A Systems Psychodynamic Perspective on the Persistence of Racial Inequality at Work

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses systems psychodynamic concepts to develop theory about the persistence of racial inequality in U.S. companies, treating White men as the dominant group and Black people as an illustrative subordinate group. We theorize that this persistence is rooted in organizational pressures on White men to emulate idealized images of White masculinity, which provoke persistent, unconscious anxiety about failing to embody such images; to fend off this anxiety, organizations and their members mobilize a multi-level defense system. White men use projective identification, an unconscious psychological defense mechanism, whereby they disown feelings that belie their desired masculine image, e.g., feelings of incompetence; project them onto Black people; and treat Black people in a manner intended to evoke those self-same feelings in them, enabling White men to externalize doubts about their self-worth. We further propose that organization-level discourses of rationality, meritocracy, and colorblindness function as an unconscious social defense that fuels these dynamics while diverting attention away from them by constructing a substitute problem: Black peoples’ “shortcomings.” Meanwhile, the real problem—work contexts that threaten White men’s self-worth—remains hidden, and racial inequality persists. We offer guidance on how to interrupt these dynamics by building holding environments in which White men can safely acknowledge and metabolize their anxiety. We conclude by offering theoretical contributions to organizational inequality, masculinity, and systems psychodynamics literatures.
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In U.S. firms, people of color and White women lag behind their White male counterparts in securing power and influence associated with high-level positions, contributing to an unchanging race and gender gap in seniority, income, and wealth (Helms, 2020; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). A multi-billion-dollar industry supplying diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has emerged to help leaders solve the problems of inequality in their organizations (Mehta, 2019). Examples include interventions designed to eliminate bias in workplace practices, such as hiring (Castilla & Rho, 2019) and evaluation (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019); employee trainings on the psychological foundations of identity-based inequalities in organizations, including feedback on participants’ biases and prescriptions for personal change (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt, 2015; Naff & Kellough, 2003); formal mentoring and networking programs intended to reduce underrepresented groups’ exclusion from career-enhancing relationships and eliminate gaps in access to valuable feedback and career opportunities (Kalev, 2009; Srivastava, 2015); and employee resource groups (ERGs), organizationally sanctioned groups comprising employees who share a salient identity and come together for support and networking and to advocate for change (Douglas, 2008; Welbourne, Rolf, & Schlachter, 2017).

To date and to the best of our knowledge, none of these initiatives has succeeded in changing behavior over the long term or sustaining the advancement of subordinated group members into positions of authority (Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011; Paluck, & Green, 2009; Paluck, Green,

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1 We capitalize the words “Black” and “White” throughout this article. Capitalizing “Black” gives necessary weight to an identity that has been pressed upon people of African descent and involves much more than color. Capitalizing “White” affirms the racialization of a group of people whose members too often see themselves as without race, and further, removes the signaling (via lowercase “w”) of Whiteness as the standard and norm.
Green, 2019). What emerges is a portrait of stubborn persistence: individuals and organizations maintain patterns of thought and action that replicate and solidify societal inequalities despite significant investments aimed at reducing them.

This paper generates theory that helps explain this persistence. We take as a starting point for our theorizing both the dysfunctional nature of inequality and its intransigence in organizations: inequalities unequivocally diminish individuals, organizations, and societies yet are ubiquitous and long-standing (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Persistent, dysfunctional patterns in organizations point to the possibility of concealed, psychological underpinnings—processes that are unavailable for conscious reflection because their very purpose is to divert attention away from disturbing feelings while ostensibly serving a more honorable purpose. In short, it is precisely because such dynamics are unavailable to consciousness that they persist, even as they undermine seemingly functional stated intentions.

We are not the first to recognize how unconscious forces shape race relations. Nearly seventy years ago, Allport (1954) pointed to such forces when he posited that the roots of discrimination and racism lie in dominant groups’ unconscious tendency to externalize problems of discomfort and feelings of weakness onto a scapegoat. Rather than focus, as he did, on the consequences of such scapegoating for subordinated groups, we are interested in explaining the dominant group’s psychological process of externalizing and how its embeddedness in organizations maintains—and hides—that process, keeping subordinated groups from receiving opportunities and advancing in organizations.

Specifically, we draw on systems psychodynamic theory (Menzies-Lyth, 1990; Miller & Rice, 1967; for a review, see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020) to explore how interlocking unconscious maneuvers at individual, intergroup, and organizational levels may reinforce norms,
practices, and patterns of interaction that lock inequality in place. We begin by illustrating key concepts in the theory, examining in depth projective identification as an unconscious defensive process rooted in individuals’ anxiety and buttressed by organizational arrangements, called social defenses. We then trace the action of projective identification across levels of analysis, using as our context the persistence of racial inequality in U.S. companies. While we name White men as the dominant group, we make no assumption that all White men are the same. For illustrative purposes, we reference Black people as the subordinate group in modern U.S. organizations and similarly make no assumption that all Black people are subordinate. Finally, we explain how promoting individual and organizational growth and development can interrupt these defensive processes in organizations, paving the way for greater workplace equality.

**SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY: KEY CONCEPTS**

To examine the possibility of unacknowledged, hidden investments in maintaining inequality, we focus on unconscious processes within individuals and organizations, which have proven instrumental in understanding the persistence of dysfunctional systemic patterns (Clarke, 1999; Miller & Rice, 1967; Pratt & Crosina, 2016). Evidence across numerous disciplines points to how people’s behavior and motivations are routinely and unwittingly shaped by unconscious forces (Barsade, Ramarajan & Westen, 2009; Schacter, Addis, & Buckner 2007). These forces often feature intrapsychic processes that overwhelm ordinary capacities of judgment and perspective (Clarke, 1999, 2003; Davids, 2011; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Systems psychodynamic theory provides a theoretical base from which to investigate systemic inequality as a function of the interplay between such intrapsychic mechanisms and the organizational arrangements that reinforce and sustain them (see Bion, 1955; Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960). This perspective is key to uncovering how the unconscious routines individuals use to manage
complex emotions shape and are shaped by organizational norms, practices, and structures.

Central to the systems psychodynamics perspective is the premise that individuals employ unconscious defenses to protect themselves from the conscious experience of anxiety (Hinshelwood, 2001; Miller & Rice, 1967). Anxiety involves distress, which presents as intense, excessive, and persistent unease (Kohut, 1971). Profound anxiety arises from circumstances that challenge a person’s ability to think of themself as valued and valuable, such as when an identity around which they have organized their self-worth (ego) is threatened (Vaillant, 1993). Anxiety can also develop in response to the possibility of isolation (Miller, 1959), the threat of losing individual agency and control (Smith & Berg, 1987), or threats to one’s very existence, as in confrontations with mortality (Menzies, 1960).

In their desire to avoid experiencing anxiety, people unconsciously resort to psychological defense mechanisms, which help regulate emotions that arise when experiencing such threats (Kohut, 1971). Defense mechanisms can be adaptive when they allow people to hold onto and consciously work with anxiety. Adaptive ego defenses (such as humor) meter rather than remove affect, reduce pain rather than anesthetize, and channel rather than block feelings (Vaillant, 1993). Maladaptive defenses (such as denial) abdicate personal responsibility through, for example, externalization as when individuals unconsciously seek to rid themselves of anxiety by acting as if it belongs elsewhere (Vaillant, 1993).

We focus in this paper on the maladaptive use of projective identification, a classic psychological defense mechanism people use to ease anxiety by unconsciously splitting off the unwanted, disavowed, anxiety-provoking “parts” of themselves; projecting them onto an external object, or “other,” by contriving those parts as belonging to the other and not to the self; and, when possible, treating the other in a manner intended to evoke in them an experience analogous
to the projector’s split-off parts (Clarke, 1999, 2003; Klein, 1959). The projector then selectively ignores real aspects of the other that may contradict or invalidate the projection (Shapiro & Carr, 1991), leaving the projector with a strong, clarifying sense of a purified self and a diminished other (Clarke, 2003). In this way, the other serves as object in relation to whom the projector can (dis)identify with their disowned parts. In short, “[p]rojection,” writes Dalal (2002: 32), “is a way of hiding things from oneself.”

This (a)voiding of one’s unwanted parts is a form of unconscious identity work (see Petriglieri & Stein, 2012), undertaken in the spirit of the old adage, “the best defense is a good offense.” Although people employ a variety of unconscious defense mechanisms, such as denial and repression, to fend off anxiety, projective identification is unique in comprising not only intrapsychic maneuvers but also an interpersonal component (Gabriel, 1999; Horowitz, 1985): the projector manages conflicting elements within the self by offloading the disturbing parts onto an “other” and enlisting the other to take up those parts on their behalf—offensive tactics that serve to defend against threats to the self (Bion, 1961; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012).

As an example, think here of J. Edgar Hoover, a closeted homosexual who “for half a century waged war on homosexuals . . .” (Summers, 2011). In projective identification terms, he can be said to have been disavowing a shameful part of his self, a part that threatened his self-image as a “good” person and thus evoked in him great anxiety; locating that part in others, where he could more safely demonize it; and persecuting those others as a way to simultaneously detoxify himself and invoke in them the very experience of shame he wished to avoid. By repudiating others for an identity he could not tolerate in himself—an identity widely regarded at the time as morally reprehensible—he could keep his unconscious anxiety at bay. This analysis is consistent with research showing that men who expressed stronger negative attitudes toward
gay men reported less—but evidenced more—physical arousal when watching videos of gay male intercourse (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1996), suggesting that homophobic men who are sexually attracted to other men may denigrate gay men as a cover for their own “lurking insecurities” (Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2013: 981).

Projective identification processes have been demonstrated empirically. For example, compared to participants told they scored low on dishonesty, those told they scored high rated a target higher and, subsequently, themselves lower on that trait—evidence that the act of ascribing a negative self-attribute to another (projection) enhances one’s self-image on that attribute (projective identification) (Schimel, Greenberg, & Martens, 2003). Qualitative field studies have shown how projectors behave in ways unconsciously intended to evoke targets’ compliance with their projections. For example, an ethnographic study of a natural food cooperative, whose hybrid mission contained an inherent tension between idealism (related to communal values) and pragmatism (related to business practices), showed how members used projective identification to manage the anxiety arising from that duality. Splitting the dualism into valued and devalued parts, members settled into two distinct subgroups, each taking up the part it valued and projecting onto the other the part it devalued. Members then orchestrated board meeting interactions to ensure that the opposing (projected) point of view was expressed, even as they outwardly disagreed with it. Through mutual projective identification, this arrangement maintained the dynamic equilibrium between idealism and pragmatism that all members understood to be necessary for the organization to sustain its operations (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). (For additional examples of mutual splitting, projection, and projective identification, see Petriglieri et al., 2018, and Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020.)
People under threat frequently use groups—both identity and organizational groups—as the focus of their projections, as in the above Hoover and food cooperative examples, respectively. Targeted groups are associated with stereotypes or other features that make them vulnerable or receptive targets for projectors’ split-off parts. Relatedly, people tend to project their “unwanted emotional elements . . . downward in terms of hierarchy and status” (Krantz, 2001: 53); hence targets are often members of relatively low-power groups. Several studies are illustrative. For example, research participants derogated a member of a group negatively stereotyped on dimensions on which they recalled having experienced failure; in one scenario, the target was a woman, and in another, a Black person (Govorun, Fuegen, & Payne, 2006). Likewise, participants who received negative feedback about their intelligence derogated a member of a stereotyped group (a hypothetical Jewish job applicant); derogating the stereotyped-other subsequently restored participants’ threatened self-image (Fein & Spencer, 1997). In another study, these same researchers gave participants either credible or non-credible feedback about their intelligence and then showed them a description of a man that included information suggesting he was either gay or straight. Those whose self-image was threatened and who read the description of the gay man rated the man higher on negative stereotypical dimensions and themselves as more dissimilar to him than did participants in the other three conditions (Fein & Spencer, 1997).

If a group is not easily accessible, some have argued, those seeking to off-load their anxiety-provoking parts may establish oppressive institutions in order to create one. “If the Jew did not exist,” Sartre (1976: 13) wrote, “the anti-Semite would invent him.” When enacted in the context of intergroup inequality, projective identification is particularly potent as high-power groups have the means not only to press low-power groups into service to meet their unconscious
needs but also to cover their tracks in the process (Alderfer, 1982; Kahn, 1993; Voronov & Vince, 2012).

Systems psychodynamic scholars have demonstrated a tight interrelatedness between these kinds of maladaptive psychological defenses, on one hand, and collusive organizational arrangements, called social defenses (Menzies, 1960; Miller, 1993), on the other. Social defenses are features of organizational life—such as a workplace structure, work practice, or prevalent discourse—that members create or use collectively and unconsciously to bolster their defenses against anxiety derived from outside threats, internal conflicts, or aspects of their work (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010: 47). “Individuals invest in institutional features that sustain convenient illusions, and then behave as if those features are necessary even if they are dysfunctional”; in short, organization members “animate and protect institutional features that help protect [them].” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020: 424). One example of a social defense comes from a study of nurses who established a set of organizational practices to defend against anxieties raised by daily confrontations with illness and death: they routinely referred to patients by their diseases or bed numbers and instituted shifts that reduced their attachments to patients (Menzies, 1960). This social defense was dysfunctional because it robbed their work of meaning and interfered in their ability to perform their caretaking tasks.

Although members across the power spectrum may be emotionally invested in sustaining such features, high power groups tend to be better served by them. Organizations’ social defenses have not only proved more effective in protecting powerful groups from confronting their unconscious emotional conflicts, they have also surfaced as instrumental in preserving the status quo on behalf of those in power (Kahn, 1993; Padavic et al., 2020).
Psychological defense mechanisms at the individual and intergroup levels, reinforced by social defenses at the organizational level, constitute an organization’s defense system (see Padavic et al., 2020: 95, for a diagramed defense system). The classic example of a defense system comes from the study of nurses fending off collectively held anxiety arising from the challenges of caring for critically ill and dying patients (Menzies, 1960). At the individual level, nurses used depersonalization, a defensive maneuver in which they expressed indifference or cynicism toward their work and treated patients accordingly. At the intergroup level, projective identification between senior and student nurses further relieved senior nurses’ anxiety (although at students’ expense): senior nurses routinely treated the student nurses as if they were irresponsible, splitting off the parts of themselves that felt overwhelmed and projecting them onto their more vulnerable junior counterparts. These defense mechanisms were reinforced by the organization’s social defense—work practices that fortified nurses’ disconnection from patients (e.g., using diseases and bed numbers to identify patients).

The result of such dynamics is a system in which psychological defense mechanisms, bolstered by social defenses, divert attention away from deeply disturbing emotions that arise from threatening aspects of the work or work context, while at the same time creating a substitute problem. In the nurse example above, the defense system, which rendered their work meaningless, gave rise to another problem: student nurses’ burnout and turnover. While troublesome, this problem was less threatening than confronting the anxiety raised by encounters with mortality, and for this reason it served as a useful substitute problem on which to focus instead. Importantly, the substitute problem is unresolvable precisely because members are invested in keeping its sustaining mechanism—the defense system—intact (and its functioning
invisible) so that it can serve its protective purpose. “The operation of a . . . defense system is thus circular and self-reinforcing” (Padavic et al., 2020: 67).

EXPLAINING THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN ORGANIZATIONS:
A SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Using these concepts, we turn to the problem of persistent racial inequality in U.S. profit-seeking companies, where White men have historically predominated (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Recent historical analyses of capitalism’s inextricable link to slavery provide a backdrop to our theorizing. While the specifics of this link have been rigorously debated (for different perspectives, see Fox-Genovese, 2000; Patterson, 1979; Rockman, 2014; Rosenthal, 2018), most would agree that “slaveholders (and those who bought their products) built an innovative, global, profit-hungry labor regime that contributed to the emergence of the modern [capitalistic] economy” (Rosenthal, 2018: 3). We interrogate how aspects of that “labor regime” in turn foster a set of unconscious dynamics inside organizations that contribute to the persistence of modern racial inequality.

Specifically, we situate our analysis in a work context shaped by capitalism’s demand for employee value measured in economic terms and reified by organizational norms and practices that conflate definitions of competence with idealized images of White masculinity (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Ray, 2019). Such norms and practices shape White men’s sense of self-worth “from the outside in” by setting the standards against which they will be measured, compared, found lacking, and corrected (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998: 298). At the same time, White men’s need for affirmation leads them to appraise themselves, using these same standards to gauge their self-worth “from the inside out” (Covaleski et al., 1998: 299).
White Male Anxiety at Work

From this context arises a subterranean reservoir of White male anxiety stemming from pressures on White men to emulate dominant forms of masculinity, often referred to as “hegemonic masculinity,” or a culture’s “most honored way of being a man” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). In the United States, where the hegemonic ideal is heterosexual, “white, monied, and self-possessed” (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009: 284), such masculinity is assertive, aggressive, competitive, autonomous, strong, decisive, agentic, rational, and emotionally detached (e.g., Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1987, 1995; Kimmel, 1994). Men’s displays of these traits confer status (Ridgeway, 1991; Tiedens, 2001), legitimate their accrual of power (Ridgeway & Correll, 2000), and authorize them to claim privilege, elicit deference, and resist exploitation (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). In short, “[t]he hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (Kimmel, 1994: 125). Whereas few men embody these idealized images, and even archetypal men exhibit contradictions (Kondo, 1990), many men aspire to them, and are judged—by themselves and by others—accordingly.

Hence, men go to great lengths to prove their worth as workers and as men (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity is an identity men strive to achieve by beating “lesser men” in contests of manhood (Kerfoot & Knights, 1993: 672). Those who seek it are “preoccupied with . . . differentiating self by out-performing others [and] validating self by negating others” (Barrett, 1996: 141). Such seekers are “never secure,” however, as they need others “to affirm and reaffirm to themselves and to others who and what they are” (Barrett, 1996: 141; see also Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & William, 2018; Bird, 1996; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Messner, 2005). In this vein, Jacqueline Rose (2021) calls out the “fraudulent
authority” of White hegemonic men who, steeped in the illusory ideal of omnipotence, mastery, and prowess, experience constant if unacknowledged anxiety related to their inevitable failure to live up to that ideal. Empirical research on “precarious manhood” substantiates this view of White men as, on average, chronically insecure, perpetually plagued by doubts (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009). Consistent with group threat theory, White men in Western societies may feel especially threatened by recent social, political, and legal challenges to the legitimacy of White male dominance and by concomitant increases, both real and perceived, in subordinate groups’ entry into positions traditionally reserved for white men (Blalock, 1967).

**Projective Identification and White Male-Black Relations**

We propose that a core mechanism driving persistent racial inequality in the U.S. is White men’s unconscious efforts to fend off these threats by projectively identifying with Black people—a process deeply embedded in the country’s history of institutionalized racism. Some have posited that this history may itself deriving from the emotional needs of the dominant group. As Toni Morrison (1992: 38) argued, to the Pilgrims, who themselves were fleeing persecution, “[n]othing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery.” Race has long been a vehicle through which boundaries have been drawn between oppressor and oppressed, a separation walled off and absolute (Gordon, 2004). Black people’s skin color physically marks them as “other” in a White-dominated society, making them an easily accessible target for Whites’ projective identification. In his comprehensive history of Black oppression in the U.S., *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram Kendi (2016) plainly documents how White men have used the inescapable “stain” of African descendants’ skin to create a social hierarchy that positions Whiteness at the top and Blackness at the bottom. White men, unconsciously grappling with
precarious manhood, thus turn to “a known quarry”—Black people (Davids, 2011: 44)—as a convenient receptacle for their anxiety.

To complete the projective identification process, interactions with Black people are unconsciously geared to evoke in them the very parts White men have unconsciously split off—e.g., feelings of incompetence, marginalization, exclusion. Consider, for example, a systems psychodynamic lens on microaggressions, the subtle, often unconscious acts of exclusion that dominant group members direct towards subordinate group members (Jana & Baran, 2020; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2001; Wells, 1998). Such acts include microassaults—explicitly derogatory verbal or nonverbal attacks intended to hurt others; microinsults—rude, insensitive disparagements of heritage or identity; and microinvalidations—treatment meant to exclude, negate, or nullify others’ thoughts, feelings, or experiences (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007), also known as “gaslighting” (Sweet, 2019). All are defensive maneuvers by which dominant group members unconsciously seek to relocate their own anxiety-provoking experiences in denigrated others, who might then carry those feelings for them. To the extent that these manipulations are unconscious, the motivations underlying them remain invisible to the projector and, often, to the recipient as well (see Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

In such interactions, the nuanced particulars of both parties—say, a White man and a Black person—are embedded within and profoundly shaped by current and historical socio-political factors that mark relations between their respective groups (Alderfer, 1982). From this perspective, what may appear on the surface to be a culturally incompetent, insensitive, or racist interpersonal interaction represents at a deeper level an intergroup dynamic in which a dominant group member has unconsciously targeted a negatively stereotyped subordinate group member to
be the recipient of their unwanted parts; subordinate group members in turn may well lack the power to openly reject those unwanted parts, even as they may or may not internalize or act on them. The societal power illegitimately accorded White men thus licenses them to denigrate others even as it is the source of their own insecurity.

The Defense System: Social Defenses and the Institutionalization of White Men’s Projective Identification in Organizations

White men’s privileged position gives them the institutional power to use organizational discourses and attendant policies and practices as an unconscious social defense in support of their psychological defenses. We focus on three such discourses, each imported from the wider culture—rationality, meritocracy, and colorblindness. Together, these discourses uphold a version of reality that masquerades as “the natural order of the world” (Dalal, 2002: 187), tacitly supporting White men’s disowning of unwanted parts while justifying and maintaining a social hierarchy in which Black people are the unwitting recipients of those parts. This defense system diverts attention away from organizations’ hegemonic masculine norms and the anxieties they provoke in White men and at the same time engineers a substitute problem: Black’s “shortcomings.” While unsettling, this substitute problem is less threatening than the real one, giving rise to a substitute and less troubling anxiety: that a dearth of qualified Black people makes the challenge of hiring and promoting a racially diverse workforce intractable.

**Rationality.** The discourse of rationality, a central tenet of capitalism as manifested in traditional bureaucracies (Weber, 1946, 1981), maintains that organization members should strive to be rational, guided by logic and deductive reasoning, and to eliminate non-rational thought from workplace decisions and interactions (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009; Ritzer, 1996). Insisting on rationality and, conversely, disparaging emotionality as a non-rational basis for
decision-making, makes using or expressing emotions in the workplace taboo. (For an exception, see Hochschild’s, 1983, analysis of how capitalism commercializes and profits from emotion.)

This discourse serves as an unconscious social defense. By pressing organization members to quash feelings, it validates White men for disavowing anxieties raised by precarious masculinity, even as it reinforces the hegemonic masculine norms that provoke such anxieties. Furthermore, by privileging rationality and disparaging emotional expression, this discourse stigmatizes the psychic work White men would need to undertake if they were to consciously name and work with their anxiety in an adaptive way. In short, the discourse of rationality encourages men to disown their disturbing emotions, paving the way for projective identification.

**Meritocracy.** Meritocracy—the idea that power and wealth are vested in people on the basis of qualities they acquire through individual talent, effort, and achievement—is a core tenet of the American Dream (see, e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Lemann, 1999; Longoria, 2009). This idea infuses modern organizations, where employers aspire to hire and promote on the basis of employee merit, an approach widely regarded as fair, legitimate, and opportunity-enhancing (Castilla, 2008; Cooper, 2015; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Scully, 2000). Paradoxically, however, meritocratic systems can permit managers to be less vigilant in their efforts to eliminate bias from employee evaluations, undermining the very meritocratic ideals on which such systems are based (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Dencker, 2009; Monin & Miller, 2001). By promulgating the notion that people rise and fall solely on the basis of their personal merits, organizations justify hierarchies and legitimate people’s standing within them. Meritocracy thus engenders hubris in winners and humiliation in losers (Sandel, 2020).
The discourse of meritocracy, and the policies and practices that flow from it, fuels the unconscious social defense for White men. By justifying their group’s dominant standing and the criteria on which it is based, it helps White men keep precarious masculinity outside of conscious awareness. Moreover, by effectively locating responsibility for failure in people’s personal shortcomings, the discourse of meritocracy problematizes Black people as deficient in the qualifications needed for success, further legitimating their suitability as targets for White men’s projections. In short, systems based on meritocracy maintain that White men have earned their dominant status just as Black people warrant their subordination.

**Colorblindness.** The discourse of colorblindness is “rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted” (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012: 205; see also Plaut, 2002, 2010). In modern organizations, this discourse implies that if race is invisible then it is impossible to discriminate on the basis of it. Yet when race is invisible, it becomes undiscussable and unaddressable (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

This feature of colorblindness serves as part of the social defense by guaranteeing that unconscious dynamics regarding race remain undiscussable. Colorblindness thus relieves White men of the anxiety that their status accrues from unearned racial privilege and further ensures that the racial hierarchy remains intact (for White men’s anxiety about their privileged status, see Craig & Richeson, 2014; Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). In addition, by effectively erasing any racist historical legacies, colorblindness distorts the problem of racial inequality, severing it from the past and denying its systemic embeddedness. The upshot is a woefully impoverished, non-racialized account of racial gaps in the workplace, an account that
directs attention to the wrong problem: how to fix those—a group that just so happens to be disproportionately Black—who fail to measure up.

In sum, these mutually reinforcing discourses and associated policies and practices fuel the projective identification processes that lock racial inequality in place. Rationality proscribes attending to emotions in the workplace, including White men’s anxiety. Meritocracy justifies and maintains the racial hierarchy by constructing White men as deserving their higher status—they earned it—and Black people as deserving their lower one—they lack the qualifications necessary to advance. And colorblindness effectively silences any discussions of race that might raise people’s consciousness about inequality and the deep-rooted, multilevel dynamics driving it.

A substitute problem. This defense system diverts attention away from the real problem—organizational systems that conflate competence with idealized images of White hegemonic masculinity—and redirects it toward a substitute problem: Black peoples’ shortcomings and the challenge they pose for hiring and promoting a racially diverse workforce. Conveniently, this substitute problem is unresolvable (the defense system, methodically but covertly, undermines Black people and keeps them from advancing), giving the organization a perpetual diversion. Meanwhile, the true anxiety—White men’s worries about their own shortcomings—lurks, largely suppressed and unaddressed while wreaking havoc on people and organizations. The result is an invisible, self-reinforcing, protective system that diverts attention away from the real culprit—organizational contexts that breed White male anxiety and equip them with the means to defend against it. So long as the defense system remains intact and its functioning invisible, racial inequality in organizations will persist.
The Costs to White Men of Maladaptive Defense Systems

Projective identification processes and the social defenses that support them pose problems not only for subordinate (target) groups but also for dominant (projector) ones. We are particularly interested in the costs that accrue to the latter—in our case, White men—when defending against anxiety raised by threats to their dominant identity. The most basic cost is time and energy: what White men expend investing in self-protection is simply unavailable for other pursuits (Balbus, 2004).

Another cost is being disconnected from reality. Faced with anxiety but unable to work with and through it, projectors unconsciously turn away from a complex reality and develop their own internal one—a partial and distorted view that can (mis)lead White men down paths destructive not only to others but also to themselves and to outcomes they care about. (See Petriglieri & Stein, 2012, for an illustration of how this dynamic played out at Gucci.) The more decision-making authority and responsibility they have, the more they need to be able to grasp complexity, and thus the steeper this cost.

This distortion also interferes in White men’s ability to engage in complex relations with others (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). Working with those whom one feels embody their unwanted parts is likely to be challenging (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). For example, projective identification precludes the capacity for empathy: lacking the capacity to own their pain, projectors view and experience others not as separate individuals for whom to have empathy but as receptacles for their own disturbing anxiety (Vaillant, 1993). These unacknowledged emotions can lead White men to feel disconnected and alienated (Alderfer, 1992). Constrained by the need to see themselves and others in simplified ways, White men develop inauthentic relationships with one another and with colleagues from subordinated race/gender groups (Balbus, 2004). Thus, White
men remain racially (and gender) illiterate, unable to decode and navigate the realities of a diverse world (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) or to truly understand the meaning and costs—both personal and societal—of their positional privilege (Helms, 2020). This illiteracy undermines the very relationships in which White men might learn about how others experience them or gain insight into themselves as racialized beings (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

**INTERRUPTING THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY**

Below we theorize about how to interrupt the defensive processes that sustain racial inequality: White men must develop the capacity to work productively with their anxiety, and organizations must institutionalize contexts that enable them to do so.

**Institutional Holding Environments: Developing a Capacity for Organizational Containment**

Organizations seeking to help members work with their anxiety rather than defend against it must establish holding environments (Hinshelwood, 2001; Kahn, 2001), intentionally constructed relational contexts in which members can practice “containment”—the capacity to ‘‘absorb, filter or manage difficult or threatening emotions or ideas . . . so that they can be worked with’’ (French & Vince, 1999: 9; see also Bion, 1970). Holding environments enable people to identify and consciously process their unconscious anxieties by allowing them to express, without judgment, seemingly unbearable thoughts and feelings; containing strong emotions; establishing boundaries to protect people from potentially disruptive stimuli that increase anxiety; and offering empathic interpretations that help people arrive at their own insights (Balint, 1954; Modell, 1976; Winnicott, 1965). In holding environments, “unbearable, threatening contents are evacuated, where they are detoxified and returned in a modified, digestible form” (Zienert-Eilts, 2020: 973).
Holding environments are ubiquitous in organizations, though they are usually not labeled as such. Mentoring, group, coworker, manager-subordinate, and consulting relationships can all be temporary holding environments for people struggling with anxiety that threatens to destabilize them and distract them from their tasks. At such times, these relationships offer calm, help, and understanding until the person is “able to regain their equilibrium and continue on their way” (Kahn, 2001: 263). When people’s emotional responses to threatening situations, such as restructuring, global pandemics, unexpected profit losses, layoffs, and lawsuits, render them temporarily unable to function, they may look for or be open to holding environments (Kahn, 2001).

When the space for containment is institutionalized—through policies, structures, practices, and ideas that help members join together rather than split apart or become isolated (see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010)—people are more likely to persist in this challenging work. Such institutions provide “larger systems of meaning that anchor our lives and comfort us by providing something ‘to hold on to’” (Josselson, 1992: 39). Absent containment, conscious reflection becomes difficult, as people and groups can be hijacked by unacknowledged, undiscussable anxiety.

Holding environments are spaces where participants engage in three types of intentional behaviors. First, they adopt and maintain a learning orientation by proactively inquiring into others’ experiences and listening in order to learn, rather than to judge, when others speak. Second, they respond by validating others’ experiences, indicating that they have heard what the other has said and acknowledging the reality of their experience, without necessarily agreeing with the other’s interpretations. Third, they help others make sense of their experience by offering possible interpretations without insisting that they have the truth. Participants can
practice these behaviors when others share their stories about anxiety-provoking experiences (Hinshelwood, 2001; Shapiro & Carr, 1991).

Barton and Kahn (2019) described the value of this work as follows.

By naming and acknowledging their emotional experiences, individuals . . . shift from primitive to higher-order cognition (LeDoux, 1998); they are able to view their thoughts and feelings amid adversity as important sources of information that they need to process in order to make intentional action choices. As other group members join the conversation, adding their own stories, perspectives, and experiences, the process reinforces connections between members. . . . [Moreover, as people] connect within a holding environment, their own anxiety becomes part of the collective experience, ultimately defused and managed by the group (Shapiro & Carr, 1991).

**Holding Environments for White Men’s Emotional Work**

Whereas holding environments can benefit anyone facing anxiety-provoking workplace challenges, White men, especially those in formal positions of authority, may arguably be most in need of holding yet have the least psychic access to it. Others have written about the particular holding needs of those in precarious organizational positions (Kahn, 2001), but we suggest that White men’s precarious identity position creates its own set of needs, especially in light of the costs White men bear for engaging in projective identification. At the same time, White men’s ability to access such holding may be especially limited. They may be more reluctant to admit to needing a space in which to be vulnerable since doing so may further threaten their masculine identity. Subordinates, for their part, may also feel threatened when White men in positions of formal authority admit to their vulnerability (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012) and thus may exert subtle pressure on such men to resist engaging in this emotional work.
Nevertheless, the benefits, to both White men and others, of creating and participating in holding environments are many. By increasing White men’s capacity for conscious reflection, holding environments enable them to identify and reclaim parts they had previously projected onto others, thus providing relief from the anxiety wrought by pressures to meet hegemonic masculine demands and helping them build a greater sense of psychic wholeness (Clarke, 1999). Awareness of the complexity within themselves may also allow White men to recognize complexity in others. Most importantly, when White men take back their projections, they no longer need to marginalize or invalidate others, giving those others more opportunities to develop and advance. In short, by participating in holding environments designed to help them deal more directly, constructively, and safely with their anxiety, White men can interrupt the vicious cycle of projective identification and, in the process, begin to dismantle racial inequality.

To reap these benefits, White men’s willingness to create and participate in holding environments is necessary, but such willingness does not inoculate them from experiencing anxiety, shame, and resistance along the way. Dominant groups are especially likely to resist as they have the most to lose from disrupting the status quo (Padavic et al., 2020), and they are particularly susceptible to experiencing guilt and shame (Rustin, 1991)—fragile foundations for change (Alderfer, 1982).

To counter such resistance, holding environments for White men’s emotional work must not only enable them to recognize and grapple with their disturbing feelings but also help them construct a compelling reason for undertaking that work in the first place. Aspiring to advance a conscious goal that is incompatible with, and intrinsically more compelling than, the unconscious goal of proving their self-worth can provide such a reason (Ely & Kimmel, 2018). Research shows that people find intrinsically compelling outward-focused goals, such as contributing to
the well-being of the whole, because such goals satisfy a basic human need for relatedness and thus are inherently more rewarding to pursue than inward-focused goals, like proving self-worth (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). A relevant illustration comes from research on offshore oil platform workers: when these men saw that proving masculinity compromised the more meaningful goals of safety and community, they were willing to risk their self-image—for instance they risked being seen as incompetent—in order to accomplish these higher priority goals (Ely & Meyerson, 2010: 15).

**DISCUSSION**

This paper uses a systems psychodynamic perspective to develop new theory explaining the persistence of racial inequality in U.S. companies. We propose that racial inequality is rooted in organizational norms and practices that conflate definitions of competence with idealized images of White masculinity, which provoke in White men persistent, unacknowledged anxiety about failing to live up to such images. To defend against this anxiety, White men engage in projective identification, an unconscious defense mechanism whereby they split off the parts of themselves that fall short of the masculine ideal—weakness, incompetence, marginalization, insecurity—project them onto Black people, and then treat Black people in ways unconsciously intended to evoke in them those same feelings of not-good-enough. This process enables White men to unconsciously disavow such feelings in themselves, relocate them in Black people, and reassure themselves that it is Black people who are unworthy, not themselves. In short, White men are able to (dis) identify with their inadequacies by off-loading them onto people already stereotyped as inadequate. This off-loading gives White men some measure of psychic relief. Microaggressions, for example, are not simply subtle acts of exclusion or disrespect but also behavioral manifestations of projective identification. The organization’s unconscious social
defense—discourses of rationality, meritocracy, and colorblindness—supports White men’s projective identification while keeping it under wraps; together, these psychological and social defenses constitute the defense system. This system fuels race gaps in attainment, creating and perpetuating an elaborate constellation of beliefs, policies, and practices that point to Black peoples’ shortcomings as the cause of such gaps. Fixating on Black people’s “shortcomings” and searching for remedies in turn becomes a substitute problem for the organization, a red herring that diverts attention away from the real culprit: work contexts that threaten White men’s sense of masculine self-worth. No matter how much energy the organization puts into shoring up Black peoples’ weaknesses, it will continually come up short because this energy is misplaced. Thus the substitute problem provides a never-ending diversion away from White male anxiety. While disconcerting for organizations seeking to reach their diversity goals, Black peoples’ shortcomings are less threatening to White men than White men’s doubts about themselves. Meanwhile, racial inequality in organizations persists.

This paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, we add to the nascent body of organizational scholarship that applies a systems psychodynamic lens to the problem of persistent workplace inequality. (For an empirical examination of persistent gender inequality using this lens, see Padavic et al, 2020.) A systems psychodynamic perspective on inequality has several advantages. Whereas most inequality scholars focus on mechanisms that explain inequality, this perspective is particularly well-suited to address mechanisms that explain its persistence. Moreover, relative to the large body of work investigating implicit racial bias, systems psychodynamics offers a more sophisticated, multilevel understanding of the unconscious dynamics that underpin racial inequality. In contrast to implicit bias, an individual-level, cognitive construct, sometimes referred to as a “mind bug” (Banaji, 2005), our approach
spotlights emotions and the interlocking, multilevel system people unconsciously use to manage their emotions in the workplace.

Our systems psychodynamic perspective on racial inequality may be generalizable to other dimensions and manifestations of persistent workplace inequality. To facilitate theorizing beyond our application, we state our theory in general terms, indicating in parentheses how we have applied it to racial inequality, as follows. At the center of our theory is projective identification, a psychological defense mechanism that derives from people’s (White men’s) unconscious need to quell intrapsychic disturbances (anxiety about self-worth) arising from threatening aspects of the work context (demands to live up to idealized images of hegemonic masculinity)—a defense mechanism that plays out in interpersonal interactions (between a White man and, e.g., a Black person) shaped by intergroup power relations (in which White men have more institutional and societal power than, e.g., Black people). This multilevel defense mechanism works hand-in-hand with social defenses at the organizational level (discourses of, e.g., rationality, meritocracy, and colorblindness, imported from the broader society, and the policies and practices that flow from them). The social defense normalizes beliefs (e.g., accounts of race gaps that point to Black people’s lack of qualifications) and legitimizes unequal power relations (a racial hierarchy in which White men are at the top), which in turn support and reinforce the defense mechanism. This defense system diverts attention away from the true anxiety (White men’s anxiety about self-worth) by creating a substitute problem (e.g., how to fix Black people’s shortcomings) on which to focus instead. At a minimum, this theory contains a rich, potentially generative set of concepts and relationships to investigate in future research, which may lead the field in promising new directions and point the way to addressing the intractability of inequality.
Second, our intersectional theorizing about White men is a contribution to masculinity studies. We offer a theoretical perspective on how White men’s efforts to fend off anxieties raised by organizations’ idealized images of dominant masculinity, defined implicitly as white, heterosexual, and class privileged, contribute to the persistence of racial inequality. Whereas previous research has recognized the elite, intersectional (white, monied, heterosexual) nature of hegemonic masculinity and the anxiety it provokes in White men (e.g., Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Berdahl et al., 2018), we are aware of no theory that addresses how this anxiety plays out in interactions with members of racially subordinated groups or perpetuates racial inequality. In addition, we further develop the idea of hegemonic masculine identity as a zero-sum endeavor (see, e.g., Berdahl et al., 2018). Masculinity research has documented the zero-sum nature of contests over who best embodies masculine ideals and accrues resources accordingly. We extend this idea by theorizing about a parallel, far less conscious zero-sum dynamic played out over anxieties that arise at the unrelenting prospect of losing such contests: the unconscious illusion that one can relieve oneself of self-doubts by provoking those self-same doubts in others.

Our research also begs the question of how organizations’ hegemonic masculine ideals play out for aprototypical men, who have cross-cutting identities. As men, they belong to the dominant gender group, but on at least one other salient identity dimension, such as race, class, sexual orientation, or age, they belong to a subordinate group (see Purdue-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, for a discussion of aprototypical men’s experiences). Using our theory as a framework, future research can investigate how such men experience and manage the emotional fallout from pressures to conform to hegemonic masculine norms and with what consequences.

Finally, we add to the nascent body of work that brings a power-based perspective to systems psychodynamic theory. Whereas previous scholars have developed theory about a
defense system that both dominant and subordinate groups use to fend off a shared anxiety, showing how the system provides a better defense for dominants (see Padavic et al., 2020), we are the first to focus on a defense system that emanates from the distinctive anxieties and defense needs of a dominant social identity group. Studies of how leaders manage internal conflicts by projectively identifying with followers are similarly focused on those with power (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012), but leaders’ power accrues first and foremost from a visible, formal, organizational role. In contrast, we focus on power that accrues by virtue of power holders’ social identities, in our case, their race and gender, an unearned, diffuse, more covert source of power. By theorizing about White men’s race-and-gender-driven projective identification, we address an arguably more entrenched, systematic, and pernicious defense system—one that may be both more pervasive and less easily penetrated—than that surrounding individual leaders who use projective identification to manage personal conflicts with their role’s identity demands. This observation raises the question of how social and leader identities interact to shape the unconscious identity work of leaders as they seek to defend against their dreaded images, while maintaining their desired ones.

CONCLUSION

Our theory helps explain why the problem of racial inequality has been so intractable even as current social movements in the U.S. have spurred organizations to embrace an anti-racist agenda. Missing from current approaches is attention to unconscious dynamics playing out at multiple levels of analysis between members of dominant and subordinate racial groups. As Rustin (1991: 68) argued over 20 years ago, “The tendency to see racism as a system of ideological or false beliefs, to be banished by anti-racist teaching and propaganda, fails to see that its main power lies at an unconscious level.” Hence, it is not enough to raise dominant
groups’ consciousness about unconscious bias, microaggressions, or the importance of allyship; they must also be supported as individuals and as a group to recognize and reckon with the emotional fallout from workplace pressures that compel hegemonic masculine striving. Absent a theoretical framework that centers psychological and social defenses, the status quo will remain firmly in place.
REFERENCES


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