm

3. We want to ensure that you are paying attention. Please choose the option, “A.”
   1. A
   2. B
   3. C
Perception of Values (randomly generated order)

1. It is important for children to have a mother and a father.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

2. Marriage is important for society.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

3. It is important for children to have two parents.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

4. It is important to maintain a high level of body hygiene.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

5. It is important to graduate high school to be successful.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

6. It is important to graduate college to be successful.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

7. It is okay to be violent when standing up for what you believe in.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree

8. Violence is never acceptable.
   0--------1--------2--------3--------4--------5--------6
   Strongly Disagree
   Strongly Agree
9. Illegal drug use is harmful to society.
   0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
   Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

10. Drug abuse is a victimless crime.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

11. Divorce is harmful to society.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

12. Education is necessary to be successful.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

13. Illegitimate birth is bad for society.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

14. Sex between two parents before marriage is acceptable.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

15. It is important to have a clean home.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

16. It should be made easier to get a divorce.
    0---------1---------2---------3---------4---------5---------6
    Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
17. If a boy gets a girl pregnant, he should marry her.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. Parents should stay together for the sake of children, even if they don’t get along.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. The cultural values of our forefathers are important to me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. How similar do you think “white trash” is to whites?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very Similar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. How similar do you think “redneck” is to whites?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Very Similar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1-2-3-4-5-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you for taking part in this study. Participants in this study all were randomly assigned to generate characteristics associated with one of three terms: “white trash”, “redneck”, and “whites”. Then, participants were asked to assess their attitudes towards categories typically associated with “white trash” and “rednecks”: education, drugs, cleanliness, economic activity, and familial structure. We are particularly interested in exploring how attitudes towards these categories impact perceptions towards “white trash” and “redneck” identities.

It is important to recognize that the procedures and measures used in this study are meant to examine general tendencies and do not say anything about you in particular. If you would like more information about this research or have further questions about the study, please feel free to contact Chase Knowles at tknowles@wesleyan.edu or Dr. Clara Wilkins at clwilkins@wesleyan.edu. Please note that we cannot ensure the confidentiality of information sent via email.

Thank you again for taking part in this study.

If interested in learning more about this topic, check out the following New York Times article discussing the white lower class: