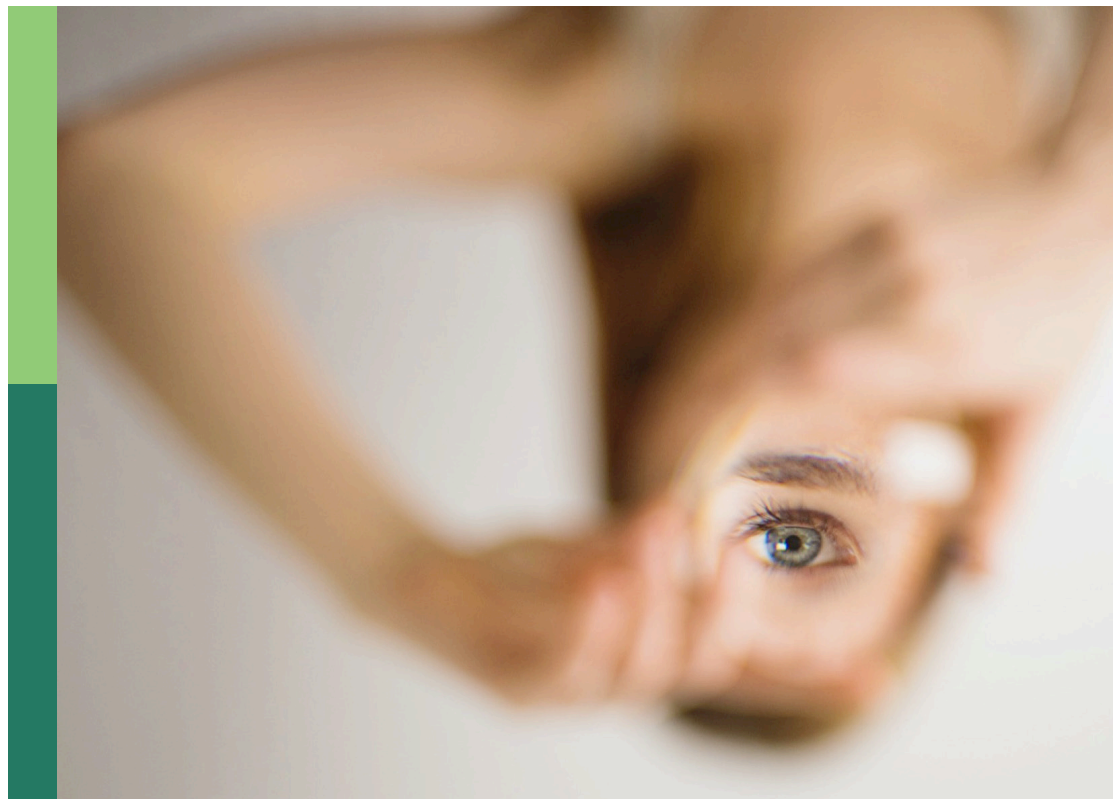# Power, discrimination, and privilege in individuals and institutions

Edited by
Sonya Faber, Monnica T. Williams, Matthew D. Skinta
and Bia Labate

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Power, discrimination, and privilege in individuals and institutions

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Editorial: Power, discrimination, and privilege in individuals and institutions

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Power, discrimination, and privilege in individuals and institutions

"The system is not much concerned if any individual swaps places between levels.
The system is concerned that the edifice itself remains intact."—*Marie Laurencin*

Introduction

We are very pleased to introduce this Research Topic in *Frontiers* on the topic of
"*Power, discrimination, and privilege in individuals and institutions*". People and systems
they create are rife with prejudices, leading to discrimination and inequitable outcomes.
Problems operating in oppressive systems include racism, casteism, colorism, sexism,
heterocentrism, ethnocentrism, and their intersections. These biases cause issues such as
rejection of stigmatized groups, structural racism, disenfranchisement of women, barriers
to higher education, economic oppression, radicalization, and colonialism. In this Research
Topic, we take a closer look to find the core of the problem, which is inevitably an
imbalance in the distribution of power and its misuse.

This Research Topic contains 20 articles that cover a range of critical issues in
Psychology (Personality and Social, Forensic and Legal, Cultural, and Gender, Sex and
Sexualities) and Sociology (Race and Ethnicity, and Gender, Sex and Sexualities). These
articles originate with researchers from countries including Germany, China, Singapore,
Romania, the USA, and Canada. The researchers submitting these articles identify with a
range of ethnicities, including Roma, Indigenous Australian, African American, Mexican
American, Southeast Asian, Jewish Canadian, and Black German to name a few.

Systems of injustice

Systems of injustice can be found anywhere power is concentrated, including
board rooms, editorial offices, university admissions policies, legislative bodies, and
organizational bylaws. Policies and procedures may seem fair and appropriate on their face,

but, in their use, end up bolstering systems that support hierarchical, non-meritocratic outcomes. The name for this is called *weaponization of policy* (Figure 1). This type of problem was evident in a paper by Faber, Wu et al. in our Research Topic that uncovered the abuse of power in the disciplinary actions of a state psychology licensing board, where inequitable outcomes were particularly devastating for disempowered early career psychologists. Since the release of those findings, the corresponding state psychological organization decided to poll its members on their experiences with the licensing board, and the problems pointed out by Faber, Wu et al. were supported by survey results (KPA, 2023), hopefully leading to reform.

Likewise, our professional societies, and by extension the products produced by them, are also rife with biases. Faber, Metzger et al. took a deep dive into an organization with a stated vision of "alleviat[ing] human suffering," the Association for Contextual and Behavioral Science (ACBS), to uncover anti-Black racism in their membership, organizational procedures, and scholarship that emerged from their journals (e.g., Misra et al., 2023). The outcome of this investigation was documenting that no Black people had held leadership positions in the organization at the time that article was submitted, severe unaddressed experiences of racism by Black ACBT members, and sparse scholarship about clinical uses for ACT for that demographic.

These systems of injustice are also at work in our legal systems. Kantachote (2024) describes the struggle of Thai American massage businesses, which are subject to heightened surveillance and regulation due to stereotypical assumptions based on race, gender, and ethnicity. These inequities result in hardships that threaten the livelihood of hard-working business owners and their staff. Black American men face this same sort of intersectional oppression. Smith and Harris advance the notion of "bad faith" as the connecting thread that permits unfreedom and inequities despite cherished US ideals of freedom and equality. This paper

FIGURE 1
Depiction of Weaponization of Policy. Policies are the framework for the system which becomes invisible for those who live within it, unable to perceive the ingrained injustices, and well-defended, making it difficult to change. Image generated by OpenAI's DALL-E.

highlights the unique issues of race and masculinity in the oppression of Black men, past, and present.

These problems are not just found in the United States but are worldwide. Goghari and Kusi offer a comprehensive and compelling introduction to the key elements of the caste system of India, underscoring the many factors that maintain this problematic categorization of people, despite strong policies enacted that aim to remedy historic and current wrongs that lead to social disadvantage.

Yuen et al. examine barriers to the pursuit of higher education among multicultural youth in Hong Kong. They found that Chinese immigrant and ethnic minority South Asian youth often encounter a glass ceiling and financial aid barriers to pursuing higher education, in contrast to their Hong Kong mainstream counterparts.

Likewise, Davidson et al. found gender, ethnicity, and nationality to be key issues causing stress among postdoctoral researchers in German academia. These early career researchers are subject to tenuous working conditions that pose significant challenges to the pursuit of a long-term research career, particularly for international scientists and those from marginalized groups.

Personal prejudice

There is a synergistic connection between institutional and individual prejudice, as they serve to maintain one another. Pascal et al. present new research on the topic of emotional relevance and prejudice, where they test the effect of disgust on prejudice toward two different stigmatized European ethnic groups. One of these groups is the Roma people, who experience severe discrimination and exclusion, contributing to their impoverished status. Pascal et al. showed that priming subjects with images to elicit feelings of disgust make them feel more unfavorably toward Roma people, who are often stereotyped as being unhygienic. This suggests that presenting stigmatized groups in stereotypical ways potentiates stereotypes, and by extension, perhaps presenting these groups in counter-stereotypical ways can help reduce prejudice.

Mental health consequences

When larger systems and powerful individuals are free to engage in bias against outgroups it can lead to various forms of oppression, resulting in negative psychological effects among those who are disempowered. Holmes et al. present the findings from the development of a new clinical measure called the Oppression-Based Traumatic Stress Inventory (OBTSI). Validated on a student and outpatient sample, this measure offers a novel approach to measuring the impact of intersectional discriminatory trauma using DSM-5 PTSD criteria. Having multiple stigmatized identities correlates with greater oppression-based trauma (Williams et al., 2023b). As such, tools like these are an important means of helping clinicians and researchers quantify the suffering caused by marginalization due to such identities.

Sometimes, the pain of being stigmatized causes the oppressed to lash out against the very society that caused them pain. Shafieioun and Haq cogently explain the process of radicalization

from a societal perspective in their qualitative study of how people become extremists. Using interviews with ex-militants of the radical group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they show how problems such as social injustice, misuse of power, marginalization, and discrimination, can serve as key factors leading some individuals to identify and sympathize with radical ideology.

Mental health clinicians have their own ways of managing the impact of racialization within their practice, and this differs based on racial identity. In their qualitative study of therapists, Bergkamp et al. describe how the way in which clinical psychologists are taught to provide patients with care can actually harm both patients and psychologists because of its lack of attention to the role race plays in psychological health and traumatization. The authors investigate the impact of socially-conferred privilege, particularly in race and gender dynamics, on the therapeutic relationship and professionalization process in psychotherapy. Their findings reveal distinct experiences for BIPOC vs. white psychologists. Neither are adequately prepared to provide care when confronted with clients of different racial backgrounds suggesting an urgent need for comprehensive changes in training models, continuing education, and supervision to address the psychological impact of race and privilege in the field. In regards to racial dynamics, this paper cogently points out how psychologists need to heal themselves before they can heal others.

Bringing light into covert systems for change

It is critical to expose covert, invisible, or under-examined aspects of power to shine a light on behaviors that bolster misuse of power by individuals and institutions in order to know where to affect change. Many of those who hold and wield power do not recognize or acknowledge that they are exercising power at all. It is important to be able to define, measure and call-out hidden power while also advancing mechanisms to support healing and harmony. Faber and Williams tackle this issue in higher education in their paper about racial and gender dynamics in university classrooms. They describe how toxic femininity is used by White women to control or derail conversations about race at the expense of students of color. They also describe strategies professors can use to recenter the conversation on people of color and maintain order in the classroom.

Morisano et al. address the issues around the conduct of research with Indigenous peoples in Canada, with a focus on ethical and policy considerations. The mental health and wellness of Indigenous Peoples is compromised by policies that ignore Indigenous rights, that frame colonization as historical rather than ongoing, or that minimize the impact of assimilation. The authors call for autonomous control over research involving Indigenous People, and ultimately a much needed research paradigm shift.

Vierra et al. wrote about critical action to redress systemic oppression using a person-centered approach. This study used mixed methods to understand why some choose to participate in more impactful forms of activism, such as Black Lives Matter, while others opt for superficial or performative action to advocate for people who experience systemic oppression. Those who were

most active in their approach to racial justice had a greater critical consciousness, whereas those who were passive tended to endorse racial colorblindness. Racial colorblindness is a form of racism whereby advocates prefer not to consider or discuss racial differences (Kanter et al., 2017).

Reclaiming personal power

Experiencing any form of discrimination can leave targets feeling disempowered and demoralized. Huang offers insights about power and self-esteem by highlighting the moderating effect of self-defense mechanisms. This study explores the dynamics of personal power in social relationships, finding that loss of power does not necessarily result in a decline in self-esteem; rather, personal self-defense mechanisms play a moderating role, indicating that constant power maintains or increases self-esteem, especially when self-defense levels are higher. Notably, when faced with social downfall, people in power are more prone to find ways to deceive themselves rather than learn humility.

Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt conducted a study of ethnic identity and resilience, to better understand protective factors against self-blame in the face of racial microaggressions. This US based cross-sectional study involving 696 diverse participants revealed that self-blame mediates the relationship between racial microaggressions and psychological distress. Embracing one's cultural identity, along with being mentally strong in tough situations, can help reduce the emotional impact of racial microaggressions, but this seems to work best for those who strongly identify with their ethnicity and have high mental resilience. Maintaining a strong ethnic identity therefore offers some protection against the negative effects of microaggressions, as we have seen in studies of African Americans (Williams et al., 2012), but does not eliminate the negative emotional impact.

Traversa et al. examine the widely maligned construct of "cancel culture", and find it can actually be useful insomuch that it provides collective validation for groups experiencing harm against the background of a majority culture that historically dismisses or invalidates the perceptions of marginalized group members when it differs from the perspectives of majority group members. This novel research addresses the impact of cancel culture on marginalized groups, finding that episodes of cancel culture can positively influence collective action intentions by fostering feelings of collective validation. This sheds light on the dynamics involved in resistance strategies of marginalized communities and the importance of an external environment that reflects the experiences of marginalized individuals.

Compassion and connection

Dismantling systems of oppression require the efforts of people in both privileged and marginalized groups to effect change. Allies are members of dominant groups that work to uplift and create equity for disempowered groups. Empathy and compassion have been implicated as important prerequisites for social justice allyship and antiracism work (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2021). Karnaze et al. underscore how racist systems impact the

wellbeing of minoritized individuals, emphasizing the potential for accelerated systemic reforms through greater ally support. Their research found that allyship was correlated with both empathy and compassion, but empathy was the stronger predictor. This contrasts with a trend in recent literature to consider compassion as the more reliable driver of behavioral change compared with empathy (e.g., Lim and DeSteno, 2016). They provide insights for future research and interventions to dismantle structural racism focused on exercises that focus on connecting with the feelings of racialized people through sharing personal narratives.

The Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group explored the role of vulnerability in intimacy, emphasizing that safe and functional intimacy emerges when vulnerability is consensual, empowered, and positively reinforced—with the responsibility for promoting this dynamic resting on the individual with more power in the interaction. In short, fostering healthy intimacy involves consensual and empowered vulnerability, with the person in a position of influence playing a critical role in creating a safe space for such interactions. This reminds us that those who are in positions of power bear the brunt of the responsibility for creating safe spaces for people in marginalized groups.

The struggle is real

One reason we sought to create this Research Topic is because we found there were few academic havens for scholarship focused on the misuse of power and systems of oppression. Strauss et al., members of our own research team, described the problem of racism and censorship in the editorial and peer review process, and we learned that even in the course of curating our own Research Topic, we would need to navigate this challenge at every turn. This was evident at each stage, from submissions we never saw because they were filtered out too early in the editorial process (deemed a poor fit), to peer-reviewers who changed their mind about reviewing papers once they realized the topic was about bias in their cherished systems, to author positionality statements that bizarrely vanished between the proofing and publications stage. These problems are not unique to *Frontiers*, and indeed the very fact we were able to create this Research Topic is a testament to the dedication of the publishers to make this Research Topic happen. These barriers typically prevent scholarship that calls out institutional problems from ever seeing the light of day. Yet, despite our many successes, there were several worthy papers that ended up being rejected by forces beyond our reach. We were astonished to learn that a paper could be rejected even after passing editorial and peer-review. This reminds us that bias and oppression are still present, even in our own systems, and much more is needed to completely dismantle them.

Conclusion

There is an inverse relationship between power hoarding (avoidance of risk) and courage (acceptance of risk) and their effects on personal moral growth (Williams et al., 2023a). This also applies to systems of power particularly in the construction and administration of institutional policy. Policy is a power tool

that can result in outcomes that advantage an ingroup but seem to be fair on the surface, and can maintain plausible deniability by allowing exceptions. Such policy is designed to covertly support biased systems and is the institutionalized correlate of individual aversive racism. One hoped for outcome in this Research Topic was a larger showing of scholarship focused on institutional systems of inequity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in hindsight, we found that this type of manuscript was the most difficult to shepherd through the publication process. This includes a manuscript that called out problems in mental health care policy and another that underscored problematic racial dynamics of an organization's board of directors. These powerful systems are self-protecting, and as such, finding ways to bring light to these issues will require thoughtful intervention at many levels.

Conflict of interest

SF was employed by Angelini Pharma and is a partner in the company Bioville GmbH. Neither of these affiliations has influenced the content of this article or any of the articles in this Research Topic.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. The other authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Publisher's note

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Power decline and the change of self-esteem: The moderating effect of self-defense

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Introduction: Power is a fundamental force in social relationships. Having more power means more freedom and resources and the ability to control and influence others. Psychologically, people are afraid of power decline, therefore are motivated towards self-enhancement to avoid the decline of self-esteem. We asked if power decline brings about a subsequent decline in self-esteem.

Objective: To investigate whether power decline in social relationships leads to a decline in self-esteem and to explore the moderating role of self-defense.

Methods: A laboratory experiment was conducted with college students in East China as subjects, which was divided into manipulation tests of power decline and Self-Defense ($N=61$) and two formal experiments ($N=65$; $N=160$). In addition, a semi-structured in-depth interview was used to further improve the ecological validity of the findings.

Results: (1) Power decline did not lead to a decline of self-esteem, and self-esteem rises when power remained unchanged; (2) When the level of self-defense was higher, constant power lead to a greater increase of self-esteem, and the decline of power would not lead to the change of self-esteem; (3) When the level of self-defense was lower, the relationship between constant power and the rise of self-esteem was weakened, and power decline would not lead to the significant change of self-esteem. At the end of this study, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

power decline, self-esteem, self-defense, self-enhancement, semi-structured interview

Introduction

Power is a fundamental force in social relations (Russell, 1938) and plays a crucial role in many areas, such as economics, politics, and general social interaction processes, penetrating almost every corner of organizations. Power is often understood as the control over money, information, or decisions (Galinsky et al., 2003) or influence over the thoughts and behaviors of others (Keltner et al., 2003). Individuals' perception of their own power

has a greater impact on behavior than the power they actually have (Haidt and Rodin, 1999). In our study, we define power to means self-perceived power. Psychologists generally agree that feeling powerful (self-perceived power) leads in turn to higher feelings of self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2012; Kuehn and Gordon, 2015; Wang, 2015), which is defined as a positive or negative attitude toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965) and is one of the central constructs of personality (Bolognini et al., 1996). The reason for the positive relationship between self-perceived power and self-esteem is because possessing power means access to higher levels of resources and freedom, also lower levels of personal risk (Galinsky et al., 2015), which in turn leads to a more positive self-evaluation, i.e., the individual's self-esteem. To better understand the subsequent effects of power, it is necessary to clarify its impact on the ego.

The refinement of rules and institutions has made people more attracted to power and risk averse towards any threat that would result in a loss of power (Anderson and Brion, 2014). However, declines in power often occur, such as dismissal, demotion, kick-upstairs (defined as someone being apparently ascended but actually descended), and retirement. At this point, the individual loses the ability to control and influence others. This loss of power means the loss of resources, freedom to act, and can also result in a loss of goal orientation (Guinote, 2017). They lose the objective conditions and psychological capital to continue to self-actualize without consequences, to overestimate themselves without repercussions, and to feel important and superior to others (Keltner et al., 2003). In addition, loss of power predicts the loss of legitimizing privileges (Wojciszke and Struzynskakujalowicz, 2007) and potentially the respect of other powerful peers. All of these indicate that loss of power can lead to the loss of conditions that maintain self-esteem. However, a study by Sivanathan et al. (2008) found that after power decline, individuals often behaved as if they had not lost power. So, does power decline really bring about a decline in self-esteem?

According to the theory of self-enhancement, although the objective conditions for maintaining high self-esteem are lost due to the decline of power, self-enhancement motivates the individual to strive to maintain a positive self-perception (Kobayashi and Brown, 2003). This intertwined state of self-esteem, self-protection, and desire for self-improvement results in a virtual personal zoo of self-defense mechanisms (Tesser, 2001). The purpose of such self-defense mechanisms is to maintain and increase self-esteem (Crowell et al., 2015). Therefore, when power declines, individuals do not allow their self-esteem decline, but rather attenuate the negative effects of declining power through various means of personal self-improvement. This study further explores the role of self-defense in the effects of declining power on self-esteem. The higher the level of an individual's self-defense, the more sensitive he or she is to factors affecting self-concept, which in turn moderates the effect of declining power on self-esteem (Waqas et al., 2015).

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows: firstly, most previous research on power has been conducted from the perspective of static power and power threat, instead of power change, especially a decline in power. This study makes up for the lack of research in this area, by deepening the understanding of the effect power has on the psyche, and thereby expanding the scope of power theory. Secondly, by drawing on the methods of power manipulation, the contextual simulation of the human response to power change paves the way for future research on power change; Thirdly, by studying the question if a perceived decline in power also brings about a decline in self-esteem, this study provides a new perspective on the relationship between power and self-esteem, which broadens power theory. Finally, the boundary effect of self-defense is explored to further validate the role of self-enhancement motivation in power decline events.

Theory and hypotheses

Power decline and self-esteem decline

Compared to the powerless, powerful people have more freedom, less risk, higher positive emotions, more freedom to engage in arbitrary thoughts, and higher self-esteem (Kipnis, 1972; Keltner et al., 2003). Power decreases results in the inability to influence others at will and increased limitations (Keltner et al., 2003). The individual also is aware of their inability to continue to have an impact on others and the outcome of events. A decline in power means they no longer have the objective conditions and psychological capital to continue to freely utilize their abilities, to feel superior to others or to criticize others unchallenged. That is, positive self-perceptions and evaluations are diminished, which leads to a decline in self-esteem. In addition, when an individual loses power, he or she also loses legitimate privilege and others may no longer consider the physical and social capital he or she currently possesses to be deserved (French and Raven, 1959). The individual's inability to continue to be respected by others can reduce the individual's self-confidence, which can result in a decrease in self-esteem. Overall, the loss of power impairs the individual's self-worth, affects his or her positive self-evaluation and judgment, and deprives him or her of the conditions for maintaining self-esteem.

According to the theory of self-enhancement, to maintain their ego individuals need to increase their self-worth and self-esteem, as well as a need to seek positive self-perceptions and avoid negative evaluations, which manifests as a tendency to maintain an unrealistically positive self-concept and encompasses self-enhancement and self-protection, with the latter being predominant (Sedikides and Gregg, 2006). The tendency to self-protection will be stronger in high-powered individuals (Kobayashi and Brown, 2003). When their power decreases, although they will lose the objective conditions and psychological capital to maintain their self-esteem, they will have a strong need to protect their threatened self-esteem as a way to maintain their positive self-image. As a result, their self-esteem level will not change significantly. Therefore, self-esteem strives to maintain at its original level even after the

decline of power. When power is constantly high, there is a temporal comparison between the individual's before and after self-evaluation, and self-improvement is often achieved by devaluing the past self and exaggerating the present self (Festinger, 1954). Self-improvement will bring individuals higher positive self-images and self-esteem. Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H1a: Constantly high power is positively related to self-esteem increase.

H1b: Power decline is not related to self-esteem decline.

Self-defense as a boundary condition

Ego-defense mechanisms are how individuals subconsciously distort threatening information to preserve certain thoughts or feelings (Waqas et al., 2015), including two approaches: defense (negative) and coping (positive). The purpose of such mechanisms is mainly to maintain and increase self-esteem (Crowell et al., 2015). The manifestation of individual defense mechanisms is also a form of personality (Huang et al., 2018). Individuals with high self-defense are more sensitive to threatening events to the self-esteem (Popelnukha et al., 2022). With power as an important factor affecting self-esteem, individuals with high self-defense would become more responsive to power altering events. At the same time, their need to enhance self-esteem, increase self-worth, and psychologically concentrate on positive self-perceptions, while suppressing negative evaluations is more urgent (Popelnukha et al., 2022). Thus, when power decreases, individuals with high self-defense tendencies will lose the objective conditions for maintaining self-esteem, but they will try more intensively to protect their ego from damage and maintain their self-esteem at the previous level. When power remains constantly high, individuals with high self-defense will increase their internal temporal comparison of self-appraisal (Wilson and Ross, 2001) and produce a higher level of self-improvement, i.e., bring about higher self-esteem. Combined with Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b, the present study hypothesized that when individuals have a higher tendency towards self-defense, their change in self-esteem will be stronger with changes in power. Therefore, the study hypothesized that:

H2a: Self-defense positively moderates the relationship between constantly high power and self-esteem increase. The positive relationship between constantly high power and self-esteem increase would be strengthened when self-defense is high, and vice versa.

H2b: Self-defense does not moderate the relationship between power decline and self-esteem decline. The relationship between power decline and self-esteem decline is not significant whether self-defense is high or not.

Based on self-enhancement theory and power theory, this study explored whether a decline in power brings about a decline in self-esteem. A manipulation test of power decline and self-defense was conducted through a pre-experiment to validate the main effect in study 1 and the moderating effect in study 2. In addition, we used a semi-structured interview to improve the ecological validity of the findings in study 3.

Pre-experiment

Manipulation test of power decline

Drawing on Sivanathan et al.'s (2008) research, this study used a contextual simulation that integrated a dictator experiment and an ultimatum experiment to assess individuals' sense of power as a way to determine whether differences in power across contexts were significant.

Procedure

Sixty-one undergraduate students from East China volunteered to participate in the experiment, 22 male and 39 female ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.48$).

Subjects were asked to read the contents of different situations and make an allocation plan and judge the sense of power as required. A total of eight scenarios were set up based on the amount of money, whether the subordinate was informed, and whether the subordinate could refuse. The specific scenarios were described as follows: "Imagine that you are a project manager of a company and you need to work with a subordinate to complete an engineering project, and you are required to allocate the project funds ($100,000/1 million in total). The subordinate knows (or does not know) the total amount of this funding, and the subordinate has the right to reject the allocation proposal. Once rejected, the project will be called off and you, as the project manager, will be demoted (or the subordinate will have to accept whatever the allocation plan is).

To prevent subjects from guessing the purpose of the experiment and the possible interference of the preceding and following situations, two questions of the Raven's Intelligence Test were inserted between each situation. A total of 15 questions were selected.

The measure of personal power was selected from the scale developed by Anderson and Galinsky (2006), and two questions with a 5-point scale were selected. In this experiment, all the internal consistency coefficients of the eight scenarios' measures were greater than 0.70.

Results

The results of the repeated measures ANOVA showed that the main effect of power manipulation was significant, F (1, 60) = 1323.39, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.96$. The results of the t-test showed that subjects' sense of power was significantly higher in the case of

subordinates who could not be refused than in the case of subjects who could be refused when the other two conditions were consistent. 100,000 + subordinates informed: could not be rejected ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.88$) was significantly higher than could be rejected ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.77$), $t = 4.43$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.56$; 1 million + subordinates informed: could not be refused ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.84$) was significantly higher than could be refused ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.83$), $t = 4.41$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.57$; 100,000 + subordinates not informed: could not be refused ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.89$) significantly higher than could be refused ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.81$), $t = 4.31$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen 's $d = 0.55$; 1 million + subordinates not informed: could not be refused ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.93$) significantly higher than could be refused ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.79$), $t = 4.76$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.61$.

The sense of power in the \$1 million case was higher than the sense of power in the \$100,000 case only when the subordinate was unaware and could not refuse, $t = 2.71$, $p < 0.01$, Cohen's $d = 0.34$. In all other cases (subordinate informed + could be refused, subordinate informed + could not be refused, subordinate not informed + could be refused), the assigned amounts did not cause significant differences.

Only when the subordinate can refuse +1 million, whether the subordinate is informed or not does not cause a significant difference in the sense of power. In all other cases, the difference was significant, 100,000 + subordinate could not refuse: subordinate not be informed was significantly higher than subordinate be informed, $t = 2.27$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.30$; 1 million + could not be refused: subordinate be not informed was significantly higher than subordinate be informed, $t = 2.65$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.34$; 100,000 + could be refused: subordinate be not informed significantly higher than subordinate be informed, $t = 2.07$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$.

In summary, all three conditions can cause individual power differences to some extent. To obtain the maximum effect of power decline, all three conditions were included in the contextual setting.

Manipulation test of self-defense

The manipulation of Self-defense drew on Huang et al.'s (2018) approach, using a self-affirmation task for initiation. Participators should complete in 8 min.

Procedure

Forty-six undergraduate students from East China volunteered to participate, including 22 males and 24 females ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 0.51$).

Subjects in the self-affirmation group ($n = 24$) were required to recall and write down two of their specialties and the corresponding scenarios as requested. Subjects in the control group ($n = 22$) were required to write down two significant inventions and their contributions as requested. Subsequently, the subjects rated their level of self-defense.

For the measurement of self-defense, the DSQ, a self-defense style questionnaire developed by Bond et al. (1983), was selected

with six items and a 9-point scale. The internal consistency coefficient was 0.70.

Results

The results of the independent samples t-test found that the self-affirmation group had a significantly higher self-defense score ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.17$) than the control group ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(44) = 2.16$, $p < 0.05$, Hedges' $g = 0.63$. Thus, the contextual initiation of self-defense was effective.

Study 1 the decline in power and the decline in self-esteem

Procedure

We recruited 65 undergraduate students, 22 males and 43 females ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.48$), in East China. They were all voluntary and rewarded with a cash prize.

Two groups were divided: the power decline group (32) and the power constant group (33). Applying the three conditions simultaneously, the reading material presenting the initial power (the highest power) to the subjects was as follows: "... Project funding (totaling \$1 million) was allocated. The subordinate has no way of knowing the total amount of this funding, but the subordinate will have to accept whatever the allocation plan is."

After the allocation of the \$1 million, the subject rated his or her self-esteem.

Subsequently, subjects were required to view a short video (5 min or less) and answer a question, and only those who answered correctly could continue to start the following experiment. This was done in order, first, to judge whether the subjects were serious about the experiment; second, to prevent the subsequent experiment from being interfered with by the previous answers; and third, to relieve the subjects' fatigue and nervousness. Through this process, 7 subjects were removed, leaving 58 subjects at the end, with a total of 28 subjects in the power decline group (8 males and 20 females, $M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.46$) and 30 subjects in the power constant group (9 males and 21 females, $M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.47$).

After completing the video task, the subjects again read a written piece about power, and the decreasing power group read the following material: "... the project just started running not long ago, and the company has allocated another sum of money to you (100,000 in total), which again needs to be distributed by you, but the subordinates know the amount of money and has the right to refuse. If the subordinates refuse, the project will be stopped and you, as the project manager, will be demoted." The material read by the constant power group was as follows: "... the project has just started running not long ago, and the company has allocated another sum of money to you (1 million in total), which again needs to be distributed by you. The subordinate also has no way of knowing the total amount, and no choice but to accept whatever the distribution plan is." The participators made the allocation, their self-esteem levels were evaluated, thereafter the experiment ended.

Self-esteem was measured using the Self-Esteem Scale developed by Rosenberg (1965), with 10 question items and a 4-point scale. The internal consistency coefficients of this scale in this study were 0.82 for initial self-esteem and 0.85 for second self-esteem. The internal consistency coefficients of pre-and post-self-esteem in the declining power group were 0.78 and 0.86, respectively; the internal consistency coefficients of pre-and post-self-esteem in the constant power group were 0.80 and 0.83, respectively.

Results

First, the scores of self-esteem before and after in the two groups were compared. The results showed that no significant decrease in self-esteem occurred for subjects in the power decline group, t (27) = 0.80, $p > 0.05$. A significant increase in self-esteem occurred for subjects in the power constant group, before: $M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.38$; after: $M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.38$, t (29) = −2.26, $p < 0.05$, Cohen 's $d = 0.17$. Thus, it is clear that a sustained high power state boosts individuals' self-esteem.

The levels of change in self-esteem were compared between the two groups of subjects. There was a significant difference in the level of self-esteem decline between the power decline group and the power constant group, t (56) = −2.09, $p < 0.05$, Hedges' $g = 0.55$. It can be seen that the self-esteem in the power constant group was significantly increased, while the self-esteem in the power decline group did not change significantly. It can be seen that although a decrease in power does not cause a decrease in self-esteem, it mitigates the increase in self-esteem brought about by constant power (persistently high power), and hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b were confirmed. See Figure 1.

Discussion

A direct comparison of pre-and post-self-esteem levels in the power decline group did not show significant results; however, the pre-and post-self-esteem levels in the power constant group were significantly higher, and the results verified the hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b. The increase in self-esteem in the power constant group gives us a deeper understanding of power. The constantly high power does not increase the individual's perception of power, but it will emphasize the state of high power, which in turn brings about a rise in self-esteem. This shows that individuals are sensitive to power signals (Sivanathan et al., 2008). The mere presence of a power signal, even if it is only the same level of power as before, will prompt individuals to recognize and reinforce the power they already possess. This temporal comparison effect could be a direction for future longitudinal studies of power. Although numerous studies have confirmed that power positively predicts individuals' self-esteem (Wang, 2015; Wang et al., 2018), subjects in the power decline group did not change their self-esteem levels, suggesting that the power decline is not simply a shift from high to low power and that individuals' self-esteem is not affected.

Study 2 the moderation of self-defense

Procedure

160 undergraduate students, 50 males and 110 females (M = 1.69, SD = 0.46) were recruited from Eastern China. They were all voluntary and rewarded with a cash prize.
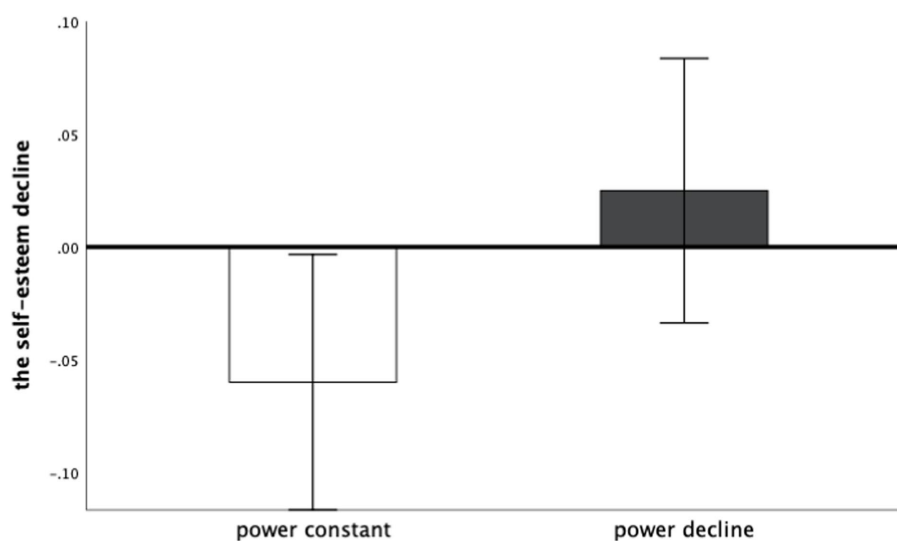
FIGURE 1
The self-esteem decline of different groups of Study 1.

They were divided equally into four groups of 40 students each: constant power + non-self-defense group, constant power + self-defense group, declining power + non-self-defense group, and declining power + self-defense group.

The only difference from the Experiment 1 process: the initiation of self-defense was performed before the second self-esteem measure.

A total of 21 people were removed through the mini-video. The final numbers left in each group were: 11 males and 24 females in the constant power + non-self-defense group ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.47$); 13 males and 22 females in the constant power + self-defense group ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.49$); 5 males and 30 females in the declining power + non-self-defense group ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.36$); and 10 males and 24 females in the declining power + self-defense group was ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.46$).

The internal consistency coefficients of the self-esteem scale in the study 2 were 0.79 (initial self-esteem) and 0.77 (second self-esteem). The internal consistency coefficients of the pre-and post-self-esteem in the constant power + non-self-defense group were 0.84 and 0.80, respectively. The internal consistency coefficients of the pre-and post-self-esteem in the constant power + self-defense group were 0.73 and 0.70, respectively. The internal consistency coefficients for the pre and post self-esteem in the declining power + non-self-defense group were 0.79 and 0.79, respectively. The internal consistency coefficients for the pre and post self-esteem in the declining power + self-defense group were 0.75 and 0.77, respectively.

Results

None of the homogeneity of variance test results was significant, so these results are suitable for ANOVA. The main effect of power change on self-esteem change was significant, $F (1, 137) = 7.03$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. The subjects' second self-esteem level was significantly higher ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.40$) than the first self-esteem level ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.43$) when power was constant, $t (69) = 3.80$, $p < 0.001$, and Cohen's $d = -0.62$. The difference between the subjects' two self-esteem levels was not significant when power declined, $t (68) = 0.00$, $p > 0.05$. The main effect of self-defense on the decrease in self-esteem was not significant, $F (1, 137) = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$. This result again verified the conclusion of experiment 1 that a decrease in power does not bring about a significant decrease in self-esteem, but a significant increase in self-esteem with constant power. Hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b were again verified.

The interaction between declining power and self-defense on the decrease in self-esteem was significant, $F (1, 137) = 4.07$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. When the self-defense was low, the difference in the self-esteem decrease between constant power ($M = -0.04$, $SD = 0.12$) and decreasing power ($M = -0.02$, $SD = 0.13$) was not significant, $t (68) = -0.58$. When the self-defense is high, the difference between the self-esteem decrease in the case of constant power ($M = -0.10$, $SD = 0.19$) and the case of decreasing power

($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.19$) is significant, $t(67) = -2.77$, $p < 0.01$, Hedges' $g = 0.67$. Hypothesis 2a and hypothesis 2b was tested. The specific effects can be seen in Figure 2.

Discussion

The results of the current study showed that a decrease in power does not bring about a decrease in self-esteem, but a constant power brings about an increase in self-esteem. In addition, the interaction effect between power decline and self-defense on decline in self-esteem is significant. When individuals have higher self-defense, the rise in self-esteem in the constant power state will be more pronounced, and the decline in self-esteem in the declining power state will not be significant. The results are consistent with the hypotheses. Higher levels of defensiveness mean more sensitivity to events that affect self-esteem (Popelnukha et al., 2022) and contribute to the impact of events on self-esteem. Conversely, individuals with lower levels of defensiveness are insensitive to events that result in power decline, which leads to a weaker impact on self-esteem. Thus, for those individuals with higher self-defense, the power decline elicits a stronger response, resulting in a greater impact on self-esteem.

Study 3 semi-structured in-depth interviews

To further validate and enrich the research model and improve the ecological validity of the findings, study 3 used the typical sampling principle to select Employee A of a technology R&D department in a machinery industry as a case study subject, and used unstructured in-depth interview to conduct in-depth interviews about the background, passage, causes, and results of Employee A's power decline, as well as Employee A's feelings and experiences throughout the process. This case study approach can contribute to a greater overall understanding of the entire process of power decline and the environmental characteristics and outcomes of its effects (Merriam, 1998), and to some extent compensate for the lack of authenticity of laboratory experiments, as well as validate the model of the study, and provide fuller support for the reliability of the conclusions.

Selection of the interviewee

In the process of selecting interviewees, we found a difficult reality that most of the people chose to leave their original work environment before or after the decline in power events, and the time point of the event is too far in the past to obtain accurate information. After screening, employee A was selected as an example for the following reasons: the time point of the decline in power was relatively recent (started 6 months ago and lost power completely after 3 months), and he still works in the company's

FIGURE 2
The self-esteem decline of different groups of Study 2.
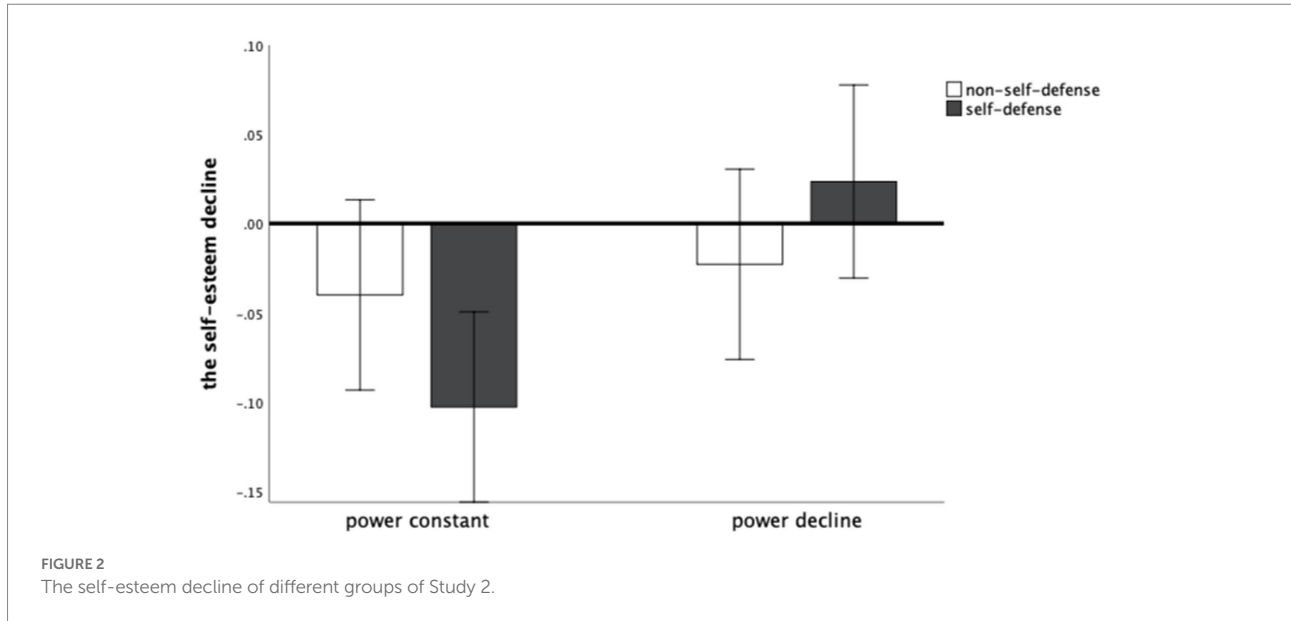
department after the decline in power occurred. He has worked in the company for 10 years and has a strong emotional commitment to the organization, and reacts strongly to the decline in power.

Interview outline

Based on the research model, the outline of the questions revolved around the five set areas, allowing Employee A to describe them in as much detail as possible. Different from structured interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews are designed to obtain the maximum amount of information by fully communicating with the individual and making appropriate adjustments to the outline during the interview process. Therefore, the questions in the interview outline are not standardized topics.

The five areas of the interview outline are.

1. the whole process of the power decline event.
2. the individual's feelings of self-esteem after the event.
3. the individual's feelings of self-esteem before the event.
4. whether self-defense was carried out after the event.
5. the effect on self-esteem after self-defense occurs.

During the interview, with the consent of Employee A, nearly 40 min of recorded interview material was obtained. After transcribing it into text, a total of 5,000 words of textual material was obtained.

Results and discussion

Employee A's reaction to his loss of power is generally stronger. Although he recognized the newcomer who replaced him, he was very disappointed and angry at the company. After all, he had worked in the company for 10 years and was considered a veteran employee. And the reason for the company to decrease his power is that the employee was having difficulty fully taking care of their work and life responsibilities over a short period of time, not because of a lack in ability or competence. This is cold-blooded. He has always recognized his competence and believes that his self-esteem has declined, but not significantly. This study combined Employee A's own words, and the definition of self-esteem, to conclude that the matter of declining authority did not significantly reduce Employee A's level of self-esteem.

Employee A's statement that he is a person with an extremely high level of self-esteem is confirmed by his recognition of himself as a person who joined the technical department of the company after graduation and whose working ability has been continuously recognized, thus strengthening his self-recognition and gaining the corresponding power. The study concluded that Employee A's 10 years of work experience had strengthened his self-esteem, and his "spiritual leadership" position after gaining power had strengthened his belief that he was a capable and successful person. Therefore, in this case a sustained high-power state does lead to an increase in self-esteem levels.

Employee A complains to his ex-colleague after his power decreases and has an intentional conflict with his manager. In addition, he also analyzes and explains the reasons for the decrease in power and produces more regressive behaviors (e.g., indulging in recreational activities, shopping, etc.), all of which indicate that he adopts a higher level of self-defense. According to our findings, individuals with high self-defense have their self-esteem affected by a decrease in power, which is reflected in the fact that self-esteem is no longer elevated or even has a slight decrease. Employee A experienced a non-significant decrease in self-esteem level, which is consistent with our results.

General discussion

The discussion of results

By drawing on and modifying Sivanathan et al.'s (2008) power change manipulation, our study used a scenario simulation with three power-related variables to allow participators to self-assess their sense of power in the situation. In this way, the subjects' different sense of power in different situations were judged, and the results of the manipulation test confirmed that this scenario-simulated dictator and ultimatum game were effective and could indeed cause a decrease in individual power. Study 1 tested hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b: there was no significant change in the pre-and post-self-esteem in the power decline group; the pre-and post-self-esteem in the power constant group, however, increased significantly. This shows that even if power remains constant, the continuous presence of this power signal will promote individual self-esteem. Previous studies have suggested that power levels positively predicted self-esteem levels (Wojciszke and Struzynskakujalowicz, 2007; Anderson et al., 2012; Kuehn and Gordon, 2015) and that high power holders experience more objective conditions to maintain self-esteem. At the same time, the high stability of self-esteem (Kuster and Orth, 2013) and the strong resistance to the decline of self-esteem results in individuals maintaining their positive self-images (Kobayashi and Brown, 2003). Thus, the impact of power decline on individuals is not simply a linear path from "high power" to "low power," but a more complex process, and it is important to explore the contents of this black box.

Study 2 tested Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b: Self-defense moderates the relationship between power decline and self-esteem decline. When power is constant, a more significant increase in the self-esteem level of high self-defense individuals occurs; when power decreases, the self-esteem level of high self-defense individuals does not change significantly. Self-defense, as a stable personality trait, represents the individual's sensitivity to information that threatens the self and self-esteem (Popelnukha et al., 2022). In this study, for individuals with high self-defense, whether power decrease or not would have bigger different impacts on self-esteem. Most of the previous studies have explored self-defense as a mechanism and less as a personality trait (Huang et al., 2018), so there is no way to understand why various individuals have different intensities of defense in the face of threatening events. The present study begins with self-defense tendencies to understand their moderating effect on the relationship between power decline and self-esteem decline. This exploration of boundary conditions not only deepens the understanding of power decline, but also provides support for the idiosyncratic nature of self-defense.

Theoretical implications

Our findings have at least four theoretical implications. First, most current research on power has focused on static power, and not much research has explored changes in power levels, especially power decline (Sivanathan et al., 2008). Research exists on the positive relationship between power and self-esteem (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Keltner et al., 2003; Anderson et al., 2012; Kuehn and Gordon, 2015; Wang, 2015), that is more power would lead to higher self-esteem. Jordan et al. (2011), Mooijman et al. (2019), and Wisse et al. (2019) explored the impact of power stability. Yong et al. (2010), Pettit et al. (2016), and Reh et al. (2018) found individuals would initiate active measures to compensate for power loss in the face of status threats. That research however can only show that individuals are averse to power loss. Little research has examined what effects constantly high power and power decline have on the change of self-esteem. However, the widespread existence of power decline in real-life situations and its effects on individuals' minds and bodies have prompted researchers to explore this area. Our study can, to some extent, fill this gap and deepen the understanding of the concept and the theory of power and expand the outreach of power research.

Second, by drawing on the methods of power manipulation, the contextual simulation of power change can better reflect the real sense of power. The study used a contextual simulation of self-assessment to better reflect the real sense of power. At the same time, we introduced three contextual variables (the amount of distribution, whether the recipient was informed, and whether the recipient could refuse) simultaneously in the formal experiment to maximize the effect of power change. This kind of power change research using contextual simulation can provide an methodological concept and a new direction for future research, and opens the door for experimental research on power change.

Third, focusing on the core of the entire personality, the study tried to answer the question "Does a decline in power bring about a decline in self-esteem?" Motivation to self-promote is one of the main motivations in self-motivation (Leary, 2007). So based on the power theory and the theory of self-enhancement, we provide a new perspective on the relationship between power decline and self-esteem change, which can provide the most direct explanation of the effect of power decline and provide a basic direction for subsequent research.

Fourthly, the exploration of the boundary effects of self-defense fully explains why the effects of power decline are greater for some people, while some people respond more moderately to power change. Self-defense is an important ego-defense mechanism which helps protect certain thoughts or feelings (Waqas et al., 2015), especially self-esteem (Crowell et al., 2015). This exploration of individual differences can provide more explanations for the impact of power decline, consolidate the strength of the theory's explanation of the model, and deepen the understanding of the theory.

Finally, the study not only deepens the understanding of individual power but also expands the results of socio-economic power, such as privilege and discrimination. Research confirms that social power is a cornerstone of racism, sexism, and privilege (e.g., Operario and Fiske, 1998; Fisher and Hammond, 2018; Rankin et al.,

2021). The results of this study show that loss of power does not result in a decline in self-esteem because of the personal need for self-enhancement which the individual maintains through an active psychological process. However, it does not mean power decline has no effects on the privileged in that self-esteem becomes stable instead of inflated (under constantly high power). This further confirms that powerful individuals tend to actively work against power decline (Van de bos, 2009; Yong et al., 2010; Reh et al., 2018; Mooijman et al., 2019; Wisse et al., 2019), and even pretend that their power position has not changed (Sivanathan et al., 2008). This study examined the short-term effects of power decline using experimental methods, which could not verify long-term effects. Therefore, it remains to be further tested whether the findings can be extrapolated to long term conditions. Compared to the powerful, the self-esteem of the powerless is low (Anderson et al., 2012; Kuehn and Gordon, 2015; Wang, 2015). After a period of power decline, the privileged stabilize at a lower power level and their self-esteem at this state would be expected to have decreased. On the other hand, they may strive to regain power as a coping mechanism through some means, such as increasing oppression, and abuse, or harming the powerless (Rankin et al., 2021). So the further illumination of the effect of power decline on the privileged provided by these results points out new directions for the study of power, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege.

Practical implications

The findings of this study have the following implications for real world scenarios: First, the aftermath of demotions can hinder the continual rise of individual self-esteem, which would require organizations or leaders to work in opposition to these tendencies by proactively enhancing employees' self-esteem by affirming their abilities and values more often at the same time or shortly after a demotion. If the organization informs the whole company of the decision or the leader reprimands the employee when informing the news, it will further negatively affect the employee's self-esteem.

Second, constant high power leads to an increase in self-esteem, which further makes powerful individuals feel special, confident, and privileged. People who are in high power and high-status state for a long time will tend to gradually lose themselves morally. It is important to remind high power individuals regularly that having power does not mean absolute power and privilege, this type of intervention can help reduce the incidence of corruption, violence, and other crimes.

Third, self-defense reinforces the relationship between demotion and lowered self-esteem, which requires the organization or leader to work to make the employee accept the reality of the demotion, reduce his or her sensitivity to the power-decreasing event, and thus reduce the likelihood that he or she will activate self-defense mechanisms. This can be done through a gradual reduction in power, rather than a sudden demotion; or a demotion that is accompanied by a temporary freeze in the employee's income and benefits.

Fourth, self-regulation is also needed in self-management to reduce one's adverse reactions to power-decreasing events and to use fewer psychologically immature defense mechanisms so that one does not overreact. Currently, there is a growing group of suicides due to depression, which is predominantly among young people, many of whom have lost hope in life because of setbacks in their lives that have made them devastated. This frustration is the loss of control over the individual's life and surroundings, i.e., a decrease in power, and therefore, this study may provide theoretical support to alleviate this phenomenon.

Limitations and directions for future research

The shortcomings of this study and the development of future research are as follows: (1) The manipulation of power decline was a new contextual simulation, and future research is required to validate this intervention more completely. In addition, the context was a company context and the subjects were ordinary college students, which did not ensure that they could empathize with the situation. Future studies could select subjects with a business background, such as MBA students, or set the context of the situation to school. The context could also be modified to fit the specific research context. (2) There are some problems with the representativeness of the subjects. Most of the experimental subjects in this study were selected from student subjects in more economically developed areas. The study confirmed that compared to urban students, rural students are more submissive and more stoic when things go wrong (Liu and Zou, 2015). Therefore, student subjects in economically developed areas may react more intensely to the decline in power, and future research can expand the selection of subjects to take into account factors such as geography and economy. (3) The experimental study with exclusively student subjects has certain shortcomings and cannot fully reflect the impact of power changes in the organizational context, and future studies can add field studies or case studies to further strengthen the validity of the results. (4) The research approach is not sufficiently varied or detailed. Future research can try to design a power decline scale to improve the ecological validity of the study.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by IRB of College of International Economics and Trade, Ningbo University of Finance and Economics. The

patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

CH: conceived this study, designed questionnaires, collected data, analyzed data, wrote the whole paper and finalized the manuscript for submission.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Compassion as a tool for allyship and anti-racism

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Racist systems, policies, and institutions subvert the quality of life for minoritized individuals and groups, across all indicators, from education and employment, to health, to community safety. Reforms to address systemic racism may be accelerated with greater support from allies who identify with the dominant groups that derive advantage from such systems. Although enhancing empathy and compassion for impacted individuals and groups may foster greater allyship with and support of minoritized communities, little work to date has assessed the relationships among compassion, empathy, and allyship. After reviewing current work in the area, this perspective offers insights into the utility and specific components of a compassion-based framework that can be used to combat racism, using findings from a survey study in which we investigated the relationship between validated psychometric measures of compassion and allyship with minoritized communities. Several subdomains of compassion, as measured among individuals identifying as non-Black, correlate significantly with levels of felt allyship with Black or African American communities. These findings inform recommendations for compassion-focused research, including development and testing of interventions to promote allyship, advocacy, and solidarity with minoritized groups, and support efforts to undo longstanding structural racisms that have patterned inequality in the United States.

KEYWORDS
compassion, empathy, allyship, anti-racism, systemic racism

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and recent fatal encounters with law enforcement have disproportionately impacted communities of color in the United States., highlighting four centuries of devastating structural racism as the bedrock of persistent racial disparities in health and policing. Those who have historically benefitted from racist or discriminatory systems and practices are increasingly being called on to recognize systemic racism and to act in allyship or solidarity with minoritized communities to address inequities and reform oppressive systems.

One potential tool for developing allyship is cultivating compassion. Compassion includes recognizing suffering, and feeling positive regard for distressed persons, which motivates helping behavior. Dispositional compassion is associated with stronger social relationships; in addition, people can be prompted to act more kindly toward others even when others are viewed as being in opposition to one's own group (Klimecki, 2019). The role of compassion training in promoting stronger allyship remains a nascent area of inquiry, especially in relation to high-impact

advocacy work and actions to promote social justice, which the United Nations has broadly defined as "fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth" (Department of Economic and Social Affairs–DESA/UN, 2006). Misconceptions about the nature of compassion (e.g., that it is equivalent to pity) may make it seem antithetical to true solidarity with those who are oppressed. Existing work in this area suggests that a central component of social justice action is feeling for the suffering of others as a motivator of efforts to help alleviate that suffering (Viray and Nash, 2014). In this way, social justice efforts can be viewed as embodying compassionate acts aimed at supporting or advocating for those who suffer from social inequities, and "allies" include members of a dominant social group not directly experiencing suffering from such inequities but who perform acts of compassion based on their empathy for those who are (LeBlanc et al., 2022).

It is important to differentiate allyship from the notion of saviorism. Allies perform roles supportive to members of non-dominant social groups, rather than monopolizing leadership roles, and their status of allyship is defined by the groups they purport to help (Smith et al., 2016). Saviorism, in contrast, refers to actions that claim to help people in minoritized groups, but a closer examination reveals that these actions are self-serving rather than beneficial for the community "in need" of support. Examples might include engaging in charity work to boost one's reputation or social standing, or to resolve guilt associated with acknowledging privilege traditionally afforded to one's dominant social group. Such actions can be viewed as exploiting the plight of minoritized communities for self-serving aims and can have negative long-term consequences for these communities (e.g., Anny, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). Racial justice allyship can be rewarding, but it must involve the "deliberate dismantling of explicit, implicit, and systemic patterns of injustice" which requires courage to confront the status quo and face any negative consequences from one's social group in doing so (Williams et al., 2023). Courage can take time to develop, and Williams and colleagues have outlined several practical exercises based on cognitive-behavioral approaches to guide action even when feeling anxious or afraid of potentially adverse responses from members of socially dominant groups.

Rectifying racist policies will require allyship from those who currently benefit from such policies. Unfortunately, even when people state their intentions to be allies, self-reports fall short of actions as assessed in low-stakes scenarios in the laboratory setting (Williams et al., 2021), highlighting the shortage of white allies and the need for effective methods to cultivate more allies. Compassion is uniquely situated to be compatible with and to enhance allyship. First, there is evidence that positive feelings inspired by an "outgroup," and feeling motivated to interact with members of an "outgroup," are associated with allyship (Pittinsky et al., 2011; Williams and Sharif, 2021). Similarly, compassion should also motivate prosocial behavior toward those suffering from discrimination. Second, feelings of compassion, or at minimum a compassionate mindset, should be conducive to an ally's social interactions with members of dominantly situated social groups, when the goal is to confront injustices in order to change the status quo. More research is needed to understand how compassion and empathy relate to feelings of allyship in support of minoritized communities. We present preliminary work from a field survey in which we sought to assess the relationship between compassion and

allyship with Black or African American communities among people who do not identify as Black. We also discuss how the findings point to possible areas for further research to promote a compassion framework for allyship, advocacy, and solidarity.

Authors' positionality statement

Our team of co-authors hold positionalities that in combination have shaped our collective approach to this research. All authors identify as cis-gender female, and our lived experiences within our racial/ethnic identities (Asian, mixed-race, South Asian, and White), as well as our research interests, have together informed our perspectives on the intersection of compassion and social justice. Our scholarship encompasses a diverse set of expertises in emotion and emotion regulation, beliefs about emotion, public health, racial health disparities and health equity, ethics, precision medicine, intervention research, and medical education. This study and our findings were shaped by our collective research expertise, lived experiences, and participation in anti-racism and compassion cultivation training conducted at our institution in 2020.

Compassion and allyship with Black and African American people

In June 2020, as part of a larger study of compassion and empathy during the pandemic (Karnaze et al., 2022), we fielded a survey to U.S.-based adults recruited from two convenience samples, Amazon Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics Online Panels. For the present analysis, we focused on the 861 individuals surveyed who did not self-identify as Black or African American. In this subsample, about half identified as female ($N=402$). In terms of race/ethnicity, a majority identified as White ($N=766$) and the rest identified as Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, mixed race, or other race ($N=95$), with three-quarters reporting ethnicity as non-Hispanic/Latino ($N=642$; versus Hispanic/Latino).

Using psychometrically validated measures, we examined partial correlations between a measure of felt allyship with "Black people" (Neufeld et al., 2019) and: (a) dispositional compassion (Hwang et al., 2008), (b) dispositional empathy (Spreng et al., 2009), and (c) five components of compassion as informed by Eastern contemplative practices and contemporary emotion theory (Strauss et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2020). These correlations controlled for binary sex/gender, social desirability, and political ideology, as partisan interests in the U.S. may shape perceptions about which social groups have "valid" emotions of distress and suffering and thus which are deserving of compassion (Shields, 2005).

Dispositional empathy and compassion scores were all correlated with allyship (Figure 1), although the correlation of allyship with compassion was statistically significantly stronger than with empathy. Of the compassion subdomains, three showed moderately strong relationships with allyship. Feeling for a person suffering and emotionally connecting with their distress showed the strongest correlation. Two other components had moderately strong correlations with allyship, tolerance of uncomfortable feelings elicited in response to the suffering of another person, and acting or feeling motivated to act to alleviate another person's suffering.
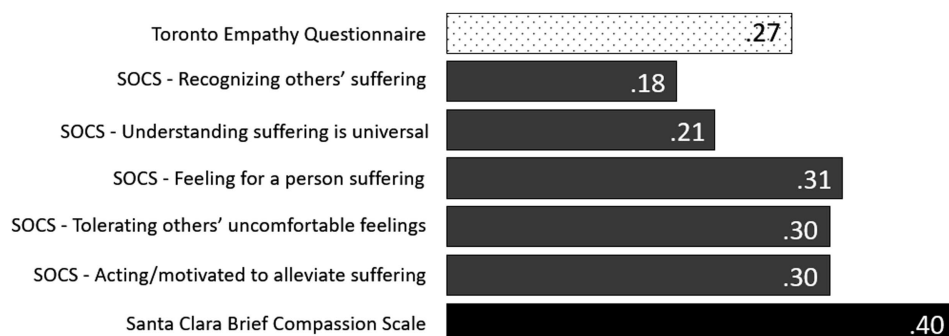
FIGURE 1
Partial correlations of empathy and compassion with felt allyship with Black People, controlling for sex, social desirability, and political beliefs. SOCS is the abbreviation for the Sussex Oxford Compassion for Others Scale and is used to refer to each of the five subscales of the measure.

Next, we discuss our preliminary findings in the context of these results and draw upon existing research to suggest areas for further investigation on the utility of cultivating compassion to increase allyship and solidarity with minoritized individuals. Given that applying compassion in a social justice context must contend with several challenges, we also discuss elements to avoid in designing compassion-based interventions.

Areas for future research on compassion to promote allyship

Our research recommendations are organized by the five elements of compassion as defined by Strauss and colleagues, which we assessed in our survey (Strauss et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2020). Where appropriate, we discuss the progression of these elements in more specificity as outlined by Stevens and Taber's (2021) conceptual model of how empathy and compassion translate to prosocial behavior.

Recognition of suffering

Theories of compassion define the recognition of distress or suffering experienced by another person as the first step in being able to compassionately respond to their suffering. Our preliminary work revealed a small correlation between recognition of suffering in general terms (e.g., "I notice when others are feeling distressed") and allyship. To increase potential allies' recognition of suffering *experienced by marginalized groups*, research should test whether strengthening the capacities of those who have not experienced discrimination leads them to understand or take the perspective of those who have.

When adversity based on discrimination is not experienced directly, there are outlets for escaping or avoiding recognition of its detrimental impacts, a luxury to which marginalized groups do not have access (Sadavoy and Zube, 2021). Enhancing skills for perspective-taking can enhance recognition of and action against social injustice, while its absence can aggravate social conflict,

prejudice, and discrimination (Garcia et al., 2021). Research shows that perspective-taking promotes compassion cultivation (Klimecki, 2019), reduces stereotyping and prejudice against marginalized groups (Todd et al., 2011; Matsuda et al., 2020), and increases the likelihood of engaging in helping actions toward outgroups (Batson et al., 2002).

In addition, further studies are needed to determine whether focusing attention on the effects of racist practices and policies increases recognition of suffering and felt allyship with individuals who experience the brunt of these policies. This may help reduce any fundamental attribution error when members of dominant groups encounter the suffering of minoritized individuals; the fundamental attribution error involves blaming individual attributes or choices for adverse outcomes—rather than structural or systemic factors—and can result in assigning blame to the individual suffering from discriminatory practices or policies, rather than systems that perpetuate discrimination. Focusing on racist systems rather than individual "bad actors" who perpetrate racist acts may also help reduce any cognitive dissonance that members of dominant groups might otherwise resolve by, for instance, viewing themselves more favorably than "racists," which shifts focus away from one's potential for agency and allyship with minoritized groups. Experiments are needed to test whether reducing these tendencies to focus on individuals who commit racist acts (rather than focusing on racist systems) increases recognition of suffering due to racism and results in felt empathy and compassion.

Feeling for persons in distress

After recognition of suffering occurs, the next step in compassionate responding is to share the feelings of the person in distress, which is referred to as empathy. In our preliminary work, feeling for a person suffering and emotionally connecting with their distress was the component of compassion that had the strongest correlation with allyship. We propose that interventions for enhancing allyship among individuals and groups with traditionally racially privileged identities should emphasize minoritized individuals' *personal experiences* of suffering resulting from racism, rather than

raising awareness about discrimination in more abstract terms. For example, trainings that center personal narratives or vignettes humanizing those impacted by institutional racism and highlighting experiences of suffering in the context of lived experiences, may offer functional levers for increasing allyship with marginalized communities.

Feeling for a person suffering and emotionally connecting with their distress can involve both down-regulating feelings that might interfere with empathy and up-regulating positive feelings and positive regard for the person in distress. In future work, perspective-taking and other evidence-based affect regulation strategies could be employed to up-regulate positive "feelings for" others including care and concern for individuals of minoritized groups.

Tolerance of unpleasant feelings

Empathizing with others' suffering can involve discomfort, so having the ability to tolerate unpleasant feelings with the goal of maintaining empathy is important for then shifting to feelings of compassion and a desire to help the person in distress. We found that allyship was correlated with tolerance of uncomfortable feelings elicited in response to the suffering of another person (e.g., fear, disgust, distress) in order to remain accepting of and open to the person suffering. Experimental research shows that compassion and empathy for others can be modulated (Leiberg et al., 2011), as can acceptance of unpleasant emotions (Wolgast et al., 2011), a necessary condition for having compassion when witnessing another's suffering (Stevens and Taber, 2021). To increase such tolerance, researchers can test the efficacy of interventions designed to facilitate recognition and acceptance of one's own reactions to others' suffering, for example through mindfulness practice (Magee, 2021), especially in contexts that trigger motivations to down-regulate unpleasant feelings so as to experience less guilt or reactivity about one's complicity in racist actions or systems (Ford et al., 2022).

Relatedly, one way that *intolerance* of unpleasant feelings can manifest is through pity, or well-intentioned "helping" acts, such as those exemplary of "White saviorism." These actions tend to otherize marginalized groups and center the doer's perspectives and desires to feel good over the emotions and long-term wellbeing of those in need of allyship (Anny, 2021). Thus, it is vital that future research efforts continue to clearly distinguish compassion from pity, which may require testing the efficacy of interventions that foster and sustain emotional connection with those suffering to mitigate the tendency to self-focus and otherize.

Viewing suffering as a common human experience

Strauss et al. (2016) included understanding of the universality of human suffering as an important component of compassion, as this mindset has been part of Eastern contemplative practices for fostering compassion. Being able to acknowledge another's suffering as normative to human experience should minimize negative judgment of an individual's suffering, which can otherwise prevent compassion. Our preliminary work revealed a small correlation between allyship and viewing suffering as universal or adopting a "lovingkindness" orientation to all individuals. However, it can be challenging to translate this element of compassion, understanding the universality of human suffering, into allyship with specific groups. It is important to acknowledge unpleasant feelings and implicit biases that can arise when acknowledging the existence of *differential* harms and suffering among different social groups, in order to enhance feelings of allyship with members of those groups who experience disproportionate harms. Leveraging compassion to enhance allyship with minoritized groups should present these components in a nuanced way and minimize unintentional consequences. For example, viewing suffering as universal should not be engaged in at the expense of gaining a better understanding of the unique experiences of each individual, or of the experiences of suffering that may be more common to one minoritized community relative to another. One way to discuss universality of human suffering could be to include concrete examples of how racist systems harm not just minoritized communities but also individuals and groups with privileged identities in society (McGhee, 2022).

More broadly, interventions should ensure that encouraging a lovingkindness orientation does not result in harmful coping or defense mechanisms such as spiritual bypassing to avoid dealing with uncomfortable feelings (Fox et al., 2017). Nor should they result in complicit attitudes toward proponents of racist systems, defended by beliefs that "everyone suffers" or "everyone is just doing their best." The view of suffering as universal should instead be harnessed to frame a more equitable and less racist society as a means to improving quality of life and reducing suffering for *all* groups, including those who passively benefit from oppressive systems.

Acting and feeling motivated to help persons in distress

The final steps of compassionate responding include feeling compassion for another in distress, which prompts motivation to help them, and taking action to help. In our preliminary work, self-reports of acting or feeling motivated to act to alleviate another person's suffering had a moderately strong correlation with allyship. Interventions for promoting a compassionate desire to act could raise awareness of specific policies and practices that disproportionately lead to both immediate and longer-term harm or suffering among minoritized individuals and groups, while also framing these policies and practices as modifiable and amendable.

Existing research suggests that compassion, unlike empathy, should be resistant to burnout (Klimecki et al., 2014; Stevens and Taber, 2021). It is important to prioritize research on how individuals engaged in political activism maintain positive feelings of compassion for those suffering from oppression without experiencing empathy burnout and disengaging. For instance, Stevens and Taber (2021) propose that to engage in prosocial behavior rather than empathic distress, one must successfully self-regulate unpleasant feelings that are part of empathy when encountering another's suffering. Acceptance of one's unpleasant feelings (Hayes et al., 1996) and self-compassionate responding to one's unpleasant feelings (Neff, 2003) may help in the maintenance of self-regulation and sustained compassion.

While we found that acting or feeling motivated to act to alleviate another person's suffering was related to reports of allyship, future research must test whether increasing such feelings results in actual action taken in solidarity with individual members of minoritized

groups. For example, future research could leverage the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion (Huppert et al., 2004), and test whether compassion and other prosocial emotions can promote divergent systems-level thinking. Such thinking can generate innovative action steps to advance the reform of structures and policies that are racist or lead to inequitable outcomes.

Given that allyship involves action to support minoritized communities, through individual behavioral changes and through structural changes that lead to more equitable social practices, systems, and institutions, it is important to track the long-term outcomes of compassion-based actions in support of enhancing allyship. It is equally important to define and track any unintended consequences of actions that are motivated by compassion; while feelings of compassion and actions taken to help others who are suffering can have good intentions, the implications of those actions need to be evaluated by those who are experiencing suffering or discrimination. Similarly, actions motivated by compassion should result in allyship, rather than saviorship, and thus center opportunities, experiences, and voices of individuals from minoritized groups; for more conceptual clarity and concrete examples of this distinction, see Williams et al. (2021).

Researchers also need to develop strategies to minimize the risks and burdens placed on individuals from minoritized groups who are often tasked with "helping" potential allies feel compassion or take compassionate action by exposing their own painful experiences. The costs of this emotional labor should not be incurred disproportionately by those whom allyship seeks to support.

Conclusion

Compassion is central to social justice, insofar as social justice aims to reform discriminatory systems that enact systematic harms. Some argue that actions to promote social justice that are not based in compassion risk becoming performative or ineffectual, reinforcing low-effort behaviors like expressions of support on social media, rather than high-effort behaviors like protest actions to raise awareness about unfair policies or encourage legislative reforms (LeBlanc et al., 2022). Our findings suggest that cultivating compassion for others could promote a sense of allyship with communities of color that have experienced racism, irrespective of political ideology. This supports the importance of strategic implementation of high-quality compassion training to promote antiracist behavior which can ultimately lead to antiracist policy change. Importantly, allyship and political activism are known to be shaped by motivated reasoning. In recognizing the impact of emotional connection versus disengagement, the strategies and research directions we propose can promote compassionate responses to systemic suffering by anchoring recognition of racist policies and practices in greater awareness and attention to personal accounts of suffering and its impacts as experienced by minoritized individuals and groups. Importantly, future research will need to test whether increasing compassion goes beyond self-reports of enhanced allyship and leads to actual behavior that promotes greater justice, equity, and inclusion. It is also important to test the efficacy of compassion-focused strategies while centering communities of color in defining and assessing what constitutes effective allyship.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

IRB approval for the study was obtained from the University of California, San Diego (Protocol #20042949). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MK, RR, and CB contributed to the conception and design of the study. MK and CB collected the data. MK performed the statistical analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. RR and CB wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Racism and censorship in the editorial and peer review process

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Psychology aims to capture the diversity of our human experience, yet racial inequity ensures only specific experiences are studied, peer-reviewed, and eventually published. Despite recent publications on racial bias in research topics, study samples, academic teams, and publication trends, bias in the peer review process remains largely unexamined. Drawing on compelling case study examples from APA and other leading international journals, this article proposes key mechanisms underlying racial bias and censorship in the editorial and peer review process, including bias in reviewer selection, devaluing racialized expertise, censorship of critical perspectives, minimal consideration of harm to racialized people, and the publication of unscientific and racist studies. The field of psychology needs more diverse researchers, perspectives, and topics to reach its full potential and meet the mental health needs of communities of colour. Several recommendations are called for to ensure the APA can centre racial equity throughout the editorial and review process.

KEYWORDS

racism, bias, peer review, censorship, publication

Introduction

Psychological science, as a system of knowledge, strives to understand the breadth and depth of our human experience. Decades of research and theory development has significantly contributed to this goal by nurturing a scientific curiosity to explore and examine the world around us with the tools of the scientific method.

Yet, racial disparities persist. From the bodies funding research, universities hiring faculty and admitting students, and the journals publishing and disseminating knowledge, we find evidence of systemic racism in the overrepresentation of White editors, researchers, participants, and perspectives (King et al., 2018; Williams, 2019; Buchanan, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2021b; Sarr et al., 2022).

There are many studies demonstrating how racial bias remains a serious problem in the field of psychology (American Psychological Association Council of Representatives, 2021; Dupree and Kraus, 2022) including how it is pervasive in training environments, research practices, clinical settings, and the entire academic pipeline, which ultimately creates and sustains wide-ranging mental health disparities for communities of colour (Buchanan and Wiklund, 2020). Racial biases are evidenced in faculty hiring practices (e.g., Williams, 2019), teaching evaluations (e.g., Boatright-Horowitz and Soeung, 2009), and curricula (e.g., Zittleman and Sadker, 2002; Collins and Hebert, 2008). People of colour are overrepresented in precarious and temporary faculty positions and underrepresented in tenure-track and senior leadership positions (Turner et al., 2008; Kena et al., 2015). For faculty and students, university campuses are also known for being rife with racial discrimination, harassment, and microaggressions (Clarke et al., 2014; Houshmand et al., 2014;

Baker, 2017; Gillis et al., 2019; Webb-Liddall, 2020), as well as environmental racism (e.g., Sue et al., 2007; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Gonzalez and Goodman, 2016). Racism in university admissions has been described in the numerous calls to action for increased diversity and inclusion on campuses and explicit goals to admit more students of colour (e.g., Williams, 2019; Williams and Kanter, 2019; Strauss et al., 2022). Above and beyond scientific excellence, credentials, and merit, race remains a social determinant of our discipline, which shapes funding, hiring, and publishing decisions.

As racism experts, we are intrigued by the pervasive nature of racial disparities in our discipline. Using scientific methods, we explore the antecedents, underlying mechanisms, and consequences associated with racial disparities in psychology.

Racism is a serious problem

When it comes to the curation and publication of new psychological knowledge, decision-making around the types of articles that are produced and published is also influenced by race. Journals with White editors-in-chief are less likely to have diverse editorial board members, and three times less likely to publish papers highlighting race (Roberts et al., 2020). Roberts and colleagues further found the majority of psychology publications are written by White authors, who tend to include fewer research participants of colour compared to authors of colour. In a similar vein, the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) found applications supporting Black PIs (Principal Investigators), relative to White PIs, are disadvantaged at each stage of the process; applications with Black investigators were less likely to be discussed by review committees, less likely to receive a good score if discussed, and less likely to be funded if not assigned a good score (Gordon, 2022). Ultimately, these disparities create and sustain wide-ranging mental health disparities for communities of colour (Buchanan and Wiklund, 2020).

As a core part of the knowledge dissemination pathway, the peer review process acts as a quality assurance system evaluating whether the quality, originality, relevance of research is fit for publication and, if so, providing feedback to authors to improve their submission. As such, this process dictates what research is worth publishing, disseminating, and mobilising in society. There are many who champion the existing peer review system. However, the editorial and peer review process is also widely criticised in psychology and related disciplines (e.g., Smith, 2006; Tennant and Ross-Hellauer, 2020). The main concerns are inconsistency across reviewers, lack of shared standards, and data infrastructure. The peer review process is also time consuming and expensive, and there is the potential for bias and abuse (e.g., selecting favourable reviewers, rejecting research that challenges one's own, etc.; Smith, 2006; Tennant and Ross-Hellauer, 2020). Although these concerns may apply to all researchers, there is a risk of a disproportionate impact on racialized researchers and those who study race and racism throughout the review process.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is threefold, organised as follows: (a) review psychological processes underlying racism and bias in the review process, (b) outline real world examples of racism and bias at varying stages of the peer review process using 10 real examples, and (c) provision of a wide-range of recommendations for equitable publication practice. The second half of the paper features a set of concrete case studies based on actual experiences to examine racism and bias in the editorial and peer-review process. Each case study will showcase a manuscript and provide an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of racism emergent throughout the review process.

Significance

As scholars of race and racism, one question that frequently arises during the editorial and peer-review process is "Why does anyone even need this research?" Given the wide range of acceptable topics that researchers choose to study, it can be discouraging when one's area of expertise is inexplicably devalued by colleagues and editors. This was, for example, the case with a paper on measuring the strength of allyship of White individuals. In a recollection by one of the authors (Example 1):

> *The paper had gone through the peer review process and the authors had fully responded to the feedback of two independent reviewers for a manuscript on the validation of a new scale to measure White allyship, as no other such scale existed. However, upon submission of the fully-revised manuscript, rather than send it back out for review, the editor interrupted the process with a startling decision. Adopting the counterfactual reasoning that the scale did not offer anything new and without providing any supporting evidence, he falsely stated that the measure "is empirically indistinguishable from existing measures," and it was summarily rejected. The editor listed the Modern Racism Scale (MRS) and the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) as measures he believed were indistinguishable from ours; however, these are both measures to assess the cognitive component of racial attitudes (not White allyship), and no further evidence was provided to support his claim (McConahay, 1986; Neville et al., 2000).*

The question of "why would we need this research at all?" posed by a reviewer as above is an example of epistemic exclusion, a form of discrimination that occurs when certain groups or perspectives are excluded from the production of knowledge (Settles et al., 2021). The question implies that certain subjects of research are not deemed worthy of study and, therefore, are not considered useful knowledge, thus devaluing the experiences, culture, and perspectives of entire people groups. The dearth of papers focusing on Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) populations and related topics, particularly in "mainstream" (i.e., higher impact) outlets, and their relegation to "specialty journals" (i.e., lower impact) is another example of epistemic exclusion (Hall and Maramba, 2001; Cascio and Aguinis, 2008; Hartmann et al., 2013; King et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020).

This has implications for the citation metrics and career trajectories of the scholars researching these topics, as well as the impact of their papers and the trajectory of the field (Bertolero et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2021b). Epistemic exclusion is related to the concept of epistemic exploitation, which occurs when marginalised groups are expected to explain and justify their experiences and perspectives to those who do not intend to accept or understand them

(Berenstain, 2016). This type of behaviour also reinforces the power dynamics that allow certain groups to control the production of knowledge, and ultimately leads to the marginalisation and oppression of certain groups.

There are many reasons for submitted research papers to be rejected; however, when publishing on the issue of race and racism covert psychological phenomena connected to power, solidarity, and fear converge. These suppress and censor voices that illuminate this crucial corner of academic scholarship. We have found that sometimes scientific research is deemed so dangerous and threatening to established power structures, that some will attempt to bury it before it can even see the light of day.

What is the cause of these kinds of decisions? None of the authors believe that editors and reviewers are sitting at a table together, plotting about how to keep research about people of colour from being published. Nonetheless, the outcomes are such that they might as well be. So, whilst the outcomes are clear (racial disparities), the processes are often elusive.

Racial disparities deeply taint our educational environments, funding processes, and the quality of the evidence we have available to us. Moreover, these disparities challenge the objectivity or impartiality of the publication process. Despite the systematic steps and safeguards in place, this process is not without biases (De Los Reyes and Uddin, 2021; Dupree and Kraus, 2022). Ascribing to the fallacy of impartiality in peer review without reproach is dangerous for several reasons. It means biased scholarship is unchecked and perpetuated by the broader psychology community and general public. In other cases, bias prevents important and timely works from being released, or the condition of heavy censorship makes the piece a shadow of its former self. These dangers are exacerbated as this process can be invisible and implicit, as well as operating consciously and deliberately.

Positionality

We, the authors, are a diverse group, engaged in researching what many consider to be topics most vulnerable to bias and discrimination. The first author is a doctoral student in clinical psychology and a White Canadian Ashkenazi Jewish settler of European heritage who researches in the areas of microaggressions, racial bias, institutional racism, police violence, racial trauma, and psychedelics. The second author is a Canadian doctoral student in clinical psychology and a White settler of Austrian and Scottish ancestry. She works with racialized and stigmatised populations, and researches on topics of allyship, implicit biases, and cultural competence/relevance in research and healthcare. The third author is an East African immigrant woman and an experimental psychologist. She currently has concentrated her research on racism and its effects on minoritised groups in Canada. The fourth author is a *Canada Research Chair*, a registered clinical psychologist, and an African American woman. She has published over 150 peer-reviewed articles, with a focus on trauma-related conditions and cultural differences, including articles about therapeutic best practices. Finally, the fifth author is a Black German and an experienced neuroscientist and pharmaceutical professional, specialising in clinical development and social justice issues.

Our combined experience as psychologists/psychologists-in-training working on scholarship related to racism and people of colour has afforded us a unique perspective. More specifically, we have encountered many instances of racism, discrimination, and bias whilst attempting to publish our work, which we shall discuss in this piece as concrete examples of the problem. The examples are critical to understanding the issues, as those who do not experience racism have difficulty conceptualising it. Indeed, our peers frequently express astonishment that such problems still occur today when we share our regular experiences of racism surrounding this process. Further, we will situate these examples within the varied stages of the review process and provide the context needed to understand the underlying psychological mechanisms creating these barriers.

Collectively we have published over 200 academic papers, served as reviewers for over 200 papers, handled scores of papers in the associate editor role, reviewed dozens of grant proposals, and served as guest editors for several special issues, meaning that we intimately understand the peer-review process. We hope this piece will instil in readers the need to be more critical of the overall publication process and its outputs. Amongst psychologists of colour and allied collaborators we hope this discussion will serve to validate some of the challenging experiences encountered. And finally, to those in positions of power—that is journal editors, editorial board members, reviewers, etc.—we know that guidance is needed to help implement anti-racist policies and practices. We hope this work serves to create a better awareness of this issue to spark positive change. It is not our aim to discredit the existing systems that keep our science solid and credible but rather to improve them.

Psychological processes driving racism and bias

To understand the problems in editorial processes, we must first understand racism. A large body of work exploring the underlying mechanisms of racial prejudice, discrimination, and bias has shown these mechanisms are an interplay between individual, interpersonal, and structural systems. Although bias can exist across all these systems, each system can mitigate or augment the bias of another system. There are a range of psychological theories and processes describing the underlying mechanisms that give rise to biased actions and outcomes.

Individual vs. structural racism

Drawing on research, theory, and philosophical discourse, Roberts and Rizzo (2020) defined racism as "a system of advantage based on race that is created and maintained by an interplay between psychological factors (i.e., biased thoughts, feelings, and actions) and sociopolitical factors [i.e., biased laws, policies, and institutions" (p. 476)]. Haeny et al. (2021) provide a useful guide of the many forms of racism and associated concepts. There are two distinct forms of racism that influence the individual decisions and structural policies of the peer review process: individual and structural racism.

Individual racism can be subclassified into two major categories: attitudinal (prejudice) or behavioural (discrimination; Clark et al., 1999). The development of prejudice is inevitable in White-dominant cultures due to pervasive societal messaging about racial hierarchies. Like all of our social systems, the peer review process operates in this context. Prejudicial attitudes and beliefs, in turn, influence behaviour,

causing individuals to behave in discriminatory ways, sometimes even without their awareness (Sue et al., 2007; Wagner et al., 2008).

Importantly, racism is also structural because it is tacitly woven into systems, policies, institutions, and the very fabric of Western and other White-dominant societies, where it functions to advantage White people at the expense of people of colour (Salter et al., 2018). Structural racism is enacted through political, economic, and social systems that exclude people of colour from equal access to opportunity (Zong, 1994). Although bigoted or biased individuals are not needed to maintain structural racism, individual and structural racism operate in tandem, each building and sustaining the other (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; Jones, 1972; Williams, 2019). For example, prejudicial attitudes may play a role in the development and maintenance of inequitable policies and systems (Zong, 1994). In the peer review process, individual and structural racism interact to maintain systems of White supremacy that advantage White people over people of colour in academic publishing (Dupree and Kraus, 2022). In the editorial process, we see power hoarding, in the form of White dominance in the roles of editors and editorial board members, and resistance to diversification.

Implicit racial biases and aversive racism

Amongst the most widely known mechanisms underlying contemporary racism are those of implicit biases and aversive racism. *Aversive racism* is a form of racism where individuals, who are often well educated, hold conflicting feelings towards people of colour (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005; Dovidio et al., 2017). Aversive racists may feel compassion for victims of past social injustice, explicitly support racial equality, and genuinely believe themselves to be non-prejudiced. Nevertheless, these individuals simultaneously hold negative *implicit racial biases*: unconscious attitudes and stereotypes towards members of racial outgroups (Greenwald and Krieger, 1995). The coupling of negative racial bias against outgroup members with preference towards ingroup members underlies aversive racist behaviour and accounts for a large proportion of racial disparities (Gaertner et al., 1997; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005, 2014; Vial et al., 2018). Patterns of aversive racism can be seen in editors and reviewers who outwardly support diversity initiatives yet deem research on racism or racial disparities as irrelevant, unfounded, or not pertinent to the discipline. Aversive racists endorse egalitarian views and believe they will act in accordance with these views. However, certain contexts are more likely to precipitate racist behaviour unaligned with these views (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005). Such contexts include when: social norms/guidelines for appropriate non-racist behaviour are absent or ambiguous; one can rationalise racist behaviours using an alternative factor to race; and/or engaging in a racist behaviour yields little risk to one's public image as a non-racist (i.e., no witnesses). For example, in a study examining White college students' support for hiring White vs. Black candidates for a campus position, researchers found that when candidate credentials were clear (either very strong or very lacking), participants did not discriminate between Black or White applicants. However, when candidate credential strength was more ambiguous (and thus the appropriate hiring decision was not as clear), participants endorsed Black candidates much less often than White candidates (45% vs. 76%, respectively; Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000).

This is a schema learned in childhood: advantage your own (White) race only if it is not obvious, because overt racial discrimination is stigmatised. This is the essence of aversive racism, a covert cultural behaviour demonstrated empirically to have been instilled in childhood (McGillicuddy-De Lisi et al., 2006). As a result, reports of racism will be taken less seriously by White individuals than people of colour, because unlike people of colour, White people do not directly experience racism, and because race and racism are stigmatised concepts (Chrobot-Mason and Hepworth, 2005). Therefore, when confronted with racism, White individuals have learned to search for alternative (and often less plausible) explanations for unjust outcomes that do not involve racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; McGillicuddy-De Lisi et al., 2006; Neville et al., 2013). For example, they will justify the exclusion of people of colour from leadership roles, such as editors, by saying that people of colour are not interested in these roles rather than acknowledge they are being excluded.

Racial socialisation, white superiority, and white solidarity

Aversive racism and negative implicit racial biases are a product of *racial socialisation*, a natural human experience in which the attitudes and stereotypes of our early carers (parents, guardians, etc.) transfer to us and shape our earliest schemas. This theory is supported by research noting the presence of implicit biases in children as young as 4 years old (Perszyk et al., 2019). Within White families and/or White-majority societies a popular attitude imposed upon younger generations is that of colourblindness (Hughes et al., 2006). *Colourblind racial attitudes* pressure individuals not to see race, communicate that race is unimportant, and posit that any acknowledgement of or discussion of race maintains racial conflict (Zucker and Patterson, 2018). This problematic ideology parrots that everyone be treated equally, regardless of the colour of their skin— "there is only one race, the human race." In fact, colourblindness is believed to be a positive value by many White people (Kanter et al., 2019). However, such beliefs negate what is often an important part of a person of colour's identity and a major source of pride (Neville et al., 2013; Williams, 2020). Colourblind attitudes also very conveniently cover up historical and ongoing challenges, inequities, and differential privileges people of colour must contend with in all aspects of their lives, whilst obscuring or erasing any responsibility White people have to address or even acknowledge the current unequal outcomes of a system that advantages them by race. Critically, this system leads to cognitive dissonance in many. Many White people are emotionally invested in believing that the system is fair (when it is not) and that they are purely self-made (rather than they are the recipients of favour in a biased system) which results in a degree of emotional dysregulation when confronted with the reality of racial inequity (Liebow and Glazer, 2019; Bergkamp et al., 2022).

Racial socialisation shapes not only the lens with which we see others, but also our own racial identities. One such pervasive identity-influencing socialisation strategy is that of silence or an avoidance of discussing matters of race. This reluctance to discuss race-related issues is not always rooted in ill intent, but can result in negative messaging (Farago et al., 2019). More specifically, in many cases silence on race and race-related issues can serve as a negative implicit message about other racial groups. This silence results in young people

being forced to create their own narratives explaining observed racial differences (Waxman, 2021). For instance, a White college student who is unaware that equal opportunities are denied to non-White people may explain the underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic faculty in higher education as a function of their lack of motivation or intelligence compared to White faculty. Or someone absent an understanding of historical oppression and resultant traumas felt by Native American communities may believe the increased rates of homelessness and concurrent disorders are a function of laziness or a biological weakness as compared to White people. These misguided narratives, partnered with egalitarian ideologies, result in implicit and sometimes explicit feelings of White superiority over other racial groups.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, White people often feel threatened by equality because to truly understand that there are those that are unfairly disadvantaged, means one must also confront the idea that there are others who are unfairly privileged. To accept this is true about race and maintain self-esteem forces White people to make adjustments to their behaviours and worldviews. One option is to actively find ways to relinquish some of their unearned advantage. Another is to maintain the status quo and accept they are engaging in racist behaviour and are participants in oppression. The stakes are high. At the same time, racial socialisation conditions White individuals to align themselves with those that look like them to maintain their current privileged status (Williams, 2020). More specifically, from a young age, behaviours that are in line with maintaining White peoples' disproportionate level of privilege are reinforced, whereas actions that undermine Whiteness and endorse equality between all peoples are punished. When White racial allies engage in anti-racist behaviours they risk being labelled as a "race traitor," which puts social pressure on White people to align with each other. This is referred to as *White solidarity* (Williams and Sharif, 2021).

Interracial anxiety and white fragility

Whilst aversive racism and implicit racial biases may stem in large part from racial socialisation, they are maintained by a lack of interracial contact and race-based experiential avoidance (Kanter et al., 2019). Moreover, these patterns of experiential avoidance, and failure to confront internally difficult subject matter, can lead to a chronic reduction in a White person's psychological stamina for even the smallest amounts of racial stress in their environment. More specifically, *White fragility* refers to "a state in which minimum amounts of racial-stress are found to be intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves from the White individual" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). Such defences include emotional displays of anger, fear, and/or guilt. They can also include observable behaviours such as silence, argumentation, and/or fleeing the situation. In such cases, when White people are challenged on their racism and bias, or forced to face their privileged positions and roles in maintaining racial oppression, many experience emotional dysregulation; they do not have the strength or practice to lean away from these defensive moves and into anti-racist action (Liebow and Glazer, 2019). In addition to being unhelpful in solving the problem of aversive racism and bias, White fragility contributes to the problem as it forces a re-centering of White voices and emotions, whilst further de-centering the needs and interests of people of colour (Liu, 2020).

Several studies have found that White people feel less empathy towards people of colour than other White people (e.g., Forgiarini et al., 2011; Berlingeri et al., 2016; Harjunen et al., 2022). These studies use magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain to measure the response of people of different races to touch and pain. This type of measurement in response to visualised pain allows the researcher to directly test empathetic responses in a way that is not confounded by social desirability or impulse to deny racial preferences. Racism is stigmatised, which means that simply asking how people feel about people of other races will not normally provide accurate results. This point about empathy is particularly relevant due to its impacts for the field of psychology and the peer-review and publication processes, in particular (Smith et al., 2022). The results of these studies reveal that people exhibit greater empathy towards individuals with a similar skin colour (Berlingeri et al., 2016; Harjunen et al., 2022), and White individuals exhibit an anti-Black bias. Experiments in which individuals witnessed different races experiencing pain revealed that Black participants' pain was assessed as less painful than White participants' pain (Berlingeri et al., 2016; Harjunen et al., 2022). So we can observe that the mere witnessing of an individual in pain causes a measurable signal that is dependent on the racial similarity between the observer and the victim (Zhou and Han, 2021). Literally, White people empathetically feel less pain for people of colour, whether it is physical or emotional. In fact, White people felt more empathy for pain inflicted upon a purple alien hand (used as a control) than a Black person's hand (Harjunen et al., 2022).

We can summarise the key issues from this discussion of racism in Table 1. These key issues are based on the literature as described and are true for the average White person in the United States and Canada, and emerging literature indicates this is true in most Western nations as well. Given that most editors and reviewers are White, these facts become problems in the editorial and peer review process.

Real world examples of racism and bias in the peer review process

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, many journals initiated a re-evaluation of the structural racism within their policies and practices. In select cases, journals went so far as to retract previously published racist articles (e.g., Rushton and Templer, 2021). Yet, despite this racial reckoning, there remains much work to be done. To this point, the following 10 real world examples we have chosen highlight racism and bias within the publication process, where all incidents took place no more than a year and a half prior to writing this article. Readers must understand that these are not simply historical or remote issues, but that racism and bias are still very much alive within

TABLE 1 Four key causes of biased outcomes in publishing.

1	White people have a pro-White, anti-POC bias.
2	White people feel uncomfortable and anxious addressing racial issues.
3	White people will not openly side with people of colour over other White people.
4	White people feel less empathy towards people of colour compared to White people.

our own profession and must be acknowledged and addressed (i.e., see Table 2 for examples and relevant references). The editor position represents a fulcrum of power as that person is able to make decisions about what kind of research is important enough to be published. These editorial decisions have historically been shielded from public view, allowing discriminatory behaviours to grow in the dark. Exposing this clubby nexus of power as biased will allow more egalitarian methodologies to emerge for deciding whose research topic deserves to be considered in the peer review process.

It is worth mentioning here that for papers focused on diversity issues, recommendations made during the review process are based more on perceived quality than for papers focused on other topics (King et al., 2018). This finding is consistent with previously established "stricter standards" bias in which individuals with stigmatised (compared to non-stigmatised) identities must overcome negative performance expectations and assumptions about perceived unworthiness (Lyness and Heilman, 2006). The tendency to make recommendations based more on perceived quality for diversity scholarship compared to other scholarship may occur for a variety of reasons. Implicit or explicit bias may be a factor; however, even well-meaning reviewers and editors may be hyper critical of diversity scholarship in an effort to protect themselves (e.g., the journal) or the authors from backlash from biased individuals. Whilst this may seem like allied behaviour, it has the opposite effect of creating additional barriers and contributing to the underrepresentation of diversity scholarship compared to scholarship focused on other issues, and exemplifies White saviorship.

Contempt for papers about people of colour

Editors and reviewers exhibit contempt for papers about people of colour. Papers that discuss racial issues tend to face barriers to publication in the form of an inequitable higher level of scrutiny and greater rates of rejection (Roberts et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2021b). For example, a Black author submitted a paper about mechanisms used by Black individuals to cope with anti-Black racism to a journal with a White editor (Example 2). Based on what we know about racial biases, we can predict what sort of problems will occur. At the outset, we already know that on average, White people have a moderate pro-White, anti-Black bias (both implicit and explicit; Faber et al., 2019; Gran-Ruaz et al., 2022); they also feel uncomfortable/anxious addressing racial issues (Trawalter and Richeson, 2008; Farago et al., 2019). Very few White people will side with Black people over other White people, even if it means they are behaving in a manner that is against their anti-racist values (Williams and Sharif, 2021); and finally, White people feel less empathy towards Black people than other White people (e.g., Harjunen et al., 2022).

Consider how these psychological facts are realised in the review process. Most White editors would have biases against this paper before they even read it, regardless of its subject matter. Now also consider that the article is about anti-Black racism. Editors may mentally access some of these biases but not all. They will experience some emotional discomfort reading even the abstract, and even more dysregulation after reading the paper. This leads to manifestly racist editor comments questioning the very purpose of the paper (Example 2). This explains the findings by Roberts et al. (2020), where 11% of all publications highlighted race when the editors-in-chief were people

of colour, but when the editors-in-chief were White, this percentage fell nearly threefold to a mere 4%.

White reviewers can be expected to feel similarly discomforted by manuscripts about race. Based on our years of experience in the guest editor and associate editor role, we observe that many, if not most, reviewers will decline to review a paper simply because the title includes Black people, and as such it may take many attempts to identify any reviewers at all (Williams, 2020). After review, if even one White reviewer does not like the paper, a White editor will be pulled to side with them, rather than break White solidarity. There will be little empathy for the concerns of the Black authors, needs of Black readers, or the issues of harm occurring to Black people due to racism. Instead, reviewers and editors will be more concerned about how White readers might perceive the paper, as this is precisely how aversive racism functions.

A similar dynamic occurred for a paper reviewed by one of the authors, where a Black reviewer thought a racist paper should be rejected and a White reviewer approved it (Example 3), with no reason provided by the editor as to why the Black reviewer was disregarded. Typically, when reviewers disagree sharply, either: (i) a committee made up of the editor, deputy editors, statistical editors, etc. is formed to arrive at a decision; (ii) a third reviewer is brought on to provide a "tie-breaker" review; or (iii) the paper receives a simple rejection by the editor (Pless, 2006; Tanock, 2019). However, none of these scenarios occurred. Instead, the journal accepted the paper, in effect devaluing the opinion of the Black reviewer and racism expert.

Scientific racism

Example 3 is also an example of scientific racism. *Scientific racism* refers to the use of scientific concepts and data to justify and promote ideas of racial hierarchy (Winston, 2020). Pseudoscientific claims promoted White supremacy throughout the twentieth century as White psychologists claimed the biological and genetic inferiority of people of colour based on biased testing and poorly designed studies (Guthrie, 2004; Pickren, 2009). These comparative studies were plagued with serious scientific deficits, logical fallacies, inaccurate concepts related to race, statistical limitations, misuse of research literature, and flaws in reasoning (Winston, 2020).

Psychological theories and empirical research continue to be used to support biologically-based racial differences in intelligence, morality, personality, and behavioural tendencies. This research is used as a tool to legitimise and institutionalise racist ideas, methodologies, and practices. As such, these claims are then used to explain and account for racial disparities and structural inequities (Winston, 2020). Pseudoscience practices and racist content have been absorbed into the literature, training material, and psychological knowledge base. In some cases, published papers were retracted (e.g., Rushton and Templer, 2021); however, this research persists.

Examples of racism in published research include using scientific concepts to minimise or dismiss the existence, impact, or racial underpinnings of racial disparities. This includes studies that are poorly designed, inappropriately conceptualise and measure race, devalue a racial lens, make sweeping conclusions, fail to consider research implications on racialized communities, and address racial issues despite being authored entirely by White research teams. The fact that White people feel able to speak on issues of race and racism as if they are purely academic subjects, and without any input from

TABLE 2 Examples of racist reasoning by reviewers or editors.

Topic of manuscript, reference	Message and editorial reasoning for rejection or revision	Implications, assumptions, and racial stereotypes
1. Interpersonal racial justice allyship scales (Williams and Sharif, 2021)	"It looks to me like there was the potential for a more complex and multifaceted measure, but the version proposed here does not seem to offer a contribution beyond measures already readily available." (No other such measure exists.)	Assertion that the scales were not novel, when they actually were, is a pretence used to reject the paper. The implication is that we should not measure the commitment of White people to antiracism, as White allyship is not something worthy of study.
2. Black people coping with racism (Jacob et al., 2023)	"Black people cannot change racism, so this research is nonsensical … it is not clear why a review of coping with racism related experiences is needed. The authors have not provided a rationale for the current state of the literature and why this necessitates a review."	Reviewer does not see a need to study coping with racism, revealing a lack of empathy around the trauma of racism. This is dehumanising because it assumes people of colour do not feel pain and are helpless in the face of racism. It implies that they are inferior to White people. Further, it is implied that racism research is unimportant, since it is not for the good of White people.
3. Expert reviewer of colour ignored (Andersen et al., 2021)	A journal accepts a racist and anti-scientific paper over the objections of a Black reviewer, giving more weight to the White reviewer's opinion.	Elevating the voice of the White reviewer implies that the White viewpoint is more important than that of the Black reviewer. The underlying implication is that White people's opinions are superior.
4. Racism in juries (Levinson et al., 2022; Faber et al., 2022a)	"I do not think that this paper makes a significant enough contribution to the literature to justify including it in this prestigious scientific journal."	Reviewer implies that the topic of racial bias in juries is not a scientific subject worthy of study at a high academic level; the subject itself is somehow inferior. This assertion assumes, in the face of the facts presented in the paper, that it does not matter if jurors are racist. Supports status quo that White people are fit to judge people of colour without scrutiny, since their judgements are superior.
5. Analysis of two tiered disciplinary actions by a psychology licencing board (Faber et al., 2022b)	An academic talk scheduled at a state congress that was critical of a psychology licencing board was cancelled with less than 24 h' notice.	Licencing Boards are powers in and of themselves, and academic research into their functioning represents a threat to their ability to operate without oversight. Exposing bias in their policies is not permitted because it harms White Board members by making them uncomfortable and threatening their power.
6. Racism within a professional organisation (under review)	[Despite qualitative data being anonymized], "We unanimously agreed that [organisation] cannot go against legal counsel and publish potentially libellous material."	Libel is used as an excuse to exclude qualitative data when it is specifically about racism, exposing hypocrisy. Assumes Black people are not credible sources of their own oppression. Implication is that the Black authors would lie about racism for personal gain or reckless spite.
	"[writing about] those specific incidents, … appears to be career suicide and would create defensiveness rather than a real change in the organization."	Reviewer does not want to expose the racist events after conceding they actually occurred because they would embarrass the organisation. "Career suicide" is a veiled threat that exposing the events may result in harm to the Authors. Assumes that White people's feelings are more important than Black experiences of racism.
7. Equal access to graduate psychology programmes (Sarr et al., 2022)	The "reviewers noted the lack of systematic methodology and focus on only one program" and "the focus and scope of the paper is somewhat unclear, the recommendations … not particularly novel or innovative, and the empirical critique of the example ranking grid is not adequately rigorous."	When it comes to demonstrating racism with case studies, there is never enough proof; such overzealous requirements assume that Black experiences are less credible by demanding multiple cases. This sets such a high bar that it would not have been possible to publish about the observed lack of psychologists of colour. Vague critiques make it impossible to improve paper. Upholds status quo, implying that mental health of POC does not matter; and no need for psychologists of colour. Devalues experiences of POC. Implies White people's mental health is more important.
8. Barriers to POC becoming psychologists (Sarr et al., 2022)	"You cannot use the words *unceded* or *stolen*. … Maybe just remove the *stolen* and keep the land acknowledgement."	We must hide the effects of colonialism, because White people should not be made to feel bad for exploiting people of colour.
9. Rebuttal paper regarding lethal force by Canadian police officers (Williams et al., 2022)	"In the sentence [you wrote]: 'However, in this case this process was subject to racial bias.' Can this be nuanced? It may be the case, but I feel that this statement is too strong."	Reviewer agrees that racism occurred but wants to cover it with words that reduce its salience. Implies that we must not speak openly about racism in law enforcement. Result is that police remain free to do as they see fit to control people of colour.
10. Civil courage for racial justice (Williams et al., 2023)	"Paper is poorly written, unclear and disorganised, not empirically sourced."	Vague critiques of a well-organised, well-sourced and well-written paper, praised by 3 other reviewers, exposes the reviewer's bias. Assumes and implies that scholars of colour are poor writers and researchers, and therefore cannot credibly critique our racist systems.

people of colour who understand racism and racialized experiences best because they live them, exemplifies beliefs of White superiority and racial bias (i.e., racism).

Aversive racism

Whilst aversive racists may have antiracist values, their actions are guided by unconscious, and sometimes conscious, prejudiced beliefs that cause them to ultimately undermine racial equality (Levinson et al., 2022). For example, consider a real-life situation observed by one of the authors in which aversively racist students said they support equal rights for people of colour, yet voted against founding a Black student club, which has no material impact for them. Thus, someone who publicly proclaims support for affirmative action or racial equality may still have racial biases that cause them to act in ways that undermine their stated value.

Considering these examples helps us see how aversive racism may also play out in the reviewer selection process. For example, some of the present authors had great difficulty finding a psychology journal that would even review an article on the use of psychology for anti-racist jury selection (Example 4), resulting in a spate of desk rejections. For context, this was at the same time as the infamous Derek Chauvin trial for the murder of George Floyd, when this topic was of high interest. Editors failed to understand why the topic itself (racism in juries and how to address it) was even a suitable issue for a scientific journal, although two important manuscripts later came from this work. This is also not an isolated incident of racial bias in the reviewer selection process. In their systematic review, Roberts et al. (2020) found that amongst the publications examining race, the majority (63%) of first authors were White and only 23% were people of colour. Curious to know the reason for this disparity, the authors conducted *post hoc* analyses to determine if authors of colour produced lower quality research. They also considered if there are simply too few authors of colour. After ruling out the quantity of authors of colour and the quality of their research, they concluded what psychologists of colour have known all along: that the psychological publication process, as with the rest of society, is fraught with racial inequality. Moreover, whilst the above figures relate specifically to authors (not reviewers), the size of one's portfolio and/or venues for articles academics have published often help editors and their support team identify experts to call upon for review. As such, barriers experienced by authors of colour in publishing will also have negative impacts on the diversity of those featured for review.

Censorship of critical perspectives

Critical perspectives can mean multiple things. It can mean diverse perspectives, such as those of racial, gender, and sexual minorities. It can also mean non-dominant perspectives or perspectives that centre marginalised issues. Both types of critical perspectives are frequently censored in psychology. The following are examples of how this happens in the peer review process with explanations of the underlying facilitating mechanisms of racism.

Censorship to hide unflattering findings

Astonishing as it may seem, the authors experienced censorship (cancellation) of a scheduled scientific talk at a 2022 psychology convention (Example 5) to prevent the public airing of a statistical analysis of disciplinary outcomes of a state licencing board (Wu et al., 2022; Faber et al., 2022b). Censorship is an anathema to progress, and in this case a result of fear of exposure on the part of that board. The analysis provided both qualitative and quantitative data; however, in an eleventh hour manoeuvre, powerful advocates of the board pressured the conference organisers to make a political decision to cancel the talk with threats of legal action. This kind of cover-up attempt is more suited to the mafia than to psychologists; however, publishing about racial disparities can elicit censorship due to fear of disclosure, not only because overt discrimination is stigmatised, but also due to solidarity with existing power structures that have a vested interest in operating without transparency.

Censorship of diverse perspectives

Some of the authors submitted a paper to a journal focused on contextual behavioural science, providing a critical evaluation of the practices regarding diversity and inclusion within the associated professional organisation from the perspective of Black psychologists in the field (Example 6). Upon submission, the journal did not follow its standard protocol to send the anonymous paper to two or three independent and impartial reviewers with related expertise, despite the explicit request of the authors. Rather, the paper was reviewed by two White associate editors of the journal, and the publisher, all of whom would have had a strong bias against any criticism of the organisation. Unsurprisingly, the paper was rejected but with the option to resubmit as a new paper only if first-hand *accounts of Black members* were censored – in effect removing all the voices of colour and their racialized experiences as Black professionals in the organisation. Apart from the clear deviation from the standard peer review process, most problematic is the insulting and racist assertion from the editor that an analysis of racist behaviour is simply "not scientific" ("we do not feel that those [accounts] belong in a scientific journal") and that, in documenting these qualitative experiences, Black people are not credible documentarians of their own experiences ("how [do] we ensure they are adequately complete accounts that are fact checked"). Notably, the editor later rejected the offer to provide documentation for all accounts. The editor even went so far as to threaten the authors of committing libel and opening themselves up to legal liabilities. The reviewing associate editors criticised the paper for being "unbalanced" and using "inflammatory language," adding that "readers would be turned off and not take it seriously enough." The editors provided the following example:

> Another example of presenting only one side of an issue is when the authors talk about the lack of diversity in [the organisation's membership], the board of [the organisation], and [the journal's] editorial board. What's missing is how many *Blacks* [stylishly outdated wording of the editor] applied and were not successful in these pursuits. For example, maybe the current [organisation's] board is white because no Black people nominated themselves. Maybe Black researchers have been asked to be on the [journal's] editorial board but said no.

These points made by the editor can be understood as aversive racism within the broader context of racial socialisation. As previously discussed, White people are socialised to find other, less plausible

justifications for unjust outcomes than admit racism as the answer (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Neville et al., 2013), and they take reports of racism less seriously (Chrobot-Mason and Hepworth, 2005), both of which were clearly demonstrated in the editors' response letter. In this illustration, the reviewer blames Black professionals by suggesting they are less capable, less ambitious, or simply excluding themselves.

Two of the authors subsequently met with the editor of the journal and explained that their paper had been judged in a manner that was discriminatory (different from other papers), biased (reviewers had a conflict of interest), and unscientific (reviewers did not have relevant expertise). The authors were grateful when the editor agreed to send the paper out for review to qualified, less biased reviewers. The three new reviewers were all positive of the paper, and none thought it was libellous or unscientific. In fact, they all recognised the importance of the real-life examples of racism within the organisation (all examples anonymized) and praised the authors for including them. When the authors asked about the delay in hearing back from the editor, the editor warned them that the three positive reviews would not be good enough, and that the paper would have to clear the association's lawyer. The authors suggested that a lawyer with expertise in discrimination and social justice be used. This was ignored, and the organisation's chosen lawyer provided a revised manuscript with all the Black voices crossed out (just as requested in the editor's original letter), with the excuse that it might upset some of the anonymous people who perpetrated the racist acts described. Below is a brief example of a redaction demanded by the association's lawyer:

> In our investigation, we did learn that in the aftermath of George Floyd's extra-judicial murder and the subsequent global racial reckoning, there were shifts in the climate at [organization] that made more space for Black inclusion due to what one Black member described as "White guilt". For example, there is a new set of BIPOC clinicians brought in by members of the diversity committee through MEND, a group of trauma experts focused on healing communities of color (www.mendminds.org) using ACT. They had better experiences because the [organization's] diversity committee and the related special interest group found ways to make them feel welcome, such as having a social event for people of color at a recent conference. There has been some thought and action around these issues, although members feel there is still a very long way to go in making [organization] truly inclusive.

This example of censorship demonstrates that the authors advanced a balanced perspective, with some positives and some negatives, but the lawyer wanted all the negatives removed to create a false positive impression of the organisation and a biased narrative. This represents an incredible compromise of academic freedom and scientific integrity. In a stunning blow to academic freedom and scientific integrity, the editor refused to publish the paper unless the authors acquiesced to unscientific censorship of Black voices and hid that organisation's critical Black history.

An analysis of this experience by racism experts leads to the clear conclusion that these actions simply represent more racism being perpetrated by the association. The paper carefully documented experiences of organisational racism which represented the paper's qualitative data and supported this data with scientific research. These observed (and in some cases very public) instances of racism at the association were also included to ensure that future members would be treated fairly. It is unheard of that an outside *ad hoc* "publications committee" would interfere with the proper functioning of a journal and the academic freedom of scientists in the community. It is unheard of to have an outside person censor qualitative data in an academic manuscript. Further, amongst the entities that the editor conferred with for advice, there were no signs that Black members were included or that EDI committees were consulted although the authors suggested it. The lawyer consulted was more concerned about potential libel than the legalities of committing racial discrimination against Black authors. Further, the lawyer should have informed the editor that the courts have ruled that scientific articles are protected from defamation suits, as vigorous debate is good for science. The result rather was that all qualitative data was again suggested to be expunged, resulting in a watering down of the paper despite the positive reviewers' decision; the editors had to find other reasons to control the outcome and they did. The authors later told the editor this was the most blatant case of racism they had encountered in their entire academic careers and urged the editor to resign in alignment with anti-racist values.

Censorship of non-dominant perspectives

As discussed previously, as with the rest of academia, the field of psychology operates in a manner that is elitist and racist as demonstrated by the glaring mental health disparities within communities of colour and the poor representation of psychologists of colour in the field (Chapman et al., 2018; Williams, 2019; Buchanan, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2021b; Faber et al., 2023). A paper co-authored by two authors of this paper attempted to shine a light on the inequity in access to Canadian psychology graduate programmes by examining the criteria by which programmes rank their applicants and the ways in which these admission systems maintain systemic racism (Example 7). Given the comparable criteria across programmes and the lack of publicly available information on how these criteria are used or weighted, the paper used a case-study approach. Despite the importance of this issue within psychology, with real-world implications for the field and for real people, particularly racialized people, and the dearth of extant scholarship, the paper was rejected, with reviewers claiming a lack of systematic methodology, inadequate literature, and the inclusion of a case study that focused on just a single university. This is not an isolated incident. All too often, papers highlighting critical issues that hold extreme import for the field of psychology and vulnerable populations are passed over when they challenge the status quo or the dominant perspective (Buchanan et al., 2021b). Fortunately, in this case one of the senior authors was able to make a successful appeal to the editor to give the paper another chance, and it was ultimately positively reviewed and published.

Problems like this may occur for a variety of reasons. First, as previously mentioned, White people are socialised to take reports of racism less seriously and look for alternative reasons for racist outcomes (Chrobot-Mason and Hepworth, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Neville et al., 2013). As a result, people of colour who rightly call out racism are often met with criticism from White people or disbelieved entirely (Williams, 2019; Buchanan, 2020). In the editorial and peer review process, this bias may manifest as requests for more evidence and the use of "softer" or more "nuanced" language (i.e., not speaking honestly about racism; Black et al., 2022). For example, one reviewer commented the following (Example 8):

> On pg. 14 the authors state "The University of Ottawa is in Ottawa, Ontario in Canada on stolen Anishinaabe land". Agreed, but in some provinces (e.g., New Brunswick) you can't use the words

> "unceeded" or "stolen". This article is really important and we don't want to see it censored or pulled from publication due to the wording. Maybe just remove the "stolen" and keep the land acknowledgement.

These criticisms are often also neatly couched in seemingly anti-racist rhetoric. For example, the same reviewer suggested the following:

> Another general recommendation to the authors is to soften their language in the paper… the use of a softer language may increase the effectiveness of the arguments and reach a wider audience, particularly for those demographics who may be more likely to reject these arguments based on the language used (the same demographics who would benefit the most from learning from this paper).

With an understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms at play and how they may manifest in the editorial and peer-review process, it is not hard to see how White editors and reviewers may have been quicker to disregard a paper describing systemic racism in graduate psychology admissions. Of course, attitudes of White superiority and a fear of being labelled a race traitor could also bias individuals against a paper that openly challenges White power and privilege and could benefit communities of colour.

Likewise, after the acceptance of the racist paper about police and bias (Example 3), the ignored Black reviewer was invited to submit a rebuttal to address the biased and unscientific aspects of the published paper. But when she and her team submitted it for review, the editor insisted on changing the wording to "nuance" the analysis (Example 9). Further, when the authors wrote about the mechanisms of bias in the editorial and peer-review process, the editor said the paper would be rejected unless the description of those events was removed. Once the censored paper was accepted, it was another 7 months before the paper was even available online, as the publishers were holding it until the original authors had time to write their own rebuttal (Williams et al., 2022).

Racial hostility

In our experience, excellent papers are frequently subjected to harsh generalised criticism by reviewers simply because it makes the reviewer uncomfortable. It is often clear when a paper has legitimate shortcomings, as in such cases one usually receives specific and convergent feedback from several reviewers. A very different pattern can be observed when a paper is reviewed by those with racial biases and White fragility, as it can be expected to generate some degree of emotional dysregulation in the reviewer. These negative feelings can be explained away by the reviewer as unrelated to internal bias if they can find a reason to disparage the paper. As experts in racism, it is generally apparent to us when this has occurred, as the reviewer's critique will include racial microaggressions rather than a helpful discussion of concrete problems areas. Common examples include, that a paper "is poorly organised," "has an unclear rationale," "cannot see how this adds to the literature," "points are not well-supported," "filled with typos," "hard to follow," "disjointed," and "badly written"—which are aligned with stereotypes that many people of colour are less

intelligent, less capable, and speak poor English. Certainly, a number of papers submitted for publication do have these problems, which makes the aversive racism behind these statements difficult for editors to recognise.

Generalised negativity

As an example, one of the authors submitted a paper about finding the courage to be a racial justice ally to a high impact factor flagship journal of the APA (Example 10). The authors received divergent feedback from the three reviewers. Notably, the one reviewer of colour said, "I believe the authors have achieved something of significance in this work, and it will likely create a lasting impact on the readership." The other two reviewers noted they enjoyed the paper, but their reviews were nonetheless marred by biases, containing many of the microaggressions listed above in one form or another. The lead author was a seasoned researcher, having published over 150 peer-reviewed academic papers, and an excellent writer; as such she knew that these assertions about the paper needing more clarification/explanation and more empirical support were incorrect. Nonetheless, the authors felt all of the criticisms were things they could address, and so they put considerable effort into a revision that was responsive to all of the reviewers' points, glad for the opportunity to cite more key scholars in their revision.

When the decision from the editor came back, two of the reviewers noted that the authors had been exceptionally responsive to their feedback and there was no comment from the third. However, the authors were horrified to see that a fourth reviewer (R4) had been added who had only negative feedback. The comments from R4 about the revised manuscript were completely opposite the other 3 reviewers. R4 stated that the paper was "unclear and at times disorganised," "generally not up to APA style standards," "often at odds with the facts," and "more rigorous research and clearer writing would improve your paper." Despite these sweeping criticisms, R4 offered only one concrete example of something deemed incorrect—a fact that was actually correct. The authors knew the paper was well-supported, having 133 references, so they placed the empirical papers in a supplementary table with each reference attached to each salient point to address the reviewer's complaint. They also added an additional citation to their correct fact. But the critique about the unclear writing felt impossible to address, as by all academic standards the paper was already extremely well-written with no room to further improve.

Fortunately, that journal advertised a service for authors who needed writing support. The authors hired the service to review the entire manuscript and make corrections as needed. The service uncharacteristically made private positive remarks, marvelling about the paper and made only minor changes (punctuation, wording, etc.) that marginally improved the flow and readability, but edits involved no reorganisation of the material. The authors then submitted certification to the editor as proof that the paper was (and had always been) well-written, and so it was published. However, we appreciate that most authors of colour would not have been able to navigate this punishing, insulting, expensive, and racist process for a favourable outcome.

Editors can increase their awareness of bias in the review process by reading reviewer comments and looking for blanket negative statements, such as those noted above, as well as a *lack of convergence amongst reviewers*. Reviews of the aforementioned type, submitted by

people without solid research in racism and/or lived experience, should be deprioritized by editors or deleted. Editors may be reluctant to delete a review and rationalise that it may be helpful to authors, but they should also consider the distress caused to scholars of colour by constantly receiving unfair reviews fueled by racial animus.

Recommendations for equitable publication practice

The issue of bias in the editorial process is starting to be taken more seriously in the most important institutions of psychological practice. The American Psychological Association's (APA) recent initiatives to address racism in publishing, including the formation of a new working group (American Psychological Association, 2022), as well as the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) calls for research proposals to examine disparities in their journals (Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, 2022), both demonstrate a commitment to promoting equity and inclusion within the field of psychology. The swift response of the Association for Psychological Science (APS) in addressing the 2022 scandal involving racial bias against an African American tenured Professor at Stanford by four White editors/reviewers from the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, exemplified by the resignation of an editor, also serves as a positive example of how we can address and mitigate discrimination in the field (Association for Psychological Science, 2022).

Having outlined mechanisms driving racial bias in the editorial and peer review process, including bias in reviewer selection, devaluing racialized expertise, censorship of critical perspectives, minimal consideration of harm to racialized people, and the publication of unscientific and racist studies we provide recommendations which can be considered supportive to the initiatives from the APA, the APS, and the SPSSI, to ensure racial equity throughout the editorial and review process. These are outlined in Tables 3, 4 and include actions targeting key actors from across the review process.

General recommendations

When considering papers about racism and people of colour, it is important to push back against efforts to suppress these manuscripts and reviews. The burden of proof should be shifted from those highlighting the existence of racist policies and practices within the publication and peer review process to those denying its existence (Dupree and Kraus, 2022). The existence of racism is the null hypothesis, yet resisting this fact is a cultural habit baked into the process. It is the presence of equity that needs to be proven (De Los Reyes and Uddin, 2021). Practice awareness of implicit racial biases and the ways in which these biases may be affecting behaviour in the academic and research milieu (e.g., in one's own research lab, university, editorial board, journal, etc.) and the peer review process with the goal of interrupting and dismantling these biases.

As scholars of racism, we know that many who have not experienced racism will struggle with the examples provided. Some will become fixated on the veracity of the events shared and our

conclusions about them. This is to be predicted based on the dissonance caused by the wish for a just world and the reality of racism. However, the point of this paper is not to lament about our own experiences of racism, rather to use these examples as vehicles to help readers understand the pertinent issues that are impacting scholars of colour today and the mechanisms by which racism is advanced. Further, we posit that people of colour should be respected as accurate historians of their own experience, and we challenge those who demand proof of these experiences to better understand their own motivations for their needs in this regard.

Notably, in the examples provided we offered enough information so that the experiences would be relatable to academics but mostly omitted other details because the point is not to embarrass or call-out individuals. Racism is a pervasive problem, and these issues are widespread. Further, in today's "cancel culture," we have noticed that it is too easy for people to point the finger at a specific person to deflect attention away from structural issues or the need to do one's own personal work. That being said, we also recognise the need for scientific accountability and are glad to provide full documentation of any examples by request.

Is anonymous peer review a solution?

Finally, we would like to comment on the concept of double-anonymous peer review as a potential solution. Ostensibly, double-anonymous peer review represents a methodology which can reduce bias and increase meritocracy by hiding clues about authors' stigmatised identities and there is some evidence for this in the literature (Shmidt and Jacobson, 2022; Sun et al., 2022). Whilst there is little if any research on the effects of single or double-anonymous review on racial bias specifically, compared to single-anonymous review, double-anonymous review has been found to reduce various forms of bias such as gender bias (e.g., Cuskley et al., 2020) and prestige bias (i.e., positively evaluating papers written by prestigious authors or authors from prestigious institutions; e.g., Tomkins et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2022). Double-anonymous review has also been found to reduce bias towards author nationality (e.g., preference for US-based authors and authors from other English-speaking countries; Resnik and Elmore, 2016). However, there have also been mixed results with some journals reporting for example, that double-anonymous review did not result in more female authorships, reduce bias in manuscript ranking or recommendation, or improve the quality of reviews than its single-anonymous counterparts (Chung et al., 2015; Cox and Montgomerie, 2019).

More importantly, double-anonymous review is not helpful if reviewers are biased against the fundamental ideas and concepts in a paper. Resnik and Elmore (2016) refer to this as "reviewer conflict of interest." As one editor noted, anonymous review can actually hinder efforts to address discrimination and promote inclusivity (Manturuk, 2022). For example, not knowing the skin colour or gender of the author cannot save a paper which contains a frank discussion of stigmatised ideas such as those about Whiteness. In such cases, it would be immaterial if the author can be identified as female, transgender, or BIPOC because prejudice and discrimination will result in a biased evaluation of the paper anyway. If anonymizing fails to result in just outcomes, anonymous

TABLE 3 Recommendations for associations and journals on governance and publication.

Governance—action	Governance—reasoning
Include individuals with underrepresented and diverse identities, backgrounds, and perspectives in editorial teams and decision-making processes (editorial and association boards, committees, and members).	It is not enough to have an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee with no real power, or just a few people of colour on an editorial board. Diversity of perspectives should also include regional, national and international representation, and a broad range of disciplines and methodologies.
Regularly collect and publish disaggregated identity data on internal diversity (e.g., editors, committee members, and boards), the diversity of reviewers, and the diversity of the content produced and from whom (e.g., data for published authors).	This data is needed to inform decisions, recruit editors and reviewers, and address challenges in representation. If it is not measured it remains difficult to see and easy to ignore.
Ensure editors and editorial members in leadership roles impacting equitable outcomes are committed to equity and anti-racism.	These commitments help ensure leaders evaluate the equity implications of any decision or action.
Share resources with editors and reviewers to examine personal bias and critically engage with their opinions and perspectives.	Exercises to reduce bias in editors and reviewers will cause them to be more aware of bias in their decision-making processes.
Ensure all reviewers, editors, and editorial and association boards and committee members participate in implicit bias training/education, anti-racism practices, and inclusive excellence. Associations and journals might also consider developing a way to filter biased reviewers prior to commencement of the review process.	Deliberate efforts and skills are needed to counter the way we are conditioned to perceive the world and to perpetuate racism.
Acknowledge the value of lived experience in understanding the scope of our human experience.	Inequities exist across most life domains; therefore, journals could use public statements, policies, and incorporate lived experiences into published papers when relevant.
Release public statements on the journal's commitment to equity and their strategies to address publications bias.	It is inadequate to simply claim a commitment without tangible actions to move the commitment to reality.
Regularly communicate information, policies, initiatives and data related to equitable practices on the journal website and internally to the editorial team. A great start might be for journals to rate themselves on the Diversity Accountability Index for Journals (DAI-J; Buchanan et al., 2021a).	Clearly offering this information informs the public of the organisational priorities and keeps them accountable to their stated goals.
Journals need to formally audit internal systems to identify and eliminate inequities.	Written and unwritten policies uphold inequitable practices by justifying prejudice and exclusionary practices.
Solicit feedback from authors and broader readership on inclusive practices and diversity in research perspectives through discussions, climate surveys, or individualised feedback.	A diversity of perspectives is essential to equitable practice.
Have accessible and transparent protocols in place for complaints of racism in the peer review process that have been vetted by diversity and racism experts.	This will thwart the tendency of White people and others to dismiss uncomfortable complaints of racism.
Publication-related—action	**Publication-related—reasoning**
Journals should encourage authors to be transparent by requiring them to include positionality statements and measures that were taken (or lack thereof) to include people of colour and other marginalised and underrepresented perspectives in the research process. Papers that fail to do so should be rejected.	Research shows the ways authors identify informs their research topics, samples, and how their study is interpreted, communicated, and disseminated.
Likewise, journals should implement open reviews, or at the minimum, positionality statements for reviews.	Similar to above, the way reviewers identify informs their experiences, worldview, and values, and therefore, their evaluation of the relevance and importance of a given topic, methodology, results, etc.
Ensure articles with implications for communities of colour have diverse authors and research teams and are evaluated by diverse reviewers with related diversity expertise.	If a paper has implications for communities of colour and members from those communities were not included amongst the authors or the authors refused to provide positionality statements, the paper should be rejected.
Journals should require authors to report disaggregated racial and ethnic data (when applicable) or provide an explanation for why this could not be done. If samples lack diversity, journals should require authors to provide an explanation in their paper, as well as measures that were taken (or lack thereof) to recruit diverse participants. Papers that fail to do so, or for which racial and ethnic data was simply not collected, should be rejected.	Generalizability is critical. Diverse samples are necessary to ensure results are reflective, relevant, safe, and effective for a diverse society.
Dedicate special issues or research collections to research relevant to communities of colour conducted by diverse authors and research teams.	Accelerate research and bolster knowledge about groups that have been excluded or neglected.

TABLE 4 Recommendations for reviewers, authors, and readers.

Recommendations for reviewers
Reviewers should recognise their expertise or lack thereof on issues of equity and inform editors whether they have expertise in research areas specific to marginalised communities.
Reviewers should be mindful of the psychosocial mechanisms of racism discussed herein and take necessary action to ensure that they are not perpetuating racism in the peer review process (e.g., they should not decline to review papers authored by people of colour or about racial issues, dismiss other reviewers with expertise in racism and diversity issues, suggest censorship of marginalised or underrepresented voices, perspectives, or experiences, etc.).
Request that authors provide positionality statements, particularly for papers with implications for communities of colour. Reviewers should suggest that papers for which the authors refused to provide positionality statements be rejected.
In cases where the paper has implications for communities of colour and members from the concerned communities were not included amongst the authors or the authors refused to provide positionality statements, reviewers should suggest the paper be rejected.
Request that authors provide disaggregated racial and ethnic data (when applicable) or explain in their paper why this was not done. If samples lack diversity, reviewers should request that authors disclose this information and provide an explanation for the disparity in their paper as well as measures that were taken or lack thereof to recruit diverse participants. If the authors refuse to do so or if racial and ethnic data was simply not collected, reviewers should suggest the paper be rejected.
Recommendations for researchers
Prioritise diversity and inclusion of underrepresented perspectives in their research teams and participants to ensure their research is reflective, relevant, safe, and effective for a diverse society.
Report disaggregated racial and ethnic data in their results, and if samples lack diversity, authors should disclose this information and provide an explanation for this disparity in their paper as well as measures that were taken or lack thereof to recruit diverse participants.
Acknowledge their social position and how their identity influences their perspective, particularly in papers that impact marginalised communities.
Recommendations for authors
In cases where research topics and samples prioritise marginalised or underrepresented communities, authors should inform editors in a cover letter of the likelihood of bias in the review process and request that antiracism practices be enacted.
Upon submission, authors should suggest experts in the field who also have expertise in racism as potential reviewers and state why they are being recommended.
If authors experience racism in the peer review process, they can respond to reviewers explaining why they do not think it is appropriate to make the requested changes and how the reviewers' comments exhibit racial bias.
If author receives biased reviews they should also contact the editor to express their concern that the reviewers are exhibiting racial bias and ask for the races of the reviewers to be disclosed, whether any of the reviewers have expertise in racism or diversity issues, and what protocols the journal uses to mitigate racial bias in the peer review and editorial process.
Recommendations for readers
Read articles through an anti-racist lens. Ask yourself: are the authors diverse? Are the participants diverse? Did the authors report disaggregated racial and ethnic data? Did the authors provide positionality statements? Did the authors report any efforts made to include diverse identities and perspectives on their research team and in their sample? Does the research have implications for communities of colour, and were these communities included in the research process? If not, contact the journal and express your concern.

review also creates an excuse for the people who currently control the journals and editorial spaces to avoid taking responsibility for making those spaces inclusive.

Because racism is stigmatised, increased transparency seems to be more protective for authors, which is the concept behind the positionality statement for authors and reviewers. The authors openly acknowledge their race, ethnicity and social history which essentially informs the scientific work or review which they have submitted. The positionality statement is an acknowledgment that from the outset anonymous review may not be sufficient to address all forms of bias or discrimination, and that additional steps are required to ensure inclusivity and fairness. This is an important consideration, which challenges the idea of double-anonymous review as a purely objective and unbiased process.

Rather than only using double-anonymous methods to increase the representation of those who have been underrepresented, sharing power for example, including more BIPOC in the peer review process as reviewers, and open reviews, or at least including positionality statements for reviews, may represent a better way of achieving a more

just review process, although this is an area where research is needed to examine the issue empirically.

Conclusion

For decades, psychology has reviewed and published empirical studies that sustain biases and structural inequities (Roberts et al., 2020; American Psychological Association Council of Representatives, 2021). An editorial process which concentrates power in the hands of the very few and mostly White editors whilst operating in a non-transparent way is contributing to these inequities. To be equitable, published scholarship must reflect the broad range of issues relevant to all communities and accurately represent the diverse experiences of authors. This requires recognising, informing, and researching the experiences of diverse communities, as well as publishing about harms and solutions for the communities the discipline often neglects. Psychology, as a field, can be most effective when its scientific literature and knowledge base reflects the diversity of the human experience.

Author contributions

DS, SG-R, MO, MW, and SF contributed significantly to the development and writing of the manuscript. MW and MO were instrumental in the conceptualization. SF played a large role in enhancing, revising, and finalising the manuscript for publication. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

SF was affiliated with the pharmaceutical company Angelini Pharma and the German GmbH Bioville.

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The reviewer NB declared a past co-authorship with the author SF to the handling editor.

Publisher's note

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Radicalization from a societal perspective

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Studies on radicalization tend to focus on the dynamics of extremist groups and how they exploit grievances of vulnerable individuals. It is imperative, however, to also understand the societal factors that lead to such vulnerabilities and grievances. Our social environment plays a key role in how we view the world and shape our beliefs. By understanding the social dynamics, we can gain insight into the motivations that drive people to extremism. Throughout this paper, we examine the societal factors and processes such as discriminative institutional structures and social norms/practices that can make an individual vulnerable and serve as a driving force for them to join a radical group. To do that, we use the process-oriented psychology of Arnold Mindell and the phenomenology of whiteness of Sara Ahmed as our theoretical framework. These frameworks help us map out the societal dynamics causing individuals to carve social niches out of their current social group and into an extremist group. We use interviews with ex-militants of the radical group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, to show how certain societal dynamics, such as social injustice, misuse of power, marginalization and discrimination, served as key factors that led these individuals to identify and sympathize with radical ideology. The aim of this paper is to emphasize that, to develop effective preventative measures against recruitment into extremist groups, it is imperative to have a profound understanding of the social dynamics that make an individual susceptible to radicalization in the first place.

KEYWORDS
terrorism, radicalization, discrimination, marginalization, social-injustice, power, society

Introduction

As social beings, humans live in societies that are shaped by shared norms, values, and beliefs. Members of society interact with each other and with the world around them to create a sense of identity and purpose. However, there can always be an element of social inequality in society. Dorling (2010) explains that social inequality persists in a society in such a way that it becomes the part of everyday normal life. As a result of social injustice, prejudice and discrimination may become normalized. A pattern of discrimination and stigmatization can result in feelings of rejection, self-stigmatization, internalized shame, and lowered self-esteem (Burke and Parker, 2007), leading to eventual reaction. This reaction can take a variety of forms. As a group, the reaction may take the form of protest, which, if provoked further, may lead to riots. One recent example of this is the Black Lives Matter movement, which was triggered by anger following the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, by a white police officer.

Individuals are also affected by systemic discrimination and marginalization. Marginalization and discrimination may lead to feelings of alienation, exclusion, and deprivation. These feelings can change an individual's perspective on society. In such a case, she may choose to leave the said society or join an ideology or group that offers her a chance to get her grievances addressed. In recent years,

radical groups like Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) have also exploited societal injustices to recruit marginalized people. In this paper, we will discuss this affect. This is especially true in the case of people who join extremist groups or extreme ideologies. According to the Council of The European Union (2014) report "Violations of human rights can give rise to grievances and the very conditions conducive to the spread of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism." Therefore, it is vital to ensure that human rights are respected and protected in order to reduce the risk of extremism.

This paper aims to emphasize that understanding the social dynamics that make individuals susceptible to radicalization in the first place is critical to developing effective preventative measures against recruitment into extremist groups. A review of radicalization studies will be presented in the following section, along with a discussion of why we must take a step back to understand the social imbalance of power in a society in order to understand the reasons that make it inevitable for someone to move toward extremism.

Extremism and society

Globally, there has been a rise in religious extremism and right-wing extremism. In recent years, European countries have adopted a number of National Action Plans to combat radicalization and violent extremism. A major focus of these action plans is to promote basic and practical research into the root causes and processes that lead to violent engagement (Ajil, 2022). Many of these studies focus on individual and group dynamics without taking into account broader socio-political issues (Sedgwick, 2010; Kundnani, 2012; Ahmad and Monaghan, 2019). This paper aims to fill that gap in the literature by emphasizing the role that societal structures play in radicalization. Radicalization is a multi-pathway, multi-factor complex process (e.g., McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Kruglanski and Webber, 2014; Hafez and Mullins, 2015). It is essential that we understand all possible pathways and processes involved in radicalization in order to develop an effective prevention plan. In this paper, we will illustrate how society itself can play a critical role in influencing an individual's decision to move toward the path of extremism.

In the past decade, there has been an increase in support for and direct participation in radical groups. For example, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) movement took hold, almost 40,000 foreigners joined from 130 countries (Barrett, 2017). This raises the question of why people leave their home countries and risk their lives to join radical groups. To understand this, researchers in the field of radicalization studies have identified different factors and processes that pave the path for individuals to adopt a radical ideology. Some of these factors and processes include uncertainty in life (Hogg and Adelman, 2013; Hogg et al., 2013), collective identity problems (Moghaddam, 2012), experiencing alienation (Horgan, 2008; Wilner and Dubouloz, 2010), unsuccessful integration, political grievances which are usually combined with moral outrage and feelings of revenge (e.g., McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Sageman, 2008; Schmid, 2013), quest for significance, i.e., the fundamental human need for belonging, respect, performance and self-esteem (Kruglanski et al., 2014), and manipulation of so-called positive emotions like pride, feeling of power, love and the sense of belonging by radical groups to attract and retain recruits (Haq et al., 2020).

The above-mentioned processes and factors are valuable and illuminate various aspects of the complexity of radicalization. But in order

to understand the complete picture of radicalization we also need to understand why some people feel a certain way in the first place (e.g., humiliated, alienated, marginalized, etc.), which makes them vulnerable toward radical ideologies. We need to understand the structures in society that construct an environment of mistrust, discrimination, and alienation for certain individuals, and encourage them to seek out groups that promise acceptance and belonging. Our aim in this paper is to emphasize the importance of acquiring a better understanding of the social dynamics that push vulnerable individuals out of society.

The literature on radicalization studies focuses, to some extent, on social aspects that can lead to radical pathways. On the practical level, more emphasis is placed on counter-narratives that challenge predominantly the ideologies of radical groups. For instance, organizations such as the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) are focused primarily on combating radical narratives by creating counter narrative videos. As with policies at the government level, the emphasis is more on profiling individuals who may be "vulnerable" to radical ideologies. These profiles target individuals based on their appearance, religion, race, etc. (Blackwood et al., 2015; Abbas, 2017; Schclarek Mulinari, 2019; Abbas et al., 2021). A more blunt statement would be that the governmental efforts to prevent and counter terrorism in the United States and Europe, especially after 9/11, are primarily based on the use of racial profiling. For instance, in the case of Muslim immigrants in Europe who experience Islamophobia on behalf of the host population can induce the feeling of being ashamed or humiliated (Kruglanski and Webber, 2014, p. 381). The feeling of shame and humiliation, combined with systematic discrimination and marginalization based on governmental policies or on lasting prejudices in society can result in creating an environment for the targeted people which make them feel that they are forcefully pushed out of their own society.

In order to enhance our knowledge about the radicalization process and create better counter-radicalization and prevention policies, we have to take a step back, and look at the existing social structures that could act as "push" factors for some individuals or groups to the extent that they leave their society and join radical groups and movements. Some of these "push" factors can be identified as systematic discrimination, racism and marginalization, which are the violation of basic human rights.

The purpose of this article is to provide a deeper understanding of how societal factors such as discrimination, oppression, and racism can facilitate an individual toward the pathway of radicalization. To reach this objective, we rely on Mindell's (1995) take on the matter of riots and violence in society and the concept of 'phenomenology of whiteness' by Ahmed (2007) as our theoretical framework.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Arnold Mindell developed the approach of process-oriented psychology (also known as process work) in Switzerland. He originally started his work in conflict resolution with individuals and then realized that mere work on an individual level may not be enough to tackle those issues. In his view, although couple therapies, individual therapies, and family therapies are significantly helpful, our constant embeddedness in political, social, or cultural settings demands a framework that considers all of these aspects. As a result, Arnold Mindell started developing other aspects of process work, namely "worldwork" that focuses on working with small and large groups, organizations, and open city forums (Mindell, 2008).

To complement Mindell's approach on how our constant embeddedness in political, social, and cultural structures is felt and

perceived by individuals, we use Ahmed's concept of "phenomenology of whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007), which accentuates that concepts such as racism are institutional and deeply rooted in our societies. Racism does not belong to history, rather it is ongoing and still lived by some of us, while for others, it is already part of history which is over. Further, we focus on the interviews of some individuals recruited by radical groups, specifically "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of how these individuals narrate their experience about the "push" factors which they have experienced within their society. Our theoretical framework helps to highlight those less attended aspects of the process of radicalization; namely, how the existing discrimination in societies create a form of social trauma for some individuals and pushes them toward extremism, where they have an opportunity to opt for violence as a solution to their problems.

In the following section, we will start by elaborating on Mindell's view about issues such as terrorism in society and how they come into existence.

Societal vs. individual narratives: terrorists or freedom fighters?

When it comes to terrorism-related cases, the media has the power to generate and frame narratives. The impressions we gain from narratives heavily depend on how they are formulated and presented. There is a great deal of misinformation about terrorists in the media and in the legal system because of the way they are portrayed (Mindell, 1995). When an incident happens in the spotlight of the media, it is often the search for an individual motive and the case is interpreted independently from other parallel political movements and social situations. To counter this, Mindell suggests a rather novel definition of terrorism, according to which "[t]errorism is not just a political activity, but a frequent and unseen group interaction based upon the sense of being treated unjustly" (Mindell, 1995, p. 78). He further states that 'terrorist' is a word that is used in media discussions to describe people who call themselves 'freedom fighters.' This is a unique but important definition since it demonstrates why there are two very different narratives around the same concept. However, portraying terrorism as a "disempowered group's attack on the mainstream for the sake of equality and freedom" (Mindell, 1995, p. 91) can raise a problem that we would like to clarify before moving on and using that definition. Our connotation with the word 'terrorism' is far beyond 'freedom fighters,' which implies that these actions are justified and moral. It is important to keep in mind that nothing can justify the act of terrorism and using this definition is not an excuse for justifying terrorism. It is, however, an explanation for why terrorism in some cases happens and how we can understand and counter it more sufficiently. Mindell further elaborates on his definition of terrorism:

> Poverty, drugs, joblessness, lack of education, racism, sexism, and social abuse promote violence.[1] That social injustice foments revenge should be obvious from the fact that the vast majority of

those incarcerated for violent acts in all countries come from the groups with the fewest social privileges. In other words, violence occurs, in part, because the oppressed cannot defend themselves from the intentional and covert use of mainstream rank.[2] (Mindell, 1995, p. 78)

In the case of ISIS formation as a group, the *Hague Center for Strategic Studies* report (Oosterveld et al., 2017) mentioned that to some ISIS appeared out of nowhere and was born suddenly around 2013–2014 when this organization caught international attention owing to its proclamation of a state and broadening its borders. "It is clear that ISIS is a distinct product of its time, geography and circumstances: it grew out of the convulsions of the war in Iraq (2003–2011), the Arab revolutions (2010-present) and the civil war in Syria (2011-present)" (Oosterveld et al., 2017, p. 5). ISIS came into existence as a result of constant war, instability, and extreme poverty in the area. They propagate their ideology in a way that influences people, especially Muslim minorities, in different countries. This is done by taking advantage of the social oppression and marginalization that vulnerable individuals experience in their societies (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2020). ISIS propagate their ideology in a way that it looks like they are offering vulnerable individuals a chance to stand up against injustice and take revenge for the humiliation and discrimination which they (and other Muslims around the world) are experiencing. The stated mission/agenda of ISIS is to "re-establishing a 7th century Caliphate" and reaffirmation of Islamic norms to guide Arab societies (Oosterveld et al., 2017). In other words, ISIS propagate that they offer the possibility of living a utopian life under the so-called Khilafat they have created.

The interviews by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) show how the above-mentioned factors promote violence as a reaction against felt exclusion and oppression. Especially poverty fosters the feeling of insecurity, as well as lack of education and oppression may breed humiliation and frustration. These examples indicate how oppression in different forms led the individuals to become a part of ISIS.

Abu Ghazwan, a 33-year-old former ISIS member, was imprisoned in Iraq because of a family matter and despite his innocence, the officials did not drop the charges because he was Sunni, and his friends were released because they were Shia. He describes his motivation as follows:

> We joined ISIS because we are Sunnis, so that we, Sunnis, become one hand and take over the country, so that it will become a Sunni country, and everyone takes what is his. You take your rights back from those who hurt you. [I believed that Iraq] will become a Sunni country and I will take my revenge on those who imprisoned and hurt me. (Rewards of Joining the Islamic State, 2018)

Salma, a 22-year-old former ISIS member who left Belgium to follow her father to Syria after her father told her: "Life is better here. You can wear your whole hijab. We're not oppressed here" (A Belgian

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[1] Recent research incorporating machine learning also shows that low social status and problematic social relationships can contribute to extremism (Ivaskevics and Haller, 2022).

[2] Mindell defines rank as "the sum of the person's privileges" in the society, for instance, color of skin, education, social class, etc. (Mindell, 1995, p. 28)

Family in The Islamic State, 2018). She claims she has not even watched one propaganda video before moving to Syria and her dad's words were enough for her to leave Belgium.

Another interview featured Albert Berisha, a 29-year-old Kosovar. He left Kosovo to fight in Syria. He mentions the following as his motivation behind his actions:

> We saw images of people who were constantly being tortured [by the Syrian regime]. We saw images of killed children. We saw the images of massacred children. We saw inhumane behavior towards women. We saw people being burnt alive. We saw bombings where entire families were killed at once. We saw events as they were unfolding. We had a live stream of the events [on YouTube], so to speak. We experienced almost the same scope and nature of events in the [1999] Kosovo [war] as well. We were also the victims of an unjust regime. But, during the war in Kosovo, I was a child. Then, I couldn't join the war to fight alongside the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). I was only 12 or 13 years old. Now, at [my] age, you can't just cross your arms and do nothing if you see that the same injustice is happening to someone else. (Islamic State Live Streaming in Kosovo, 2019)

These examples help to shed light on how important it is to de-individualize terrorism. Looking at the overall picture shows that most of the individuals who get radicalized are not subject to a "mental disorder or dysfunction." Or "should not be pathologized." They are humans with histories of injuries and experiences of violence without having enough strength or resources to defend themselves or their families. Some of them have the basic goal of "gaining economic support, freedom and the respect necessary to survive" (Mindell, 1995, p. 100).

Mindell (1995) mentions that for minorities and many disenfranchised groups, life has been full of hatred, violence, and revenge. The more invisible and insignificant minorities feel in their environment, the more furious they become. The less the society focuses on the issues that these individuals face, the louder it receives the message: "'Wake up! You are on a trial! If you do not listen to us, we'll put a bomb in your home. That should *wake you up*'" (Mindell, 1995, p. 94). Repressed anger can form a desire for revenge. Passivity is a sign of revenge, and it can have different forms. Passivity in forms of shock, shame, numbness, and anxiety can show that someone might have a desire to get revenge and either does not know how or is afraid to do so with the fear of retaliation.

It is important to notice these early signs and listen to people who feel hurt. Listen to their stories and give their anger, shame, and numbness a legitimate platform to be expressed. Otherwise, it can result in violent responses. For instance, Brym (2007) writes that emotions like anger and hate, when combined with opportunities for revenge, act as a motivation for Palestinian bombers into action. Radical groups like ISIS provide this opportunity for vulnerable individuals and shape their affects according to what the group desires. There is a tendency in societies to ignore the early signs of revenge and passivity, and by ignoring these signs, people neglect the problems in the margin and neglect the necessity for change (Mindell, 1995). When the early signs are ignored, revenge alters its forms. It might start with a demonstration against authorities, riots, civil disobedience, and finally turn to a revolution to make the cultural changes that are blocked (Mindell, 1995). Ignoring social

marginalization and discrimination by pushing marginalized people away and trying to silence them does not make their voices go away. Instead, they might rather become louder and louder until they are heard. Before moving any deeper, it is important to clarify once again that we are not justifying violence and crimes but trying to understand the anger and frustration which can result in violent riots.

Mindell further elaborates that the political leaders suppress people who are angry in order to keep their popularity and show political success. In the first encounter, this position might seem reasonable, but it totally ignores where anger and violence come from. Why are some people angry? Privileged people, in terms of belonging to the majority and belonging to the center of the society, get angry when their world and its cultural norm is not recreated. For instance, how some conservative and far right governments target minorities. They condemn actions of minorities such as riots and retaliation and suppress them without taking a peek at the roots (Mindell, 1995). As a result, suppression leads to even more revolts, more unhappiness, and does not make conflict and violence disappear (Mindell, 1995).

To understand the anger and frustration of suppressed groups in more detail, in the next section, we will discuss the power imbalance that enables one group to suppress another, resulting in an affective push toward radicalization. To do so, we rely on Mindell's idea of rank. Which refers to the imbalance of power in a society. The concept of rank helps us to understand that when privileged groups abuse their power, they create an environment that normalizes discrimination and further marginalizes vulnerable groups. This results in anger and frustration among them.

Social repercussions of marginalization

Mindell argues that issues such as "riots" or "minority crime" are related to their so-called "rank." He defines rank as "the sum of the person's privileges" in the society, for instance, color of skin, education, social class, etc. (Mindell, 1995, p. 28). He argues that problems do not necessarily start from the mere existence of ranks, rather they develop when the rank, or in other words the privileges, get forgotten by the ones who have a higher rank. For instance, an educated person might assume that people with less education are ignorant and that they are the ones who cause the problems. On an international level, powerful countries might blame the countries with less power for being violent and supporting terrorism because privileged nations, even if they do the act of international killing in less powerful countries, are always associated with being "victims of terrorism" (Mindell, 1995, p. 90). One recent example is the refusal of the United States of America to let the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigate the cases over the alleged war crimes (involving torture and cruel treatment, dehumanizing abuses, and rape and other forms of sexual violence) committed by U.S. Army and CIA personnel during the invasion of Afghanistan (Scheffer, 2020).

In different societies, people with a specific profile have a higher rank. As a result of having a higher rank, they form the center of that society. People who do not represent the mainstream profile are pushed to the margins. Along this line of thought, Ayata (2019) suggests that the affective dimension of citizenship helps to understand how affects and emotions are used to reinforce differences and differential treatments among the members of a society:

… while two individuals may be equal citizens from a legal point of view, their perceived difference in terms of religion, race, sex, gender, or class may result in identifying one individual as the proper, true citizen who is naturally entitled to the privileges and status of citizenship, whereas the other may be identified as a "quasi" or "technical" citizen, whose belonging to the political community remains in question despite holding citizenship. (Ayata, 2019, p. 332)

When power is abused, not only people are pushed to the margins, but there is also a tendency of marginalizing these people's problems because what is experienced in the center is deemed to be more important and needs to be focused on. The ones in the center might take an attitude and send an unintended message to the margin: "Stop nagging, quit complaining and fix your problem on your own" (Mindell, 1995). Rejecting people and their problems from the center and accepting that they and their problems belong to the margin is a form of oppression. Mindlessly oppressing and marginalizing individuals has consequences. The ones who are oppressed either become silent or gain vengeance by becoming the oppressors (Mindell, 1995). The overall affective environment created by the 'ruling class' or 'center' results in clear discrimination, which may lead to fostering frustration in the quasi citizen and result in conflicts. In order to understand how power imbalance in the societal structures affects individuals, in the following section, we would like to use Sara Ahmed's idea about the 'phenomenology of whiteness.' Ahmed's ideas about the "white world" and its varying impacts on non-white individuals provide a powerful context for Mindell's work, demonstrating how their perspectives can be further enriched.

Phenomenology of whiteness

Phenomenology attends, in general, to the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, and visual character of embodied reality. However, underlying all of these characters, as Frantz Fanon says, we should consider and think of a "historic-racial" scheme (Fanon, 1986, p. 17). Ahmed (2006) describes our societies as containing a historical and racial dimension. In her view, these dimensions form individuals' experiences in society differently. As we arrive in this world, we are born into an environment that conveys affective, historical, and racial aspects that affect and direct our way of being in the world. The history of the group or nation to which we belong provides us with our first affective environment. This provides an informative perspective on why, and how, certain groups and individuals may feel oppressed, or socially excluded, from traditional mainstream society (e.g., Abdulrehman, in press).

Ahmed (2007) refers to the idea of whiteness not as a biological characteristic of the body that we are born with. Rather, she defines whiteness as an ongoing history and background of experience which make the lived experiences of humans distinct from one another. This history can enable some humans while disabling the others. This concept of "whiteness" thus refers not only (or even primarily) to the color of skin, it rather denotes an orientation that puts people in different categories and creates different experiences. Therefore, we consider it to be a promising concept for an in-depth exploration of the perceived injustice by minorities. Whiteness is a determining element of rank if we consider whiteness as a feature of "the privileged,"

a feature that marginalized populations lack. In this regard, "whiteness" is not only relevant for the Muslims in Europe and the United States, but also Muslims in minority sects in other Muslim countries, e.g., Sunnis in Iraq.

Ahmed argues that, because of the history of colonialism, we live in a white world. The world of whiteness is the world which we inherit. The world which is designed and has orders in a specific way. When we come to this world, we already have a place in which we can dwell, have access, and reach certain objects. This world of whiteness is a world in which certain things are within reach of certain bodies, allowing them to successfully reach those objects while making it difficult for others to do the same. As Ahmed states: "The 'matter' of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one 'can do,' or even where one can go, which can be described in terms of *what is and is not within reach*" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 112).

Ahmed argues that there are some bodies which are seen as "alike"; since they are "sharing whiteness" and have similar objects within reach. By having a common direction, not only does it give the bodies that have the same direction a sense of community, but it also makes them distinct from those with different directions. A *we* emerges as an effect of sharing a common orientation and a *they* emerges as an effect of cohering in a different direction. Ahmed states that the other side of the world is associated with racial otherness, meaning that we attribute all the otherness which we do not recognize as our common characteristics to the other side of the globe (Ahmed, 2006, p. 121). We are we and they are they. The following statement from prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, is a good illustration of what Ahmed refers to as "racial otherness" and "other side of the world": "We must state that we do not want to be diverse and do not want to be mixed: we do not want our own color, traditions, and national culture to be mixed with those of others. We do not want this. We do not want that at all. We do not want to be a diverse country" (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019, p. 42).

In Orban's statement above, an enormous wish for a distinction between "us" and "them" is visible. The distinction based on the color of skin, traditions and what one calls "national culture" which in *The Fundamental Law of Hungary* is referred to as "Christian Culture" (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019, p. 48), clearly ignores and devalues the individuals who do not share their mainstream norms.

Ahmed (2006) claims that sharing "otherness" comes at the cost of being stopped. Having a body that is not aligned with "white bodies" can cause two problems. On the one hand, the difficulty of accessing objects because they are far away. On the other hand, the body itself does not cooperate in trailing behind the action. A good example of not having the objects within reach is the concept of 'glass ceiling.' The non-white body does not only lack access to certain objects due to living in a white world, but when it attempts to reach for the objects, the non-white body raises against itself and prevents the body from reaching it. The non-white body cannot go unnoticed in the sea of whiteness because the spaces are made in a way that makes the non-white body noticeable. Non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, and visible as they try to take up space because they do not share a certain likeness with white bodies. Whiteness is the permission for some bodies to pass over repetitively, while the others are being stopped (cf. also Bajwa et al., 2023). Whiteness is invisible to the white bodies because they can fade in the background, whereas the non-white bodies cannot pass and become

hyper-visible. Non-white bodies appear to be "out of place," and therefore being stopped when crossing the line. Not being aware of the invisibility of white bodies to them could be what Mindell referred to as a form of rank abuse and, as already discussed, this could lead to violent responses in the society. Being viewed as an outsider and a constant failure is traumatizing. Being constantly stopped and pushed away can cause a form of social trauma, which could motivate violence from the oppressed group (e.g., Williams et al., 2023).

Trauma: a facilitator in the radicalization process

In general, a cultural trauma may be described as a physical and psychological assault inflicted by a group that is dominant. This assault is on the culture of a group of people who shares a specific identifying characteristic or affiliation (e.g., ethnicity, religion) (e.g., Stamm et al., 2004; Evans-Campbell, 2008). This trauma can manifest itself in everyday life, often leaving individuals feeling like they are not capable of attaining the same opportunities as those without "otherness." It can be further compounded when those in positions of power and privilege refuse to acknowledge this injustice, amplifying the feeling of marginalization and exclusion. The "feelings of comfort, unease, anger, empathy, (mis)trust, (dis)respect, love, and hate toward an imagined 'us' and 'others' are regulated and reproduced in official policies, discourses, and practices" (Ayata, 2019). This systematic discrimination can lead to feelings of deep frustration and resentment, which can lead to further alienation. This plays an important role in the case of young people being recruited to groups like ISIS.

The interviews with former ISIS members and their families conducted by Speckhard and Yayla (2016) indicate a common storyline for the foreign fighters who joined ISIS from Europe, especially Belgium. Many of them were encouraged by teachers from a young age to pursue the (more basic) technical track in school, and then later faced difficulties finding a full-time job. However, even when they have been to the university, they still have to face discrimination in finding jobs and getting hired.[3] One mother described the situation for her son, a second-generation immigrant, like this: "He was smart and spoke multiple languages, but high school teachers discouraged him and made him feel like he could only be a factory worker or garbage collector, so finally he dropped out of school. Then, of course, he could only get those types of jobs, so he felt totally humiliated. The terrorist recruiter promised him much more" (Speckhard and Yayla, 2016).

In one of the interviews done by ICSVE (2018) which we already referred to, Salma, the 22-year-old Belgian, talks about her experience of joining ISIS. She states: "[In Belgium], sometimes you feel targeted. You feel watched upon as if you are not the same like them. If your head is covered, you are wearing a hijab this big and everything, you are watched upon." (A Belgian Family in The Islamic State, 2018). Another interview (Georges the Belgian Jihadist, 2018) with Georges M., a 25-year-old from Belgium, who intended to join the uprising in Syria but never succeeded, portrayed the common story of being

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3   Papers that elaborate on immigrant workers' discrimination on the European job market, (see Weichselbaumer, 2017, 2020; Ball et al., 2022).

stopped, becoming hyper-visible and not being able to move upward. He converted to Islam when he was in high school and faced his parents' disagreement and disappointment. He was suspended from high school for proselytizing, and he ultimately dropped out of the school. "I knew that if I stayed in that establishment or another, things would get worse" (Georges the Belgian Jihadist, 2018). He began working in jobs below his intellect and, because of the lack of high school final certificates, he could not get a university education. He explains that after watching videos from Syria, he and his friends felt the urge to go to Syria and help Muslims fight against Bashar al-Assad. They had to return home because the father of a friend took them back. Here is a snippet demonstrating his perceived the discrimination:

> I wish everyone could practice his religion as he wants to like it's been done for a long time. Not only for Muslims, but also for Christians and Jews. [But, here in Belgium] I cannot pray at work like I want. If I wear a beard, there are prejudices. If my wife wants to wear the hijab, she'll face discrimination. [At my job], I asked to do my prayers. Everybody goes out to smoke cigarettes. Why can't I go out to do my prayer that doesn't take more than five minutes? I am not in an Islamic land, but in a so-called 'democratic' country. [Here] there is no trust in the other. (Georges the Belgian Jihadist, 2018)

When societies and institutions fail to provide spaces for some individuals and groups to act freely as compared to the other groups of society, trauma is generated. After 2001, identities of Muslim citizens in America were put under surveillance and many were perceived as dangerous or threatening. This created a comparable affective register that highlights the two categories of citizens, one (who were not Muslims) automatically shift to the naturally entitled citizens, and others (Muslims) whose citizenship became conditional and relegated to a formality if they do not act, feel and behave in a desired way. This required additional emotional and affective efforts to confirm the rightful political belonging (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). Having the wrong name, the wrong color of skin, the wrong nationality, the wrong religion, obstruct the path for individuals, sometimes temporarily and sometimes forever. It ceases them and their movements. Even if they have the right passport with a wrong body, their way is blocked. Therefore, if our nationality does not match our body, if my name does not match my nationality, if my nationality does not match my religion, then we are held as suspect and should answer those inconsistencies and mismatches. Some bodies feel more at home, and some feel the discomfort of being strangers. Some bodies are recognized more as "strangers" and "out of the place" than others (Ahmed, 2006). Being a stranger is being suspected of sharing otherness.

What non-white bodies are facing is a form of social traumatization, since it targets the entire group, and it is implemented in a societal context. Another factor that aggravates this socially embedded trauma is that the public fails to acknowledge or even actively denies the trauma. A famous example is the debate about Armenian Genocide. Even in trauma-related literature, this avoidance of acknowledging oppressive traumatic experiences as trauma exists. Holmes et al. (2016) criticized DSM 5 for not including different forms of oppression (e.g., racism or sexism) as potentially traumatic events. They elaborate that empirical evidence has shown that marginalized

groups experienced higher PTSD levels in comparison to the majority (see Holmes et al., 2016). Despite established empirical evidence, the current definition of trauma fails to include institutional, systemic and psychological forms of violence as potentially traumatic experiences. This kind of psychological violence which is usually "invisible" is a form of social neglect of trauma. As mentioned before, social trauma is an imperative element in the recruitment of young people by groups like ISIS. On the one hand, not being able to move forward, feeling hyper-visible, being stopped and interrogated, and being considered as an outsider and on the other hand, the dream that ISIS sells, the dream of having a home where you can be free and belong to. This can create a powerful contrast between the feelings of hopelessness and the promise of security and belonging that ISIS offers, making the group particularly attractive to vulnerable young people.

When hierarchies and the differences in rank are institutionalized, people with higher rank usually feel that they do not have to bear with the problems of people with less rank. Hence, all the problems get associated with the rank and the rank system gets internalized (Mindell, 1995). Internalization of oppression is so strong that people from minorities feel traumatized. There is no doubt that the political process in each country is different, but there are similar elements in all of these processes: the structure of processes between center and margin. Considering that almost all of our sources are linked to cultures practiced in the center of the society and our embeddedness in cultural systems, how we feel, and think is also an effect of that culture. Subsequently, our sense of self-worth and the worth of others is linked to what we receive from that culture. As a result, it is understandable that marginalized groups may lack confidence. "Unfulfilled needs," "repressed feelings," and "the search for the meaning of life" of marginalized groups, play a crucial role in forming a mass frustration (Mindell, 1995, p. 24).

Sometimes people do support social order and let it continue as it is; as if by nature, some are superior to others. For instance, when people see that a considerable proportion of immigrants is unemployed, they start doubting immigrants' abilities and intelligence instead of asking what would have happened if they would have gotten the same amount of opportunities to unfold their talent as the mainstream population (Mindell, 1995). This discriminatory approach persists even in research literature. Jason Richwine, for example, received a doctorate in public policy from Harvard in 2009. In his dissertation titled "IQ and Immigration Policy," he argues that immigrants have lower IQs than native white Americans, and that these low IQs are likely to persist for generations to come (Richwine, 2009). In addition, the book "The Bell Curve" by political scientists Charles Murray and Richard Hermsteirrayn can be cited as an example. They argued in the book that poor people, especially poor black people, were intrinsically less intelligent than white people (Herrnstein and Murray, 1996). Mindell (1995) mentions that mass frustration of minorities can ignite a revolution. In other terms, they aim at the replacement of existing structures, i.e., a revolution that replaces the current social, economic, or political structures. Revolutions are more radical than reforms. Reforms are some alternations in the existing systems, whereas revolutions aim to change the entire system. If structures do not change enough with reform, revolution follows (Mindell, 1995, p. 225). The up-rise of ISIS as a group might be a case in point. "It is no coincidence that ISIS and its extreme jihadi message took root in a region that was experiencing socio-political upheavals arguably of a 'one in a century' kind"

(Oosterveld et al., 2017, p. 9). After the attacks of 9/11, the American government started the war in Afghanistan and Iraq against Al-Qaeda. In the time of Iraq's invasion, Al-Qaeda was not yet grounded in Iraq, but following years of chaos, the circumstances became ideal for them to expand in Iraq and beyond. There are two concrete fatal decisions on behalf of Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which assisted the rise of ISIS, namely the de-Baathification of Iraq's government and disbanding the Iraqi army. These decisions played an important role in promoting and increasing Iraq's sectarian conflicts that played off Sunni against Shia. Since the CPA's decision had an exclusive impact on Sunni population, Al-Qaeda which later became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), found an opportunity and used the massive frustration of the Sunni population against the Shia and Western forces (Oosterveld et al., 2017). Not to mince words, the mass frustration of the Sunni population with their governments and Western countries for the marginalization, the help of former Iraqi Baathist officials as a significant part of ISIS' leadership, high goals of living in a society without discrimination under Islamic laws, the failure of the governing powers in Syria and Iraq, and lastly the unintentional support from the outside by Western countries and rebels in Syria and Iraq, contributed to the rise and development of ISIS.

In the following section, we highlight how the increase in Islamophobia might have an imperative role in contributing to a heightened sense of paranoia and fear of Muslims, adding to the appeal for the vulnerable individuals to join the extremist groups like ISIS.

The double signal of islamophobia

According to Mindell (1995), being unaware of one's rank could be a trigger for conflicts in the society. He elevates his argument and introduces the concept of "sending mixed signals" as one of the most troublesome consequences of unawareness of rank. In our communication, within families, groups, communities, and even on an international level, two types of signals are sent. "Primary signals" are the ones that are intended, and "secondary signals" are the signals which are unintended and indicate another level of a person's feeling and unconscious sense of power and rank. Often we send the primary message of "Let us talk" accompanied by a secondary message of "I am superior and what I say does not come in debate" or "stay where you belong" (Mindell, 1995, pp. 49–60). Despite the primary signal about "respect for religious diversity" the increase of Islamophobia not just among the people, but also among politicians is a secondary signal that is contrasting with the primarily intended message and thereby stigmatizes Muslims in general. As an example of the contrary signals, Canada can be cited. While Canada emphasizes multiculturalism as a primary message, it also conveys a secondary message through institutional policies such as Bills 21 and 62. Policies like these target Muslim women and marginalize them (Williams et al., 2022). In this section, we explain how the arising issue of Islamophobia, prejudice against Muslims and the policies to combat these issues could send such secondary signals.

There has been an increase in Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslims in recent years. Muslim identity has been portrayed as an incompatible identity with modernity and democracy (Wike and Grim, 2010). Muslims, and especially second-generation immigrant Muslims, can have a strenuous life in Western societies. There is

unfortunately little research on the matter of "Western views towards Muslims" but research by Wike and Grim (2010) has shown that Western societies perceive Muslims as both a security and a cultural threat which causes negative attitudes toward Muslims and therefore people tend to be more intolerant toward them. Wike and Grim cite from Cesari (2004) that September 11 was a starting point for a "Bin Laden effect" which caused discrimination and even violence against Muslims in Western societies. "The 'Bin Laden Effect', according to Cesari, 'consists mainly of casting all Muslims within the U.S. and Europe in the role of The Enemy, transforming them into scapegoats for the entire society'" (Cesari, 2004). Therefore, the perceived threat identified with Muslims turns the majority (non-Muslims) against the minority. The results of this research have shown that in the investigated countries (Spain, the U.S., Britain, France, and Germany) Muslims are regarded not only as a cultural but also as a security threat. Negative attitudes regarding Muslims do not primarily arise because of Westerners being worried about the incompatibility of Islam with democracy and modernity, rather they lie in the perception of extremism within Muslim communities. Certainly, there are extremist groups both in Muslim countries and in the West. Research has continuously shown that in most Muslim communities, only a small minority holds extremist views, and the majority are against extremism (Wike and Grim, 2010). For instance, in 2015 Pew Research Centre collected data about how the countries with significant Muslim population hold negative views about extremist organizations like ISIS (Poushter, 2015). Perceiving Muslims as a security threat can lead to extreme reactions against them and a sense of exclusion from society.

The European Islamophobia Report 2018 (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019) was published with the financial support of the European Union on the matter of Islamophobia in Europe. This report was an investigation on the dynamics that support anti-Muslim racism in Europe in a direct or indirect way. A simple example would be the incidents in which Muslims are the target. These are usually described as hate crime, whereas in other cases, they would be referred to as terrorist attacks (e.g., Corbin, 2017). In the following paragraphs, we will provide an overview of this report.

During the last decades, far-right movements, nationalists, and populists started rising in Europe, in countries such as Italy and Austria they even have been in power and in coalitions for a while. Considering that only 12% of Muslims who have been experiencing discrimination report to the authorities (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019), Islamophobia incidents happen too frequently to be ignored. Austria reported 540 cases of Islamophobic incidents in 2018, which shows a 74% increase in comparison to 2017 in anti-Muslim racist attacks. In Belgium, 84% of reported discriminations at workplaces were related to Islamophobia. France documented a 52% rise of Islamophobic incidents in 2018 in comparison to 2017, with a total number of 676 incidents (which include 20 physical attacks). According to the police statistics in Germany, there were 678 attacks on German Muslims; 40 attacks on mosques, and 1775 attacks on refugees in 2018. In the Netherlands, 91% of a total of 151 incidents of religious discrimination reported to the police were related to Muslims. Violent acts against Muslims happened in different forms, for instance, rape, shootings, planning to commit terrorist attacks against Muslims such as poisoning halal foods, killing imams, physical attacks against Muslim women, and so on.

Another dynamic against Muslims is the use of Islamophobic language by high-ranking politicians. Most of these politicians belonged in the far-right and their Islamophobic language normalizes and decreases the threshold of what is appropriate to be said in public discourses. Using such a language normalizes and legitimizes discrimination of Muslims in the society as citizens. Examples of the use of Islamophobic language by high-rank politicians were collected and reported by the European Islamophobia Report 2018 (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019): In Belgium, Bart de Wever, NVA leader stated: "Jews avoid conflict that is not the case with Muslims." In Bulgaria, the Prosecutor Nedyalka Popova mentioned: "At present, according to statistics, Muslims are 10–12% in Bulgaria, and we have no reason to think that they will become less. When they reach 30%, the state is already in danger. They are a monolithic mass, who are easy to manipulate during the elections, and they are almost like a militarized structure. If they have been told to go and vote, they go." In the Czech Republic, Dominik Hanko, vice-chair of the SPD party in the Ústecký district, referred to the Muslim population as "locusts" that destroy everything around them. In Denmark Erik Høgh-Sørensen, a regional council member in Nordjylland and parliamentary candidate for the Danish People's Party addressed the rejected asylum seekers and said that at Lindholm (detention center for rejected asylum seekers) pork should always be included in all meals of the menu. In Germany, after the Chemnitz incident, the former German Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer (CSU), said: "Migration is the mother of all problems." In Ireland, "the Identity Ireland leader Peter O'Loughlin claimed that Islam was 'destroying' cities in Europe and warned of the risk of 'Sharia courts,' 'rape gangs,' and 'grooming gangs' should a mosque be built in Kilkenny. In Italy, the former Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini warned of the danger of Islam in Italy and stated that his future government put an end to the "irregular Islamic presence" in Italy. Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician, produced and spread a campaign video accompanied by horror music and the following text with red letters: "Islam stands for hate against Jews, Christians, women, and homosexuals." This video ends with the sentence "Islam is deadly" using red drops as a resemblance to blood. In Norway, Per-Willy Amundsen, MP for the Progress Party and former minister of justice, mentioned his right to say that "the migration from Muslim countries should stop." In Serbia, president Vučić referred to Milošević, who was charged with Muslim genocide, as a great Serbian leader, with good intentions yet bad results. Also, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stated on the Srebrenica genocide: "[It] was a terrible, terrible crime but… genocide is when you are killing the entire population, the women, children and this was not that case." Downplaying and denying the genocide could be one example of public failing to acknowledge the trauma. In the UK, Boris Johnson referred to women who wear Burqa as letter boxes and said that is a ridiculous choice to walk around like that (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019, pp. 40–44).

Unfortunately, the issue of Islamophobia is not limited to Islamophobic language. In some cases, there are enforcements or demands for laws from government or political parties that directly target Muslims and put different restrictions on them in comparison to other religious communities. The European Islamophobia Report 2018 (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019) provides some examples of this legislation. In Denmark, the Danish government introduced stricter legislation for "Ghetto Package" who are low-income Muslim enclaves, to regulate life in their community. Based on these sets of laws, they receive greater penalties for crime, receive less money from the public section, and have certain restrictions regarding the upbringing of their children. In general,

there are 22 rules which the government believes should be applied to achieve their goals. The new set of laws affects not only these special groups of Muslims in Denmark. There has been a reform of the law on daycare, based on which Muslim parents are deprived of the right to choose where they want their children to go to daycare. Another approved law in Denmark is the obligatory handshakes with the local mayor at a citizenship ceremony (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2019). This is potentially a problematic issue for Muslims since physical contact with the opposite sex (with the exception of the family) such as handshaking is discouraged and for some even prohibited.

The more these kinds of laws and open discrimination are enforced, the more marginalized Muslim community gets within the society. These kinds of discriminatory conditions may push the vulnerable individuals toward the extremist groups. The narratives that groups like ISIS use to recruit individuals, highlights the injustice, collective grievances, and discriminations, and also offer a way to fight such injustices. Grievances and its associated emotions can lead individuals or groups of people to search for a platform where they can redress it. The 'seeking' phase, as a result of grievance, becomes a 'vulnerability' toward radicalization, since it is in such vulnerable situations that individuals are receptive to other worldviews that promise justice and revenge. Radical organizations use their power, resources, and creativity to turn individual grievances and emotions into collective claims and to stage opportunities to act upon these claims (van Stekelenburg, 2017).

If we want to fight extremism, it is not enough to fight how radical individuals deal with injustice. We have to take a step back and also fight the injustice itself. We would like to draw the attention once again on how oppressing the whole group and systematic discrimination can cause the outburst of anger and lead to extremism or as a young second-generation Moroccan man stated: "If all the white Belgians think I'm a monster, then I might as well be one" (Speckhard and Yayla, 2016).

There are not always written laws that are oppressive. There are numerous things that are perpetrated by systemic racism that are not written laws, and it is difficult to prove that they exist and fight against them because on paper, "they do not exist."

Conclusion

In our opinion, to tackle the issue of radicalization entails tackling racism and oppression as well. The way we deal with the radicalization in our societies often goes in the direction of pathologizing radical members without considering their situation and backgrounds, before going through the radicalization process. Often the focus is so much on proving the ideology wrong. There is a tendency to forget that these people have many psychological vulnerabilities, often stemming from the discrimination that they experienced in their society. Therefore, it is crucial to address systematic discrimination, racism, institutional abuse, and imbalance of power between different groups in a community to show how these issues can traumatize minorities and how minorities react to this trauma. Groups like ISIS take advantage of this trauma to sell their propaganda and recruit individuals by promising them a life in Utopia and a chance to take revenge on their oppressors. Mindell (1995) believes that the problem of terrorism will not be solved if we just take action on the international level. We have to be ready to deal with the roots steaming within families, churches, mosques, local organizations, and governments. The mainstream finds

it difficult to accept that it shares a responsibility in pushing marginalized people toward extremism. People do not show fundamentalist and abusive behavior out of the blue, they have often been badly hurt (Mindell, 1995).

In our view, factors like systematic discrimination, abuse of power, and constant marginalization play a pivotal role in pushing discriminated individuals out of society (in some cases, as illustrated in the examples) and into radical ideologies promising better lives. However, having said that, we do not want to justify and bring excuses for violent actions. We want to stress that these types of violent actions happen in a social context and if we continue treating terrorism just as an indication of inner and individual problems rather than social injustice, we can never fully succeed in solving the issue.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the patients/participants or patients/participants' legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Emotional relevance and prejudice: testing the differentiated effect of incidental disgust on prejudice towards ethnic minorities

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Negative emotions such as disgust or anger influence the evaluation of minorities and amplify prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination behaviors towards them. However, new discoveries suggest that these spillover effects might be more specific in the sense that the bias might occur only if the emotions are specific to the affect that is generally evoked by that particular minority, i.e. anger increases prejudice towards anger-relevant groups, and disgust towards disgust-relevant groups. Our study aimed to examine, the specificity of the spillover effects, namely the importance of emotion's relevance to the prejudice towards out-groups. To test this hypothesis, we investigated the influence of incidental disgust on the evaluation of two minorities, one that is usually associated with disgust (the Roma minority) and one usually associated with anger (the Hungarian minority). We used a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design where we manipulated the emotion experienced by the participants (disgust versus neutral) and the target they evaluated (Romani or Hungarian minority). We tested the effects of these manipulations on three aspects of prejudice toward the target group: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The results support the specificity of the spillover effect, by showing that incidental disgust increased prejudice only towards the disgust-relevant target, namely the Roma minority, and that the intensity of this emotion experienced by the participants mediates this effect. Moreover, incidental disgust increased not only the negative emotions associated with the Romani (i.e., the affective component) but also the negative cognitions associated with them and the desire to maintain an increased social distance (i.e., behavioral prejudice). These findings highlight the importance of emotions' relevance in bias toward minorities and provide a starting point for future anti-discrimination interventions.

KEYWORDS

prejudice, incidental disgust, spill-over effect, ethnic minority, emotion relevance

1. Introduction

It has been almost a century since emotions have been linked to prejudice and intergroup relations through the classical theory of frustration-aggression (Dollard et al., 1939). Although the investigation of stereotypes has been dominated for a significant period by the cognitive perspective, centered almost exclusively on attitudes (Allport, 1954), the focus tended to shift towards an emotional approach, as limitations of the cognitive perspective became evident (Taylor, 2007).

More recent theories approach prejudice in a more fine-grained manner by separating it into three components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Kite et al., 2022). Stereotypes, the cognitive component, refer to beliefs about a person or a group, prejudice to the emotions one

feels about them, and discrimination to the actual behaviors or intentions to behave in a certain way (Tejada et al., 2011). The present paper focuses on all three aspects of prejudice, aiming to examine specific pathways by which certain negative emotions bias the judgments of some minority groups while having no impact on the evaluations of others.

In Romania, the largest minority groups are represented by the Hungarian and Romani communities and the official numbers state that they represent 6.1%, respectively 3.4% of the population. However, it seems that these figures do not necessarily reflect reality. For example, Surdu (2019) states that many of the Roma ethnics are undocumented and a great majority refuse to declare their ethnic origins because they fear discrimination or unfair treatment. Moreover, another study (Surdu, 2016) concludes that the lack of an objective image of the Roma population size is an effect of certain political interests. In these conditions, it is almost impossible to know the real number of Romani ethnicities in Romania, however, we can confidently assume that it is greater than the official statistics state.

In general, the Romani minority has a negative public image, that is, at least in part, related to their poor living conditions (Anthonj et al., 2020). Most of the Roma population lives in old houses with improper sanitary conditions (Davis and Ryan, 2017). For example, in Romania more than 80% lack access to improved sanitation (an indoor toilet) or water sources (Powell Doherty et al., 2018). As a recent meta-analysis points out (Anthonj et al., 2020), discrimination is both a cause and an effect of their restricted access to basic facilities such as running water, sanitation, and hygiene – WASH (Filčák et al., 2018). Roma ethnics are negatively perceived by the majority because they mostly live in segregated areas lacking WASH facilities, but the negative perceptions of the majority represent in themselves one of the reasons for the poor conditions they live in. In order to be able to improve the quality of their living conditions they need financial stability, which is dependent on their access to superior, better-paying jobs. However, in reality, that is often difficult as studies show that Romani are discriminated against in the job application process, and many employers still refuse to hire them (Messing and Bereményi, 2017). Another example of a similar Vicious circle starts in childhood with the fact that Roma ethnics are segregated and discriminated against in schools. The fact that they are not able to benefit from the same education opportunities as the majority, and often drop out because of bad treatment, negatively influences their chances of finding highly-paid jobs in the future (O'Higgins and Brüggemann, 2014).

Moreover, empirical studies in Romania seem to support the fact that their improper living conditions represent a complex cause of discrimination. For example, Romanian doctors perceive the Roma minorities as dirty and lacking personal hygiene, which is one of the main reasons that incline them to avoid treating Roma patients, thus hindering their access to medical services (Roman et al., 2013).

Recent empirical studies confirm that associating disgust with the Roma minority is not specific only to the Romanian population, but was also discovered in Greek (Asimopoulos et al., 2019), Czech (Crețan et al., 2022) or Slovakian samples (Petrík et al., 2021). Moreover, other studies suggest that such negative emotions amplify the negative attitudes of the majority. For example, in an experimental study (Dalsklev and Kunst, 2015), it was found that reading a fictitious newspaper article about the low hygiene standards of the Roma

minority elicited feelings of disgust that led to a more positive attitude towards deportation.

The Hungarian minority, on the other hand, is perceived differently, and the disputes between it and the majority seem to be related to other causes, namely the political context (Aluas and Matei, 1998). For more than three decades, the Hungarian minority pressured the Romanian government to adopt favorable laws related to the recognition of their rights and the preservation of their customs and language. Their efforts started to pay off in 1996 and since then much favorable legislation, such as Act 125 which allowed bilingual inscriptions in areas where minorities represented more than 20% of the population (Act No. 125 on Local Administration, 2001), has been adopted. Moreover, a recent study Veres (2015) points out that only 11% of the individuals from the Hungarian minority consider themselves Romanian citizens first, while the majority prefer to define themselves as a separate ingroup, thus creating more conflicts between them and the majority.

Contrary to the Roma population, the Hungarian minority is not perceived as inferior, quite the contrary, it is perceived as a powerful group that could pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the state (Aluas and Matei, 1998). In this particular context, the relationship between the majority and the Hungarian minority mostly generates emotions of fear and resentment (Daftary and Grin, 2003), while the interactions between Romanians and the Roma minority often elicit mostly emotions of disgust and a tendency towards rejection (Hajioff, 2000).

The bidirectional link between emotions and prejudice has been proven by numerous studies. On one hand, different outgroups elicit different prejudice-related emotions (Tapias et al., 2007), but on the other hand, the emotions themselves can influence the perception of a certain group. This spill-over effect, namely the transfer of the negative valence associated with a certain emotion to the evaluation of the target, has emerged even when there is no relation between the activation of the affect itself and the group that is being judged, as in the case of incidental emotions (Paolini et al., 2021).

Out of all negative emotions, disgust is probably the most frequently researched in relation to stereotyping outgroups, and results have systematically shown its negative biasing influences (Taylor, 2007). For example, some studies (Vartanian et al., 2016) showed that the disgust elicited by people with obesity amplified participants' stereotypes and the desire to maintain social distance. Other researchers have shown that disgust-related words are intentionally used in anti-group texts because they induce negative attitudes (Taylor, 2007). Finally, other studies (Kiss et al., 2020) found that even personal factors, such as individual differences related to sensibility to disgust, are associated with more negative attitudes towards minorities.

The main goal of our study is to further investigate the negative effect of disgust on prejudice towards two different minority groups, i.e., Roma and Hungarian, in a sample of Romanian participants. While most previous studies (e.g., Dalsklev and Kunst, 2015) examined the effects of integral affective states on the target groups, we aim to test the influence of incidental emotions. In the aforementioned study, disgust was induced through a fictitious newspaper article about the poor hygiene of the Roma ethnics. One can argue that the observed effect was not only determined by the emotion experienced alone, but also by the depreciative information concerning the target group. By using unrelated emotion–inducing

materials that elicit incidental emotions we can study the specific effects of the emotion itself. Moreover, our study aims to compare the effects of incidental disgust on the evaluation of the two targets (the Roma and the Hungarian minority). This would empirically test two competitive explanatory models: the overall spill-over effect of negative emotions which refers to the idea that negative emotions determine harsher evaluations, irrespective of their relevance to the target (Vartanian et al., 2016) and the specificity of the spill-over effects which states that, in order for the biasing effect to occur, the emotion induced needs to be specific to the target evaluated (Dasgupta et al., 2009; Paolini et al., 2021).

The first model is based on several research findings (e.g., Taylor, 2007; Vartanian et al., 2016) indicating that incidental disgust has spill-over effects increasing prejudice towards minorities, thus biasing their evaluation in an apparently global manner. Yet, other studies (DeSteno et al., 2004; Dasgupta et al., 2009; Paolini et al., 2021) suggest that this effect is more specific. For example, in one study (Dasgupta et al., 2009), researchers tested the effect of three negative incidental emotions (anger, disgust, and sadness) on prejudice. Their results showed that anger and disgust amplified the negative attitudes toward different groups, but in specific ways. Anger amplified the prejudice only towards anger-relevant minorities (Arab men), while disgust only towards disgust-relevant groups (homosexual men). In other words, according to their findings, negative emotions can amplify negative judgments only if they are specific to the emotion typically elicited by the target group. A more recent research (Paolini et al., 2021) confirms the negative effects of incidental anger on prejudice towards Arabic men, using a different procedure (i.e., visualization scenarios), which further emphasizes the importance of the congruence between the induced incidental emotion and the one typically elicited by the target out-group.

In our study, we aim to further test the specificity of the spill-over effect by examining whether this effect is also instilled by another incidental negative emotion (i.e., disgust), and with other prejudiced minorities. In this respect, while previous studies (Dasgupta et al., 2009) compared two different types of minorities (a sexual and an ethnic minority), we aim to investigate the specificity of the spill-over effect on the prejudice towards two ethnic minorities: the Roma and the Hungarian. The two minorities typically elicit different negative emotions in members of the Romanian majority: the Romani ethnics are associated with disgust (Asimopoulos et al., 2019; Petrík et al., 2021; Crețan et al., 2022), while the Hungarian minority generally elicits fear and resentment (Daftary and Grin, 2003). This provides an appropriate setting for testing the emotion–related specificity of the spill-over effects. As disgust is the emotion induced in our experimental design, this manipulation should amplify only the prejudice towards the Roma population, while having no significant effects on the evaluation of the individuals from the Hungarian minority.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred and twelve participants ($N_{men} = 62$) took part in our study. The majority were undergraduate students ($N_{undergraduate} = 112$) from a wide range of universities, aged 18 to 63 years old ($M = 24.55$, $SD = 8.24$). They were recruited mostly through social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. We used a 2×2 between-subjects design where we manipulated the emotion felt by the participants (disgust versus neutral) and the target they evaluated (Romani or Hungarian). All participants identified as Romanians and had normal, or corrected to normal vision.

2.2. Procedure

The participants completed the questionnaire online via the Qualtrics platform. Upon reading the informed consent, and agreeing to take part in our research, they were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions (elicited emotion: disgust vs. neutral X target: Romani vs. Hungarian target).

Participants were exposed for 15 s to either a neutral or a disgusting picture (participants were unable to skip until the time had passed). After viewing the picture, participants completed the manipulation check task, then they were asked to think about the Romani or the Hungarian minority and complete the Prejudiced Attitude Tricomponent Test. To avoid all ambiguities, participants were reminded, at the beginning of each scale of this measure, of the minority to which they were required to refer to while completing the items.

2.3. Materials and measures

2.3.1. Prejudice

Prejudice was measured with the Prejudiced Attitude Tricomponent Test (Tejada et al., 2011). The scale measures all three components of prejudice: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and the results of this study support the differentiation between the three facets and the validity of the instrument. The answers to the items specific to each scale were added to compute an overall score for each component (Mañas et al., 2012).

The cognitive component scale ($\alpha = 0,87$) consists of eight items, evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – Very bad to 5 – Very good) that assessed various cognitive aspects related to the out-group. More specifically, the scale measured beliefs related to various socio-cultural areas such as politics, social welfare, employment, economy, social family, religion, and values. All scores were reversed so that higher overall scores reflected a more prejudicial judgment.

The affective component of the scale ($\alpha = 0,76$), evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – Very bad to 5 – Very good), measures 7 "subtle" emotions related to the out-group evaluation. Three of the emotions assessed were positive (admiration, friendliness, and respect) and four were negative (distrust, discomfort, insecurity, and indifference). The scores for positive emotions were reversed so that higher overall scores reflected more prejudice-related emotions.

The behavioral component of the scale measures the relation (distant or close) participants are willing to have with members of the target group. The scale consists of one item, based on the Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1959), that requires participants to choose one of the five types of relations. According to their choices, participants scores ranged from 5, which corresponded to a very distant relation ("not having any relations with people in the out-group") to 0, a very close relation ("form a family with a person from the out-group").

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between the three components of prejudice and the socio-demographic variables.

Variables	Min	Max	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Cognitive component	1	5	3.20	0.72	–				
2. Affective component	1.14	5	2.85	0.74	0.61**	–			
3. Behavioral component	0	5	1.69	1.73	0.57**	0.60**	–		
4. Gender	150 (78.8%) women				−0.04	−0.07	−0.03	–	
5. Age	18	63	24.71	8,25	−0.10	0.03	0.00	−0.12	–
6. Education	100 (47.2%) university graduates				−0.04	0.05	0.07	−0.10	0.50**

**p < 0.01; N = 212. All gender and education correlations represent point biserial coefficients.

2.3.2. Emotion manipulation

The emotion-inducing task consisted in presenting participants for 15 s with one of two stimuli: a neutral image (a piece of white furniture with a small plant on it) or a disgusting picture (an image of a dirty closet). The procedure is similar to that used in other studies and has been proven efficient in inducing disgust (e.g., Moretti and di Pellegrino, 2010; Clifford and Wendell, 2016). Moreover, a recent review (Siedlecka and Denson, 2019) suggested that visual stimuli represent the most effective material in inducing disgust.

2.3.3. Manipulation check

The effectiveness of the manipulation was assessed using one item asking participants to evaluate, on a 5-point Likert scale (1- not at all, and 5- very much) to what degree they feel each of the six basic emotions (sadness, happiness, surprise, fear, anger, and disgust). The emotions were chosen based on a previous study (Sarlo et al., 2005) where researchers used this procedure to evaluate the effects of a disgusting material, and its results support the validity of this measure.

3. Results

3.1. Manipulation checks

We analyzed the effects of our experimental manipulation of emotion on affective ratings using the Independent Samples t-test. Results indicate that participants in the disgust condition reported more intense disgust ($M = 4.38$, SD = 0.96) than those in the neutral condition ($M = 1.21$, SD = 0.56; $t(210) = 29.76$; $p < 0.001$). We also found other emotional effects of the experimental manipulation, as participants in the disgust condition reported being more surprised ($M = 3.23$, SD = 1.32 vs. $M = 1.59$, SD = 0.87; $t(210) = 10.74$; $p < 0.001$) and angrier ($M = 2.36$, SD = 1.47 vs. $M = 1.31$, SD = 0.72; $t(210) = 6.70$; $p < 0.001$). Yet, the comparisons among the intensity of the six emotions reported by the participants in the experimental group indicate that the intensity of their experienced disgust was above that of all the other emotions (all ps < 0.01). There were no other significant differences between the two groups in their emotion ratings (all ps > 0.05).

3.2. Relationships between the three components of prejudice and the socio-demographic variables

The descriptive statistics and the relationships between the three components of prejudice measured by the Prejudiced Attitude

Tricomponent Test and the socio-demographic variables are presented in Table 1. Results show positive associations between the three components of prejudice, while no relationships between these scales and gender, age, or education emerged as significant.

3.3. Effects of the manipulated variables on the three components of prejudice

Next, we examined the effect of the two variables we manipulated (i.e., emotion and target evaluation) on each of the three components of prejudice using between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA). On the cognitive component of prejudice, we found a significant main effect of the emotional induction [$F(1, 208) = 38.15$, $p < 0.001$], participants in the disgust condition scoring higher on this scale than those in the neutral condition ($M = 3.46$, SD = 0.64 vs. $M = 2.93$, SD = 0.70). There was also a significant main effect of the ethnicity of the target evaluated [$F(1,208) = 4.83$, $p = 0.03$], participants evaluating Romani ethnics expressing stronger cognitive prejudice than those evaluating the individuals from the Hungarian minority ($M = 3.27$, SD = 0.80 vs. $M = 3.10$, SD = 0.63). We also found a significant interaction between the two independent variables [$F(1,208) = 22.91$, $p < 0.001$]. When exploring this interaction, we found that among participants evaluating the Romani target, those in the disgust condition expressed stronger cognitive prejudice than those in the emotionally neutral condition [$F(1,103) = 58.81$, $p < 0.001$; $M = 3.77$, SD = 0.57 vs. $M = 2.81$, SD = 0.70], but the effect of the emotional induction was not significant in the group evaluating Hungarian ethnics [$F(1,105) = 0.99$, $p = 0.32$; $M = 3.17$, SD = 0.56 vs. $M = 3.04$, SD = 0.69].

On the affective component of prejudice, results indicated a significant main effect of the emotional induction [$F(1, 208) = 7,32$, $p = 0.007$], participants in the disgust condition expressed stronger affective prejudice than those in the neutral condition ($M = 2.96$, SD = 0.81 vs. $M = 2.72$, SD = 0.66). We also found a significant main effect of the target evaluated [$F(1, 208) = 17.07$, $p < 0.001$], participants evaluating Romani ethnics scoring higher on this scale than those evaluating Hungarian ethnics ($M = 3.02$, SD = 0.79 vs. $M = 2.66$, SD = 0.65). The interaction between the two independent variables was also significant [$F(1, 208) = 26.59$, $p < 0.001$]. Participants in the disgust condition expressed stronger cognitive prejudice than those in the emotionally neutral condition concerning Roma ethnics [$F(1,103) = 28.08$, $p < 0.001$; $M = 3.40$, SD = 0.73 vs. $M = 2.67$, SD = 0.68], but the effect of the emotional induction was not significant among participants evaluating the individuals from the Hungarian minority [$F(1,105) = 3.33$, $p = 0.07$; $M = 2.54$, SD = 0.65 vs. $M = 2.76$, SD = 0.64].
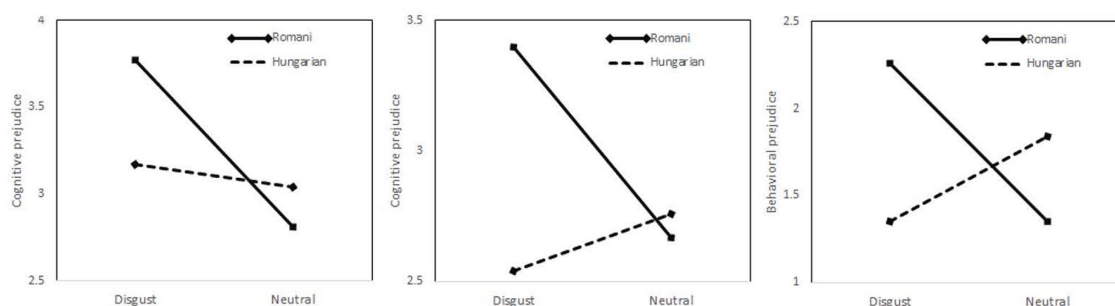
FIGURE 1

The interactions between emotional induction and ethnicity of the target evaluated on the intensity of three facets of prejudice.
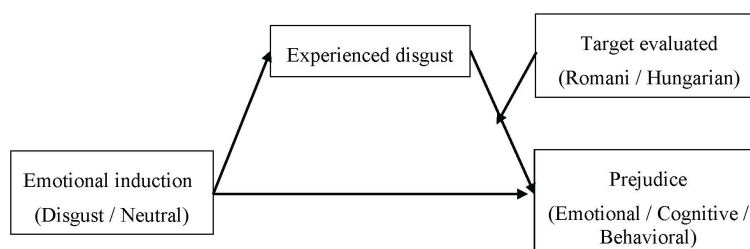
FIGURE 2

The hypothesized mediation model between emotional induction, disgust, and the three components of prejudice moderated by target ethnicity.

On the behavioral component of prejudice, neither the emotional induction [$F(1, 208) = 0.84$, $p = 0.36$] nor the target evaluated [$F(1, 208) = 0.78$, $p = 0.38$] had significant main effects, but their interaction emerged as significant [$F(1, 208) = 8.95$, $p = 0.003$]. Among participants evaluating the Romani minority, those in the disgust condition expressed stronger behavioral prejudice than those in the emotional neutral condition [$F(1,103) = 7.18$, $p = 0.009$; $M = 2.26$, SD = 1.90 vs. $M = 1.35$, SD = 1.59], but the effect of the emotional induction was not significant in the group evaluating Hungarian ethnics [$F(1,105) = 2.92$, $p = 0.13$; $M = 1.35$, SD = 1.54 vs. $M = 1.84$, SD = 1.77]. The interactions between emotional induction and ethnicity of the target evaluated on the intensity of each of the three facets of prejudice are represented in Figure 1.

3.4. Experienced disgust as mediator and ethnicity of the target as moderator of the effects of emotional induction

The results presented above indicate that the experimental manipulation of emotion increased all three facets of prejudice expressed, especially concerning the Romani minority. Next, we investigated whether these effects are mediated by the intensity of disgust experienced by the participants and whether this indirect effect varies according to the ethnicity of the target evaluated. The analyses were performed using Model 14 in PROCESS v. 4.1 macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022) on 5,000 bootstrap samples, using a percentile bootstrapping approach for creating 95% confidence intervals. The hypothesized moderated mediation model in Figure 2 was tested

using as dependent variable (Y) each of the three components of prejudice. In all three analyses, we introduced the manipulation of emotion as the independent variable (X), disgust as the mediator (M), and target ethnicity (W) as the moderator of the effect of X on M. The two affective states that emerged in the manipulation checks reported above as being significantly influenced by our emotional induction, besides disgust (i.e., surprise and anger) were introduced as covariates in all three models.

3.4.1. The cognitive component

The results of the analysis of the model including the cognitive component of prejudice as the dependent variable confirmed the effect of our experimental manipulation on experienced disgust ($b = 2.80$, $p < 0.001$, CI: 2.56, 3.04). We also found that the effect of disgust on cognitive prejudice was moderated by target ethnicity, as the interaction between these variables emerged as a significant predictor ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$, CI: 0.12, 0.32). Moreover, the overall mediation model of relationships between the emotional induction, the experienced disgust and cognitive prejudice was significantly moderated by target ethnicity, as indicated by the *index of moderated mediation* = 0.62, CI: 0.35, 0.91. The fact that the bootstrapped CI of this index did not include zero suggests that the indirect effect in this model (i.e., between the emotional induction, disgust, and cognitive prejudice) differ across the two ethnic groups evaluated by our participants (Hayes, 2015). Specifically, we found that this conditional indirect effect was significant in the group evaluating the Romani target ($B = 0.53$, CI: 0.22, 0.87), but not in the group evaluating the Hungarian target ($B = -0.09$, CI: -0.45, 0.28). This difference stemmed from the fact that, in the first group, the experienced disgust was a

significant factor of cognitive prejudice ($b = 0.19$, $p = 0.005$, CI: 0.06, 0.32), and thus a significant mediator of the relationship between the emotional induction and cognitive prejudice, while in the group evaluating the Hungarian target disgust did not predict cognitive prejudice ($b = -0.03$, $p = 0.66$, CI: −0.17, 0.11).

3.4.2. The affective component

Results indicated target ethnicity as a moderator of the effect of experienced disgust on affective prejudice ($b = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$, CI: 0.17, 0.38). The index of moderated mediation = 0.76, CI: 0.47, 1.06 also suggested that the conditional indirect effects of the emotional induction on affective prejudice via experienced disgust differed across the two target ethnic groups. The conditional indirect effect emerged as significant in participants who evaluated the Romani target ($B = 0.89$, CI: 0.51, 1.31), where experienced disgust was a significant factor of affective prejudice ($b = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$, CI: 0.18, 0.45), and thus mediated the effect of the emotional induction on affective prejudice. In the group evaluating the Hungarian target, the conditional indirect effect was not significant ($B = -0.13$, CI: −0.27, 0.52), as disgust was not significantly associated with affective prejudice ($b = 0.05$, $p = 0.54$, CI: −0.10, 0.19).

3.4.3. The behavioral component

Target ethnicity was also a significant moderator of the effect of experienced disgust on behavioral prejudice ($b = 0.40$, $p = 0.003$, CI: 0.14, 0.67), as well as of the mediation relationships between the emotional induction, disgust, and this type of prejudice (index of moderated mediation = 1.13, CI: 0.42, 1.87). This conditional indirect effect was significant in the group evaluating the Romani target ($B = 1.21$, CI: 0.25, 2.28), but not in participants evaluating the Hungarian target ($B = 0.08$, CI: −0.96, 1.14). As in the cases of the other two components of prejudice, experienced disgust had a significant effect on behavioral prejudice in participants evaluating the Romani target ($b = 0.43$, $p = 0.01$, CI: 0.08, 0.79), but not in the Hungarian target condition ($b = 0.03$, $p = 0.87$, CI: −0.34, 0.40).

4. Discussion

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the extent of the emotional spill-over from incidental disgust to prejudice towards two of the most numerous minorities in Romania (i.e., Romany and Hungarian), varying in the emotion that the members of the majority typically associate them with. By experimentally manipulating the incidental emotion experienced by participants, we measured the influence of disgust on the three components of prejudice, i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral, towards each of the two minority groups. Our results indicated that the spill-over effect from disgust to prejudice was target-specific across all three components, as disgust increased only the prejudicial reactions towards the Roma minority, which is typically associated with disgust in members of the majority (Hajioff, 2000; Roman et al., 2013; Dalsklev and Kunst, 2015).

A considerable number of studies showed that disgust has negative spill-over effects on prejudice towards different types of groups (Dalsklev and Kunst, 2015): some usually associated with disgust, such as obese people (Vartanian et al., 2016), or homosexual minorities (Kiss et al., 2020) but also on neutral out-groups, such as fictitious communities (Hodson et al., 2013). Our results, however,

suggest that, at least in relation to ethnic minorities, the effect of negative emotions is more specific, amplifying prejudice only if it was relevant to the target evaluated. In our study, incidental disgust increased prejudice only towards the Roma minority, while having no effect on the evaluation of the Hungarian minority, typically associated with other negative feelings, i.e., anger and resentment (Daftary and Grin, 2003). Moreover, this specific spill-over effect from disgust to ethnic prejudice was observed in all three aspects of prejudice: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

Previous research has suggested that emotional influences on prejudice are specific. For example, DeSteno et al. (2004) showed that anger, and not sadness determined negative evaluations towards out-groups, and Dasgupta et al. (2009) found that anger increased prejudice only toward minorities that commonly evoke similar emotions (i.e., Arab men). Similarly, disgust did not affect the evaluation of anger-relevant minorities, but increased prejudice towards homosexual men, a minority usually associated with lack of purity. On the same target minority of Arabic men, Paolini et al. (2021) have replicated this pattern of effects, showing that for biasing effects to occur, the incidental emotion induced has to be relevant to the outgroup being evaluated.

Our research extends and confirms these findings related to the importance of the relevance of emotion towards the target, firstly by showing that this effect is not specific only to anger, as previously highlighted, but also occurs in the case of disgust. Secondly, the mediation analysis results provide additional support for the specific spillover hypothesis by showing that the intensity of disgust experienced is a significant predictor of the magnitude of prejudicial bias towards the Roma minority. Thirdly, our results suggest that incidental disgust does not affect only the emotional component of prejudice, but also biases the behavioral and cognitive evaluations. Participants who experienced disgust also reported more negative emotions towards Roma, such as anger or fear, and less positive emotions, like admiration. They also expressed an increased desire to maintain social distance and avoid direct interactions with members of this minority. Fourthly, disgust also increased the probability that participants would consider negative stereotypes about Roma's work ethic and personal habits as true.

Lastly, our study also contributes to the existing knowledge by revealing the emotion-specific spill-over effect when comparing two different ethnic minorities. Past studies have compared different types of minorities (e.g., for example, an ethnic with a sexual minority) (Dasgupta et al., 2009) or included only the Arabic minority as the target group (Paolini et al., 2021). Furthermore, Paolini et al.'s (2021) study, which also highlighted the importance of the relevance of the incidental emotion to the target outgroup, used visualization tasks in order to induce emotions, a technique with limited efficacy for some basic emotions (Siedlecka and Denson, 2019). By using visual stimuli, which past research indicated to be the most efficient disgust-eliciting technique (Siedlecka and Denson, 2019), it is possible that the participants in the experimental group of our study experienced more intense emotional states.

The Roma community is generally perceived as a low-social-status minority, with lower levels of education (Van Cleemput et al., 2007). They usually live on the periphery of cities in poor conditions, without access to WASH and basic facilities to maintain proper hygiene (Davis and Ryan, 2017). In the media, they are also portrayed negatively (Kóczé and Rövid, 2017), as problematic parasite communities, that

break the law and represent a social problem rather than as a vulnerable minority (van Baar, 2011).

Disgust is elicited by people that transgress moral norms (Chapman and Anderson, 2012), are dirty, or carry contagious diseases (Curtis, 2007). In Romania, the Roma minority is associated with all three of these aspects, thereby disgust is the emotion most commonly elicited by them in members of the majority (Crețan et al., 2022). This highlights their vulnerable status in Romanian society, as such negative emotions further strengthen the depreciative stereotypes and discrimination towards the Roma minority (e.g., Roman et al., 2013). Furthermore, this disgust–fueled prejudice against them is also difficult to tackle and reduce, as indicated by the observation that the interventions aiming to reduce discrimination towards Roma ethnics in Romania have often failed (Pascal, 2020). One possible reason could be related to the fact that they did not address the cause of the prejudice, namely the specific negative emotions elicited by this minority in members of the majority. Different minorities are associated with specific negative emotions (Madon et al., 2001; Tapias et al., 2007) and distinct emotions promote particular reactions. For example, anger triggers aggressive, confrontational behavior, while disgust quite the opposite, leads to avoidant reactions (Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005). By showing that the intensity of disgust increases all three aspects of prejudice (i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) against the Roma minority in Romania, our study provides a possible starting point for future research aiming to reduce prejudice against this group.

This study has several limitations. Our sample was gender imbalanced, as the majority of our participants were females. We tested the influence of only one incidental emotion, i.e., disgust, which was found to be the emotion most commonly associated with the Roma minority (Petrík et al., 2021; Crețan et al., 2022). Nevertheless, previous studies have also found that other emotions can also increase prejudice. For example, in a Polish sample incidental anger also amplified the negative attitude toward the Romani minorities (Bukowski et al., 2014). As such, future studies should explore the influence of other incidental emotions such as fear or anger. Another important avenue of research is related to the possible effects of emotional regulation strategies. For example, participants' habitual use of suppression or reappraisal, or their individual sensitivity to disgust could moderate the effects of the emotional induction tasks on the actual emotion that they experience, which could presumably determine prejudicial tendencies of varying magnitude.

In sum, our findings suggest that disgust increases prejudice, but only towards ethnic groups that are commonly associated with the same emotion. Inducing incidental disgust increased prejudice towards the Roma community while having no influence on the prejudice towards the individuals from the Hungarian minority, and the intensity of experienced disgust mediated the aforementioned relation. Moreover, the effect was observed on all three aspects of the prejudice: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Our results offer support for the thesis of the specificity of the spill-over effect and may provide important information for future prejudice reduction interventions.

Interventions aiming at reducing negative bias towards minorities are usually based on general approaches that target the development of more favorable attitudes and inclusive behaviors. For example, such a general bias-reducing strategy is creating real or imagined contact between the participants and the discriminated group (Paolini et al., 2021). This strategy has been shown, in some cases, to reduce perceived differences between the majority and the discriminate group (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008), that in turn creates the necessary premises for increased empathy (Pascal, 2020). However, there are also studies showing that these general approaches have limited effects in reducing prejudice, especially towards minorities such as the Roma ethnics (Pascal, 2020). This paper provides empirical support for the specificity of the spill-over effect which seems to be a possible explanation of the limited results of previous interventions. The main findings of our research suggest that future bias-reducing strategies could be more successful if they employed a tailored approach, targeting the specific emotion triggered by each discriminated group. For example, interventions aiming to reduce bias towards homosexual or Roma minorities might be more effective if they employed strategies that target the reduction of the negative emotion commonly associated with them, e.g., disgust (Roman et al., 2013; Kiss et al., 2020). Whereas, diminishing bias towards Arabic minorities, for example, could be more effective if they targeted emotions such as anger which are usually associated with them (Paolini et al., 2021). Future studies should empirically test the efficacy of more tailored prejudice reduction approaches based on the specific emotion elicited by the discriminated group.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Comisia de etică a cercetării din cadrul Facultății de Psihologie şi Ştiinţe ale Educaţiei a Universităţii "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Iaşi. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

EP, AH, and FM contributed to the conception and design of the study and wrote sections of the manuscript. FM collected the data and organized the database. AH performed the statistical analysis and wrote the *results* section of the article. EP and FM wrote the first draft of the manuscript. EP and AH contributed to the manuscript revision and editing. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The reviewer EF declared a past co-authorship with the author AH to the handling editor.

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Critical action to redress systemic oppression: a person-centered approach

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Introduction: In 2020, public outcry against police brutality prompted many social media users to post black squares and use the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (BLM). Many of the people who posted these squares were engaging in performative action in the sense that they failed to engage with BLM's history and core principles. Drawing from a critical action framework, the current research seeks to more deeply understand what drives people to engage in more versus less impactful forms of action to resist systemic oppression.

Methods: We employed a mixed-methods and person-centered methodological approach with the goal of providing nuanced information about factors that distinguish among individuals who engage in different forms of action. Participants were 359 undergraduates who reported that they engaged in some form of action to support BLM.

Findings: Latent profile analysis identified three subgroups (i.e., latent classes) in the larger sample, which we labeled (1) intentional action, (2) intermediate action, and (3) passive action. Participants in each latent class differed from one another in their sociopolitical attitudes, sociodemographic background, and level of action to support BLM. Through the qualitative coding process, the research team unearthed three overarching themes and a range of subthemes that help to explain why the members of each class engaged in different forms of action.

Discussion: We conclude by proposing a flexible intervention that may motivate individuals to engage in critical action to support BLM.

KEYWORDS

Black Lives Matter, activism, critical action, performative action, systemic oppression

Introduction

In 2020, public outcry against the social contextual climate surrounding police brutality prompted many social media users to post black squares and use the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (BLM; Wellman, 2020). Although the posts demonstrated support for BLM, many of the social media users failed to engage with BLM's history or core principles; instead, they resorted to passive performative activism (Kalina, 2020; Wellman, 2020). The lack of context and depth in the use of the hashtag and black squares minimized the struggle for racial justice and can be perceived as a superficial effort to appear socially aware without truly engaging in meaningful action. The existing scholarship provides limited insight into why some individuals choose to participate in more impactful forms of activism while others opt for superficial or performative action to advocate for people who experience systemic oppression. To this end, the current research focuses on data collected from undergraduates who reported engaging in some form of action to support BLM. Through our mixed-methods and person-centered design, we sought to identify attributes that distinguish among subgroups of participants who engage in more

versus less impactful action. In addition to filling a gap in the literature, the research results provide insight into avenues for intervention to motivate individuals to engage in impactful forms of action and become advocates for people who experience systemic oppression.

Previous research has identified various factors that lead individuals to engage in various types of action (Techakesari et al., 2017; Chan and Mak, 2020; Fieck et al., 2020; Goldberg et al., 2020; Moore and Stathi, 2020; Thomas and Newell, 2023). Many of these studies apply either civil courage or critical action as a conceptual framework (Greitemeyer et al., 2007; Broz, 2008; Diemer et al., 2016, 2021; Williams et al., 2023). *Civil courage* is frequently referenced as brave behavior intended to embody or modify ethical norms without concern for the social cost. In addition to advocating for people who experience systemic oppression, civil courage requires knowledge of the specific type of injustice at hand and a willingness to resist social norms associated with this injustice (Williams et al., 2023). On the other hand, *critical action* is defined as individual or collective behaviors taken to create social change and challenge systems of oppression (Diemer et al., 2016). Critical action is an important framework for understanding what motivates some individuals to engage in impactful forms of action compared to potentially performative forms of action. Therefore, the current study focuses on critical action while acknowledging its overlap with the civil courage framework.

The Black Lives Matter global network comprises 40 chapters spanning across the world, all of which share a collective vision for the advancement of Black freedom and a commitment toward liberation efforts (BLMLA, 2023[1]). Moreover, BLM is recognized as the largest social justice movement in US history (The New York Times, 2020[2]). The BLM movement contends that social institutions in the United States, such as the police, devalue Black lives and that the militarization of the police has increased racial oppression. In addition, the BLM organization argues that the police are not the only tool used to oppress and control Black people in America; rather, they see the police as a symptom of a larger issue. They have called for improvements in educational, medical, and political institutions in addition to criminal justice reform (Black Lives Matter, 2023[3]). The present-day civil rights movement relies on action, or public protests, to bring attention to the disproportionate killings of Black people by law enforcement (Garza et al., 2014; Taylor, 2016; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017). Today, the BLM organization continues to critically analyze white supremacy in institutions and motivates its members to continue fighting for Black people's well-being.

Distinguishing among different forms of action

Action to support BLM includes a wide array of behaviors. These behaviors include participating in a boycott, protesting for racial justice, volunteering for a political movement in support of BLM,

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1 https://www.blmla.org/who-we-are

2 https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html

3 https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/

posting on social media, or simply seeking out information about BLM (Hope et al., 2016; Hong and Peoples, 2021; Hendricks et al., 2022). This array of behaviors is reasonable considering collective action is defined as *any* activity intended to improve the circumstances of a group (Wright et al., 1990). Scholars have increasingly argued that action occurs on a spectrum, with some forms of action being more impactful than others (Hope et al., 2016; Techakesari et al., 2017; Chan and Mak, 2020; Fieck et al., 2020; Goldberg et al., 2020; Moore and Stathi, 2020; Hong and Peoples, 2021; Hendricks et al., 2022; Thomas and Newell, 2023).

One less impactful form of action that has been critiqued in recent years is performative action. *Performative action* is described as action that is carried out to build one's social capital rather than a strong commitment to a social movement (Kalina, 2020; Wellman, 2020). When engaging in performative action, a person would rather let the world know that they are not racist (or sexist, or homophobic) than work to alter the racist institutions that exist in our nation (Kalina, 2020; Wellman, 2020). As mentioned above, in response to police brutality, social media users began uploading black squares and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to show support for BLM with little to no context about the organization's origins. Wellman (2020) found that many social media influencers were deliberately using performative action to gain and keep followers' trust; generally, their posts did not contribute to meaningful improvements in diversity, equity, or inclusion.

In contrast to performative action, *critical action* is action that has a more meaningful impact. This is because critical action is characterized as a form of civic engagement focused on challenging and dismantling oppressive social systems and is thus not characterized as traditional action (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Shaw et al., 2014; Diemer et al., 2021). Critical action is a byproduct of critical reflection (Diemer et al., 2016), which refers to the proficiencies required to critically analyze social systems and support group equity. Once an individual notices oppression within a social system (critical reflection), they are more likely to engage in action to resist and challenge systems of oppression (critical action). Therefore, action that is not accompanied by critical reflection (e.g., posting a black square on social media and returning to life with little or no critical reflection) does not constitute critical action.

To our knowledge, previous research has yet to identify factors that lead individuals to engage in more impactful forms of action (e.g., participating in a protest or march) compared to less impactful forms of action (e.g., posting a black square on social media). Accordingly, the current research uses a mixed-methods design and person-centered approach to identify subgroups of people who engage in impactful versus performative action. In particular, we seek to better understand how the subgroups differ with regard to their backgrounds, traits, life experiences, and reasoning about injustice.

A person-centered and mixed-methods approach

To address the call for additional research that illuminates why people engage in more versus less impactful forms of action (Diemer et al., 2021), the current research leverages two methodological approaches that are well suited to capturing nuance in the data: a person-centered approach and a mixed-methods approach.

Person-centered approaches afford insight into meaningful subgroups within a larger sample. For instance, imagine that Lily and Rowan both engage in action to support BLM. Lily posts a black square on social media using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. By contrast, Rowan participates in a BLM protest and spends time critically reflecting on systemic oppression. A person-centered approach makes it possible to identify subgroups of people like Lily and Rowan and identify attributes that make these subgroups distinct from one another.

To identify these subgroups in our sample, we utilized latent profile analysis (Hagenaars and McCutcheon, 2002; Muthén and Asparouhov, 2015; Jason and Glenwick, 2016). More specifically, analyses focus on undergraduates who reported engaging in some form of action to support BLM. Through the use of latent profile analysis, we sought to identify subgroups of participants with substantively different profiles on the following correlates: (1) *Critical Consciousness*, which is defined as the ability to critically analyze social and political conditions, approve of societal equity, and engage in action to challenge perceived inequities (Diemer et al., 2017); (2) *Racial colorblindness*, which is defined as the denial or belittlement of race and racism (Neville et al., 2000; Apfelbaum et al., 2012); (3) *Engagement in activism and radicalism*, which is classified as the evaluation of political mobilization and willingness to sacrifice oneself for a group or cause (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009); (4) *Acknowledgement of white privilege*, which is characterized by awareness of white privilege in America (Mo Bahk and Jandt, 2004); (5) *Everyday discrimination*, which is the belief that one is treated unfairly by individuals and social institutions because of personal characteristics such as race (Williams and Mohammed, 2009; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022); and (6) *Belief in a just world*, which is understood as the belief that good people are rewarded and bad people are punished (Rubin and Peplau, 1975). After deriving the subgroups on the basis of these six correlates, we examined whether the groups differ from one another in terms of the types of action they engaged in to support BLM.

Second, we use a *mixed-methods* approach with the goal of supplementing the quantitative analyses with qualitative data that provides deeper insight into how the participants in each latent class reasoned about engaging in action to support BLM. Incorporating qualitative data to clarify and enrich quantitative patterns is consistent with Creswell's (2014) sequential mixed-methods design. As highlighted in the most recent American Psychological Association (2017), mixed-methods designs can be helpful in illuminating complex social issues and in capturing individual subjectivities (Grzanka, 2014).

Materials and methods

The current study is guided by the following objectives: (1) identify subgroups within a sample of undergraduates who engaged in action to support BLM and (2) provide nuanced, in-depth insight into how these subgroups differ from one another. Together, these objectives enable us to shed light on what might contribute to people engaging in more versus less impactful forms of action. We will address the study's objectives through a blend of quantitative and qualitative data (see Creswell, 2014). First, we will conduct quantitative analyses (namely, latent profile analysis) to identify subgroups (i.e., latent classes) in the sample on the basis of participants' responses to six scales that assess

social attitudes: (1) critical consciousness, (2) racial colorblindness, (3) activism and radicalism, (4) whiteness in America, (5) everyday discrimination, and (6) belief in a just world. We did not have *a priori* hypotheses about the number of classes that would emerge or their attributes, as is typical of person-centered approaches.

After identifying latent classes, our second objective was to examine whether participants in each class differed in meaningful ways. This leads us to Research Question 1: *Do the participants in each latent class differ in terms of their sociodemographic background?* Specifically, we examined whether participants in each latent class varied on the basis of background attributes such as gender, race, and political party. Relatedly, Research Question 2 is as follows: *Do the participants in each latent class engage in different types of action to support Black Lives Matter?* To provide insight into this question, we asked participants about their engagement in various forms of action that ranged from being less impactful (e.g., social media post about BLM) to more impactful (e.g., participating in a BLM protest).

Next, we turned to qualitative data to explore how the participants in each latent class differ from one another when asked to reason about their involvement in action to support BLM. Specifically, Research Question 3 is as follows: *Do the people in different latent classes reason about their action to support BLM in different ways?* In conducting the qualitative analyses, we also explore ethnic-racial differences in how participants reasoned about their engagement in BLM. Specifically, Research Question 4 is as follows: *Compared to the rest of the sample, do Black participants differ in their reasoning for engaging in action to support BLM?*

Participants

Participants were recruited from a large, public, research-intensive university in the Southwestern U.S. Students at this university have a median family income that is comparable to that of students at other selective public colleges in the region and across the country (The New York Times, 2017[4]). Participants were a subset of a larger sample. Specifically, the current research focuses on 359 undergraduates who reported engaging in some form of action to support BLM. Participants completed an online survey for course credit during the 2020–2022 academic years. All participants were enrolled in introductory psychology, which is a popular general education course. Nearly all participants (91%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. The sample included 243 women (67.7%), 100 men (27.9%), 16 participants (4.5%) who elected not to disclose their gender, and no participants identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming. Participants who elected not to disclose their gender were regretfully not included in the quantitative gender comparisons due to sample size constraints. With regard to political ideology, 198 participants (55.2%) identified as Democrat, 96 participants (26.7%) identified as "Other" or Libertarian, 38 participants (10.6%) identified as Progressive or Socialist, 24 participants (6.7%) identified as Republican, and 3 participants chose not to specify.

With respect to ethnic background, 105 participants (29.2%) identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 80 participants (22.3%) identified as

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Asian or Pacific Islander, 71 participants (19.8%) identified as white, 59 participants (16.4%) identified as Black or African American, and 44 participants (12.3%) identified as a member of a different ethnic group. Participants who identified as white and as a member of a marginalized group were classified as members of the marginalized group. For example, if a participant identified as white and Black, they were classified as Black. Participants that identified as members of two marginalized ethnic groups (e.g., Black and Latinx) or who identified as members of three or more ethnic groups (e.g., Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and white) were regretfully not included in the quantitative ethnic comparisons due to sample size constraints. To examine the validity of our self-report measure of ethnic identity, participants were asked what race most people think they are (i.e., street race; see Vargas et al., 2021). Percentages were largely similar apart from white participants: 31 percent selected that people think they are white, whereas our self-report measure placed 20 percent of participants into the white category. A full description of demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Procedure

The university's introductory psychology subject pool was used to recruit participants for an online survey. All participants provided their consent before beginning the survey. The survey included a short demographic questionnaire, scales assessing participants' attitudes on social issues, and an open-ended question pertaining to participants' reasoning for engaging in action to support BLM. As noted, analyses for the current study focus on a subset of participants who reported

engaging in some form of action to support BLM. The study described in this manuscript is the only study that utilizes data from this data collection effort. All study materials are available upon reasonable request to the first author. Below, we elaborate on the measures used in the current study.

Measures

Critical consciousness

The critical consciousness scale is a 22-item scale that measures participants' ability to critically analyze their social and political conditions, approval of societal equity, and engagement in action to challenge perceived inequities (Diemer et al., 2017). For example, participants rated their agreement with statements such as, "Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores reflect higher critical consciousness. Scores on this measure demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Racial colorblindness

The colorblind racial attitudes scale is a 20-item scale that measures the cognitive aspects of colorblind racial attitudes (Neville et al., 2000). For example, participants responded to items such as, "Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores reflect higher colorblind racial attitudes. Scores on this measure demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$).

TABLE 1 Frequencies and chi-square results for demographic data.

Demographics	Class 1 (%)	Class 2 (%)	Class 3 (%)	n	χ^2	df	p
Gender				343	22.05		<0.001*
Man	18.2	31.9	50.9				
Woman	81.8	68.1	49.1				
Race				359	14.90	8	0.061
Black/African American	20.9	11.1	17.5				
Asian/Asian American	20.3	27.1	15.8				
Hispanic/Latinx	27.2	33.3	24.6				
White	16.5	19.4	29.8				
Multi-racial	15.2	9.9	12.3				
Political				356	44.74	6	<0.001*
Democrat	58.7	59.7	36.8				
Progressive + Socialist	16.1	8.3	1.8				
Republican	1.9	5.6	22.8				
Libertarian + Other	23.2	26.4	38.6				
Street race				358	14.59	8	0.068
White	29.3	28.5	43.9				
Black	19.1	10.4	15.8				
Asian	20.4	25.7	15.8				
Hispanic/Latinx	26.1	33.3	19.3				
Other	5.15	2.1	5.3				

Activism and radicalism

To evaluate participants' political mobilization and willingness to sacrifice themselves for a group or cause, we used a 10-item scale created by Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) called the activism and radicalism intention scale. For instance, participants were asked to respond to items such as, "I would travel for an hour to join a public rally, protest, or demonstration in support of my group." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores indicated that participants were less likely to participate in political mobilization and sacrifice. Scores on this measure demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Whiteness in America

To assess participants' awareness of white privilege in America, we used a 25-item scale created by Mo Bahk and Jandt (2004) called the whiteness in America scale. An example item is, "White people have privilege in the United States." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated that a participant was more aware of white privilege in America. Scores on this measure demonstrated adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Everyday discrimination

To measure participants' perceived discrimination or belief that they are treated unfairly because of personal characteristics such as race, we used the 9-item everyday discrimination scale (Williams and Mohammed, 2009). Participants responded to items such as, "People act as if they think you are not smart." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*almost every day*) to 6 (*never*). Higher scores suggested that participants did not perceive themselves to have experienced discrimination. Scores on this measure demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Belief in a just world

We measured participants' personal belief in a just world using the 13-item belief in a just world scale (Rubin and Peplau, 1975). Belief in a just world is generally understood as the belief that good people are rewarded and bad people are punished. Participants responded to items such as, "I believe that, by and large, I deserve what happens to me." Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater belief in a just world. Scores on this measure demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Forms of action

To measure participants' engagement in action to support BLM, we generated a list of various forms of action through conversation within the research team and in consultation with the literature. This effort led to the identification of 9 distinct types of action: (1) donated money to BLM, (2) posted support on social media for BLM, (3) protested in support of BLM, (4) supported a Black-owned business, (5) volunteered at a nonprofit in support of BLM, (6) education on BLM: e.g., attended a workshop, read a book(s), listened to a podcast(s), (7) signed a petition in support of BLM, (8) voted for politicians or propositions that are pro-BLM, and (9) advocated with friends and family for BLM. Participants were presented with the list and instructed to check all of the action items they had engaged in.

Demographics

Participants were asked to share their ethnicity, street race, gender, education level, social-economic status, and political affiliation.

Qualitative coding

We used an open-ended question to tease out the different forms of reasoning participants used when discussing why they got involved in action. Specifically, participants responded to the following prompt: "Tell us about your most meaningful experience engaging in activities to support Black Lives Matter or similar Anti-racism work. What did you do? Why did you get involved? Did other people you know participate? How did participating impact you?"

We used thematic analysis to code the open-ended data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that is used to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations for thematic analysis guided our analytic approach. First, the lead author thoroughly read through the entire corpus of data and developed a coding manual using a blend of deductive (i.e., theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) methods. The coding manual included three overarching themes, which each had a number of corresponding coding categories. To test for inter-rater reliability, the lead author and three trained undergraduate research assistants used the coding manual to double-code all 359 responses. The research team met regularly throughout the coding process to establish inter-rater reliability and check for coder drift. Inter-rater reliability, which was indexed by Cohen's kappa, was good-to-excellent throughout the coding process ($k = 0.81–0.90$). In an effort to supplement our analysis, we tasked research assistants with identifying any types of actions that were not quantitatively captured. However, their analysis did not reveal any additional findings.

Researcher positionality

Throughout the data analysis and data coding process, the research team sought to be mindful and reflective of the ways in which our positionality may have shaped the questions asked and corresponding analysis. The first author is a doctoral candidate in her 20s who identifies as a White, cisgender woman and whose academic training is in developmental psychology. The second author is a Latinx immigrant and queer doctoral student with an academic training in social, multicultural, and quantitative psychology. The third author is an Asian American woman assistant professor with training in social and multicultural psychology with expertise in microaggressions and addictions. The final author is an associate professor in her 30s who identifies as a White, cisgender woman; her academic background spans developmental, social, and educational psychology. The remaining team members are psychology undergraduate students: (1) A woman in her 20s who identifies as South Asian and bisexual; (2) A woman in her 20s who identifies as Asian/ Filipino and heterosexual; (3) A woman in her 20s who identifies as Mexican and bisexual.

Analytic approach

The selection of latent profile analysis (LPA) as our analytic approach was motivated by the fact that latent profile analysis is an

efficient and powerful technique used to identify "hidden" and meaningfully distinct subgroups in a larger sample. In addition, when compared to other person-centered methodologies like cluster analysis, LPA has clear advantages (Pastor et al., 2007). LPA, in particular, allows researchers to find the optimal number of classes using a model-based approach, reducing the chance of classes being created based on arbitrary or subjective criteria (Pastor et al., 2007). Lastly, LPA allows us to capture Zou and Cheryan's (2017) suggestion to incorporate dimensionality when examining engagement in activism.

Results

Creswell (2014) sequential mixed-methods design guided our analytic approach. Within this approach, quantitative findings are prioritized; qualitative findings serve a supportive role by supplementing, clarifying, and contextualizing quantitative patterns. To that purpose, the following analyses are divided into two parts. The results of the latent profile analysis (LPA) are described first, followed by the identification of quantitative correlates of class membership (Research Question 1) and an examination of the different forms of action that characterize each subgroup (Research Question 2). The qualitative data is then used to gain a deeper understanding of the reasoning that might guide participants to engage in different forms of action (Research Questions 3 and 4).

Latent profile analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 2.

We used LPA to identify individuals who engage in varying levels of action, discover subgroup-level variation between these participants, and examine how the subgroups differ concerning their scores on critical consciousness, racial colorblindness, activism and radicalism, belief in a just world, whiteness in America, and everyday discrimination scales. LPA is a method for categorizing people from a diverse sample into classes (categorical subgroups) that share similar characteristics (Hagenaars and McCutcheon, 2002; Muthén and Asparouhov, 2015). To discover the optimal number of classes, researchers often fit a series of models to which classes are steadily

added one by one. Parsimony, conceptual and practical merit, and comparative fit indices are used to determine the best-fitting model (Muthén and Muthén, 2000; Marsh et al., 2009). We relied on a combination of fit indices. Specifically, we considered Akaike's information criterion (AIC), the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), and the sample-size adjusted Bayesian information criterion (SABIC). Across these fit indices, models with lower values are preferred over models with higher values. We also examined the adjusted likelihood ratio test (LMRT) and the bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT), which indicate whether a model with k classes fits significantly better than a model with k-1 classes.

Analyses were conducted using M*plus* version 7 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017) using the robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR). All analyses were run with 3,000 random start values; the best 100 of these starts were retained. We tested latent profile models that encompassed 1, 2, 3, and 4 classes. According to all fit indices, the 2-class model fit significantly better than the 1-class model. Likewise, according to all fit indices the 3-class model fit significantly better than the 2-class model. In contrast, the 4-class model did not fit significantly better than the 3-class model. Therefore, the 3-class model was retained. To further evaluate the robustness of the 3-class solution, we examined the model's entropy and the latent class probabilities. Both measures have possible values between 0 and 1, with values nearer 1 indicating higher classification quality (Hix-Small et al., 2004; Tein et al., 2013). The 3-class model had an entropy value of 0.73, and the average posterior class membership probabilities were 0.85 (Class 1), 0.90 (Class 2), and 0.86 (Class 3). Taken together, these metrics show that the 3-class solution had sufficient classification quality and accuracy.

Figure 1 illustrates how the participants in the three latent classes scored on the focal variables: (1) critical consciousness, (2) racial colorblindness, (3) activism and radicalism, (4) whiteness in America, (5) everyday discrimination, and (6) belief in a just world. According to an ANOVA, scores on each focal variable varied significantly by latent class. To further distinguish among the classes, we also used chi-squares to examine (1) whether the members of each class differed in their sociodemographic backgrounds (Research Question 1), (2) whether the members of each class engaged in different forms of action (Research Question 2), and (3) whether members of each class differ in their reasoning about their action to support BLM (Research Questions 3 and 4). Full results of the chi-squares are presented in Tables 1, 3, 4.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for continuous variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Critical consciousness	--					
2. Racial colorblindness	0.527***	--				
3. Activism-radicalism intention	0.199***	0.316***	--			
4. Everyday discrimination	0.097	0.028	0.125*	--		
5. Belief in a just world	0.228***	0.117*	0.087	0.348***	--	
6. Whiteness in America	0.533***	0.648***	0.226***	0.112*	0.174***	--
Mean	3.50	3.44	3.33	2.58	3.69	3.67
Standard Deviation	0.61	0.94	1.20	1.00	0.96	0.54
Range	1–7	1–7	1–7	1–6	1–7	1–5

*$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$.
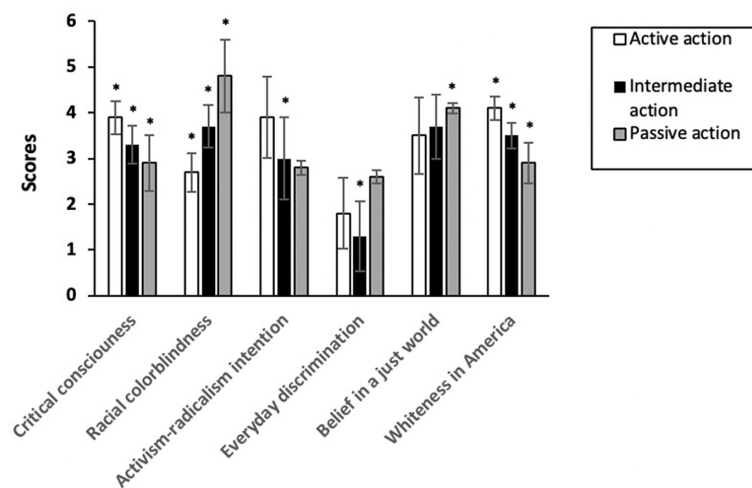
FIGURE 1
Focal variables scores for different latent classes.

TABLE 3 Frequencies and chi-square results for action items supporting BLM.

Action variable	Intentional action (%)	Intermediate action (%)	Passive action (%)	χ^2	df	p
Posted on social media	84.80	62.20	52.60	28.25	2	<0.001*
Protested	33.50	10.40	5.30	34.40	2	<0.001*
Supported a Black-owned Business	74.70	56.00	40.40	23.36	2	<0.001*
Volunteered with an anti-racist org	7.00	3.50	3.50	2.30	2	0.325
Educated oneself	64.60	41.70	19.30	38.46	2	<0.001*
Signed a petition	83.50	45.10	26.30	75.99	2	<0.001*
Voted for a politician or policy	57.00	28.50	22.80	33.90	2	<0.001*
Advocated to friends or family	68.40	41.00	29.80	35.06	2	<0.001*

Class 1

We titled the first latent class *intentional action*. This class was composed of 158 participants (44% of the sample). A Bonferroni post-hoc test (see Figure 1) indicated that compared to participants in the other two classes, participants in the *intentional action* class scored significantly higher on variables such as critical consciousness and whiteness in America. Further, according to the chi-square results (see Table 3), participants in the *intentional action* class were significantly more likely than participants in the other two classes to have engaged in all forms of action except for volunteering for a political movement in support of BLM. In relation to gender and political demographics, 81.8% identified as women, and 58.7% identified as Democrats. Regarding ethnic identity, there was a fairly even distribution of participants from different ethnic groups in this class: 27.2% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 20.9% identified as Black or African American, 20.3% identified as Asian or Asian American, 16.5% identified as white, and 15.2% identified as more than one marginalized ethnic group.

Class 2

We termed the second latent class *intermediate action*. This class was composed of 144 participants (40% of the sample). A Bonferroni

post-hoc test (see Figure 1) indicated that participants in the *intermediate action* class scored significantly lower than the intentional action class but significantly higher than the passive action class (Class 3) on variables such as critical consciousness and whiteness in America. According to chi-square results (see Table 3), the *intermediate action* class engaged in all forms of action except for volunteering for a political movement in support of BLM significantly less than the intentional action class but significantly more than the passive action class. In relation to gender and political demographics, 68.1% identified as women, and 81.1% identified as Democrats. Regarding ethnic identity, 33.3% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 27.1% identified as Asian or Asian American, 19.4% identified as white, 11.1% identified as Black or African American, and 9.9% identified as more than one marginalized ethnic group.

Class 3

Lastly, we termed the third-class *passive action*. This class was composed of 57 participants (15% of the sample). A Bonferroni *post hoc* test (see Figure 1) indicated that compared to participants in the other two classes, participants in the *passive action* class scored significantly lower on variables such as critical consciousness and whiteness in America. According to the chi-square results (see

TABLE 4 Frequencies and chi-square results for qualitative themes.

Action variable	Active action (%)	Intermediate action (%)	Passive action (%)	χ^2	df	p
Interpersonal	42.90	46.90	10.20	1.83	2	0.401
Structural	56.30	37.50	6.30	1.60	2	0.449
Identity or relationship	19.70	6.90	5.30	14.52	2	<0.001*
Collective efficacy	37.00	55.60	7.40	3.38	2	0.185
Reason for not protesting: Anxiety	41.70	33.30	25.00	0.80	2	0.672
Hierarchy	38.50	53.80	7.70	3.98	2	0.136

Table 3), participants in the *passive action* class were significantly less likely than participants in the other two classes to have engaged in all forms of action except for volunteering for a political movement in support of BLM. In relation to demographics, 49.1% identified as women, and 36.8% identified as Democrats. Regarding ethnic identity, 29.8% identified as white, 24.6% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 17.5% identified as Black or African American, 15.8% identified as Asian or Asian American, and 12.3% identified as more than one marginalized ethnic group.

Qualitative analysis

To answer Research Question 3, we turn to our qualitative data to examine whether participants in each latent class differ in their reasoning about their action to support BLM. All themes, coding categories, and sample responses are presented in Table 5. Three overarching themes emerged in the data. The first overarching theme is *reason for engaging in action*. Within this theme, there are four subthemes: (1) interpersonal ($f=49$), (2) structural ($f=16$), (3) identity or relationship ($f=44$), and (4) political efficacy ($f=27$). The second overarching theme is titled *anxiety as a reason for not protesting* ($f=12$). The third overarching theme is titled *hierarchy of participation* ($f=39$). The themes and subthemes were not mutually exclusive, meaning if a participant referenced more than one theme or subtheme, they could be coded into multiple themes or subthemes. A number of qualitative responses were not coded because participants did not provide a rationale for engaging in action to support BLM or simply listed the forms of action they had engaged in with no further detail or context. After coding all responses, we conducted a chi-square analysis to determine whether coding membership differed significantly by class. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 4 and discussed below as we present each theme.

Reason for engaging in action

The first overarching theme captures participants' explanations for why they engaged in some form of action to support BLM. The subthemes that characterize their responses are listed below. A chi-square analysis revealed that participants in the *intentional action class* were significantly more likely that the participants in the other two classes to explain that they engaged in action to support BLM because of their *identity or relationships* (subtheme described below). This means that relative to the rest of the sample, participants in the intentional action class were particularly likely to share that their own ethnic

identity or the ethnic identity of someone they know well motivated them to engage in action. All other chi-squares that tested for qualitative variation across the three latent classes were statistically nonsignificant.

Interpersonal

Many participants explained that they engaged in action to resist individual racist interactions or the small number of racist individuals that still exist. For example, Darren[5] (white man) explained that he got involved to combat his family's unproductive thoughts, stating, "I have a family member who tends to say racist things, which is not ok. I ended up talking to him about things that have been going on with the black community and that he should not just blatantly talk like that about anyone." In addition, Daniel (Hispanic or Latinx man) explained that he got involved to resist individual racist interactions, stating, "My most meaningful experience in anti-racism work is by protecting minority individuals like myself against rude remarks." These quotes reflect that some participants are motivated to engage in action to support BLM as a means to resist racism that occurs between individuals without analyzing or resisting social systems that create racial oppression.

The interpersonal theme also captures responses in which participants explained they had engaged in action to support the equal treatment of all. For instance, Ava (white woman) stated, "The reason I got involved was because everyone in our country deserves to be equally treated and not feel like their life is threatened." Similarly, Mia (Hispanic or Latinx woman) shared, "I got involved because as someone who is in a minority group, I believe everyone should be treated equally and should not be defined because of their race." These quotes highlight a strong focus on equality (versus equity) and the idea that no matter one's racial identity, individuals should be given the same resources and opportunities in society.

Structural

In contrast to the interpersonal subtheme, participants in the structural subtheme explained that they engaged in action to resist structural systems that create inequities that the Black community faces, such as police brutality. For instance, Maya (Asian or Asian American) voiced that they got involved to protest police brutality, stating, "The reason why I was involved is that the history of police

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5 All names are pseudonyms. We present participants' ethnic background and gender identity alongside their data excerpts when this information is available.

TABLE 5 Action themes.

Theme	Definition	Example
Reason for Engaging in Action	Participants explained why they engaged in some form of action to support BLM.	"I got involved because I believe in the cause." (multi-racial woman)
Interpersonal	Participants explained that they engaged in action to resist individual racist interactions, the small number of racist individuals that still exist, or to support the equal treatment of all.	"I got involved because everyone should be treated equal no matter the color of their skin." (Hispanic or Latinx woman)
Structural	Participants explained that they engaged in action to bring awareness or resist structural systems that create inequalities faced by the Black community. Examples include mentioning police brutality and systematic racism.	"I got involved with protests and the movement because institutional racism is really just sickening and change needed to and still needs to happen." (multi-racial woman)
Identity or relationship	Participants explained that they engaged in action because of their own ethnic identity or the ethnic identity of someone they are close to. For example, participants may state that they engaged in action because they are a person of color, or they are close to a person of color.	"I got involved because I have experienced discrimination myself, and I have seen even more extreme racism among my African American peers first hand as well." (Asian or Asian American woman)
Political efficacy	Participants explained that they engaged in action because they felt they could make a positive difference or make a positive impact.	"I felt it was important that I get involved because I wanted to be a part of some kind of change within the community." (Black man)
Reasoning for not protesting: Anxiety	Participants stated that they did not participate in a BLM protest because they felt unsafe, had anxiety about protesting, were worried about the pandemic, or explained that they do not like to get political.	"I have anxiety in crowds and bigger events, so I was slightly nervous to go out and protest which is why I chose to stay home and post online." (Hispanic or Latinx woman)
Hierarchy of participation	Participants acknowledged that they could have done more to support BLM. For instance, participants compared themselves to others they believe did more to support BLM, explained that they engaged in less action than they would have hoped to, or used phrases such as: "the most I could do," "the most I've done" or "I would've done more but."	"I know that other people are far more involved than I am in BLM or anti-racism work, but I do try my best to be informed." (multi-racial woman)

brutality had not stopped." In addition, Della (Black woman) stated, "I got involved because I had been growing increasingly angry and frustrated with police brutality in the U.S." Further, some participants referenced unjust structural systems as their reasoning for engaging in action. For instance, Casey (white) expressed motivation to "dismantle harmful stereotypes and reform broken systems." Moreover, Evelyn (Hispanic or Latinx woman) stated, "I got involved with protests and the movement because institutional racism is really just sickening, and change needed to and still needs to happen." These quotes indicate that participants hold the ability to construct an analysis of structural oppression. This supports the notion that once participants hold the ability to critically analyze systems of oppression, they are more likely to engage in critical action (Diemer et al., 2016).

Identity or relationship

Some participants explained that they engaged in action because of their own ethnic identity or the ethnic identity of someone they know well. For instance, many participants stated that they engaged in action because they are a person of color. Dave (Black man) stated, "I did it because I'm half Black and minorities need to be heard. This made me feel like I might have really impacted change across the world." Zoey (Black woman) stated, "I got involved because I'm black so seeing black people being murdered in viral videos triggered something in me." Further, Anna (Hispanic or Latinx woman) stated, "I got involved because not only is the way black people in America are treated completely outrageous, I am also a minority in a position that can help." Other participants explained that they engaged in action

because someone close to them is a person of color. For example, Sarah (Asian or Asian American woman) stated, "I have seen even more extreme racism among my African American peers firsthand as well."

Political efficacy

A number of participants explained that they engaged in action because they felt they could make a positive difference or have an impact on society. For example, Jessie (Asian or Asian American) stated, "I was involved because I wanted the racism to stop. I wanted to make a change." Jamie (Asian or Asian American man) stated, "I have always wanted to be part of a movement to cause change to those who are oppressed." These quotes indicate that participants held the motivation and confidence to participate in activities that promote social change.

Anxiety as a reason for not protesting

The second overarching theme focuses on a subset of participants who explained that anxiety or related personality attributes motivated them to choose other forms of action over protesting. Participants in this theme frequently mentioned that they did not participate in a BLM protest because they felt unsafe, had anxiety about protesting, were worried about the pandemic, or explained that they do not like to get political. For example, Ariel (multi-racial man) stated,

"I personally do not enjoy getting political and going out in stuff like that. I do know other people that have participated and done protests. However, that's just not my style of action and how I feel is different."

Hailey (Latinx woman) stated, "I have anxiety in crowds and bigger events, so I was slightly nervous to go out and protest, which is why I chose to stay home." These reflections suggest that some participants may require greater political efficacy to hold the motivation and confidence to participate in activities that promote social change. Along a different vein, a handful of participants explained that they did not participate in a BLM protest because of the pandemic. For example, Sara (Hispanic or Latinx woman) explained, "I did not participate in protest for Black Lives Matter because of COVID."

Hierarchy of participation

The third overarching theme focuses on a subset of participants who acknowledged that they could have done more to support BLM. These participants compared themselves to others that they believed had done more to support BLM or explained that they engaged in less action than they would have hoped. For example, Tom (white man) stated, "I felt like I did the bare minimum." In addition, William (Asian or Asian American man) stated, "Although I shared news and donated, I felt I could not do enough and felt I should've done more." These quotes signify that at least some participants were aware of racial oppression and resistance movements such as BLM, but lacked the direction, motivation, or confidence required to participate more actively in movements such as BLM.

Ethnic differences in qualitative themes

Lastly, to answer Research Question 4, the qualitative coding team examined whether novel themes emerged when focusing exclusively on Black participants' qualitative responses. In particular, we sought to examine whether Black participants provided responses that touched on their lived experiences such as describing a sense of exhaustion or social pressure as they attempted to drive the BLM movement forward. However, the qualitative team was unable to identify novel themes that differed from the themes that were present in the broader sample. Below, we discuss how our methodological approach may have made it difficult to tease out meaningful ethnic variation in the qualitative responses.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to identify meaningful subgroups in a sample of undergraduates who engaged in action to support BLM and identify the ways in which these subgroups differed concerning their backgrounds, traits, life experiences, and reasoning about injustice. We also attempted to better understand what motivates individuals to participate in critical action to become advocates for people who experience systemic oppression. To achieve our objectives, we employed critical action as our conceptual framework (Diemer et al., 2016, 2021) and leveraged a unique blend of person-centered and mixed-methods analyses (see Creswell, 2014).

A latent profile analysis identified three distinct latent classes which were defined by their level of action to support BLM: intentional action (Class 1), (2) intermediate action (Class 2), and passive action (Class 3). Participants in each latent class differed in background traits, life experiences, and reasoning about injustice. In addition to quantitative distinctions among the subgroups, we proposed that people within each latent class may reason differently about social justice and action. Accordingly, we used an open-ended question to tease out these different forms of reasoning. Through the coding process, the research team unearthed three overarching themes and a range of subthemes. The first theme pertains to participants' *reasons for engaging in action to support BLM*. This theme was characterized by four subthemes, which together capture a range of factors (e.g., desire to resist systemic oppression) that motivated people to engage in action. The second theme pertains to participants' *reasons for not protesting* wherein participants explained that anxiety or related personality attributes motivated them to favor other forms of action over involvement in BLM protests. The third theme was termed *hierarchy of participation*, wherein participants acknowledge that they could have done more to support BLM.

Below, we elaborate on key findings. Then we draw from our findings to propose a flexible intervention that may encourage individuals to engage in critical action to support BLM. We conclude by speaking on themes of power, discrimination, and privilege.

Intentional action class

The intentional action class was composed of 158 participants (44% of the sample). There are many unique features of this latent class. Compared to the intermediate and passive action classes, participants in the intentional action class scored higher on constructs that are conceptually associated with social justice (e.g., critical consciousness; Diemer et al., 2017). They also reported higher rates of involvement in *all* forms action to support BLM. This latter pattern is somewhat different than what we anticipated. Specifically, we expected that we might find a subgroup of undergraduates who primarily engaged in critical action while eschewing more performative forms of action. Instead, we identified a subgroup that *takes advantage of all available opportunities* to engage in action—even if some of these forms of action are typically conceptualized as more performative. In the future, it might be fruitful to consider whether behaviors that are sometimes described as performative (e.g., social media posts) are accompanied by more meaningful forms of action.

Another unique attribute of the intentional action class pertains to the qualitative data. Compared to participants in the intermediate and passive action classes, participants in the intentional action class were significantly more likely to explain that they had engaged in action to support BLM due to *their identity or the identity of someone they know well*. Relatedly, although not a statistically significant difference compared to the other two latent classes, there were more Black participants in the intentional action class. Hollander and Einwohner (2004) suggest that Black people may actively engage in acts of resistance against racism as a type of proactive coping. Proactive coping encompasses methods that contest the existence or acceptance of repressive demands made within a racialized system and goes beyond managing one's own experience with racism. For example, proactive coping seeks to address the detrimental effects of a systemic issue, stress the reality of the injustice, and prioritize group action and motivation over individual action (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997; Sohl and Moyer, 2009).

Intermediate action class

We termed the second latent class *intermediate action*. The intermediate action class was composed of 144 participants (40% of the sample). Participants in the intermediate action class scored lower on focal variables compared to the intentional action class but higher than the passive action class. In addition, participants in the intermediate action class engaged in fewer forms of action compared to the intentional action class but more compared to the passive action class. Notably, 33.5% of participants in the intentional action class participated in a BLM protest whereas only 10.4% of participants in the intermediate action class participated in a protest. Although not a statistically significant difference, compared to the other latent classes, there were more Hispanic or Latinx participants in the intermediate action class. This aligns with prior research indicating that trauma-inflicting immigration factors can prompt Hispanic or Latinx families to deter their children from engaging in more noticeable and expressive forms of activism (Suzuki et al., 2022). This may account for the disparity in participating in a protest between the intentional and intermediate action class.

Passive action class

We termed the third latent class *passive action*. The passive action class was composed of 57 participants (15% of the sample). Compared to the intentional action and intermediate action classes, participants in the *passive action* class scored lower on the focal variables and engaged in fewer forms of action to support BLM. Although not a statistically significant difference, compared to other latent classes, there were more white participants in the passive action class. This is concerning. Freire (2000) argued that liberation of the oppressed requires camaraderie in which the oppressor fights at the side of the oppressed. Taking this into account, future research may benefit from employing a civil courage framework to better understand why white participants fall short when it comes to engaging in critical action to advocate for people who experience systemic oppression.

Implications for intervention

Taken together, our findings reveal that people engage in various forms of action to support BLM. In addition, people's level of engagement appears to be associated with their background, life experiences, and reasoning about injustice. Thus, in the forthcoming section, we provide a flexible blueprint of a data-driven intervention that aims to motivate individuals to engage in critical action to support BLM. More specifically, our objective is to use findings from the current research to outline core components of the intervention but allow flexibility in how the intervention will be implemented (Kloos et al., 2012). Because of this flexibility, the intervention can be implemented with participants of various demographic backgrounds and differing readiness to engage in critical action to support BLM.

Our findings demonstrate that scoring low in critical consciousness, activism and radicalism, and whiteness in America act as hurdles to engaging in critical action to support BLM. Further, scoring high in colorblind racial attitudes and belief in a just world also stand as hurdles to engaging in critical action. Therefore, the intervention should start by encouraging *critical thinking*. Critical

thinking promotes the skills necessary to recognize systems of oppression, the possible roles one has taken in these systems of oppression, and how one has rationalized the dominant cultural values as accepted truths and norms (Watts et al., 2011). Critical questions will encourage participants to discuss and acknowledge how racial oppression results in an uneven circulation of resources and greatly reduces access to educational opportunities, occupational advancement, and social status for Black individuals. Even more so, these critical questions may increase critical consciousness and whiteness in America and reduce colorblind racial attitudes.

It is also important for intervention facilitators to *break-down the power dynamics* between individual participants. This is essential, considering previous research finds that individuals who hold more social privilege may be more willing to share their perspectives with the group (Howard Jay et al., 2006; Pitt and Packard, 2012; Lee and Mccabe, 2021). This could result in white participants dominating the conversation and not providing a space for participants of color to share their experiences with racial oppression. Further, without a breakdown of power dynamics, this could create pressure for participants of color to primarily serve as a means of facilitating the learning and advancement for white participants (Williams et al., 2020). In addition, it is important that intervention facilitators promote a collective identity amongst intervention members by stressing *respect of all speakers' opinions*. If participants do not feel safe to open up due to power dynamics or fear of backlash, they may stay silent (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2007). Montero (2009) recommends that interventions encourage active participation from all group members while also showing appreciation for contrasting opinions. Although it is important to appreciate contrasting opinions, Silva (2012) adds that it is essential to respectfully challenge opinions. For example, if a participant shares false information about BLM, it is important that the facilitator remind intervention members of truthful information about BLM. Therefore, we recommend that the intervention facilitator be knowledgeable on the history and goals of BLM.

In the process of hearing diverse viewpoints and opinions from intervention members, individuals will become increasingly *aware of sociopolitical circumstances* (Dillenbourg, 2006; Montero, 2009). This is crucial considering that our findings demonstrated that many participants did not hold a robust understanding of sociopolitical circumstances. Specifically, only a small number of participants mentioned engaging in action to resist structural systems that create inequities. Listening to diverse viewpoints allows participants to piece together varying experiences (unlike their own) and develop a deeper understanding of inequitable sociopolitical circumstances (Dillenbourg, 2006; Montero, 2009). Following participants' newfound ability to acknowledge and critically analyze racial oppression, participants will, ideally, show (a) greater development of critical consciousness and understanding of white privilege, and (b) reduced endorsement of colorblind racial attitudes and belief in a just world.

After instilling the intervention components delineated above, intervention participants may feel empowered and motivated to take part in critical action (Freire, 2000; Sinacore and Boatwright, 2005). This is especially important considering the *hierarchy of participation* qualitative theme, which revealed a subset of participants who alluded to a desire to engage in more meaningful forms of action. Promoting intentional activism and encouraging participants to engage in authentic discussion may lead to increased engagement in action to support BLM.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations to the current study. Most notably, it is important to revisit Research Question 4 wherein we examined whether Black participants differed from the rest of the sample in their qualitative reasoning for engaging in action to support BLM. This is an intuitive question to investigate considering BLM is arguably more personally meaningful for Black participants. Surprisingly, however, analyses did not reveal substantive ethnic differences in the qualitative data. There are several potential explanations for this unexpected result. First, a small sample of Black participants may be one explanation for the lack of variation. It may be that we simply did not have enough Black participants to capture the nuance in the data required to notice a difference between the Black participants and the rest of the sample. Another explanation may reside in the prompt we used to introduce the open-ended question, which did not directly ask participants to reflect on whether and how their racial-ethnic background played a role in their decision to get involved in action. Relatedly, a member of the qualitative coding team speculated that our use of a short-answer response format might have limited participants' ability to fully explain their reasoning for engaging in action to support BLM. Specifically, participants may have felt compelled to share their reasoning in just a few sentences. To obtain a more thorough understanding of how ethnic background bears on participants' reasoning for engaging in action, future research should adopt a methodological approach such as semi-structured interviews that allow for richer, more nuanced responses.

Another limitation pertains to the timing of data collection, which began in 2020. Due to the pandemic, many individuals chose to stay home in 2020. Although a few participants mentioned not protesting due to the pandemic, we did not directly ask about this possibility. Accordingly, we cannot be sure how common it was for participants to avoid protesting due to the pandemic. It is possible that participants will report higher levels of involvement in protests in future research that is not overshadowed by the pandemic. Lastly, due to social desirability or response bias, some participants may have felt pressure to project a favorable image and avoid criticism (Hebert et al., 1997). Therefore, some participants may have responded to survey items falsely or reported engaging in greater amounts of action than was reality.

Conclusion

The BLM movement has brought to the forefront issues related to power, discrimination, and privilege in contemporary society (Garza et al., 2014; Taylor, 2016; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017). Critical action to support BLM resists the privileged position of those who have historically held power and calls for a redistribution of resources to better support marginalized communities. Our findings demonstrate that in order to become advocates for people who experience systemic oppression and in opposition to those in power, individuals must hold the skills required to critically analyze social systems and support group equity. This study contributes to the literature by providing in-depth information about subgroups within a large sample of undergraduates who engaged in action to support BLM. In addition, our findings provide potential avenues for intervention work. We encourage others to build on our findings through methodological

approaches (e.g., interviews) that capture greater nuance in the data with the goal of more deeply understanding how participants' background shapes their reasoning for engaging in action.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by The UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Ethnic identity and resilience: a moderated mediation analysis of protective factors for self-blame and racial microaggressions

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Introduction: People of Color (PoC) in the United States encounter everyday racial microaggressions, and these commonplace experiences can wear and exhaust PoC's resources. Racial microaggressions have shown detrimental effects on physical and psychological well-being. Consequently, researchers have examined and tested different ways in which PoC cope and protect themselves from these everyday exchanges. Past findings have indicated that PoC might blame themselves for racism-related occurrences to cope with these commonplace discriminatory experiences. Ethnic identity and resilience have emerged in research as protective factors that can moderate and buffer the impact of racism on PoC's well-being. We used a combination of mediation, moderation, and conditional analyses to unpack the relationships between racial microaggression (predictor), psychological distress (outcome), self-blame (mediator), resilience (moderator), and ethnic identity (moderator).

Methods: This study used a cross-sectional design and sampled 696 PoC regarding their experiences and responses to racial microaggressions. We tested the association between psychological distress and racial microaggressions and further examined whether self-blame mediated the relationship. We also tested ethnic identity and resilience as moderators and used a conditional analysis to determine whether these protective factors moderated the mediation model.

Results: Findings from the mediation, moderation, and conditional analyses supported our four hypotheses: (H1) self-blame mediated the relation between racial microaggressions and psychological distress (mediation), (H2) ethnic identity moderated the association between racial microaggressions and self-blame but only at low and average levels (moderation), (H3) resilience moderated the relation between self-blame and psychological distress but only at low and average levels (moderation), and (H4) evidence of moderated mediation were found for all five variables (conditional). While statistically significant, most moderation effects were minimal to small.

Conclusion: PoC may engage in self-blame when experiencing racial microaggressions, which explains why these everyday, commonplace occurrences might lead to psychological distress. There was evidence that ethnic identity and resilience can protect PoC from the negative effects of racial microaggressions. These buffering effects, however, only emerged for PoC endorsing high levels of ethnic identity and resilience, and it should be noted that for most participants, the link between racial microaggressions and psychological distress was still significant. Future studies might need to explore additional individual and interpersonal alongside institutional factors that can protect PoC from racism-related harms.

Introduction

People of Color (PoC) in the United States (U.S.) have experienced centuries of racism (both interpersonal and institutional). Racial oppression in the U.S. continues in cultural practices, commonplace social exchanges, and institutional policies (Crenshaw, 1990). Racial tension more recently has heightened in the U.S., with White and PoC reporting an increase in race-related struggles (Pew Research Center, 2019). The violence of racism in the U.S. has experienced many ebbs and flows— from blatant and attention-grabbing to covert and less visible. The consensus from decades of research findings has indicated that repeated experiences with racism can have a detrimental impact on the physical and psychological well-being of PoC (American Psychological Association, 2016). Thus, researchers have emphasized the protective factors for PoC confronting discrimination practices, power dynamics, and oppressive environments (Suyemoto et al., 2022). Scholarship on racism (Pieterse and Powell, 2016) have explored the effects of different societal levels (e.g., individual, interpersonal, and institutional), and findings do suggest that PoC may be self-blaming and internalizing the racism-related sentiments toward their racial groups (Clark and Clark, 1947; Helms, 1990; David, 2013; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022b). Less is known, however, about this tendency of PoC to self-blame as it relates to more hidden forms of racism, such as racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2014). Researchers have explored some internal processes at the individual level, such as ethnic identity and resilience, as protective factors against the effects of racism (Brown and Tylka, 2011; Nissim, 2014). The bulk of the literature has highlighted the beneficial aspects of ethnic identity and resilience as empowering traits for PoC, particularly when experiencing commonplace racism, such as racial microaggressions (Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt, 2021; Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022).

Racial microaggressions are everyday slights, insults, and indignities targeting PoC (Sue et al., 2007) occurring at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Sue et al., 2019). There is evidence that PoC experience psychological harm from racial microaggressions (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2019; Williams, 2020; Barrita, 2021; Cheng et al., 2021). For example, Abreu et al. (2023) found that intersectional microaggressions (racial and sexual) were associated with symptoms of depression among Latinx LGBTQ+ youth. In a series of experimental studies, Wong-Padoongpatt et al. (2017) found that manipulating microaggressions decreased implicit self-esteem and increased physiological stress among Asian American participants (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2020). Recent findings have also revealed that PoC can use negative or harmful strategies when coping with racial microaggressions (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). In a diverse PoC sample, Barrita et al. (2023a) found that experiences with racial microaggressions were closely associated with substance use coping, and this effect was further mediated by psychological distress. Overall, racial microaggressions appear to elicit various types of undue harm to PoC.

Other maladaptive coping strategies, such as internalized racism, have been explored (see David et al., 2019, for a review). A few studies have examined in more detail the associations between racial microaggressions, internalized racism, and mental health. Wong-Padoongpatt et al. (2022a,b,c) recently addressed these relations in a series of studies examining the lived experiences of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall message was that Asian Americans not only experienced more everyday, commonplace racism but also reported higher internalized racism compared to other racial groups during the pandemic. According to the Internalized Oppression Theory (IOT; David, 2013, p. 14), people who are oppressed are likely to endorse self-defeating and negative cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Self-blame is an aspect of internalized racism that PoC may use as a maladaptive coping strategy. That is, PoC may cope with racism by blaming themselves for these occurrences. Researchers have found links between self-blame and poor mental health among different communities of color (Wei et al., 2010; Szymanski and Lewis, 2016; Lei et al., 2022). Szymanski and Lewis (2016) found that self-blaming and detachment coping strategies were mechanisms for the effect of gendered racism on psychological distress among African American women. Similarly, among Asian Americans, Lei et al. (2022) found that self-blame coping strategies predicted distress. Moreover, when distress was associated with racism, Lei et al. (2022) found that self-blame mediated this relationship. A recent study (Barrita et al., 2023b) explored racial microaggressions specific to immigration using a sample of Asian and Latinx college students and found evidence of self-blame coping strategies. Specifically, during xenophobic attacks, Asian and Latinx students were more likely to engage in self-blame coping strategies associated with negative mental health effects. Similarly, other studies have explored self-blame and racial microaggressions using diverse PoC college samples (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022b) or samples with multiple marginalized identities, such as Queer PoC (Barrita et al., 2023c). Since self-blame can be an integral part of racism-related experiences, the current study also tested self-blame as a mediator for racial microaggressions and the connection to psychological distress (Sue et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2020).

Before discussing possible protective factors for racism, particularly ethnic identity, it is important to highlight specific differences between the terms *race* and *ethnicity,* given that the current study explores both when it comes to PoC's experiences with racial microaggressions. Race is defined here as a social and cultural construct that categorizes and separates groups based primarily on physical traits such as the color of skin, hair, and eyes (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Chang et al., 2023). Historically, PoC and other groups (e.g., Jews, Irish people) in the U.S. have been *racialized* based on White supremacy ideologies where Whiteness is upheld as the standard; and therefore, White people are positioned to acquire social dominance (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Helms, 1990). The process of *racialization* carries social, economic, and political factors that reinforce a system of racial oppression against those seen as less or non-White (Fredrickson, 2002) and gives power and privilege to

White people (Helms, 1990). Racial microaggression is one example of racialization occurring in everyday exchanges. U.S. federal practices, such as the nationwide census, have historically changed and redefined racial categories. Hyphenated racial identities (e.g., Asian-American) in official federal documents can also be perceived as a form of division from White people. A person's racial group membership is socially imposed, leaving both PoC and White people little agency to choose their race (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Helms, 1990). For White people, the process of acknowledging their racial identity exists in the context of racism and requires recognizing their racial power and privilege (Helms, 1990).

Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a fluid, non-exclusive cultural construct (Phinney, 1992) that incorporates heritage, genetic backgrounds (e.g., Samoan, Irish), and even nationality (e.g., Mexican, Spanish). Compared to race, ethnicity does not aim to divide; instead, it makes room for overlapping identities. Race and ethnicity are sometimes mistakenly treated as the same in the literature, therefore erasing identities within groups with a history of diversity or colonization (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Indigenous Latinx, Black Asians; Adames et al., 2021). One of the aspects in which ethnicity can be assessed is ethnic identity. And as mentioned, ethnic identity has been described as a protective factor for racism in the literature (Brown and Tylka, 2011; Nissim, 2014). Ethnic identity can be defined as culturally and developmentally informed beliefs, thoughts, and self-perceptions about ethnicity's meaning, value, and significance (Phinney, 1992; Swanson et al., 2009). The development of ethnic identity for PoC is partially informed by overcoming social rejection (Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1992; Jones and Neblett, 2017). As such, ethnic identity, in this study, is explored among PoC as a possible protection from racial microaggressions.

Ethnic identity has been explored in the context of racism as an influencing factor for PoC (Bracey et al., 2004; Lou et al., 2022). Research suggests that individuals who have positive attitudes about their group membership report other positive outcomes (Jones and Neblett, 2017). For example, positive ethnic identity attitudes have been linked to higher self-esteem for Black and African Americans (Bracey et al., 2004). Lou et al. (2022) examined the Chinese Canadian experience and tested ethnic identity as a protective factor for the effect of personal and group discrimination on well-being. Findings indicated that Chinese participants who endorsed a strong ethnic identity experienced less adversity when navigating discrimination. In a review on ethnic identity and racism, Jones and Neblett (2017) found strong support for ethnic identity as a moderator for racism and psychological outcomes. The findings around ethnic identity being a "protective" factor, however, are not entirely consistent and can differ across communities of color. Even though there is relatively less evidence for this claim, some studies have found that strong ethnic identity was associated with greater perceived discrimination and negative psychological outcomes (Bair and Steele, 2010; Lee and Ahn, 2013). A meta-analysis across 26 studies on Black Americans showed that greater perceived racial discrimination was associated with strong ethnic identity. Moreover, these effects were linked to self-blame processes related with greater psychological distress (Lee and Ahn, 2013). However, this same meta-analysis found that racial identity (e.g., Afrocentricity) was a protective factor. Psychometric experts have also suggested that ethnic identity affects racism-related experiences differently. Phinney (1992) developed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM),

categorizing ethnic identity into two developmental stages: (1) search and (2) commitment. The search factor of MEIM has ethnic identity as an explorative phase (e.g., how much does one know about their ethnicity). The second factor on commitment measures how much one feels connected to their ethnic group. The mixed findings around ethnic identity and the association with racism-related experiences raise questions about how protective (or not) ethnic identity is for PoC. *Is ethnic identity a protective factor for PoC when experiencing racial microaggressions? Does ethnic identity protect PoC from blaming themselves when experiencing racism? If so, when does such buffering effect take place?* Previous findings overall suggest that the endorsement of ethnic identity can benefit PoC in some cases. For this study, we were curious about the relationship between ethnic identity and a more hidden type of racism—racial microaggressions. We tested the effectiveness of ethnic identity as a moderator in the relationship between racial microaggressions and self-blame coping strategies for discrimination.

Resilience is another positive attribute often linked to marginalized groups. This is the ability to recuperate from challenging or stressful situations (see Cabrera Martinez et al., 2022, for a review). Like ethnic identity, resilience is sometimes referred to as another protective factor for well-being when experiencing racism (Cabrera Martinez et al., 2022). Resilience is often associated with positive mental health outcomes in the context of oppression (Siriwardhana et al., 2014). Vincent et al. (2020) examined resilience among young Black men who have sex with men, and their findings indicated that resilience was a key protective factor for depression. Findings further indicated that resilience played a critical role in the beneficial effects of peer social support. Based on past evidence, some researchers have highlighted the importance of building and promoting resilience among marginalized youth (Carranza, 2007; Evans and Pinnock, 2007; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013). Other scholars have questioned, however, whether the full endorsement of resilience, without considering other factors (e.g., systemic and institutional factors), can be harmful to marginalized groups (Aguilera and Barrita, 2021; Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt, 2021). Some scholars have called for a *revisit* of the ways in which resilience is defined in the context of oppression (Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022). Sims-Schouten and Gilbert (2022) argue that the reconceptualization of resilience should include how this "trait" is a byproduct or result of continuous and historical oppression. Thus, the question remains whether resilience influences the way PoC experiences racism. Brown and Tylka (2011) found that Black young adults' resilience was negatively related to racial discrimination only when lower racial socialization was experienced. Moreover, resilience was no longer a significant moderator; and therefore, did not buffer the effect when racial socialization was high. Similar to ethnic identity, these mixed findings leave questions around the protective nature of resilience. While resilience has been explored as a moderator in relation to blatant or systemic racism and well-being among PoC (see Cabrera-Martinez for a review), to our knowledge, resilience has not been tested as a moderator for everyday racial microaggressions in relation to self-blame coping strategies. Thus, this current study examined whether self-reported resilience buffered the relation between self-blame coping strategies and psychological distress.

Our study explored the relationship between racial microaggressions, psychological distress, and self-blame coping for discrimination. Secondly, we tested the internal processes of resilience and ethnic identity as possible

FIGURE 1
Conceptual moderating effects of committed ethnic identity and resilience on mediated relation of racial microaggressions and psychological distress through internalization.
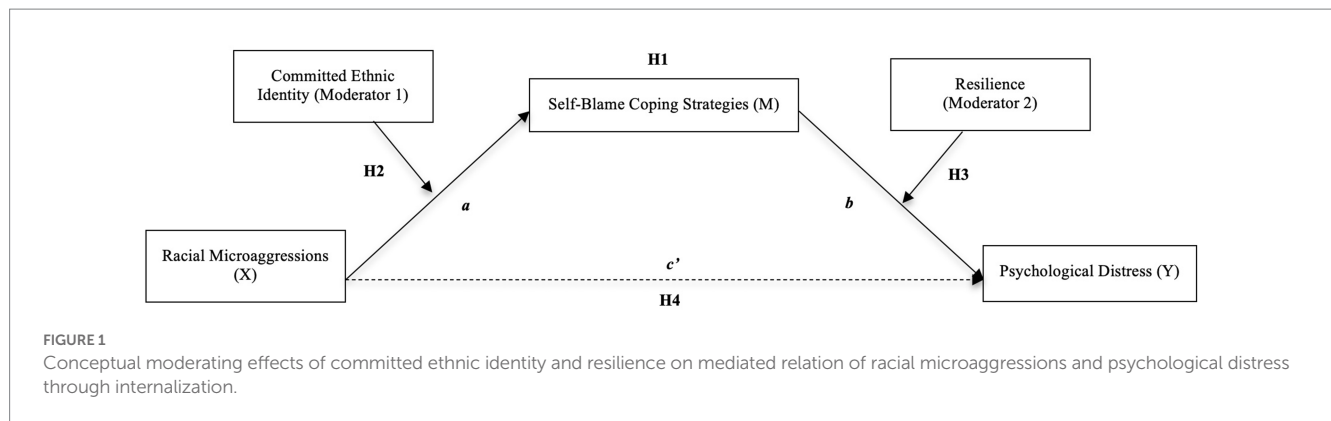
protective factors from racial microaggressions. This study is among the few that have examined the influence of resilience and ethnic identity as internal processes within the framework of microaggressions. Specifically, we used a series of mediation, moderation, and conditional analyses (see Figure 1) to comprehensively examine the mechanisms and interactions of the impact of racial microaggressions on psychological distress.

Current study

Our study unpacked the possible factors associated with racial microaggressions given the increment of racial tension in the U.S. in the last decade (Pew Research Center, 2019). In 2015, microaggressions was named the word of the year and according to a large-scale study on racism, PoC reported experiencing racial microaggressions consistently (American Psychological Association, 2016). There have been recent recommendations to explore power, privilege, and protective factors when unpacking discrimination experiences (Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022; Suyemoto et al., 2022). The current study assessed how self-blaming coping strategies can explain the link between racial microaggressions and psychological distress. Furthermore, we tested if ethnic identity and resilience can be protective factors that moderate these relations. Thus, we tested the following hypotheses.

H1: The relationship between racial microaggressions and psychological distress will be mediated by self-blame (Mediation model).

H2: The relationship between racial microaggressions and self-blame will be moderated by the level of committed ethnic identity, such as that lower levels of committed ethnic identity will be associated with higher levels of self-blame when experiencing racial microaggressions (Moderator 1).

H3: The relationship between self-blame and psychological distress will be moderated by the level of resilience, such as that lower levels of resilience will be associated with higher levels of psychological distress when self-blame coping (Moderator 2).

H4: Conditional hypothesis. If H1-H3 are supported, we hypothesize that both committed ethnic identity and resilience will moderate the

mediated relation between racial microaggressions, self-blame, and psychological distress. (Double moderated mediation model). See Figure 1 for the proposed model.

Materials and methods

Participants

We collected data during the Fall of 2020 using a cross-sectional online survey. We recruited a convenience sample from two sources: (1) college students from a diverse southwest university in the U.S. who participated for class credit, and (2) voluntary participants from social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) who accessed the survey through an advertised flyer without compensation. Inclusion criteria for the study included: (a) be 18 years or older, (b) be fluent in English, (c) currently reside within the U.S., and (d) identify as a member of a racial or ethnic minoritized group. A sample of 702 participants was initially collected for this study, with 48% of participants ($n = 337$) recruited from the southwest institution. Three participants were removed for not passing attention checks (e.g., asking to mark a specific response for an additional item on each quantitative measure randomly placed). Additionally, three more participants were removed for being flagged as significant outliers across our main variables in a linear regression model (racial microaggressions, self-blame, psychological distress, ethnic identity, and resilience). Significant outliers were those that scored outside of recommended cut-offs for two or more of the three recommended outlier checks (Cook's, Mahalanobis, and Leverage distance values). Thus, a final sample of 696 participants was kept for this study. The demographic information for our sample is displayed in Table 1.

Procedures

This study was exempted by a university institutional review board (IRB# UNLV-1572714) and conducted based on federal and university regulations. Each participant was informed of the purpose of the study at the beginning of the survey and was asked for consent to participate. After consent was obtained, participants were asked to answer various quantitative measures,

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Baseline characteristic		
	n	%
Gender		
Ciswomen	510	73.3
Cismen	172	24.7
Transgender	3	0.4
Non-conforming	4	0.6
Non-binary	4	0.6
Other	3	0.4
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American (non-Latinx)	115	16.5
Southeast Asian	142	20.4
East Asian	102	14.7
Black, Afro, or Caribbean Latinx	83	11.9
Indigenous Latinx	156	22.4
White Latinx	98	14.1
Immigrant generation		
1st Generation	32	4.6
1.5 Generation	82	11.8
2nd Generation	367	52.7
3rd Generation	89	12.8
4th or above generation	126	18.1
Sexual Identity		
Heterosexual	537	77.2
Gay or Lesbian	42	6.0
Bisexual	68	9.8
Queer	9	1.3
Pansexual	14	2.0
Asexual	6	0.9
Prefer not to disclose	20	2.9

M_{age} = 22.26 years old (SD = 3.84). MSES = 5.50 (SD = 1.60) using a self-rated scale 1 to 10 for socioeconomical status.

provide demographic information, and received psychological resources during the final debriefing section.

Measures

Racial and ethnic microaggressions

The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011) is a 45-item instrument that measures the frequency of racial and ethnic microaggressions experienced in the last 6 months. Participants are asked to report how often they have experienced scenarios such as "Someone assumed I was not intelligent because of my race," using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*I did not experience this event*) to 5 (*I experienced this event five or more times*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of racial and ethnic microaggressions experiences. REMS has been consistently used to assess everyday discrimination experiences among PoC, showing consistent and high reliability (Nadal, 2011; Barrita et al., 2023a). For this study, REMS showed strong reliability with α = 0.91.

Self-blame coping

The Coping with Discrimination/Internalization subscale (CDS-I; Wei et al., 2010) is a 5-item measure that assesses participants' self-blame as a coping strategy when experiencing discrimination. Participants are asked to report their level of agreeableness to items such as "I wonder if I did something to provoke this incident," using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never like me*) to 5 (*always like me*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-blaming experiences with discrimination. CDC-I has shown strong reliability in previous studies exploring racial microaggressions (Wei et al., 2010; Barrita et al., 2023b). For this study, CDS-I showed a reliability of α = 0.83, and full CDS produced a Cronbach's alpha of α = 0.84.

Psychological distress

The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Antony et al., 1998) is a 21-item measure that assesses symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (seven items for each category). Participants are asked to report their level of agreeableness to items such as "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to," using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*did not apply to me*) to 4 (*applied to me most of the time*). Higher scores on this scale suggest more evidence for symptoms of psychological distress. DASS has shown strong reliability in previous studies exploring the relationship between racial microaggressions and psychological distress (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a,b,c). For this study, DASS produced a Cronbach's alpha of α = 0.91.

Ethnic identity

The Multiethnic Ethnic Identity Measure Affirmation Subscale (MEIM-A; Phinney, 1992) is a 7-item measure that assesses participants' sense of affirmation, belonging, and commitment to their ethnic identity. For this study, we intentionally tested only the committed version using the MEIM Affirmed subscale (Phinney, 1992), as previous findings indicated that other types of ethnic identity (i.e., searching or in development) provide less protection (Jones and Neblett, 2017). Participants are asked to report their level of agreeableness to items such as "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means," using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores suggest higher levels of commitment to one's ethnic identity. MEIM has been used in previous studies connected to racial discrimination showing strong reliability (Lee and Ahn, 2013). For this study, MEIM-A produced a Cronbach's alpha of α = 0.88.

Resilience

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) is a 6-item scale that assesses the perceived ability to bounce back. Participants are asked to report to which extent they agree to items such as "It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event," using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores suggest higher levels of resilience. BRS has shown strong reliability in previous studies using PoC samples (Barrita, 2021; Grooms et al., 2021). For this study, BRS produced a Cronbach's alpha of α = 0.90.

Demographics

Participants provided demographic information about their racial and ethnic identity, socioeconomic status (SES), age, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Additionally, the immigrant generation was assessed based on the following categories: (a) *1st generation*: you immigrated to the U.S. after age 12, (b) *1.5 generation:* you immigrated to the U.S. at or before age 12, (c) *2nd generation:* you were born in the U.S., and at least one of your parents immigrated to the U.S., (d) *3rd generation:* you and your parents were born in the U.S., and at least one of your grandparents immigrated to the U.S., (e) *4th generation:* you, your parents and your grandparents were all born in the U.S. (see Table 1 for full demographic info).

Statistical analysis

We used SPSS 28.0 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL) to analyze the data for this study. The analysis plan included a preliminary analysis of assumptions and significant outliers and a moderated mediation analysis using Hayes' (2012) PROCESS model 21 to test our hypotheses. To test all four of our hypotheses, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using 5,000 bootstrap samples based on Hayes' (2012) PROCESS macro-Model 21 (two moderators within mediation) exploring: a) if the relationship between racial microaggressions (IV) and psychological distress (DV) is explained by self-blame (Mediator), b) if committed ethnic identity (moderator 1) influences the relation between racial microaggression and self-blame (*path a*), c) if resilience (moderator 2) influences the effect of self-blame on psychological distress (*path b*), and d) if overall, the link between racial microaggressions and psychological distress can be explained by self-blame and influenced by both committed ethnic identity and resilience (moderated mediation). To test moderation effects, we assessed specific regions of each interaction based on standard deviation levels (i.e., 1 SD below mean, mean, and 1 SD above mean). We used simple slope analyses (Johnson and Fay, 1950) as this technique is considered superior to locating regions of significance for an interaction (Hayes, 2012) and has been used in similar studies focused on racial microaggressions using a moderated mediation model (Barrita et al., 2023b).

Results

Our preliminary analysis found three significant outliers, which were removed prior to the main analysis for our five main continuous variables (racial microaggressions, self-blame, psychological distress, committed ethnic identity, and resilience). Similarly, we checked for homoscedasticity, independence errors, and multicollinearity, finding no concerns to conducting our main analyses. We checked for covariates among our categorical variables. Results from one-way ANOVA's showed no significant difference around sexual orientation or immigrant generation for our five main continuous variables. Around gender, 11 participants (2%) self-identified as gender expansive, which, compared to the other two groups' sample sizes (ciswomen and cismen), made it impossible to compare. We conducted various t-tests to compare cisgender groups for our main variables. Results for committed ethnic identity between cismen ($M = 21.98$, $SD = 4.85$) and ciswomen ($M = 23.63$, $SD = 4.05$) indicated

significant differences $t(684) = -4.55$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.39$; thus, gender was considered a covariate. We conducted a Pearson's bivariate correlation analysis for other continuous variables such as age or SES (see Table 2). Results suggested that neither SES nor age were significantly associated with our main continuous variables. Gender was the only covariate controlled for during our main analysis.

H1: Mediation

Results from our model highlighted that racial microaggressions were a significant and positive predictor of self-blame $B = 0.375$, $SE = 0.114$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.152, 0.598], self-blame was a significant predictor of psychological distress $B = 0.697$, $SE = 0.253$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.201, 1.193]. Evidence of partial mediation was found as racial microaggressions significantly predicted a change in psychological distress after controlling for self-blaming $B = 0.214$, $SE = 0.038$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.140, 0.288] (direct effect), while a significant coefficient was obtained for the model $B = 0.002$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.003] (indirect effect). Thus, H1 was partially supported.

H2: Committed ethnic identity (moderator 1)

Using the same Hayes' macro-Model 21 (Hayes, 2012), we tested if committed ethnic identity moderated path *a* (racial microaggressions and self-blame) in our mediation model. Results suggested that committed ethnic identity was a significant negative predictor of self-blame $B = -0.224$, $SE = 0.092$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.246, −0.056]. The interaction of committed ethnic identity and racial microaggressions also significantly predicted a change in self-blame $B = -0.013$, $SE = 0.005$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.022, −0.003]. Specifically, there was a positive relation between racial microaggressions and self-blame, which was moderated by committed ethnic identity, where the higher this was, the lower levels of self-blame were reported. This path model accounted for 4.72% of the variance, with the interaction accounting itself for 1% unique variance, $F(1,692) = 6.96$, $p < .01$. Figure 2 visually depicts a slope analysis of the interaction, which shows that racial microaggressions were significantly predicting more self-blame only when committed ethnic identity was 1 *SD* below the mean (Effect = 0.132, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.075, 0.189] and at its mean (Effect = 0.076, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.034, 0.118]. But when committed ethnic identity was 1 *SD* above the mean, racial microaggressions were no longer a significant predictor of self-blame (Effect = 0.021, $p = 0.501$, 95% CI [−0.040, 0.081], suggesting that when PoC participants reported high levels of belongingness and commitment to their ethnic identity, they did not internalize racial microaggression. Thus, committed ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor against racial microaggressions and moderated its association with self-blame, supporting our H2.

H3: Resilience (moderator 2)

Next, we tested if resilience moderated path *b* (self-blame coping and psychological distress) in our mediation model. Results suggested that resilience was a significant negative predictor of psychological

TABLE 2 Bivariate correlations.

Measure	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Racial Microaggressions	16.54	9.55	—						
2. Psychological distress	40.28	11.10	0.239**	—					
3. Self-blame	14.09	5.42	0.127**	0.323**	—				
4. Affirmed racial identity	23.21	4.32	0.098**	−0.161**	−0.133**	—			
5. Resilience	19.31	4.66	−0.069	−0.438**	−0.209**	0.101*	—		
6. Age	22.26	3.84	0.193	0.135	−0.141	−0.057	0.218	—	
7. SES	5.50	1.60	−0.070	−0.153	0.052	0.136	0.146	0.222	—

$N = 696$.
*$p < 0.05$;**$p < 0.01$.

FIGURE 2
Moderating influence of committed ethnic identity on the association of racial microaggressions and Self-Blame Coping strategies for discrimination.
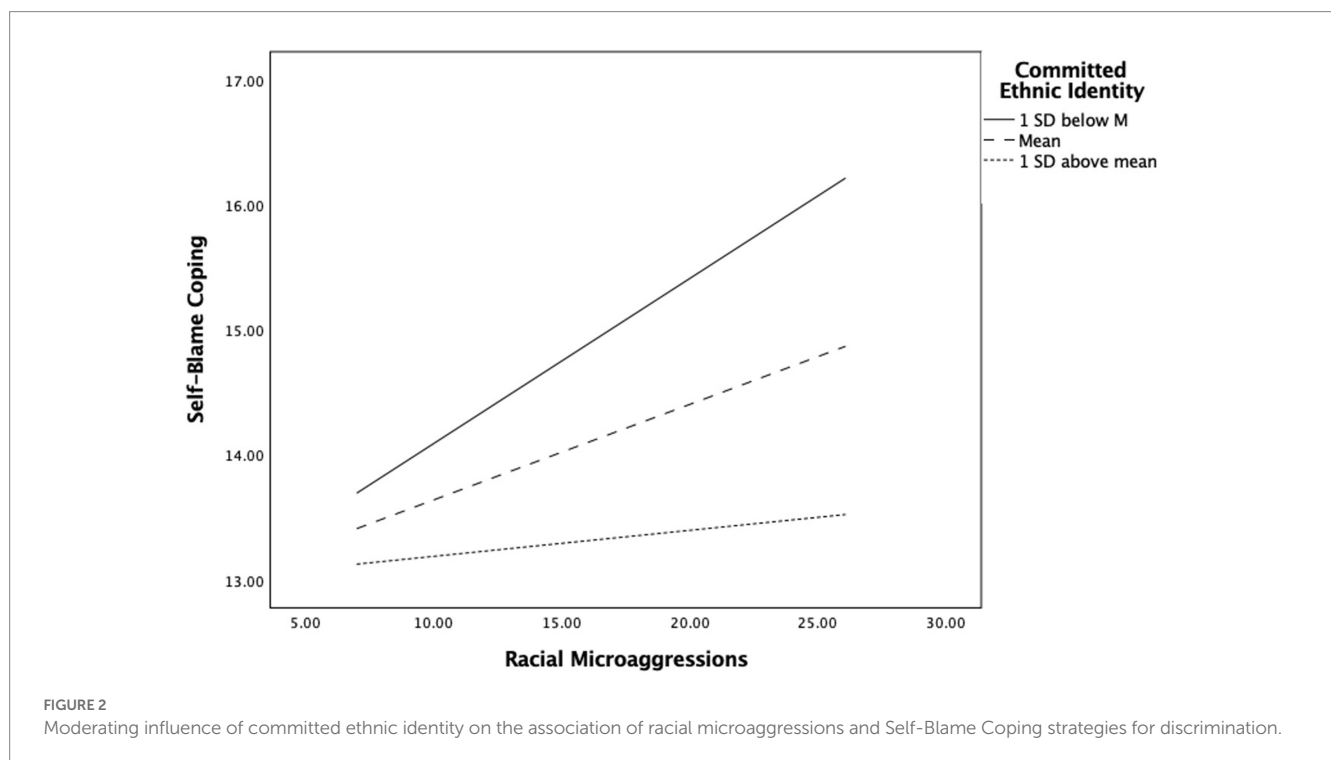
distress $B = −0.721$, $SE = 0.198$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [−1.109, −0.332]. The interaction of resilience and self-blame also significantly predicted a change in psychological distress $B = −0.113$, $SE = 0.013$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.203, −0.038]. Specifically, there was a positive relation between self-blame and psychological distress which was moderated by resilience, such as the higher resilience was, the lower psychological distress levels were reported. Path b in our model accounted for 29.3% of the variance, with the interaction accounting itself for 3.1% unique variance [$F(1,691) = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$]. Figure 3 shows a slope analysis of the interaction where self-blame significantly predicted more psychological distress only when resilience was 1 SD below the mean (Effect = 0.065, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.015, 0.103] and at its mean (Effect = 0.060, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.012, 0.089]. But when resilience was 1 SD above the mean, self-blame was no longer a significant predictor of psychological distress (Effect = 0.005, $p = 0.324$, 95% CI [−0.008, 0.023]. Thus, resilience can serve as a protective for mental health when engaging in self-blaming coping strategies associated with racial microaggressions, therefore, supporting our H3.

H4: A moderated mediation

Overall, our model supported our H4 (see Table 3), as self-blame helped explain the association between racial microaggressions and psychological distress. Furthermore, both committed ethnic identity and resilience moderated this mediating effect (Index = 0.002, $BootSE = 0.001$, 95% BootCI [0.001, 0.003]. Table 4 describes the specific indirect effect of the model based on three levels (1SD below mean, at mean, and 1SD above mean) for each of our moderators.

Post-hoc analyses

As part of the review process, additional comparative analysis across race and ethnicity was suggested to assess if there were significant differences across the subgroups within our sample. Given our findings about the direct and indirect effects of the mediation

FIGURE 3

Moderating influence of resilience on the association Self-Blame Coping strategies for discrimination and psychological distress.
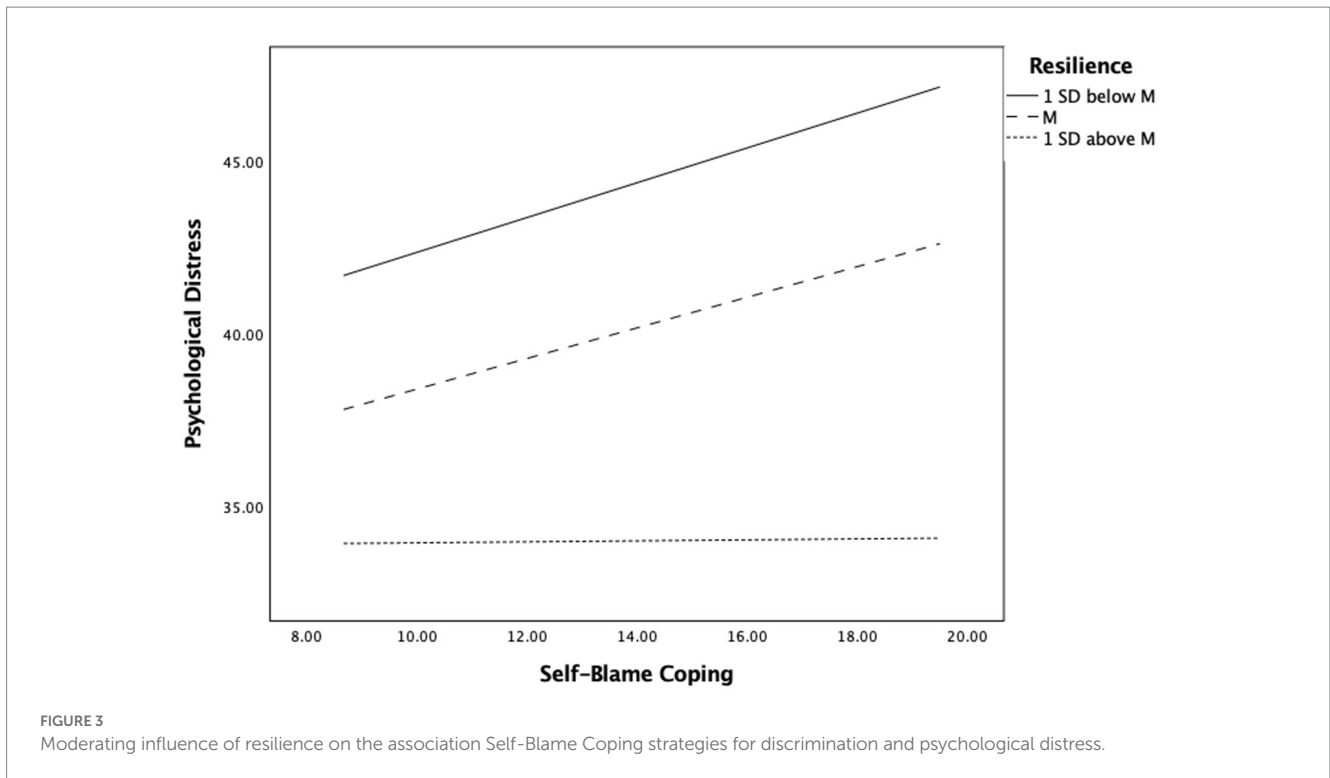
TABLE 3 Moderated mediation model characteristics for predictors on self-blaming coping strategies (mediator) and psychological distress (dependent variable).

	Internalizing coping strategy			Psychological distress		
Predictor	B	SE	95% CI	B	SE	95% CI
Racial microaggressions (X)	**0.375*****	0.114	0.152; 0.598	**0.214*****	0.038	0.140: 0.288
Self-blaming (M)				**0.691****	0.253	0.201: 1.192
Affirmed ethnic ID (W)	**−0.224***	0.092	−0.205: −0.056			
X × W[**H2**]	**−0.013****	0.005	−0.022: −0.003			
Resilience (V)				**−0.721*****	0.198	−1.109: −0.333
M × V[**H3**]				**−0.113***	0.013	−0.203: −0.037
X > W > M > V[**H4**]				**0.002***	0.001	0.001: 0.003
Sex	−0.720	0.451	−1.606: 0.165	−1.170	0.003	−0.001: 0.645
Model R^2	**0.047, $F(3,691) = 11.41$ $p < 0.001$**			**0.283, $F(4,691) = 68.16$, $p < 0.0001$**		
Interaction Δ^2	**0.010, $F(1,692) = 6.96$, $p < 0.01$**			**0.031, $F(2,691) = 12.44$, $p < 0.05$**		

$N = 696$.

*$p < 0.05$;**$p < 0.01$;***$p < 0.001$.

Bold values are statistically significant.

model portion of our study, we tested race/ethnicity (see subgroups in Table 1) using Hayes' (2012) PROCESS Model 59 moderated mediation with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. This model can be used to test one single categorical moderator (race/ethnicity) across all three paths of the mediation. Results for this model suggested there was no evidence of moderated mediation for any group, as zero was found between *boot* confidence intervals (95% bias-corrected) for the difference of conditional indirect effects suggesting no significant coefficients for any racial/ethnic group. However, these results should be conservatively interpreted, given that sample sizes for subgroups might have been too small therefore underpowering this analysis.

Furthermore, the literature does suggest that there are specific differences in our main variables based on race and ethnicity (Ponterotto and Park-Taylor, 2007; Bailey et al., 2019; Aguilera and Barrita, 2021; Cabrera Martinez et al., 2022).

Discussion and implication

The findings supported all four of the study's hypotheses. First, we wanted to know if self-blame explained the link between racial microaggressions and psychological distress. Results

TABLE 4 Conditional indirect effects of racial microaggressions on psychological distress through self-blame accounting for affirmed ethnic identity and resilience as moderators.

Affirmed ethnic identity	Resilience	Indirect effect or index	BootSE	Boot 95% CI
Low	Low	0.067	0.023	**0.027: 0.116**
Low	Average	0.059	0.018	**0.027: 0.096**
Low	High	0.051	0.017	−0.020: 0.088
Average	Low	0.039	0.014	**0.014: 0.070**
Average	Average	0.034	0.011	**0.014: 0.057**
Average	High	0.029	0.010	−0.011: 0.052
High	Low	0.011	0.007	**0.010: 0,044**
High	Average	0.009	0.014	−0.019: 0.037
High	High	0.008	0.012	−0.017: 0.032

$N = 696$. Bold values are statistically significant.

from our mediation model supported H1 and suggested that those who experienced more racial microaggressions were more likely to endorse self-blame coping for discrimination. Furthermore, those who endorsed high levels of self-blame coping also exhibited more psychological distress. These results are consistent with previous findings exploring other forms of racism (e.g., systematic, institutional) where PoC engaged in self-blaming coping behaviors that predicted psychological distress (David et al., 2019). Our findings are also consistent with IOT (David, 2013), as PoC in our sample not only reported experiencing racial microaggressions but also reported blaming themselves for discriminatory experiences. Our findings suggest that self-blame coping can explain the psychological impact of racial microaggressions on stress, depression, and anxiety. These results can inform current clinicians and practitioners assessing race-related stressors about specific factors, such as self-blaming behaviors associated with experiencing racial oppression.

Results for our H2 confirmed that low and average levels of committed ethnic identity moderated the relation between racial microaggressions and self-blame. Only high levels of committed ethnic identity disrupted such relations. Results for our first moderator analysis suggested that committed ethnic identity, which previous studies have described as a key protective factor against racism (Jones and Neblett, 2017), did not serve as such for those with low or average levels of committed ethnic identity. Only those reporting ethnic identity one standard deviation above its mean were the only participants that no longer reported significant levels of self-blame when experiencing racial microaggressions. These results support previous critiques (Bair and Steele, 2010; Lee and Ahn, 2013) that challenge arguments about ethnic identity protective traits and minimize the impact systemic and individual oppression has over time on PoC and its influence on ethnic identity protective traits. Our findings suggest that PoC can endorse and commit to their ethnicity and still blame themselves for hostile messages. It is also possible that, given that racial microaggressions are consistent stressors (Sue et al., 2007) taking place in one's microsystem, it might be hard to quickly find positive coping strategies (e.g., externalization and resistance). Our results showed that self-blame was still reported for many participants in our sample who had low or average levels of committed ethnic identity. Therefore, the issue remains on systemic and individual oppression and not on one's sense of belonging to their ethnic group.

Our findings around H3 for resilience found similar results as for ethnic identity. At low and average levels, resilience moderated the relationship between self-blame coping and psychological distress. However, the relationship between self-blame coping and psychological distress was no longer significant when resilience was one standard deviation above the mean. These findings challenge consistent descriptions of PoC's resilience as a necessary or effective factor that shields from oppression (Evans and Pinnock, 2007). For our sample, the *foretold* protection of resilience was only effective at very high levels, suggesting that such a protective effect is the exception and not the rule for such a trait. This finding does support critiques that question the absolute positivity of resilience (Aguilera and Barrita, 2021; Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt, 2021; Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022). Our results around the effectiveness of resilience on psychological well-being can also be explained by the detrimental effects of internalized racism (e.g., self-blame) on PoC (see David et al., 2019 for a review). Perhaps resilience, which can be protective in some cases (Evans and Pinnock, 2007), did not moderate in our model because it is harder to psychologically recuperate once one has blamed themselves for these experiences. These findings provide additional evidence to the current debate around self-reported resilience and its protective nature.

Finally, supportive evidence for our moderated mediation model (H4) was found, and results suggested that the relationship between racial microaggressions and psychological distress was partially mediated by self-blame, which was moderated by both committed ethnic identity and resilience at low and average levels. Specifically, indirect effects for both moderators showed how the psychological impact linked to self-blaming differed based on moderating levels (e.g., low, average, and high) for ethnic identity and resilience. Furthermore, this model also showed how both moderators at high levels no longer produced a significant relation for our main variables. Our findings add evidence to current counter-discussions on the effectiveness or protective value both ethnic identity and resilience might have when facing oppression. Our study explored various factors previously studied for systemic racism in relation to everyday racial microaggressions. Therefore, our findings can also inform how cumulative effects from harder-to-identify aggressions can impact PoC's well-being. Larger implications from our study include informative evidence to help clinicians improve their

assessment of race-related stressors or consider other factors, such as PoC's self-blaming coping strategies connected to racism. Furthermore, our findings challenge the assumptions that PoC's ethnic identity or resilience can serve as absolute protection from racism. Our study meticulously unpacked these traits and findings showed that ethnic identity and resilience only protected some – and not the majority – putting back the responsibility to liberate PoC on the oppressor and the mechanisms upholding the racialized system.

Limitations and conclusion

Our study carries important limitations that can guide future research on the impact of racial microaggressions. First, our cross-sectional study limited participants' responses to one-period time and asked participants to recall racial-related experiences that cannot always be identified as aggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Our sample was also collected during a global pandemic that sparked higher racial tension for some groups in the U.S., including Asian Americans (Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022a,b,c), and in the same year when the world saw a rise of social movements and protests demanding justice for George Floyd and other Black lives from police brutality (Reny and Newman, 2021). As such, the timing of our data collection might have influenced the psychological distress and racial awareness among our participants. Causal relations or distinctions between which factors (e.g., resilience, ethnic identity, and psychological distress) occurred first cannot be claimed given our methodological approach. The evidence of ethnic identity serving as an absolute protective factor is inconsistent, and it is possible that other identities can also serve as protective factors (e.g., racial identity). Furthermore, cultural and developmental factors, such as differences in participants' direct environments (e.g., racially homogenous or heterogenous), were not assessed, which could have influenced experiences with racial microaggressions or participants' ethnic identity development (Helms, 1990). Thus, future studies exploring the influence of ethnic identity and racism should consider expanding on these factors. Similarly, our study assessed resilience as defined by the BRS (Smith et al., 2008), which measures only internal-individual self-reported levels of resilience and no other types of, such as community-resilience or spiritual-resilience also reported by minoritized groups (Aguilera and Barrita, 2021). It is possible that external forms of support, such as community, might produce different levels and effects of protection that can be defined as resilience too. Future studies on the effects of racism may consider experimental or longitudinal approaches that can further unpack different types and levels of resilience as protective factors. Moreover, the effect sizes for our significant findings were small. Thus, some of these changes in psychological distress are likely imperceivable by the participants. Finally, future research on the liberation of PoC and other marginalized communities might benefit from intersectional approaches that test not only individual levels of microaggressions but also systemic and institutional levels.

Despite the limitations of this study, our results produced evidence that can inform researchers and clinicians about the effects of racial microaggressions and relevant factors. Our study explored multiple relations using a combined moderated mediation model, which tested two factors constantly described as protective in the relation between racism and well-being. Our findings suggest that ethnic identity and resilience can influence the impact PoC experience from racism. But more importantly, our study brings awareness to how PoC are still considerably impacted by racial microaggressions despite these traits. Thus, PoC can continue to commit strongly to their ethnic identity and be resilient, yet still, be significantly impacted by racial microaggressions. Thus, ethnic identity and resilience are important individual-level factors, but the endorsement of these traits should be discussed within a larger sociopolitical context. PoC in the U.S. have needed to develop traits and strategies to cope with and recuperate from decades of racism. Thus, true changes toward a more equitable and just world demand that those in positions of power and privilege match the resilient spirit of the oppressed and engage actively against oppression.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by UNLV. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Pathways to the therapist paragon: a decolonial grounded theory

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Introduction: While many professional associations within clinical and counseling psychology have made an aspirational call for clinician awareness of social position, there is a lack of research into how socially-conferred privilege impacts psychotherapy. Specifically of interest is the differences in race and gender within the therapeutic dyad, in which there is a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color)/white[1] or male/female-identified dynamic.

Method: The authors utilized a Grounded Theory approach to analyze qualitative interviews with practicing psychologists to construct a process model regarding how socially-conferred privileged identity domains impact the therapeutic relationship and the participants' professionalization process.

Results: The analysis identified the core conceptual theme of the Therapist Paragon, representing an idealized version of what a perfect therapist should be. This replicated the foundational figures of our field - primarily older, white men. The process model consisted of two distinct pathways toward the Therapist Paragon, one for BIPOC psychologists and one for white psychologists. The female BIPOC pathway consisted of imposter syndrome, persistent feelings of inadequacy, and tendencies to over-credential their professional identity to seek credibility in the eyes of clients and colleagues. The white pathway consisted of down-playing whiteness and attempting to initially modify behavior toward client cultural norms.

Discussion: The results point to a distinct professionalization and practice process for BIPOC psychologists compared to white counterparts. This dynamic may have implications beyond increasing support for BIPOC clinicians specifically, but instead indicate a lack of acknowledgement of the psychological impact of socially-conferred privilege in the psychotherapy enterprise overall. Recommendations are offered for revisions to training models, continuing education, and supervision/consultation.

KEYWORDS

privilege, psychotherapy, microaggressions, ethics, imposter syndrome, education

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1 Crenshaw (2011) purposely uses "white" to signify and highlight the different and unparalleled history of being "Black" by contrast. Crenshaw specifically suggests in a comparison of white and Black: "Of the myriad differences is the fact that while white can be further divided into a variety of ethnic and national identities, Black represents an effort to claim a cultural identity that has historically been denied" (p. 1255).

Introduction

Social privilege has been increasing in the general discourse over the past decade, making its way into politics and social media (Ross, 2016; Haines, 2019; Asare, 2021). Yet, academic research on the topic has been sparse and mostly resides in the fields of sociology and women's studies (McIntosh, 2017). Research on individual's experiences and understanding of social privilege allows scholars and practitioners alike an interesting avenue through which to address systems of oppression and inequality. However, literature reviews today turn up little information regarding individuals' experiences and understandings of social privilege. While a number of researchers in the fields of sociology, education, and psychology have attempted to address this lack of knowledge of systems of power and privilege (Tatum, 1994; Ferber and Herrera, 2012; Case and Cole, 2013; DiAngelo, 2016; Atkins et al., 2017; Fors, 2018; Johnson, 2018), few of these studies have specifically looked into how social privilege may affect therapeutic practice. Furthermore, there are no studies that address how social privilege might specifically affect doctoral level practice.

American Psychological Association (APA) (2017a,b), declared their aspiration to view psychology through a social justice lens. With this declaration, the APA committed to the process of critically examining the impact historical and modern systems of privilege and oppression have had on the field. While these aspirations are well-intentioned in nature, there remains a lack of guidance regarding the enactment of this paradigm shift within psychotherapy (Abe, 2019).

In this article, we begin with a historical review and definition of social privilege, address issues of intersectionality, and social location, then summarize the current literature related to privilege in psychotherapy. Then we will provide a description of the research design and general principles of grounded theory. The results section will provide common and distinct themes from the date, and the emergent grounded theory. Finally, implications for graduate education, continuing education, and ethics are offered.

Literature review

Social privilege

The concept of social privilege can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois published a book entitled, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he described the differential experience, or the "double consciousness," that white and Black people experience as they move through the world. Specifically, Du Bois (1935) noted that although both impoverished white and Black people received low wages for their work, the white workers also received social benefits that were denied to their Black counterparts. Du Bois (1935) termed these benefits "wages of whiteness," and explained to readers that these wages could only exist as long as Black individuals were oppressed.

Du Bois' initial definition has evolved over time to address the highly complex praxis of social privilege. Helms (1984) echoed DuBois' work and developed a five stage White Racial Identity Model, in which she explicitly recognized that because all individuals live in a racialized world, white people's identities are

therefore inherently influenced by racism. This sentiment was furthered by McIntosh (2013), who outlined many invisible ways in which white individuals benefit from oppressive systems. She referred to this concept as white privilege, which can be further understood as an invisible, unearned "knapsack" of benefits and assets: an unquestioned, unearned set of privileges afforded to white people. These privileges contribute to a sense of belonging, physical and emotional safety and wellbeing, general protection from harm, access to opportunity, and ability to remain blind to the impact of race, ethnicity and culture without penalty. McIntosh acknowledged the highly complex and hierarchical nature of white privilege, which can be enhanced depending on one's sex, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, nationality, or religion. Case and Cole (2013) termed these interlocking hierarchies as "automatic, unearned benefits bestowed upon perceived members of dominant groups based on social identity" (p. 2). Not only is privilege associated with systems of dominance and power, but it is also associated with one's social identity.

Black and Stone (2005) provided an all-encompassing five domain definition of social privilege. First, they asserted that privilege is a special advantage, which is neither common nor experienced universally. Second, privilege is not earned by effort but socially granted to someone irrespective of individual labor or talent. Third, privilege is a right or an entitlement that is often associated with one's status and rank. Fourth, individuals utilize their privilege for their own benefit and often at the expense or detriment of others.

Black and Stone's (2005) fifth and final assertion was that social privilege often exists outside of someone's conscious awareness. This invisibility, which is evoked within McIntosh's knapsack metaphor, can also be understood as a form of dysconsciousness. The term dysconsciousness, coined by King (1991), has been adopted to describe lack of awareness of one's privilege. Dysconsciousness allows those with privilege to receive the benefits of their social location without questioning the systems of power that keep them privileged through the exploitation of marginalized groups. The very nature of social privilege being invisible presents an interesting quandary to those who want to study the concept: how can we study something that we cannot see? While the concept of critical consciousness was first pioneered by Freire (1970) and Heaney (1984) expanded it to describe the active effort one must take to acknowledge their own social privilege, actively judge and critique social order, and refrain from uncritical acceptance of the status quo.

The present study adopts Black and Stone's understanding of social privilege, while also acknowledging the developmental nature of how human beings come to understand it. Bergkamp et al.'s (2022a,b) Model of Integrating Awareness of a Privileged Social Identity (MIAPSI) offers individuals a way of understanding the idea of social privilege awareness as an active, ongoing, and ever evolving process. According to MIAPSI, social privilege awareness is developmental in nature and occurs in a non-linear and cyclical fashion. Specifically, this includes four phases that individuals move through as they develop their own social privilege awareness: Critical Exposure, Identity Threat, Identity Protection, and Reconciliation. The authors also noted that throughout these four phases, three conducive factors may encourage and help to evolve the development of one's own privilege awareness. These conducive factors include cognitive scaffolding, interpersonal safety, and intrapersonal safety.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality challenged dominant, single-axis theories which viewed power in terms of "have" and "have nots." These single-axis frameworks failed to recognize the many "multiply burdened" (1989, p. 14) individuals in this world who possess multiple marginalized social identities, for example Black women. To regard Black women's social identities in terms of one category or another is insufficient. They should instead be acknowledged as having their own intricate and complex understanding of identity and belonging in the world. Crenshaw's theory has since been expanded to include the many overlapping layers of privilege and oppression that can exist within one individual. Intersectionality scholars encourage the study of overlapping marginalized identities as a method to understand the deeper issue of systemic and institutional oppression. Schuller (2022) states, "The experiences of marginalized people expose the true workings of power in all its forms. Identity forms a key piece of intersectionality, but it provides the lens, not the target (p. 7).

The ADDRESSING Model (Hays, 2022), uses an acronym which identifies ten different identity domains that can help to illuminate an individual's position in society. The ten domains are age, developmental or acquired disability, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender. Each individual possesses their own set of identity domains, which interact and overlap in different ways resulting in individual variance of power and positionality within society. Bergkamp et al. (2020) proposed that the domain of ethnicity be expanded to also include racial identity, the domain of national origin be expanded to include citizenship, and that the domain of gender should include sex assigned at birth. Coupling the aforementioned definitions of social privilege with this understanding of intersectionality and positionality helps to illuminate how different identity domain combinations yield different levels of power in our world (Adams and Estrada-Villalta, 2019).

The terms agent and target can help us to further understand the complex phenomena of privilege and oppression (Adams et al., 1997). Agent refers to individuals who belong to the most socially privileged positions within a certain identity domain and target refers to individuals who belong to marginalized groups (Hays, 2022). For example, in a patriarchal society a cis-man is considered an agent and cis-women, trans people and non-binary people are termed targets. These terms intentionally evoke countervailing ideas of efficacy, control, passivity and victimization in order to highlight the stark power imbalance present in dynamics of privilege and oppression (Adams et al., 2018). This is further refined by Nieto's (2010) distinction of rank versus status. While status refers to dynamic situations in which an individual might temporarily be in the minority (i.e., one of few white students in school), rank refers to the persistent aspects of identity that do not change across person, place, and situation. Further, rank is defined by historical intrenched systems and institutions that socially-confer or deny privilege based on identity domains (i.e., being Black or identified as a woman). However, it is critical to note that although individuals may experience the benefits of privilege and the detriments of oppression on a personal level, the forces of privilege and oppression are perpetuated on cultural and institutional levels (Nieto and Boyer, 2006). Thus, it is impossible for any one person to escape either force without substantially overhauling a myriad of societal systems (DiAngelo, 2016).

Furthermore, privilege must be seen as a corollary to oppression. Goodman (2015) refers to oppression and privilege as two sides of the same coin, and encourages individuals to shift their focus away from focusing solely on individuals who are disadvantaged, to placing an equal emphasis on studying those who are advantaged. She asserts that in order to truly understand the dynamics of social inequality that exists today in our world, we must understand the roles of *both* privilege and oppression and the way they mutually influence one another to produce and perpetuate prejudice and systems of oppression.

Privilege in psychotherapy

Some recent psychological research is sensitive to the tension that differing levels of social privilege can cause in a therapeutic relationship and attempts to address privilege awareness within the therapeutic dyad (Suzuki et al., 2019). There is a burgeoning body of work explaining the potential pitfalls that may arise for therapists with agent ranks working with clients with target ranks (Fors, 2018; Hays, 2022). More specific research has corroborated these assertions by examining the negative impact of white therapists' microaggressions on the therapeutic relationship with clients of Color and asserting white privilege as an essential concern of therapy (Davis et al., 2016; Hoffman, 2022). Similarly, it has been shown that when white therapists successfully initiate discussion about differences in privilege between themselves and their clients they strengthen their therapeutic relationships (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Zhang and Burkard, 2008; Edwards et al., 2017; LiVecchi and Obasaju, 2018; PettyJohn et al., 2020). Findings such as these lead to the creation of multiculturally sensitive ethical standards from the APA in an effort to protect clients from marginalized groups within the therapy room (Suzuki et al., 2019).

Recent research is beginning to consider the impact of social privilege on therapists with target ranks as well. A growing body of research examines the challenges faced by therapists dealing with direct discrimination from their clients (Haskins et al., 2015; Guiffrida et al., 2019; Branco and Bayne, 2020; Cottrell-Boyce, 2021). This focus is complemented by research examining therapists' methods for dealing with client-expressed prejudices, which the therapist personally disagrees with, but by which they are not directly targeted (Spong, 2012; Drustrup, 2020).

Furthermore, such studies raise questions about therapists' ethical duties to the broader community with regard to their decisions around interacting with prejudiced clients (Drustrup, 2020). The emphasis that these studies place on the experiences of clients is important, but there is a dearth of complementary research exploring therapists' own experiences with social privilege. The present study aims to turn the mirror toward mental health providers, asking clinicians to consider their own understanding and experiences of social privilege. The aim of this study is to explore how social identity domains and areas of privilege and power may produce individual or relational stress in the therapeutic relationship.

Current research on social privilege within the context of psychotherapy reveals that we, as psychologists, have a strong tendency to study individuals who do *not* have privilege, rather than those who *do*. We posit that, perhaps by not researching the dynamics of holding social privilege within therapy, we are engaging in our own

form of dysconsciousness (King, 1991). Turning a blind eye maintains a convenient status quo for those with privilege, since becoming aware of it can be an uncomfortable process (Bergkamp et al., 2022a,b). In fact, research has shown that social privilege awareness can elicit uncomfortable reactions: feelings of defensiveness and judgment, guilt or shame, and feelings of entitlement or a fear of loss, among others (Wise and Case, 2013). Despite this discomfort, researchers assert that we need to shift the narrative and focus on cultivating our own social privilege awareness as clinical psychologists (Black et al., 2007; Helms, 2017; Sue, 2017).

Engaging in the developmental process of our own social privilege awareness has many potential benefits. According to Black et al. (2007), counselors who possess privilege must become aware of this privilege in order to be considered truly competent. They assert that mental health providers must think critically about the consequences of oppression, and how they might consciously and subconsciously be enacting such oppression in their own work. Hays (2022) notes that in order to move toward cultural humility and competence, we must expand our understanding of multiculturalism to include notions of privilege awareness.

Sue and Sundberg (1996) observed that when therapists acknowledge differences between them and their client, it enhances counselor credibility, client satisfaction, depth of client disclosure, and clients willingness to return for follow up sessions. Zhang and Burkard (2008) noted that counselors who bring up differences are rated as more credible and have stronger working alliances with their clients than counselors who do not. Importantly, however, the authors noted that counselors of Color who bring up these differences with white clients do not see improvement ratings on credibility and working alliance. This underscores the fact that people working toward liberation frameworks are more often than not from marginalized groups themselves. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of making discussions of privilege awareness more mainstream among white counselors who hold immense power and privilege not only in the therapy room, but also in the world (Chavez et al., 2016). We believe that social privilege awareness should therefore be adapted into the core values of our work, and the core messaging of our training.

Addressing gaps in current literature

Currently, there are no empirical studies that examine the perspectives of doctoral level clinical psychologists on social privilege awareness. The present study assumes that social privilege and oppression are corollary and divergent structural systems that are codependent and inseparable (Case and Cole, 2013). We integrate King's (1991) notion of dysconsciousness to amplify how dangerous complicity can be, and to highlight how privilege often operates in invisible and unknown ways. We encourage readers to peel back the veil of oppression that dysconsciouness enshrouds us in, and expose ourselves to the rules of whiteness that dictate our behavior (Helms, 2017). We hope that by peeling back this veil, readers can be jolted into a state of critical awareness of their own power and privilege that may cause anxiety, confusion, and discomfort (Cottrell-Boyce, 2021). We also acknowledge the developmental nature of social privilege awareness (Bergkamp et al., 2022a,b), and anticipate that when we are willing to shed ourselves of privilege armor, we will likely feel

uncomfortable, defensive, and protective of our values and integrity (Wise and Case, 2013). We acknowledge the work of scholars before us to bring this veil of oppression to the forefront of psychological research, and also acknowledge the lack of literature surrounding how understanding of and experiences with privilege impacts a psychologists' personal experience in the field.

Methodology

Philosophical assumptions

We assert that contemporary systems of social privilege, which advantage certain groups over others, are a direct manifestation of historical colonization and the current coloniality mindset (Bhatia and Priya, 2018). Considering the aims of this project, it is important to scaffold the research with coherent philosophical assumptions that address issues of social privilege and avoid further coloniality in research. To this end, the researchers utilized inductive qualitative grounded theory with a social constructivist approach and an eye toward decolonization. The goal was to mindfully construct knowledge derived from the participant's experience versus dictated from the more traditional colonial positivistic techniques that continue to center Western white patriarchy (Smith, 2012).

The colonial worldview valorizes historical European and contemporary American society as superior and universal by first commoditizing the idea of knowledge and then holding up traditional Western thought as the pinnacle of modernity and rationality. Thus, whatever "knowledge" those societies promulgate, be it the latest scientific research or capitalistic venture, is often perceived globally as the most correct and valuable knowledge available by virtue of the societies' status at the top of the hierarchy. This type of artificially privileged knowledge also encapsulates more damaging and subtle colonial concepts like race and patriarchy (Quijano, 2007).

Coloniality is evident in the current reification of white, Western, male, heterosexual hegemony; and so contextualizes issues of race, sex, class, and gender-based discrimination within a historical context. Coloniality is a powerful influence on Western psychology's definition of what is functional, normal, and healthy (Dirth and Adams, 2019). To reiterate, while colonialization is not a metaphor, and instead refers to historical atrocities, coloniality is the current manifestation of this legacy/history/context that permeates our daily lives (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Bhatia and Priya, 2018). According to Goodman et al. (2014), colonizing practices refer to those that "reproduce the existing conditions of oppression by failing to challenge the hegemonic views that marginalize groups of people, perpetuate deficit-based ideologies, and continue to disenfranchise the diverse clients and communities" (p. 148).

Antithetical to a colonizing perspective, a decolonial psychology emphasizes compassion over domination, generativity over stagnation, and distributive justice over the privileging of majority discourse, beliefs, and practices. Decolonial theory asserts that the human mind does not exist on its own, but rather, it exists within a rich and complex social context. As many scholars have noted, it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to form one succinct definition of decolonial psychology. Instead, it is often depicted as a perspective shift that one adopts in an effort to resist dogma and instead welcome dissonance and disruption of epistemology and thought (Mignolo, 2011; Tate et al., 2013).

It is our belief that by adopting a decolonial, social justice and liberation-oriented stance, the APA will continue to adhere to its mission to "promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives"(American Psychological Association (APA), 2022). By exploring the impact of social privilege on psychotherapy, we hope to shed light on the many visible and invisible impacts of colonial privilege on our profession.

Research approach

Grounded theory

A grounded theory approach can be useful when limited research exists on a topic, as it allows the researcher to root a conceptual theory in the experience of those who actually confront the problem themselves (Charmaz, 2006). In grounded theory, the researcher is also incorporated explicitly as a subjective interactor in the production of knowledge, therefore situating the participants *and* the analysts as collaborators in knowledge production (Glaser, 1978; Creswell, 2018; Bergkamp, 2022). As a result, knowledge is digested in an emergent and rather never-ending process throughout the production of a theory. Consequently, grounded theory emerges as a transformative and developmental form of research which dedicates itself to the evolving act of resisting uncritical acceptance of one's idea as a universal or explicitly known "truth" (Creswell, 2013).

Although some may claim it to be inductive in nature, Glaser (1978) asserts that grounded theory is both deductive and inductive; data collection, analysis and theory generation occur and reoccur repeatedly throughout the research process and constantly influence one another. When a code, category, or theme emerges, it is in turn compared with new and emerging data to determine the fit and relevance of the grounded theory. This in turn leads to increased theoretical sensitivity, or an enhanced ability to detect when concepts no longer "fit," "work" or remain "relevant" to the data at hand.

Method

Study sample

Participants of this study were 9 psychologists over the age of 21 with doctoral level education in psychology. The demographic characteristics of each participant was assessed with a 9-item questionnaire based on the Hays' (2022) ADDRESSING Model. All participants reported that they were natural born U.S. citizens. One participant reported being indigenous to a geographic or cultural region either by birth or by lineage. Five participants reported that they were white or European-American, two participants reported that they were biracial, and two participants reported being from a non-white, non-biracial racial identity domain. All participants considered themselves in middle to upper-middle class. Most ($n = 7$) participants reported falling between age 30 and 60. Most ($n = 8$) participants denied having either a physical or mental disability. Five of the participants reported subscribing to either Christianity or secularism within a primarily Christianity-influenced culture. One participant identified as a cis-gender male, with the remaining eight participants belonging to another gender identity domain. One participant identified as lesbian and eight participants identified as heterosexual.

Recruitment

Before recruitment began, approval was granted for research with human participants by the affiliate university. The first author recruited participants using his own professional contacts. Then, further participant recruitment was completed using a snowball sampling method within participant's professional networks. Participants were not given any compensation for their participation.

Informed consent and assent

All participants were required to sign a written informed consent prior to being interviewed. Upon initial contact, each participant was provided with an electronic copy of an informed consent document which described the purpose of the project, the nature of the interviews, and any potential risk or harm they could be exposed to throughout their participation.

Data collection

Procedures

Interviewers first obtained informed consent from participants, and then asked participants to fill out a short demographic questionnaire based on Hays' (2022) ADDRESSING model, to collect uniform demographic data. Next, interviewers engaged volunteer participants with a set of 5 open-ended interview questions based on the overarching question of "what is your experience with social privilege within your psychotherapy practice?" These interviews were conducted either in-person, by telephone, or by video conference. Participants who participated in telephone or video conference interviews provided consent to being recorded before the interviews began. After each interview was completed, participants were given a list of crisis services in the case that the interview elicited distressing emotions. The researchers then stored the audio recordings on dual-password protected devices for later transcription. Researchers redacted personal information from each interview transcription, including participant names, names of spouses/children/family members, school affiliations, etc. After each transcription, all recordings were deleted immediately. Researchers then began qualitative analysis using the Dedoose computer software program.

Data analysis

All data was analyzed using a grounded theory methodology, utilizing a constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In line with grounded theory, the researcher is considered the main instrument of analysis (Bergkamp, 2010, p. 24). Therefore, we expected that the positionality and perspective of each researcher would have an impact on data collection, analysis and theory formation. To address this, we placed a heavy emphasis on researcher reflexivity throughout our data analysis process. The sequence of our analysis

included open coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. Key concepts from the data were condensed to highlight main concepts, and then each of these concepts were compared and grouped into main categories. These main categories were then contextualized into a grounded theory understanding of how social privilege comes up in the therapy room.

Results

In this section, we will review the overall commonalities across the participants, as well as describe some important distinctions between participants. Namely, the analysis revealed a split between the white and BIPOC participants, with similarity among the two sub-groups and noticeable differences in comparison. Excerpts will be included to elucidate the themes. An abbreviated table of findings and next steps can be found in Figure 1.

Commonalities

All participants conveyed that social privilege is a factor that impacts their psychotherapy. As a whole, they conveyed that being aware of the dynamics of social privilege was essential for therapy.

"I feel like the issue of privilege may be salient if the therapist hasn't done enough work to know their own mind, to manage themselves, to - I mean certainly to be aware. I do see that as problematic."

They also expressed a lack of related education during their graduate training, a lack of CEs offerings addressing this aspect in psychotherapy, or privilege being discussed in supervision or consultation. Most of the participants voiced some kind of confusion or difficulty when addressing this dynamic, especially as there seemed to be no clear guidelines to follow. In summary, all participants expressed concern regarding the right way to handle the issue of privilege in psychotherapy and a motivation to improve their professional services.

White psychologist participants

Most participants in this sub-group, when asked about their own social privilege, brought up examples of working with clients that were culturally different from them. None addressed how social privilege impacts therapy when the dyad match is both a white client and therapist. Furthermore, they identified common culturally-sensitive methods they employ to ensure initial rapport and therapeutic alliance.

"So, to me it is not so much about privilege, but it is about understanding the person and why they are the way that they are. And what is, you know, a phenomenological and empathic way to interpret their struggles and their behavior in a way that is non-judgmental and least critical and gracious."

FIGURE 1
Pathways to the therapist paragon.
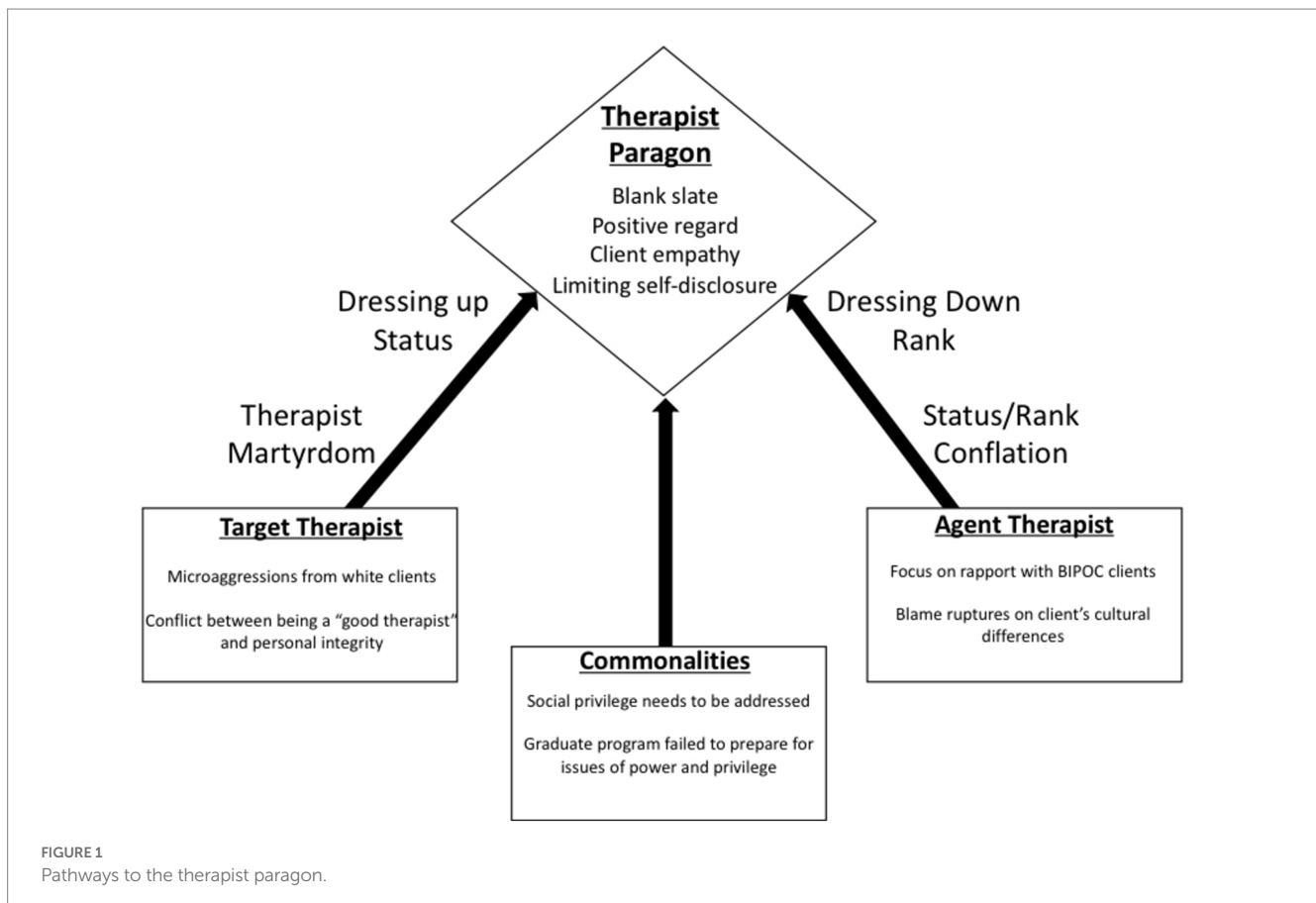
The unifying concept for the white participants was the emphasis on their own role power as the psychologist or expert, and the need to de-emphasize this power differential with the culturally-different client.

> "You know, being a professional person with, you know, the title of doctor, there are certain social privileges that come with that. People have expectations. My own identity definitely has aspects of social privilege educationally."

> "So, first of all, I have the privilege of being a clinician. And I've been benefitted or given certain access to education and financial support to be able to do what I do. And so, when I'm working with clients or patients most of them don't have the same opportunities that I've had."

> "The issue [of privilege] psychotherapy practice that transcends social and cultural identity is that the reality of the power differential of the provider and the patient and the client is extreme. And I think that it's underestimated a lot. People don't necessarily take that as seriously as they should."

These included attempts to equalize power within the relationship and efforts to emulate the clients assumed cultural norms for the sake of rapport. Examples include attempting to emulate the assumed cultural practices of the client, and adopting a collaborative and strengths-based approach to counteract their client's societal marginalization. Some mentioned dressing more plainly, using first names, and avoiding talking about themselves when having sessions with clients that held marginalized identities. They also attempted to speak in simple English, limiting professional jargon, instead working to adopt cultural phrases that might put the client at ease.

> "One of the things that I think we all struggle with a little bit is what's the best way to present ourselves in a clinical setting? I have the notion that I wanted to make myself, I didn't want to accept the authority of the position in some way and so if I dressed more casually, be more relaxed, use more slang or colloquial language, this would make me less threatening, or more like a peer and that the way to build a therapeutic alliance was in some ways to be a peer and think about that and have a patient feel more comfortable. I realized that that didn't fly. I was still the therapist."

When the issue of therapeutic rupture and repair with culturally-different clients arose in the interviews, white participants seemed to attribute the difficulty to the lack of client readiness or capacity for change. There was no consideration of the cultural values of the client, or the possibility that western psychotherapy could be a foreign cultural concept for the client. Also lacking was the potential for cultural assumptions or tendencies to pathologize cultural difference due to the psychologist's implicit bias. If there was some consideration of culture, there was a lack of acknowledgement that the therapist's whiteness may contribute to this dynamic.

> "Again, I'm not sure that those identity factors trump an actual psychotherapy relationship where the therapist has a lot of power as the expert, as the person who's helping, as the person who's getting paid. I'm not convinced that the social dynamic is any more, but I also have never been any - I've never been a man, I've never been a Person of Color (laughs), so I don't know if I would feel differently about that if I were a therapist who was, you know, different."

Expanding on their challenges when working with clients who are culturally-different, especially BIPOC clients, the white clinicians also brought up the limited multicultural education in their graduate programs and the lack of clear practice guidelines. They felt uncomfortable addressing ruptures and most doubled down on ideal therapeutic values of forgoing their own feelings and keeping the attention on the client to preserve rapport and alliance.

> "I think it's problematic, and in this case it was tricky because I knew there was stuff going on with racial identity for this adolescent girl who was seeking out her white parent, like curious about her white parent. But this African American couple said "oh no, it's just not an issue in our family." I felt kind of in a bind about being able to say "oh yes it is!" (Laughs) I didn't even really feel like I could say "really?" which would have probably been the best intervention right then, like "huh? I'm confused!" you know?"

BIPOC psychologist participants

When this group was asked about the impact of social privilege on psychotherapy, the participants focused on challenges that arise when working with white clients. While they mentioned the essential need for cultural humility and effective practice, including clinician self-awareness, most of their narrative involved personal and professional risks and costs when working with white clients. The common themes for this sub-group involved microaggressions from the white client toward themselves as the psychologist. Confusion regarding how to therapeutically respond during therapy. The struggle to establish credibility with their clients and colleagues. And compensation strategies used regarding the microaggressions and threats to professional credibility.

> "I remember one of my first clients when I was a trainee. Oh my god, it was so awful. It was a white couple, I think they were. And they just really didn't like each other, so they were a difficult couple. And they didn't want to work with me. And I remember feeling very upset. They didn't want to work with me because they thought I was the...there was a sliding scale, I was the trainee, and they came to the clinic because I presume it was a clinic, and there was this racialized way they coded it. They coded it as, like, they didn't want the discount therapist. I think that's the word they used, the discount therapist. And I knew it was because of race. We were all discount therapists, you know."

The most striking similarity among this sub-group was the reports of microaggressions from white clients and colleagues. These microaggressions came in many forms but usually involved questions about the veracity of the BIPOC psychologist's education, training, experience, and expertise. Participants also expressed concern and confusion for how to address microaggressions during therapy. They stated that they had not been trained for these kinds of situations, especially when the dyad is a white client and a BIPOC therapist. They

were nervous about appearing too focused on their own feelings at the sake of the client's therapeutic needs. Most tried to ignore these events and some were concerned that bringing up the possibility of microaggressions with their clients could result in the client not showing up again.

> "I have another client who sticks out to me, they were somebody who I thought did good work in the community, but she was from a much higher SES bracket than me, even today, I think for generations, she had generational wealth. Issues came up in her life around the business that she was in and I said something, I don't remember what, but I recognized that she had more social privilege than me, and then she fired me, or eventually she just didn't come back I guess."

These microaggressions would occur at all stages of the process, from clients hiring of the therapist, to the initial sessions, all the way through to termination. This caused the participants to question their own status and role, along with their ability to live up to the expectations of a good therapist. A few participants questioned if the microaggressions were due to the fact that they may not look, sound, or act like the quintessential therapist that the client expected. Another main construct that permeated this sub-group data was the constant efforts to seek credibility from clients, colleagues, and from themselves. Much of this process was triggered by microaggressions from clients and colleagues, but also due to imposter syndrome. This was accompanied by worries about how they are being perceived and what kind of judgmental criteria was being utilized.

> "I was very new and self-conscious. I already felt like I wasn't good enough. I was already like "I don't know how to do this therapy stuff," and these people didn't want me because I'm not good at therapy. Of course I'm not good at therapy. So they played into the fear that I understandably had. I was also quite young. So they were older than me, they were white. They weren't old, but they were maybe in their late twenties, thirties, I started graduate school pretty young. I was in my early twenties. So they were older than me, but not old. They were white, and they felt insulted that they got the "discount therapist," I remember that. So I definitely felt targeted racially. That was really horrible."

BIPOC participants reported different ways of dealing with microaggressions and imposter syndrome. Some would experiment with bringing it up during therapy, which they felt would violate norms of neutrality or personal self-disclosure. Some were impacted to the degree in which they decided to only see BIPOC clients or stopped psychotherapy altogether, opting for evaluations that did not demand the same level of rapport and alliance, or transition to academia or consulting. For those that continue engaging in psychotherapy, they reported constantly engaging in continuing education to substantiate their expertise to both clients and colleagues. They purposefully hang all of their diplomas and certificates on the wall, make sure that their offices are well furnished and they dress as professional as possible, and highlight their most recent CE session. All in a way to reinforce their status as the expert to be trusted.

The grounded theory: pathways to the therapist paragon

As a reminder, the core analytical question during the grounded theory analysis is identifying the dilemma experienced by the participants and the process in which they deploy to address and resolve this dilemma. In this study, the participants were asked about the construct of social privilege, how it impacts their work as psychotherapists, and what they do to address this process.

The core concept—therapist paragon

The core concept that appeared to pervade much of the data was the Therapist Paragon. The word paragon is defined as "a person or thing regarded as a perfect example of a particular quality" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022). The concept of the Therapist Paragon can be defined as the internalized referential image of a perfect therapist, one that practicing therapists use to evaluate themselves and other therapists. It consists of the underlying values and responses that a perfect therapist is supposed to embody. Usually including a clinician's overall motivation to help others through deep connection and sophisticated guidance, a full focus on the client's wellbeing and healing, and an ability to set themselves aside and remain emotionally grounded for the sake of the therapeutic alliance. This last value also encompasses the issue of self-disclosure and the need to sustain a fairly neutral stance during the therapeutic process.

The Therapist Paragon is utilized to establish when the individual therapist believes they have done a good job, or not, during and after the session. When they believe their performance was not satisfactory, it usually means they did not reach the paragon standard. The therapist paragon consists of idealized predecessors of the field, the ethical aspirations, internalized mentors and past supervisors, and the underlying values of prominent theoretical orientations. While the origins of a professional's Therapist Paragon can begin to take root in early personal therapeutic experiences, the formation and foundation occurs during educational training. The modification can occur with subsequent continuing education and consultation/supervision, but usually this does not significantly impact the core paragon beliefs and values.

Psychotherapy education for professional clinicians include the teaching and practice of person-centered therapy, evidence-based common factors of effective psychology, and the remnants of psychoanalysis. The underlying values innate in these approaches include the therapist as a blank-canvas for client projections, the intentional use of self-disclosure, the emphasis that every effort is made for the client's well-being or treatment, and a general bracketing of the clinicians personal needs and reactions. Rogers (1951), a pillar of the field, encouraged clinicians to exercise unconditional positive regard, clinician authenticity, and empathy in a non-directive format that prioritized a self-actualization framework. Taking this approach further, the recent common factors literature makes the empirical assertion that therapeutic alliance, therapist empathy, position regard, and genuineness are essential for effective therapy (Norcross and Lambert, 2018).

The remnants of psychoanalysis also find their way into contemporary curriculum. Psychoanalytic concepts of disclosure,

projectives, analysis free of bias, interpretation, and passivity continue to be taught and practiced today. This also includes the psychoanalytic concept of neutrality, which encourages the therapist to resist the natural urge to reciprocate affect and analyze transference as opposed to responding to it (Malcolm, 1981). Malcolm (1981) described psychoanalysis as voyeurism, asserting that one watches what is happening, but does not jump into the fray.

These, and other common approaches taught in professional training, constitute the underlying beliefs and values of the Therapist Paragon. This common curriculum is usually applied equally to all psychotherapy students, without much consideration for their social location, socially-conferred privileged, or oppressed identities. The pioneers of the field consist predominantly of white theorists and practitioners, with most also being male. A more critical pedagogical approach to training usually results in the ingratiation of white, male normative hegemony seeping into the field, resulting in the Therapist Paragon. Again, an internalized metric of good or bad performance and being - one that white, and male, therapists can find more personal congruence within.

The blank-slate value

The blank-slate value innate in the Therapist Paragon makes seamless therapeutic alliance an epitome of practice, ostensibly to avoid harm to the client. This core concept suggests this epitome is unattainable and may cause harm to the therapist, and leads us to question whether it is always entirely beneficial to the client. When a blank-slate therapeutic alliance is seen as the standard, therapists learn there are limits to their authenticity. They must be authentic enough to establish rapport, but not so authentic that conflict arises in the therapeutic alliance. This means therapists may need to deny their true selves when they are experiencing harm in the relationship. The blank-slate therapeutic alliance says harm to the therapist does not matter; only harm to the client matters. This virtually ensures the therapy room will be a place where therapists with target ranks will need to code-switch, denying their own position in a system of unequal privilege and power in order to play their role (Sithole, 2022). Therapists with agent ranks, on the other hand, benefit from the blank-slate therapeutic alliance, since it provides a built-in reason—avoiding client discomfort or harm—to maintain dysconsciousness and avoid addressing the harm all people experience in a system that maintains the privilege and power of some at the expense of others.

Because the status quo itself leads to harm, there is a question whether the blank-slate therapeutic alliance is entirely beneficial to clients. Clients may benefit from authentic therapeutic alliances that can weather rupture and repair, and clients may find growth in discomfort and appropriate challenge to their beliefs and behaviors. An authentic, conscious therapeutic alliance may prove more engaging and beneficial to clients than one in which the therapist performs for the client as a dysconscious or code-switching paragon.

Pathways to the therapist paragon

The most notable dynamic within the data was the differences between the white and BIPOC psychologists that participated in the study. Specifically, they both alluded to the Therapist Paragon, in that they discussed underlying values they strive for to make their services effective. The Therapist Paragon beliefs and values were strikingly similar across both sub-groups. Yet, the pathway of each group toward the therapist paragon was distinctly different. Both in terms of

strategies used to obtain perfection and client approval, as well the impacts to their professional and personal selves.

White and BIPOC pathways

Commonalities across the sample was a notion that social privilege does impact psychotherapy and it is important to address in some way. The core concept that united all the participants was an underlying pursuit and adherence to their internalized image of the perfect therapist, embodying core values in psychotherapy. The therapist's core values most applicable to their dilemma was to prioritize the clients needs first by setting themselves (feelings, thoughts, beliefs) aside for the sake of the client, the use of self-disclosure, remaining non-judgmental, assuming the best intentions, and maintaining empathy. The core category of the Therapist Paragon was mentioned or alluded to by the participants in view of the fact that they strived to provide adequate care, assess their own performance, their approach to consultation with colleagues, and navigate the therapeutic relationship.

The core differences between the sample seemed to generally occur down the line of white and BIPOC psychologists, with each sub-group expressing common themes. The most striking sub-group differences regarding social privilege involved the therapeutic dyad focus, methods used to establish and maintain rapport and alliance, and their personal experience in these interactions. Thus, the pathway toward the Therapist Paragon was paved and reassuring for the white sub-group or the source of harm and self-doubt for the BIPOC sub-group.

White psychologist sub-group

Status/rank conflation

One mechanism this sub-group utilized to pursue the Therapist Paragon was termed "status/rank conflation." While the white participants focused heavily on their status power as a "doctor" or "expert," most did not acknowledge their own social location or privileged identities, possibly due to Therapist Paragon values. This can be explained by the conceptual distinction of status versus rank (Nieto, 2010). Status is a state-like dynamic role that may hold temporary privileges within certain contexts, such as being a psychologist, but is not permanent across settings. Rank is a static trait-like aspect, such as being a BIPOC individual, that is consistent across time, person, and situation (Hays, 2022). The convenient confusion when asked about privilege was to focus on their educational and professional status versus their whiteness.

Dressing down rank

The other Therapist Paragon mechanism for this group was "dressing down rank." The white group discussed cases with a culturally-different other, presumably working with BIPOC clients. They focused on how they could modify their appearance and behavior to make rapport/alliance easier, attempting to match the client's culture. They tried to embody a friend or confidant role by ignoring the power dynamic and emphasizing equality. They relied on their multicultural education, working to suspend assumptions and

maintain a self-less approach. When difficulties arose, they attributed these to the cultural differences innate in the client. Other participants asserted that the lack of their cultural knowledge was due to lacking multicultural education in their graduate programs, versus dynamics of their own social privilege awareness. In the case of the data, the white participants discussed the interpersonal dynamics of status privilege, but did not address their socially-conferred privilege as white individuals.

Ultimately, when involved in this white therapist/culturally-different client dyad, this sub-group replicated the Therapist Paragon they were ingrained with throughout their professional career, usually that of a white male. The values of an ultra-focus on the client, minimizing self-disclosure, and modifying themselves for the sake of the client may also allow the white therapist to avoid the truth of social privilege power differences within the therapeutic relationship. It fosters a sense of confidence in their intention without a full awareness of their social location and the inevitable impacts.

The Therapist Paragon values can serve as a method of transcendence from the worldly constructs of race, relying fully on unconditional positive regard and non-judgmental empathy. For the white psychologists, the pathway to the Therapist Paragon was paved by the congruence of whiteness. The congruence of whiteness between themselves and the paragon image allows for an assurance they are doing the right thing, and when things do not work out, it is not a reflection of privilege differentials, but rather the cultural aspects of the client.

The BIPOC psychologist sub-group

In direct contrast, the BIPOC sub-group discussed microaggressions from clients and colleagues, the internal struggles with imposter syndrome, and the common compensation strategy of bolstering their status power as the doctor and expert.

Therapist martyrdom

In the face of microaggressions from white clients, the paragon values of setting themselves aside and unconditional acceptance prevented them from speaking up in the spirit of mutual respect. It, instead, resulted in them being complicit in their own harm for the sake of the therapeutic relationship or the real fear of losing clients and the risk of a negative reputation in the professional community. The paragon values reinforced the societal pressure for BIPOC professionals to sacrifice their own needs and dignity in pursuit of the ingrained image of white perfection.

Dressing up status

Their compensation included attempting to work harder compared to their white counterparts, attempting to appear competent and professional, and constantly accrue knowledge through certifications and continuing education sessions. Due to the persistent distress caused by these dynamics, some of this sub-group made the conscious decision to stop working with white clients or psychotherapy altogether.

The primary method in which this sub-group strove toward the Therapist Paragon was by emphasizing their education, training experience, and expertise. This was done by attempting to accumulate more knowledge than white colleagues and appearing more competent in the way they spoke, dressed, and displayed their diplomas and certificates. This "dressing up status," as termed during analysis, was an effort to counteract the microaggressions and imposter syndrome they experienced throughout their career.

For these participants, the pathway to the Therapist Paragon was paradoxical, in that it appeared to cause pervasive feelings of self-doubt and personal harm. The paragon values allowed the microaggressions and imposter syndrome to thrive and isolate this sub-group. While it appeared to guide the white therapists through complex issues of power differences for the sake of their own comfort, the ingrained image of white, male therapeutic perfection resulted in added burden for the BIPOC sub-group.

Discussion

The implications of this grounded theory involves all aspects of the human service field. For the sake of brevity, this section will focus on clinical and counseling psychology with an initial attempt to examine graduate education and continuing education, as well as supervision/consultation. We also question if these paragon values are codified in our ethics codes. Specifically, we call on the field to consider the origins of the Therapist Paragon and how this image of therapeutic perfection impacts clinician's careers across racial lines.

Graduate training

The proposed definition of the Therapist Paragon is the constellation of implicit and explicit principles and values regarding what makes good therapy and how the perfect therapist is supposed to look, sound, and act. Sources of this internalized image of perfection consist of theories, research, guidelines, and common practice. These are introduced and ingrained during graduate education in the form of textbooks, articles, lectures, role plays, clinical training, supervision, and evaluation. Thus, through graduate school, the clinician is gradually formed into the field's image of the competent entry-level practitioner.

Considering the history of our field, many of the prominent forbearers are white and male. These theorists and practitioners are closely studied and honored through reading, discussing, and emulating their techniques. While the field educates its students in theory and practice, it is difficult to separate the ideas and techniques from the originating pioneer. Thus, we naturally celebrate both the pioneer and the knowledge. While there have been many brilliant BIPOC scholars and clinicians throughout the history of psychology, they usually are underrepresented in the curriculum. Furthermore, while most programs include a class addressing individual and cultural differences, many do not include the aspect of socially-conferred privilege and how to account for this in psychotherapy.

The implications of this study point to the possible negative impact upon both BIPOC therapists and clients due, in part, to the Therapist Paragon. To address this, further research and programmatic changes are recommended. Specifically, decolonizing the curriculum

has been a recent trend in some pockets of psychology (McCubbin et al., 2023). This usually involves adopting a critical lens to examine how current education is perpetuating a white supremist, patriarchal view of the field based on historical practices (Ratts et al., 2016). Efforts to reframe these aspects of the syllabi include re-centering international, indigenous, and BIPOC scholars into the curriculum, acknowledging the field's historical contribution to oppression of marginalized groups, and daring to consider new ways of research, assessment, and practice (Ponce et al., 2023). Additional recommendations include increasing diversity within faculty and students, and considering the impact of cultural competence and humility training on both white and BIPOC students.

Continuing education

Continuing education is a common mechanism to keep practitioners trained in the most contemporary research and practice of the time. It is an embodiment of the professional value of lifelong learning in the field of psychology. In light of these results, it is important to consider that the Therapist Paragon can be deeply ingrained in the learner, especially dependent on what era they attended graduate school. Much of multicultural education has changed drastically over the decades, with the focus on social privilege and social responsiveness occurring in recent years (Bergkamp, 2022). Thus, it is important to consider the learner's era of training and focus on updating their knowledge from that point to develop a congruent historical sequence. This will also assist in understanding possible philosophical conflicts in supervision and consultation.

In addition, current continuing education offerings need to match the contemporary curriculum of graduate programs. As aforementioned, both need to expand the training from cultural differences within the therapeutic dyad to historically entrenched systems of social privilege allotment that impact psychological functioning (Wilcox, 2022; Bergkamp et al., 2022a,b).

Ethics

All of our professional associations within the field of psychology include an ethics code that guide and mandate education, research, and practice. The origins of these ethics consist of commonly held beliefs and values of psychology that increase benefit and mitigate harm. In light of the Therapist Paragon theory, it is hypothesized that our ethics codes are a potent source of therapeutic perfections that may be embedded within a history of hegemonic colonial values. Further research and consideration is encouraged to assess the codification of white, patriarchal norms embedded within our aspirational principles and requirements.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Antioch University Seattle. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Cancel culture can be collectively validating for groups experiencing harm

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Introduction: Social psychological research on collective action and intergroup harm has yet to adequately consider the potential role of cancel culture or feelings of collective validation in motivating collective action. The current research will begin to fill this gap and may broaden our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that inspire and maintain collective action in response to intergroup harm. To our knowledge, this research is the first social psychological analysis of the impact of cancel culture on collective action and as means for producing feelings of collective validation.

Methods: In two experimental studies, participants read a story describing an event of discrimination against their group followed by a manipulation of the presence or absence of an episode of cancel culture. Study 1 samples woman university students ($N = 520$) and focuses on their responses to a sexist incident on campus. Study 2 (pre-registered) assesses the generality of the model in a racism context with a community sample of East Asian Canadians and Americans ($N = 237$).

Results: Study 1 showed that an episode of cancel culture had an indirect positive effect on collective action intentions mediated by feelings of collective validation and collective empowerment. Study 2 showed the indirect effect of cancel culture on collective action intentions mediated by feelings of collective validation and collective anger and contempt.

Discussion: The current research offers a novel theoretical and empirical introduction to the concept of collective validation and the understudied context of cancel culture to the existing social psychological research and theory on collective action. Further, cancel culture has been criticized as problematic. However, this perspective centres those in positions of power. Through this research, we hope to shift the focus onto marginalized groups' perspectives of episodes of cancel culture. This research shows that groups who experience harm find these episodes of cancel culture validating in ways that have yet to be fully explored by intergroup relations research. Further, these findings suggest that collective validation does mediate the relationship between cancel culture and collective action; thus, cancel culture becomes an important contributor to resistance by marginalized groups through collective validation.

Introduction

Cancel culture involves the highly visible calling for and enacting of boycotts, condemnation, and social exiling of a person or group whose harmful behaviours or attitudes have been deemed unacceptable, offensive, or inappropriate. While predominantly online, the practice of cancelling and cancel culture predates the internet and has its foundations in Black liberation and protest. Anne Charity Hudley, chair of linguistics of African America for the University of California Santa Barbara, states,

> [w]hile the terminology of cancel culture may be new and most applicable to social media through Black Twitter, in particular, the concept of being canceled is not new to Black culture [… cancelling is] a survival skill as old as the Southern black use of the boycott (from Romano, 2020).

She likens cancel culture to protest and boycott of people and groups, rather than businesses, and describes cancel culture as a way to empower those whose voices are marginalized; "*it's a collective way of saying, 'We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we are not going to pay attention to you in the way that we once did. I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you'*" (quote from Romano, 2020).

However, cancel culture has been criticized by some as more problematic than helpful (Ronson, 2016; Hagi, 2019; Romano, 2020; see also Drury, 2002 for reactionary crowds). Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) advocate and social media influencer, Beecham (2021) argues that while the goal of cancel culture is to combat prejudice, in practice it often redirects prejudice to a new target through "us vs. them" thinking. Beecham's argument implies a singular goal of cancel culture as combatting prejudice and claims that cancel culture is ineffective in achieving this goal. It seems hasty to claim that cancel culture's only goal – or main goal – is to combat prejudice, and conclusions about the overall value of this social practice are premature without first considering a wider range of possible goals and impacts, especially the impacts on those who have been harmed and are speaking up. This is not to say that Beecham has neglected to consider the impacts of cancel culture on harmed groups, or that all her critiques of cancel culture are or erroneous – many have merit. Rather, we propose that cancel culture, whether effective at reducing prejudice or not, may reduce the impact of harm and/or elicit other productive forms of collective action. Harmed groups may benefit from the support, validation, and visibility from others who are involved in cancelling perpetrators of harm. That is, an episode of cancel culture might provide the conditions for the harmed group to experience feelings of collective validation that, in turn, could increase feelings of empowerment that inspire or maintain collective action.

To our knowledge, this research is the first social psychological analysis of the impact of cancel culture on collective action. In addition, research on collective action in response to intergroup harm has yet to adequately consider the role of feelings of collective validation as a motivator of collective action. The current research will begin to fill this gap and in so doing may broaden our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that inspire and maintain collective responses to intergroup harm.

Feelings of collective validation

Validation is typically understood as the recognition and affirmation of a person's experiences and an affirmation of their feelings as legitimate. In clinical trauma therapy, practitioners have successfully used validation to support patient wellbeing and have identified feelings of validation as an important and necessary component of recovery and healing following harm (e.g., Hong and Lishner, 2016; Özeke-Kocabaş and Üstündağ-Budak, 2017). However, this research focuses on the psychopathology of trauma and practitioners' use of trauma validation to support *individual* clients in *interpersonal* contexts. To develop the concept of *intergroup* validation, it may be valuable to consider group-based harm (discrimination, harassment, oppression, etc.) as trauma (Carter, 2007). Thus, the concept of validation might also be useful when understanding and thinking about responses to intergroup harm.

Discussions and investigations of validation within social psychological literature are scant, but there are a few. Kalkhoff (2005) describes collective validation as occurring when "*bystanders copy or refrain from challenging a lower-status actor's deference to a higher-status actor [or] validate deferential behavior collectively by pressuring a recalcitrant lower-status actor to defer to a higher-status counterpart*" (p. 59). More simply, Kalkhoff is suggesting that the behaviours of bystanders validate social norms within groups by pressuring lower-status members to conform or by refraining from challenging the submission of those with lower-status. However, this use of group validation focuses on *intra*group relations, where members of a single group validate the actions of their own group members. Contrastingly, collective validation as an *intergroup* phenomenon would involve the feeling that one's group and its experiences have been recognized and validated by members of other groups. Additionally, Kalkhoff's definition describes only how validation can further marginalize those of "lower-status" and fails to recognize that validation might also occur where a "lower-status" group challenges a "higher- status" group – members of other groups may validate the harmed group, recognize the illegitimacy of the harm, and even join them to challenge the actions of the perpetrator group and demand reparations. Therefore, we can extend Kalkhoff's conceptualization of collective validation by examining group-based harm where the harmed group challenges the perpetrator's behaviour and demands justice.

An interesting and relevant example of validation is present in Foster et al.'s (2021) research on women's expectations of validation from others for engaging in online collective action. They found that when women expected greater validation for their social media activism, they showed more interest in future collective action. However, validation in Foster and colleagues' work focused on experiences of personal validation (validation of me as a person – likable, friendly, etc.). In addition, this work focuses on expectations that one will be validated for future actions. Here, we hope to expand on this by focusing specifically on actual experienced feelings of collective validation (the feeling that one's group is being validated).

Interestingly, collective validation of group-based harm is also briefly described in the literature on collective apologies (e.g., Hornsey and Wohl, 2013), where recognition of a group's continued suffering and commitment to redress by the perpetrator group are seen as essential to an effective apology. An effective apology should offer this kind of validation. However, while a collective apology offers

validation of a group's suffering and their responses to that suffering, we propose that collective validation following harm may be sought from groups other than the perpetrators – from a wider range of agents, including ingroup members and especially members of the superordinate category (see Turner et al., 1987) – the larger, more inclusive group that includes the harmed group, the perpetrator group, and other groups. Thus, although the validation offered by perpetrators through apologies may be important, validation by third party groups may also be particularly valuable.

Harmed groups receiving support from a third party is also explored by Simon and Klandermans' (2001) triangular model of politicized collective identity. This model proposes three steps that lead harmed group members to become politicized and act against harm. First, group members become aware of the harm and agree that it is unwanted (awareness of shared grievances). Next, they identify an adversary to whom they attribute the harm (adversarial attribution). If this adversary does not address their harmful behaviours, the harmed group seeks to connect with members of the broader society to gain support. Although Simon and Klandermans do not explicitly consider that the participation of third parties can serve as validation, they do consider other consequences for this recruitment of a third party, such as structuring of the understanding of the conflict as one including opponents and potential allies, rather than "*bipolar in-group/out-group confrontation*" (p. 328). This broadens the meaning of collective action to include both actions aimed at opponents (or perpetrators) and action aimed at recruiting third party allies. This implies that the contributions of other groups (third parties) are desirable and valuable to disadvantaged group members. We propose that one reason for this is that third parties offer not only a strategic advantage but also psychological validation of the ingroup and its struggle. In addition, Simon and Klandermans' ideas map nicely onto the context of cancel culture, where members of other groups within the larger society join in the action and thus evidence themselves as potential allies with the harmed group.

Finally, most discussions of validation describe validation in terms of the actions of those who are providing validation. Thus, validation is conceptualised in terms of the behaviours of others that are intended to create the conditions for members of the harmed group to *feel validated*. However, these behaviours *may or may not* produce these feelings. Thus, any action by others is only validating to the degree that the harmed group experiences it as such. Therefore, we propose that collective validation is more aptly understood as the psychological experience of those who are targeted. Thus, the current research centers the psychological experience of the harmed group by describing and measuring collective validation as the feelings of those who have been harmed.

Cancel culture and feelings of collective validation

Okimoto and Wenzel (2008) describe how intergroup transgressions can threaten the status and power equilibrium and also threaten the validity of common values that the victim group expects are shared across the superordinate category (their community or society). The kinds of transgressions that lead to episodes of cancel culture often involve acts that threaten the victim group's status, power and autonomy/control over their reputation

(e.g., a sexist comment threatens the status and diminishes the power and autonomy of all women in that context). This is especially salient in intergroup relations where the status of the offending group may come at the expense the harmed group. Simultaneously, values the victim believes are shared broadly within society are also violated, threatening the validity of these values (e.g., the victim believes that society values women and sexist comments violate, and thus call into question, the general support of that value). According to Okimoto and Wenzel (2008), a response to this injustice would need to address both concerns if justice is to be restored. We propose that both concerns may be partially addressed by an episode of cancel culture. When a perpetrator is "called out" for their offensive actions, they are given the opportunity to take responsibility, apologise, and restore justice. However, if the perpetrator refuses, the harmed group calls on the superordinate group – society – for justice. By isolating, humiliating, and diminishing the status of the offender, cancel culture involves the superordinate group communicating to the harmed group that their status, and autonomy over their reputation, and the importance of the shared values that had been violated by the offending group are indeed secure. Therefore, cancel culture offers to the harmed group the objective conditions that may lead to feelings of collective validation, through high visibility (e.g., amplifying the voices of harmed group members), public denouncing of social norm violation (i.e., "*we agree that the sexist comment violates a norm*"), punishment of the perpetrators and calls for justice (i.e., through cancelling and public shame), and explicit support for the harmed group (e.g., "*we believe, see, hear, and agree with you*").

Thus, cancelling of the offending group may provide the conditions that lead members of the harmed group to feel validated through the participation of the superordinate group in reaffirming and recognizing the harmed group's status and power, and restoring shared values in defense of the harmed group. In part this is done by increasing the visibility of the offense while simultaneously decreasing the visibility of the offender, and by increasing the visibility of the harmed group's response to the offense, thus amplifying the voices of marginalised groups.

This process reflects Banet-Weiser's (2018) claim that online societies function through an inequality of power, where power is embodied through visibility and attention and often politicized and commodified. Attention – in the form of likes, shares, and trending hashtags – becomes a means to promote specific online content following the same socioeconomic politics of power as the offline world. When actions challenge deeper systems of oppression and power, they become undesirable and are less likely to attract attention. Banet-Weiser explains that many popular and commodified online feminist movements, for example, fail to "*challenge deep structures of inequalities*" (p. 11) and this failure makes them more palatable to those in power and, consequently, leads them to be more visible. Additionally, "for some images and practices to become visible, others [those that do challenge deep structures of inequalities] must be rendered invisible" (p. 11). Cancelling a perpetrator group or its members can, at times, amplify and make more visible harmed and marginalized groups.

Thus, visibility may be key in inspiring feelings of collective validation as it offers public recognition and the possibility that others will also affirm the suffering caused by intergroup harm. Therefore, this research uses the context of cancel culture as one that could

inspire feelings of collective validation after group-based harm because it includes the following:

a. It is provided by members of a superordinate group
b. It directly recognizes that harm was done to a particular group
c. It explicitly affirms the harmed group's emotional responses to that harm
d. It supports and amplifies the harmed group in challenging the perpetrator group's actions and in demanding justice
e. It has high public visibility

Even when limited and sporadic, episodes of cancel culture may have positive influences on social change through amplifying the harmed group's voices, by temporarily canceling powerful and harmful voices, and by raising the visibility of marginalized groups. This explicit recognition and support (i.e., validation) of a harmed group may allow them to recognize their collective power (i.e., feeling of collective empowerment) and thus motivate continued efforts for social change. Therefore, we propose that one way that cancel culture can influence subsequent actions is through the resulting experience (or subjective feeling) of collective validation and its subsequent impact on feelings of collective empowerment.

Collective empowerment and collective action

We propose that experiencing validation following harm can play an important role in building the sense of collective empowerment that is critical for members of disadvantaged groups to initiate, join, and continue their involvement in collective action directed at social change (e.g., Drury and Reicher, 1999). Rappaport (1987) defines collective empowerment as the phenomenon or process of being able or allowed to do something because there is control or authority over that thing. Similarly, Wright (2010) conceptualises perceived collective control as comprised of two beliefs: "(*1*) *that social change is contingent upon behavior* (i.e*., that the situation is modifiable*) *and (2) that [*a person's*] group in particular can execute the behaviors necessary to produce the desired change*" (p.864; see also Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988).

Both representations of empowerment support the contention that *collective* empowerment includes two components. One is the belief that one's *group* has the power to influence the social environment. However, one cannot experience these feelings of efficacy or power if one first does not first perceive the social environment as malleable to influence. That is, one must first perceive "instability" (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) in the current social environment. Therefore, collective empowerment involves perceptions of instability and collective efficacy. Thus, while collective validation is the feeling that one's group's experiences – especially with harm – are recognised, valued, and affirmed by a superordinate group, collective empowerment is the feeling that the social environment that generated harm can be changed (instability) and that one's group has the power and means to change it (efficacy).

Thus, if experiencing collective validation serves to heighten feelings of empowerment – then cancel culture may lead marginalized groups to engage in collective efforts to achieve social change indirectly through the psychological mechanisms of feelings of collective validation and collective empowerment.

Collective emotions and collective action

In addition to recognizing and condemning the harm done to the group, cancel culture might also offer legitimacy to collective emotions such as anger and contempt. Thus, the feeling of validation that results from an episode of cancel culture could also include the sense that one's strong negative emotions about perpetrators of harm are appropriate, which in turn may strengthen the expression of emotions that are well-documented to provide one the psychological foundation for collective action – outgroup-directed anger and contempt. For example, Stürmer and Simon (2009) found that anger was a direct predictor of collective action as it provided an avenue for participants to relieve aggressive tension. Similarly, van Zomeren et al. (2008a) identify group-based anger as a unique pathway to collective action (see also Tausch et al., 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2012; van Zomeren, 2013) describing how "emotional social support validates the group-based appraisal of [an] event, which also affirms emotional responses like anger" (van Zomeren et al., 2004, p. 650). However, few of these studies focus on the combination of anger and contempt.

Anger and contempt are distinct, yet highly related emotions. Mackie et al. (2000) argue that anger – which is the emotional evaluation of someone's *actions* – is related to "action tendencies against the triggering agent" (p. 610) or attack behaviours (e.g., violence, arguing). Contempt is the emotional evaluation of someone's *worth* and is related to exclusionary actions (e.g., avoidance or exiling behaviour). Groups that are traditionally marginalized by oppressive systems may feel contempt for perpetrator groups following incidents of harm because of the long history of attempts to address injustices with little success. Simultaneously, these harmed groups might still hope for an end to oppression – which requires cooperation from perpetrator groups – and, thus, being angry or frustrated with the perpetrator groups for their lack of cooperation in resolving conflict.

Evident in most episodes of cancel culture is the presence of both anger and contempt where participants engage in *both* attack and exclusionary actions simultaneously. The act of attacking someone's reputation is an anger response. Social exiling of perpetrators is a contempt response to unacceptable behaviour. This mixture of anger and contempt make cancel culture an interesting example of intergroup conflict.

Further, the participation of superordinate group members in cancelling of the perpetrators may communicate to the harmed group that their emotional responses of both anger and contempt are reasonable, merited, and valid. The resulting feeling of validation of one's anger and contempt on behalf of their group's experience may serve to increase these emotions, which should in turn increase their likelihood of engaging in collective action. Therefore, this current research will assess whether the subjective feelings of validation that emerges as a result of an episode of cancel culture also enhance anger and contempt which should lead to greater willingness to engage in collective action.
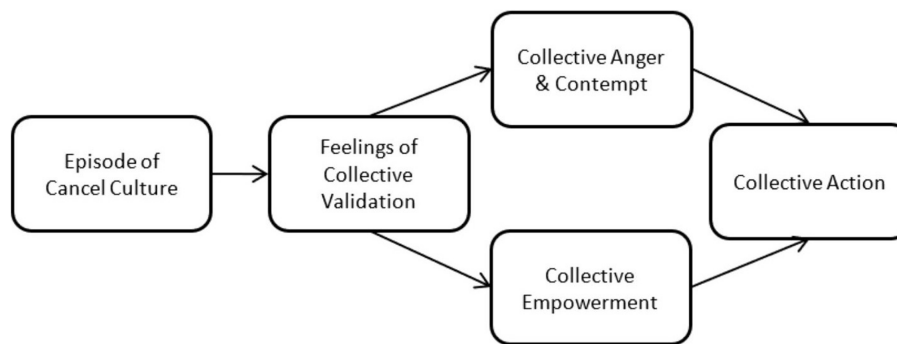
FIGURE 1
Theoretical mediation model.

Theoretical model

This theorizing results in a sequential mediational model that proposes that, following collective harm, an episode of cancel culture should elicit feelings of collective validation in the harmed group. This experience of collective validation strengthens feeling of both collective empowerment and the collective emotions of anger and contempt, which in turn lead to stronger intentions to engage in collective action. Thus, it is predicted that an episode of cancel culture will have indirect positive impacts on collective anger and contempt, feelings of collective empowerment, and collective action that are mediated by feelings of collective validation.

The current research

Two experimental studies test the model presented in Figure 1. Study 1 uses a university student sample and focuses on the responses of women to a blatantly sexist incident on campus. Study 2 uses a community sample of East Asian Canadians and Americans and focuses on an episode of cancel culture in response to an act of anti-East Asian discrimination.

In both studies it is expected that being exposed to an episode of cancel culture, versus a control condition, will increase collective action intentions and behaviours. This effect will be sequentially mediated first by feelings of collective validation, followed by both collective anger and contempt and collective empowerment (see Figure 1). We do not have *a priori* predictions about a direct pathway between the manipulation of cancel culture and collective anger and contempt or between the manipulation of cancel culture and collective empowerment.

Study 1: sexism and university women

Method

Participants

Data were collected between October 2021 and March 2022. Cases were removed if participants did not complete the survey (133

TABLE 1 Summary of participant demographics (Study 1).

Race/ethnicity	Participants (N =520)	
	N	%*
Black or African	9	1.7
East Asian	133	25.6
Indigenous	6	1.2
Latino/a/e or Hispanic	12	2.3
Middle Eastern/North African	34	6.5
South Asian	116	22.3
South-East Asian	54	10.4
White or European	192	36.9
Prefer to specify or provide more detail	19	3.7
Age	N	%
18–20	433	83.3
21–25	82	15.8
26–30	1	0.2
31–35	1	0.2
36–40	1	0.2
40+	2	0.4

*Percentage values may not equal to 100% for race/ethnicity since participants were able to select more than one category.

cases), spent less than 500 s (approximately 8 min; 17 cases), or spent more than 7,200 s (120 min; 65 cases) on the survey.[1] Finally, repeating cases were removed (20 cases). The final sample, after removing problematic cases (e.g., nonconsenting, repeated submissions, etc.), consisted of 520 university women. Demographic information is listed in Table 1.

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1 Participants who spent less than 500 s on the survey had more incomplete data and tended to select the same scale values throughout (e.g., selecting five for every item). Participants who spent longer than 7,200 s on the survey were more likely to spend long periods of time on one page with questions that should only have taken minutes to complete, indicating that they may have left the survey open to complete other tasks and come back to it later.

Procedure

University women were recruited online using the Psychology Department's Research Participation System (RPS). Participants were told that the researchers were "*interested in understanding perceptions of community responses to contentious incidents and topics in campus environments*." Those who signed up for the study were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In both conditions, participants read a fictitious scenario of a sexist incident on campus. In the cancel culture condition this incident was followed by a description of a highly visible episode of cancel culture against the perpetrator group. In the control condition, the incident was followed by some filler/neutral information about unrelated activities on campus.

Following exposure to the given condition, participants responded to measures of feelings of collective validation, collective empowerment, anger, contempt, and collective action intentions.

Cancel culture condition

The cancel culture condition included a scenario describing a sexist incident on campus (modeled on a real event at Texas Tech University; see Barbato, 2014; Servantes, 2014) followed by a description of a targeted campaign by others from the community to cancel a fictitious fraternity (e.g., #EndEtaNu). The episode of cancel culture includes components naturally found in real-world cancel culture scenarios such as high visibility ("*[…] the post had 200 likes and has been shared over 30 times by the university community and beyond*"), public denouncing of norm violation ("*women on campus have every right to be pissed*"), punishment of the perpetrators ("*Two Eta Nu members […] fired from a co-op position and […] suspended from the swim team*") and calls for justice ("*A petition […] calling for the removal of Eta Nu chapter and already has over 1,500 signatures in less than a week*"), and objective support of the harmed group ("*this is hurtful and has very real consequences for women on campus*").

Control condition

The control condition included the sexist incident on campus scenario, but the description of the campaign to cancel the fraternity was replaced with filler information about other homecoming incidents unrelated to the sexist incident or to issues of gender or sexism more generally (e.g., vandalism and littering, a student getting stuck on top of a residence building).

Measures

Feelings of collective validation

This measure was constructed for this study.

Participants responded to 24 items consistent with the definition of subjective or felt collective validation previously outlined (e.g., "*Experiences of harm faced by women are recognized by the university community*") on a 7-point scale (1 *Strongly disagree* to 7 *Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater felt collective validation (α =0.79). See Appendix A.[2]

2   See Supplementary materials for EFA.

Collective anger and contempt

Participants responded to 8 items measuring anger and contempt (Mackie et al., 2000). They reported the extent to which they felt angry, displeased, irritated, furious, contemptuous, disgusted, repelled, and sick on 5-point scales (1 *Not at all* to 5 *Extremely*). Higher scores indicate greater reported feelings of anger and contempt (α =0.94). While Mackie et al. use two separate measures for anger and contempt, this study uses one since Mackie et al. found a high correlation between the two emotions, which was mirrored in these data ($r = 0.86$).

Collective empowerment

Our initial conceptualization of empowerment research included perceived instability and collective efficacy. However, our 3-item measure of perceived instability of the relationship between the perpetrator group and harmed group adapted from Mummendey et al. (1999) and Wright et al. (2020) had very low reliability ($\alpha = 0.56$) and including it undermined the reliability of our measure of collective empowerment. Thus, these three items were not included, and the overall final measure of collective empowerment included two scales.

The second was a 5-item measure of collective efficacy adapted from Sabherwal et al. (2021). Participants rated how likely "*Women on campus, working together, can influence the following groups to do something about gender-based violence on campus*": (a) the federal government, (b) the provincial government, (c) the local government, (d) university administrators, and (e) fraternity leaders on 7-point scales (1 *Not at all* to 7 *Extremely*). Higher scores indicate greater perceived collective efficacy ($\alpha = 0.85$).

The third measure was a more general measure of empowerment that included 4 items measuring women's feelings of strength, control, and power (e.g., "*I feel that women on campus are strong*") on a 7-point agreement scale (1 *Strongly disagree* to 7 *Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater feelings of empowerment ($\alpha = 0.81$).

The collective efficacy and general empowerment measures were aggregated to provide a single collective empowerment score with higher scores indicating greater feelings of empowerment ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Collective action intentions

Participants responded to 10 items measuring their willingness to participate in various forms of anti-sexism activism (e.g., "*I would participate in a rally demanding equal salaries for men and women*"; "*I would act against sexism in general*") on 7-point scales (1 *Very unlikely* to 7 *Very likely*). This measure was adapted from Becker and Wright (2011) for use in a 2022 Canadian Context (e.g., "*I would donate for a women's organization which lobbies for women's rights, such as Terres des femmes*" was changed to "*I would donate to an organization that advocates for women's rights, such as Canadian Women's Foundation*"). Higher scores indicate stronger intentions to participate in collective action ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Results

Predicted mediational analyses

The hypothesised model using the measure of Collective Action Intentions as the dependent variable was assessed using SPSS PROCESS Model 81 (Hayes, 2022).

Condition (cancel culture vs. control) had a significant direct effect on Feelings of Collective Validation, which also had a

significant direct effect on Collective Empowerment. Collective Empowerment had a significant direct effect on Collective Action Intention. The direct effect of Condition on Collective Action Intentions was not significant, and the only significant indirect effect of Condition on Collective Action Intention was a sequential mediation through *both* Feelings of Collective Validation and Collective Empowerment [β = 0.03, 95% CI (0.01, 0.05)]. The causal steps approach to mediational analyses (see Baron and Kenny, 1986) held that a direct effect of the independent variable on the final outcome variable (or the total effect) should be a "gatekeeper" to mediational analyses. However, more recent statisticians have argued against this approach (Shrout and Bolger, 2002; Hayes, 2009) and have suggested using bootstrapping to test for indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2004). This bootstrapping method is the approach taken in Hayes SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2022) that was used for these analyses. Therefore, these results suggest the need to consider other possible pathways between Condition and Collective Action Intentions that were not included in this model (Table 2).

The predicted direct effect of Feelings of Collective Validation on Collective Emotions was non-significant and thus the sequential indirect effect of Condition on Collective Action Intentions mediated by Feelings of Collective Validation and Collective Emotions was non-significant (β = −0.00, 95% CI (−0.01, 0.01)). However, the direct effect of Collective Emotions on Collective Action Intentions was significant. See Table 3 and Figure 2 for details of these direct effects.

Discussion

This first experimental study provides initial evidence that being exposed to an episode of cancel culture does elicit feelings of collective validation and these feelings are associated with a stronger sense of collective empowerment which in turn is associated with greater collective action intention. To our knowledge, this is the first time that a positive relationship between exposure to cancel culture and intentions to engage in collective action has been demonstrated using an experimental design. However, the correlation between Condition and Collective Action Intentions is small (−0.01), implying the possible presence of other pathways in the total model. Regardless, despite legitimate critiques of cancel culture and a recognition that, like cancel culture itself, these effects may be limited in time and scope, it does appear cancel culture in response to a blatant act of sexism can have a positive impact on women's interest in taking actions to fight gender inequality.

Collective empowerment and feelings of collective validation

While collective – and personal – empowerment has been linked to greater collective action in previous work (Drury and Reicher, 1999; van Zomeren et al., 2008b; Wright, 2010), this research provides preliminary support for the role of collective validation as a precursor for women's sense of collective empowerment and, thus, intentions to participate in collective action. Therefore, future research on motivating factors for collective action may benefit from the inclusion of feelings of collective validation and consider sources of this validation (e.g., cancel culture). It is also possible that instances of allyship such as cancel culture elicit collective validation of a group's existing power through communicating collective care and, thus, group value (i.e., "*we care about your wellbeing and experiences with harm because you matter*"; e.g., Smith, 1997; Weis et al., 2006; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011). This is not to say that cancel culture should be used to motivate groups toward collective action, rather it serves as an interesting and important example of allyship from a superordinate group that may, through collective validation (i.e., recognition, support, and increased visibility) of a harmed group, foster the collective empowerment needed to motivate groups toward collective action.

Emotions and feelings of collective validation

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Stürmer and Simon, 2009; Tausch et al., 2011; Shepherd and Evans, 2020), stronger feelings of anger and contempt were associated with stronger collective action intentions. However, this relationship seems to be separate from cancel culture and feelings of collective validation. One may argue that the collective validation that emerges from cancel culture may alleviate feelings of anger and contempt. However, the women in the current study were substantially angry and contemptuous ($\bar{x}$ =4.43, SD = 0.71, on a 5-point scale). Hence, two other possible explanations for this finding are that (1) emotions constitute a pathway toward collective action that is separate from collective validation and that these emotions are more influenced by the nature of the harmful/unjust actions of the perpetrator group than by the subsequent responses to those actions and (2) there is a difference between affective social support and instrumental social support present in this research.

TABLE 2 Correlation matrix for all variables.

	Mean (SD)	Condition	Collective validation	Collective emotions	Collective empowerment
Collective validation	4.3 (0.7)	0.18**			
Collective emotions	4.4 (0.7)	0.06	0.01		
Collective empowerment	4.6 (1.0)	0.09*	0.27**	−0.06	
Collective action intentions	5.6 (1.2)	−0.01	0.11*	0.26**	0.28**

*Correlation significant at the 0.05 level.
**Correlation significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 3 Direct effects of predicted model 81.

| | Feelings of Collective Validation | | | | |
| | | | | 95% CI | |
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	**0.23**	**0.06**	**<0.001**	**0.12**	**0.34**
Feelings of collective validation	–	–	–	–	–
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	3.92	0.09	<0.001	3.74	4.10
	$R^2 = 0.03$ $F(1,518) = 16.28, p < 0.001$				

| | Collective anger and contempt | | | | |
| | | | | 95% CI | |
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	0.09	0.06	0.15	−0.03	0.22
Feelings of collective validation	−0.01	0.05	0.92	−0.10	0.90
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	4.33	0.21	<0.001	3.90	4.73
	$R^2 = 0.00$ $F(2,517) = 1.03, p = 0.36$				

| | Collective empowerment | | | | |
| | | | | 95% CI | |
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	0.09	0.09	0.32	−0.08	0.26
Feelings of collective validation	**0.40**	**0.07**	**<0.001**	**0.27**	**0.53**
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	2.81	0.29	<0.001	2.24	3.38
	$R^2 = 0.07$ $F(2,517) = 20.60, p < 0.001$				

| | Collective action intent | | | | |
| | | | | 95% CI | |
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	−0.13	0.10	0.20	−0.32	0.07
Feelings of collective validation	0.10	0.08	0.32	−0.07	0.23
Collective anger and contempt	**0.41**	**0.07**	**<0.001**	**0.31**	**0.57**
Collective empowerment	**0.27**	**0.06**	**<0.001**	**0.28**	**0.54**
Constant	2.21	0.45	<0.001	1.32	3.10
	$R^2 = 0.14$ $F(4,515) = 21.74, p < 0.001$				

van Zomeren et al. (2008a) social identity model of collective action (SIMCA) proposes three distinct predictors of collective action: affective justice (emotional responses to perceived injustice – such as anger); politicized identity; and collective efficacy. Therefore, it is possible that collective anger and contempt are

motivating collective action intention for reasons separate from feelings of collective validation.

In addition, according to van Zomeren et al. (2004), emotional social support (support of the harmed group's emotions and opinions) influenced collective action through collective anger, whereas

instrumental social support (direct action by a superordinate group to correct the injustice) influenced collective action through collective efficacy (see also van Zomeren et al., 2008a affective vs. nonaffective injustice). Therefore, it is also possible that the cancel culture scenario presented in the current research elicited a sense of instrumental social support more so than emotional social support resulting in the lack of a relationship between feelings of collective validation and collective anger and contempt. For example, the campus community petitioning administration to expel the perpetrators and enact consequences for the Eta Nu fraternity may have been viewed by participants as instrumental collective validation (or social support) since these examples represent public actions.

Improvements for study 2

Study 2 will extend the current findings with three important changes from Study 1. First, we will test the generality of the findings by focusing on a different intergroup relationship. Thus, Study 2, includes a community sample of East Asian Canadians and Americans and focuses on responses to an incident of Anti-Asian discrimination. Second, in order to better consider the impact of emotions as mediators, the scenario presenting the manipulation will include more messages that reflect affective responses (van Zomeren et al., 2004). Third, to streamline the data collection, the 2-part measure of collective empowerment used in Study 1 will be replaced by a simpler, more direct measure (Moya-Garófano et al., 2021).

Study 2: anti-East Asian racism

Incidents of violence and anti-East Asian hate crimes are on the rise following the 2020 COVID-19 outbreaks (Chen et al., 2020). In addition, the East Asian diaspora is beginning to speak openly about this xenophobia and racism. Prior to these recent events, racism toward East Asian Canadians and Americans has typically been marginalised and downplayed, at times even by East Asian communities (e.g., Tai, 2020; Shao and Lin, 2021). This may be in part due to the Model Minority Myth (MMM) that minimises and marginalizes East Asian communities and groups' experiences with racism since they are viewed as passive, privileged, successful and even as "honorary whites" who do not complain or protest like other systemically marginalised groups (Aguirre and Lio, 2008; Yoo et al., 2010; Lee, 2022). Thus, East Asian peoples may fear that drawing attention to themselves via collective action against anti-East Asian racism might result in backlash and more racist discrimination, rather than support or solidarity, from the dominant groups that endorse the MMM. Wei et al. (2010) found that Asian American women who endorsed direct confrontations of gender discrimination reported more negative outcomes including decreased life satisfaction. While the MMM has received considerable academic and public critique, it remains a common representation of East Asian communities in both the US and Canada. The resulting lack of public attention has also led to limited attention from social psychological and anti-racism research. However, anti-Asian racism has been rampant in North America for decades, and there is growing public discourse and activism (Brockell, 2021; Government of Canada, 2021; Lee, 2022). Therefore, a focus on anti- East Asian discrimination and collective responses to it are both important and timely. Thus,

we will use this context to explore the role of cancel culture, feelings of collective validation, emotions, and collective empowerment in motivating collective action.

Focus group

Prior to beginning the study, the second author conducted a focus group with East Asian Canadian students. The rationale was to include members of East Asian communities early in the research process as we were developing the content of the manipulations and adapting the measures to this new intergroup context. It was important that the scenarios and measures be respectful of East Asian cultures, perspectives, experiences, and communities. The specific goal of the focus group was to gauge how East Asian students responded to an early draft of the scenarios used in the manipulation and to use their feedback to make alterations. In addition, it was important that the list of potential collective actions was culturally relevant (e.g., would members of East Asian communities be likely to attend a protest).

In the focus group, the students read both the control and cancel culture fictitious racism scenarios and the collective action intention measure and provided feedback on each. No changes were made to the fictitious scenarios as a result of the focus group feedback. We received positive feedback from participants about the realism, cultural sensitivity, and participant responses to both the control and cancel culture conditions. However, the collective action measure was modified to include some actions in which the group indicated members of East Asian communities would be more likely to engage (e.g., writing to government officials).

Method

Participants

Data was collected via *Prolific*, an online survey research platform for social sciences. The survey was available to participants who were of East Asian descent and residing in either Canada or the United States. Participants were remunerated with $6 USD for approximately 30 min of time. Cases were removed if participants did not complete the core measures of the survey (33 cases) or spent less than 500 s (approximately 8 min; 12 cases).[3] Despite using Prolific demographic filters, some participants did not indicate being of East Asian descent and these cases were removed (17 cases). Due to a technological error, the randomly assigned condition for two participants was not recorded by Qualtrics and these cases were removed. The total sample following removal of problematic cases consisted of 237 self-identified East Asian Canadian and American participants. Demographic information is listed in Table 4 below.

Procedure

In this pre-registered experiment,[4] Participants were told that the researchers were interested in *"understanding responses to contentious online topics and behaviours."* Those who signed up

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3   No participant spent more than 7,200 s.

4   osf.io/qftn8

for the study were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In both conditions, participants read a fictitious scenario of a racist incident in the Vancouver community. In the cancel culture condition this was followed by a description of an episode of cancel culture against the perpetrator group. In the control condition, participants read only the scenario of a racist incident without any additional information. Following exposure to the given condition, participants responded to measures of the same variables in Study 1.

Manipulation

Cancel culture condition

The cancel culture condition included a scenario describing a racist incident in the community followed by a description of a targeted campaign by others from the community to cancel the perpetrator. While the racist incident described in the scenario was fictitious, it was based on real experiences of East Asian and Pacific Islander Canadians and Americans throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Kambhampaty and Sakaguchi, 2020; Baylon and Cecco, 2021). Descriptions of these real-world experiences were reviewed prior to writing the scenario. The episode of cancel culture included components naturally found in real-world cancel culture scenarios such as high visibility ("*the post had 2,200 likes and has been shared over 300 times by the Vancouver community and beyond*"); public denouncing of norm violation ("*This is deplorable, especially during a time when we should be working together*"); punishment of the perpetrators (e.g., calls for police investigations and expulsion from programs) and calls for justice ("*It's time for racists in this community to face the consequences of their actions*"); and expressions of support of the harmed group ("*East-Asian people are right to expect better from their neighbors*").

Control scenario

The control condition included the same racist incident but did not include the description of the cancel culture episode.

Measures

Feelings of collective validation

Participants responded to 24-items consistent with the definition of feelings of collective validation (e.g., "*The experiences of harm faced by East Asian people are recognized by the community*"). Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1 *Strongly disagree* to 5 *Strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater felt collective validation ($\alpha = 0.91$). See Appendix A.[5]

Collective anger and contempt

Participants responded to a shorter (4-item rather than 8-item) version of the anger (anger, frustration) and contempt (contemptuous and disgusted) measure adapted from Mackie et al. (2000). Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1 *Not at all* to 5

Extremely). Higher scores indicate greater anger and contempt ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Collective empowerment

Participants responded to a 10-item measure that asked "*As an East Asian person, if I were in the situation described in the article, I would feel*": empowered, in control of the situation, humiliated, inferior, defenseless, full of energy, stimulated, independent, not in control of the situation, and weak (Moya-Garófano et al., 2021). Because of a technical error in the Qualtrics file, five of the 10 items (full of energy, stimulated, independent, not in control of the situation, and weak) were randomly omitted for 80 participants. Thus, a shorter 5-item version of the measure was used to maintain the entire sample. Responses were provided on a 5-point scale (1 *Not at all* to 5 *Extremely*), and the reliability for this 5-item version was good ($\alpha = 0.82$; full 10-item measure $\alpha = 0.89$). Scores for items indicating helplessness/disempowerment were reversed so that higher overall scores indicate greater feelings of collective empowerment.

Collective action intentions

Participants respond to 10-items about their willingness to participate in various forms of activism against anti-East Asian racism (e.g., "*Write a letter/email to government officials in my area regarding policies that impact East Asian peoples and cultures*") on a 5-point scale (1 *Very unlikely* to 5 *Very likely*). This measure was adapted from Becker and Wright (2011) for use with East Asian participants but was also informed by the focus group feedback with East Asian Canadian students regarding racism in their communities and ways they would be (un)likely to respond. Higher scores indicate greater willingness/intention to participate in collective action ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Results

Predicted mediational analyses

The results show a significant positive direct effect of Condition on Feelings of Collective Validation, but also a significant direct effect of Condition on Collective Empowerment that was not predicted. As predicted, there was a significant direct effect of Feelings of Collective Validation on Collective Empowerment. However, there was also a significant direct effect of Feelings of Collective Validation on Collective Anger and Contempt. In addition, there was a significant negative direct effect of Condition on Collective Anger and Contempt (not mediated by Feelings of Collective Validation) that was not predicted.

Further, Collective Anger and Contempt had a significant positive effect on Collective Action Intention, but the effect of Collective Empowerment on Collective Action Intention found in Study 1 did not emerge here.

Finally, significant indirect effects were found for Condition on Collective Action Intention mediated by Collective Anger and Contempt ($\beta = -0.16$, 95% CI (-0.32, -0.04)), and for Condition on Collective Action Intention mediated sequentially by Collective Validation and Collective Anger and Contempt, and [$\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.20)]. See Tables 5, 6 and Figure 3 below for details.

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5   See Supplementary materials for EFA.

TABLE 4 Summary of participant demographics (Study 2).

Country of residence	Participants (N =237)	
	N	%
Canada	72	30.4
The USA	165	69.6
East Asian Ethnic Group	N	%*
Chinese	145	61.2
Japanese	19	8
Korean	39	16.5
Mongolian	0	0
Taiwanese	16	6.8
Tibetan	1	0.4
Vietnamese	14	5.9
Prefer to specify or provide more detail	13	5.5
Parent East Asian ethnic group	N	%*
Chinese	148	62.4
Japanese	19	8
Korean	37	15.6
Mongolian	0	0
Taiwanese	16	6.8
Tibetan	1	0.4
Vietnamese	11	4.6
Prefer to specify or provide more detail	17	7.2
Grandparent East Asian ethnic group	N	%
Chinese	150	63.3
Japanese	21	8.9
Korean	38	16
Mongolian	0	0
Taiwanese	16	6.8
Tibetan	1	0.4
Vietnamese	9	3.8
Prefer to specify or provide more detail	14	5.9
Disability	N	%*
An autism spectrum disorder	7	3
A chronic health condition	11	4.6
A communication impairment	0	0
A developmental disability	0	0
A learning disability	4	1.7
A mental illness or health challenge	23	9.7
A mobility or orthopedic impairment	3	1.3
A sensory impairment	2	0.8
A temporary impairment due to illness or injury	3	1.3
Prefer to specify or provide more detail	1	0.4
Prefer not to answer	19	8
Not applicable	184	77.6
Gender	N	%
Woman (cisgender and transgender)	113	47.9
Agender	2	0.8
Non-binary/gender fluid/gender non-conforming/gender queer	2	0.8
Man (cisgender and transgender)	112	47.5
Prefer not to answer	6	2.6
Sexual orientation	N	%
Asexual	10	4.2
Bisexual	16	6.8

(Continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Country of residence	Participants (N =237)	
	N	%
Gay	3	1.3
Lesbian	4	1.7
Pansexual	1	0.4
Heterosexual/straight	192	81
Queer	2	0.8
Prefer to self-describe	1	0.4
Prefer not to answer	8	3.4
Age (years)	*N*	%
18–24	68	28.7
25–34	88	37.1
35–44	40	16.9
45–54	24	10.1
55–64	11	4.6
65–74	1	0.4
Prefer not to answer	5	2.1
Education (highest level completed)	*N*	%
High school diploma	16	6.8
Some college	34	14.3
Undergraduate/Bachelor's degree	139	58.6
Graduate/Master's degree	36	15.2
Doctorate/Professional degree	9	3.8
Prefer not to answer	3	1.3
Income (yearly, pre-tax)	*N*	%
< $10,000	26	11
$10,000–$19,999	11	4.6
$20,000–$29,999	16	6.8
$30,000–$39,999	17	7.2
$40,000–$49,999	21	8.9
$50,000–$59,999	18	7.6
$60,000–$69,999	13	5.5
$70,000–$79,999	25	10.6
$80,000–$89,999	13	5.4
$90,000–$99,999	14	5.9
$100,000–$149,999	21	8.9
> $150,000	21	8.9
Prefer not to answer	20	8.5
Employment status	*N*	%
Employed full time	131	55.3
Employed part time	34	14.3
Unemployed looking for work	20	8.4
Unemployed not looking for work	1	0.4
Retired	2	0.8
Student	40	16.9
Prefer not to answer	9	3.8
Residence	*N*	%
Owned or being bought	113	47.9
Rented for money	67	28.4
Occupied without payment or money or rent	2	0.8
Student housing provided by university	4	1.7
Living with friends	2	0.8
Living with family	48	20.3

*Percentage values may not equal to 100% for race/ethnicity and disability since participants were able to select more than one category.

TABLE 5 Correlation matrix for all variables.

	Mean (SD)	Condition	Feelings of collective validation	Collective anger and contempt	Collective empowerment
Feelings of collective validation	3.39 (0.66)	0.566**			
Collective anger and contempt	4.26 (0.82)	−0.092	0.097		
Collective empowerment	2.33 (0.91)	0.274**	0.302**	−0.382**	
Collective action intentions	3.36 (0.89)	−0.025	0.056	0.439**	−0.186**

*Correlation significant at the 0.05 level.
**Correlation significant at the 0.01 level.

Discussion

Overall, there is support for the primary prediction that being exposed to an episode of cancel culture will elicit feelings of collective validation and that these feelings of collective validation will be positively associated with collective action intentions. However, the overall correlation between Condition and Collective Action Intentions was small, suggesting possible other variables in the total effect.

Further, it was collective validation's positive influence on collective anger and contempt, rather than empowerment, that accounted for its positive association with collective action intentions. In fact, while exposure to an episode of cancel culture and the subsequent feelings of collective validation were associated with collective empowerment, this empowerment did not enhance collective action intentions.

Emotions and feelings of collective validation

The significant association between Feelings of Collective Validation and Collective Anger and Contempt found in Study 2 is consistent with van Zomeren et al.'s (2004) work on affective social support versus instrumental social support. The description of the cancel culture episode in Study 2 included more evidence of shared affective experiences (e.g., it included more emotionally charged comments such as, *"If this bigot loses his business because of this, so be it"*), and this evidence of shared emotions appears to have served to validate the participants' own feelings of collective anger and contempt. Thus, this aspect of validation may be similar to what van Zomeren et al. (2004) are describing as affective social support, which they have shown increases interest in collective action through increased anger (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008b). Thus, it appears that cancel culture can serve to collectively validate action-oriented negative emotions like anger and contempt if the content and tone of cancelling focuses on these shared emotions. Thus, collective validation may lead to collective action through either what van Zomeren et al. (2004) have called an emotional (usually anger; see also van Zomeren et al., 2008a) pathway or the collective empowerment pathway shown in Study 1 – or perhaps in some cases through both pathways.

Further, there was an interesting and unexpected negative direct effect of Condition on Collective Anger and Contempt and negative indirect effect of Condition on Collective Action Intentions mediated by Collective Anger and Contempt. These findings may indicate that for our East Asian participants, exposure to cancel culture in defense of their group may alleviate perpetrator-directed negative emotions such as anger and contempt, rather than increase them. Perhaps this is because, through engaging in cancel culture, the superordinate group shares the emotional burden of anger and contempt with the harmed group, especially if affective social support is present. However, these findings also emphasise the importance of the role of collective validation in the model. More research is needed to understand these effects fully.

Collective empowerment and collective action intentions

The lack of a significant effect of empowerment on collective action intention is inconsistent with the findings of previous research and theorizing (e.g., Drury et al., 2005), as well as the surprising significant negative collective validation and empowerment pathway in the exploratory analysis. There are several possible explanations for these findings. The measure of collective empowerment only included five of the 10 items because of a random error. It is also possible that the measure did not capture the aspects of collective empowerment that drive collective action.

Construct validity of collective empowerment measure

The Collective Empowerment measure may be measuring something other than empowerment as it is usually defined and understood. Items on this empowerment measure such as "*humiliated,*" "*inferior,*" and "*defenseless*" may be capturing feelings of safety and group status instead of empowerment (Hartling and Luchetta, 1999; Edmondson, 2004; Farbod et al., 2017) that may lead participants to disengage in response to harmful situations to protect themselves and their communities from further harm or backlash.

To roughly assess the construct validity of the measure, Model 81 was reanalyzed using only the "*empowerment*" and "*in control of the situation*" items of the Collective Empowerment measure ($\alpha = 0.86$). Both items include components of empowerment as defined by Rappaport (1987) and Wright (2010) and are consistent with the empowerment measure used in Study 1. Overall, participants reported low Collective Empowerment ($\bar{x} = 1.95$, $SD = 0.95$ on a 5-point scale). However, results show a significant, but small, *positive* direct effect of Collective Empowerment on Collective Action Intentions ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI (0.00, 0.25), $p = 0.05$), with small *positive* significant indirect effects of Condition on Collective Action

TABLE 6 Direct effects of predicted model 81.

Feelings of collective validation					
				95% CI	
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	**0.74**	**0.07**	**<0.001**	**0.60**	**0.88**
Feelings of collective validation	–	–	–	–	–
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	2.27	0.11	<0.001	2.04	2.49
$R^2 = 0.32$ $F(1,235) = 110.76, p < 0.01$					
Collective anger and contempt					
				95% CI	
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	**−0.36**	**0.093**	**0.01**	**−0.61**	**−0.11**
Feelings of collective validation	**0.28**	**0.10**	**0.01**	**0.08**	**0.47**
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	3.86	0.28	<0.001	3.31	4.41
$R^2 = 0.04$ $F(2, 234) = 5.05, p < 0.01$					
Collective empowerment					
				95% CI	
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	**0.28**	**0.14**	**0.04**	**0.01**	**0.55**
Feelings of collective validation	**0.30**	**0.10**	**<0.001**	**0.09**	**0.51**
Collective anger and contempt	–	–	–	–	–
Collective empowerment	–	–	–	–	–
Constant	0.90	0.30	<0.001	0.31	1.48
$R^2 = 0.11$ $F(2, 234) = 13.96, p < 0.001$					
Collective action intent					
				95% CI	
	B	*SE*	*p*	*LL*	*UL*
Condition	0.02	0.13	0.85	−0.23	0.28
Feelings of collective validation	0.02	0.10	0.83	−0.18	0.22
Collective anger and contempt	**0.46**	**0.07**	**<0.001**	**0.32**	**0.60**
Collective empowerment	−0.03	0.07	0.65	−0.16	0.10
Constant	1.37	0.41	<0.001	0.56	2.81
$R^2 = 0.19$ $F(4, 232) = 13.95, p < 0.001$					

Intentions mediated by Collective Empowerment ($\beta = 0.07$, 95% CI (0.00, 0.17)) and of Condition on Collective Action Intentions mediated sequentially by Feelings of Collective Validation and Collective Empowerment ($\beta = 0.03$, 95% CI (0.00, 0.06)). Thus, while the effects are small, there is evidence that the negative items on the Moya-Garófano et al. (2021) empowerment measure may be impacting the construct validity of the measure.
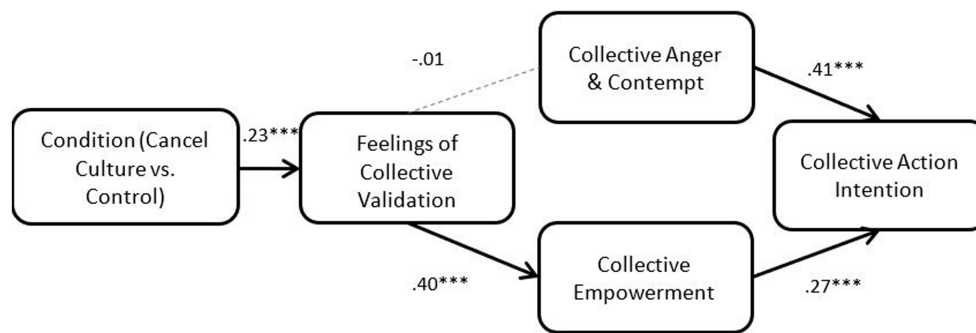
FIGURE 2
Study 1 mediation model result. Partial support for the predicted sequential indirect effects of condition on collective action intention mediated by feelings of collective validation, collective anger and contempt, collective empowerment. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.01$.
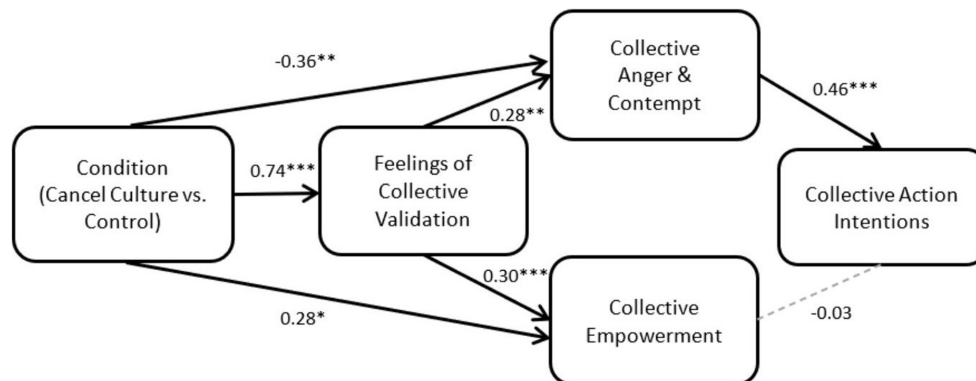
FIGURE 3
Study 2 mediation model result. Partial support for the predicted sequential indirect effects of condition on collective action intention mediated by feelings of collective validation, collective anger and contempt. The direct effects of condition on collective anger and contempt and on collective empowerment were unexpected. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.01$.

Feelings of collective validation and social identity

The social identity of East Asian peoples might be important for understanding the pathway from collective validation to collective action. Indeed, some prior research has identified social identity as an important and meaningful predictor of collective action. For example, van Zomeren et al.'s (2008a) SIMCA includes politicized identity as a main predictive pathway of collective action (see also Simon and Klandermans, 2001). Similarly, Foster et al. (2021) found politicized identity to be important for women engaging in online collective action. Thus, it is possible that the scenario in each study primed participants to think more about their woman (Study 1) or East Asian (Study 2) identities and this may be responsible for the differing empowerment and collective anger and contempt results.

Further, most of the literature on empowerment and collective action focuses on White Western samples and contexts (see Zimmerman, 2000; Lardier et al., 2020), which may not generalize to the East Asian Canadians/Americans in this sample. Therefore, it is possible that episodes of cancel culture that explicitly provide greater affective social support of the East Asian community (as was done in Study 2), may inspire the kind of collective validation that allows for greater expression of perpetrator-directed negative emotions. This

may be, in part, because this affective social support directly challenges stereotypical expectations of East Asian people imposed by the MMM (Aguirre and Lio, 2008; Yoo et al., 2010; Lee, 2022).

Therefore, future research should consider the important role of specific social identities and the nature of the existing intergroup relations experienced by those groups. Feelings of collective validation and its impact on emotions and collective empowerment may vary depending on the specific histories, and current social realities of these different groups.

As well, it should be noted that the cancel culture scenarios in both studies were based on real-world instances and widely understood definitions of cancel culture. For example, Ng (2020) states that cancel culture is "*the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues*" (p. 623). The scenarios used in the current studies reflect this definition. However, it must also be recognized that no direct manipulation checks were used to assess whether participants perceived the scenarios to reflect or represent an episode of cancel culture.

Thus, future studies should address this potential limitation by including manipulation checks or providing other direct evidence that participants recognized the scenarios as reflecting the core elements of cancel culture.

General discussion

Two experimental studies examined the role of feelings of collective validation in the context of cancel culture as an important determinant of collective action through its impact on collective empowerment and collective anger and contempt. Across both studies, there is evidence that feelings of collective validation play an important mediating role in the relationship between cancel culture and collective action intentions. However, the two studies provide a somewhat less definitive story concerning the mediational processes that account for collective validation's association with collective action. Study 1 supports only a collective empowerment pathway from collective validation to collective action intentions in a sexism context, while Study 2 supports only a collective anger and contempt pathway from collective validation to collective action intentions in an anti-East Asian racism context.

Implications and future directions

Cancel culture, feelings of collective validation, and collective action intentions

Overall, the present research provides novel evidence that cancel culture and feelings of collective validation should be included and examined in collective action research and theory. For example, through cancel culture, members of the superordinate group – which includes more than just members of the relevant ingroup and members of the perpetrator group – can be involved in challenging a perpetrator group's actions and disrupting (however fleeting) the online economy of visibility and structures of inequalities. This support from other members of the superordinate group can be validating for members of the group that has been harmed and this validation can agitate them enough to challenge the individuals, groups, and systems that have perpetuated this harm.

These findings are consistent with a recent study by Foster et al. (2021, see Study 2) who found that women were motivated toward collective action when they anticipated greater personal validation from others for responding to sexist tweets. Similarly, Droogendyk et al. (2016) identify "supportive contact" as an important determinant of increased collective action by the harmed group. This concept, in which an advantaged group member explicitly expresses their opposition to inequality and supports the harmed group's goals, coincides with the elements of cancel culture (explicitly acknowledging harm and supporting group goals). Thus, it is possible that supportive contact elicits feelings of collective validation in similar ways as cancel culture and including measures of collective validation in future work on supportive contact may offer insights into the psychological mechanisms involved in its influences on collective action.

Cancel culture, collective validation, and Allyship

The present research also supports the inclusion of cancel culture and feelings of collective validation in research on allyship, as they appear to encompass important components of allyship. Along with supportive contact, Becker et al.'s (2022) (see also Becker and Wright, 2022) concept of "politicized contact" seems to be relevant to participation in cancel culture. In their work, Becker and colleagues show that contact that recognizes and includes discussion of group inequality is linked to greater solidarity-based allyship behaviour by advantaged group members. Thus, it seems that when members of the advantaged group, the harmed group, and even third-party groups all jointly engage, cancel culture could serve as a proxy for politicized contact and thus may increase solidarity-based collective action intentions among all three groups.

However, a critique of cancel culture is that it can backfire and alienate allies by making them afraid of being cancelled themselves for making simple mistakes. Ross (2021) claims "*[i]n our pursuit of political purity, we are alienating a lot of our allies, and we are criticizing them for not being 'woke' enough.*" To address this strain on the ally-ingroup relationship, Ross promotes "call in" culture where allies and group members can have open, non-judgmental conversations about harm. Ross claims that call-in culture is about "*achieving accountability with grace, love, and respect as opposed to anger, shame, and humiliation.*" This "call in" approach shares much with Becker et al.'s (2022) description of politicized contact and thus these conversations may well serve to increase allyship behaviours among the advantaged group.

However, the issue with positioning call-in culture and cancel culture against each other is that the goals and motivations of these two practices differ substantially. The goal for call-in culture, according to Ross, is to end oppression through meaningful work with allies, while one goal of cancel culture is to hold accountable powerful and perpetrator groups and people who refuse to hold themselves accountable. While calling someone in might be helpful with a willing and open ally, what happens when calling in fails because the harmful party refuses to acknowledge the harm they have caused? Who holds them responsible? How do we call in those with political and social power (e.g., celebrities, billionaires, politicians, police) who refuse to acknowledge their harmful actions? Thus, while Ross is correct in stating that the goal of the human rights movement is "*to end oppression*" and that call-in culture may be an effective method for achieving this long-term goal, it may also be true that a one-size-fits-all approach to achieving this goal is too narrow. Call-in culture may be less helpful where those who are marginalized and harmed are continuously silenced by their oppressors (e.g., as victims of sexual violence). In these situations, silencing perpetrators, prioritising support, and amplification of the harmed group seem more immediately important, especially if the harmed group deals with unique stereotypes and expectations based on their group identity (such as the MMM for East Asian communities). Therefore, cancel culture, as supported by the current research, may be effective in immediate harm-reduction for the harmed group in the form of feelings of collective validation and a subsequent stronger intention to work for change that may be another path to a long-term shift away from oppression.

Conclusion

The current research offers a novel theoretical and empirical introduction to the concept of collective validation and the understudied context of cancel culture to the existing research and theory in the social psychological literature on collective action and related topics (e.g., allyship). We found strong support that cancel culture is collectively validating for harmed groups, and that these feelings of collective validation mediate the relationship between cancel culture and collective action intentions. Therefore, we suggest and hope that future intergroup relations research on collective action and related concepts continue to utilise collective validation and cancel culture to deepen psychological understanding of collective action motivations and various psychological outcomes for harmed groups (e.g., wellbeing and life satisfaction, collective action intention and behaviour, empowerment, group identity, etc.).

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: https://osf.io/qftn8/.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MT: writing, editing, recruiting participants, creating materials and survey, constructing measures, main data analyses, methodology and statistical analyses plan, power analyses, and theoretical background. YT: editing, recruiting participants, creating materials, focus group, and minor data analyses. SW: editing, methodology and statistical analyses plan, creation of materials, theoretical background. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1181872/full#supplementary-material

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Promoting appetitive learning of consensual, empowered vulnerability: a contextual behavioral conceptualization of intimacy

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Vulnerability is emphasized in a number of theoretical models of intimacy (e.g., Intimacy Process Model), including from behavioral and contextual behavioral perspectives. Vulnerability is generally defined as susceptibility to harm and involves behaviors that have been historically met with aversive social consequences. From these perspectives, intimacy is fostered when vulnerable behavior is met with reinforcement. For example, interventions have trained intimacy by building skills in emotional expression and responsiveness with promising results. Vulnerability has divergent functions, however, depending on the interpersonal context in which it occurs. Functional intimacy is explored through the lens of functional relations, which play a key role in interpersonal processes of power, privilege, and consent. This conceptualization suggests that vulnerability must be under appetitive functional relations, consensual, and empowered for safe intimacy to emerge. The responsibility to promote appetitive learning of consensual, empowered vulnerability to foster intimacy falls to the person with more power in a particular interaction and relationship. Recommendations are offered for guiding this process.

KEYWORDS

intimacy, vulnerability, consent, power, well-being, appetitive, context, behavioral

1. Introduction

Intimacy has long been considered a fundamental aspect of human well-being and development (e.g., Erikson, 1950, 1963), and remains a key social factor in modern scientific explorations of well-being. In children, friendship intimacy buffers the relationship between symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and social problems such as rejection by peers, emotional regulation, and social reciprocity (Becker et al., 2013). Naturally occurring increases in physical intimacy predict concurrent and subsequent decreases in somatic symptoms for people in romantic relationships (Stadler et al., 2012). Intimacy also mediates the positive effects of decreased loneliness and increased happiness associated with social media use (Pittman, 2018). At the societal level, overall experiences of intimacy attenuate the impact of negative outgroup experiences on attitudes toward that outgroup (Graf et al., 2020). In short, intimacy is considered a hallmark of both relational and personal well-being, despite the homogeneity of sample populations in the research (Williamson et al., 2022).

The English words "intimacy" and "intimate" are derived from Latin roots, *intimus* (innermost) and *intimare* (to make innermost known; Partridge, 2006). By literal definition, intimacy is "the state of being intimate; something of a personal or private nature"

(Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the behavioral sciences, several conceptual models of intimacy have emerged (e.g., Waring, 1985; Reis and Shaver, 1988; Wilhelm and Parker, 1988; Register and Henley, 1992; Prager, 1997, Gaia, 2002), each of which vary slightly on common themes. These models converge on defining *intimacy* as dynamic, contextually-bound (see Gaia, 2002), and involving the disclosure of thoughts, feelings, and personal information with reciprocal trust and emotional closeness (see Timmerman, 2009). In other words, historical accounts of intimacy emphasize a dynamic interpersonal process of reciprocal vulnerability.

The role of reciprocal vulnerability is seen explicitly in behavioral and contextual behavioral models of intimacy, which emphasize intimacy as the product of interactions in which vulnerable behaviors are reinforced by one's partner's responsiveness (Cordova and Scott, 2001). Likewise, a contextual behavioral reformulation of the Interpersonal Process Model (IPM; Reis and Shaver, 1988) posits the evolution of intimate relating as involving vulnerability being met with reinforcing responsiveness, thereby increasing the likelihood of vulnerable behaviors being emitted in the future (Kanter et al., 2020). Thus, intimacy emerges when an interaction evokes and reinforces bidirectional vulnerability.

2. Vulnerability

The English word "vulnerability" is derived from the Latin roots, *vulnus* (wound), and *habilitatem* (ability or capacity; Partridge, 2006). Defined literally, to be vulnerable is to engage in behavior that results in an increased capability "of being physically or emotionally wounded" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In other words, vulnerability colloquially involves socially risky behavior. Research on vulnerability typically revolves around describing populations that are at risk of being taken advantage of (e.g., Msall et al., 1998) and considering individual differences in emotional responding (e.g., Timmers et al., 2003). Vulnerability is increasingly being explored, however, as an aspect of well-being rather than a threat. For example, social worker, speaker, and author Brown (2013) stated that vulnerability entails "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure," and is understood as necessary for personal growth and well-being. Recognizing and accepting personal vulnerability, or an "openness to attack," is seen as a critical aspect of *shame resilience* (Brown, 2006). A similar definition of emotional vulnerability as an "aversive state" of openness to feeling hurt or rejected can be found in Vogel et al. (2003). Vulnerability, particular to the relational context, has been observed as fear of abandonment emerges in some relationships but not others (e.g., with real or potential threats of rejection; Fowler and Dillow, 2011). In this way, a person's experience of vulnerability may change as a function of the relational context(s) that are present (Jordan, 2008).

Behaviorally, vulnerable behaviors are those that have historically been punished in social situations (Cordova and Scott, 2001). According to this perspective, what behaviors, topographically speaking, are vulnerable (i.e., what behaviors have been punished) vary between individual learning histories interacting with cultural norms. Extending from behavioral to a contextual behavioral perspective, Kanter et al. (2020) further characterize this class of previously interpersonally punished behaviors as including self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness,

and emotional responsiveness. In other words, contextual behavioral explorations of vulnerability consider the effects of sharing personal information, communicating emotional state, and shifting verbal and affective communication to respond to another's emotional state. This line of research positions vulnerability as a feature of relational closeness (Aron et al., 1997), emotional regulation (Panayiotou et al., 2019), relational aggression (Shea and Coyne, 2017), anxiety sensitivity associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (Bardeen et al., 2015), and more. The centrality of vulnerability to important outcomes has further supported its role in interventions designed to directly train intimacy (e.g., see Kanter et al., 2020).

3. Vulnerability-based intimacy interventions

Interventions have been developed to improve intimacy, but traditionally with a fairly narrow scope. Specifically, most have targeted persons in romantic relationships (see Kardan-Souraki et al., 2016 for a review of interventions to increase marital intimacy). Contextual behavioral interventions designed to promote intimacy (i.e., Functional Analytic Psychotherapy; FAP) have aimed for a broader scope. FAP involves directly training functionally vulnerable interactions, in which emotional expressions (i.e., emotional expressiveness combined with self-disclosure and invitations to self-disclose) evoke and reinforce emotional responsivity, and vice versa (Kanter et al., 2020). In this way, contextual behavioral interventions for building intimacy emphasize *interlocking behavioral contingencies* (IBCs; Glenn, 2004), in which one person's behavior is functionally related to (i.e., sets the context for) another person's behavior. These interventions also allow for consideration of cultural norms in terms of *metacontingencies* (Glenn, 2004), or the aspects of context that select for particular IBCs across groups.

Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP; Kohlenberg and Tsai, 1991; Holman et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2019) is a talk therapy approach wherein therapists address a client's presenting problems by intervening on client's in-session clinically relevant behaviors (CRBs) to enhance the client's intimate relationships. Put another way, therapists working from a FAP perspective work to evoke and reinforce vulnerable interactions with their clients (CRB2s) as alternatives to the behaviors contributing to their difficulties (CRB1s). Systematic reviews investigating the effectiveness of FAP (e.g., Kanter et al., 2017; Singh and O'Brien, 2018) call for additional research with improved rigor, but emphasize that techniques and identified mechanisms of change (i.e., shifts in CRBs) are well supported when considering the therapist-as-social-reinforcer functions of FAP.

FAP has been proposed as particularly appropriate for establishing a therapeutic relationship in contexts where clients are likely to have punishing interpersonal histories, making these clients inherently more vulnerable (e.g., racially diverse client-therapist dyads, Miller et al., 2015; people struggling with gender and sexual minority stress, Skinta et al., 2018; transcultural or culturally sensitive services, Vandenberghe, 2008; Vandenberghe et al., 2010). FAP has also been extended beyond the psychotherapy context to training emotional rapport and responsiveness in ways that significantly improve medical doctors' interactions with Black patients (Kanter et al., 2020). Finally, FAP has been applied in groups to promote intimacy (i.e.,

connectedness) in college students across racial differences (Kanter et al., 2019) with promising results, particularly for white participants (Williams et al., 2020). One topic of particular importance in vulnerability-based intimacy interventions, especially as they are extended to benefit inherently vulnerable interactions outside of the therapy context, is safety.

Kanter et al. (2020) describe safety as foundational to emotional responsiveness. The authors described promoting *safety* functionally as "engaging in non-verbal and verbal responses that decrease a speaker's perceptions of threat and emotional arousal when engaged in non-verbal vulnerable emotional expressions" (p. 79). Kanter et al. (2020) further specify three formal categories of safety-providing responses: (1) synchronized emotional expressiveness, (2) indicators of interest, care, and affiliative intent, and (3) reciprocal vulnerable self-disclosures. This model acknowledges that these responses are "functionally complex" (i.e., have multiple functions), but that safety functions are imperative (Kanter et al., 2020). Whether such "safety-providing responses" function to decrease threat and nervous system activation to foster intimacy may require further conceptualization of the range of complex functions vulnerability can take on.

4. Re-considering functions of vulnerability

The vulnerability of behavior in a particular context has been functionally defined using its historical consequences (i.e., previously interpersonally punished; Cordova and Scott, 2001). Similarly, the intimacy of an interaction in a particular context is functionally defined in terms of both historical and immediate consequences (i.e., previously interpersonally punished, currently interpersonally reinforced; Cordova and Scott, 2001). No distinction has been made, however, between the overarching effects of different types of immediate reinforcement (i.e., positive or negative reinforcement) and corresponding antecedents (i.e., motivating operations and discriminative stimuli) involved in the IBCs that comprise a vulnerable interaction. In particular, it may be that vulnerability can emerge in appetitive or aversive functional relationships with a context, the distinction having important practical implications for facilitating intimacy in applied contexts.

4.1. Aversive vs. appetitive functional relations

Punishment and negative reinforcement both involve behavior interacting with *aversive* events, or situations that the organism will work to avoid or escape (see Hineline, 1984; Hineline and Rosales-Ruiz, 2013). *Punishment* is a process in which a behavior decreases in probability or frequency due to contact with aversive contexts, and *negative reinforcement* is a process in which behavior increases due to decreased contact with aversive contexts. In other words, punishment and negative reinforcement contingencies can be collectively described as involving *aversive control*, or, more broadly speaking, aversive functional relations between behavior and context.

Aversive functional relations are characterized by a narrowing of the entire contingency, or the field of factors comprising the interaction between behavior and context [e.g., conditioned suppression, Lyon (1968)]. Aversive functional relations thus involve a narrowing of context, where those stimuli available and accessible (i.e., to serve eliciting, evocative, discriminative, and/or consequential functions) are limited to aversive events and events that predict their reduction or absence. Aversive functional relations also involve a narrowing of behavior, where the available repertoire is limited to those operant behaviors involved in escape or avoidance and the co-occurring elicited subtle behaviors (e.g., Lovibond, 1970). The relative constriction of ongoing aversive functional relations between context and behavior results in an insensitivity to shifts in context (Ramnerö et al., 2015), thereby making aversive functions particularly persistent (e.g., Hoffman et al., 1966). The cumulative effect of aversive learning is increased sensitivity to aversive contexts and, in turn, an increasingly narrow and rigid repertoire (Hineline, 1984; Ramnerö et al., 2015).

Positive reinforcement, on the other hand, involves behavior interacting with *appetitive* events, or those that the organism will work to access. Indeed, *positive reinforcement* is a process in which a behavior increases in probability or frequency due to resulting increased contact with appetitive contexts. As such, positive reinforcement contingencies can be described as involving *appetitive control*, or, more broadly speaking, appetitive functional relations between behavior and the contexts, antecedent and consequential, in which that behavior occurs.

Appetitive functional relations are characterized by a broadening of the entire contingency, or the field of factors comprising the interaction between behavior and context (Wilson and DuFrene, 2009). Appetitive functional relations thus involve a broadening of context, where those stimuli available and accessible to serve eliciting, evocative, discriminative, and/or consequential functions are expansive and flexible. Access to a broader range of events that may function as context comes with a broader range of accessible behaviors, including operant behaviors generally involving seeking, exploring, and engaging, and the co-occurring elicited subtle behaviors. The relative breadth and flexibility of ongoing appetitive functional relations between context and behavior results in sensitivity to shifts in context (Skinner, 1958). In this way, appetitive functional relations are associated with increased *degrees of freedom* (i.e., alternative accessible behaviors; Goldiamond, 1975, 1976), and the subjective experience of choice. In contrast with aversive functional relationships, the cumulative effect of appetitive learning is increased sensitivity to appetitive contexts, and, in turn, an increasingly broad and flexible repertoire (Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group, 2022).

4.2. Intimacy involves vulnerability under appetitive functional relations

Vulnerability is central to intimacy, but it may not be a sufficient condition for intimacy to emerge. Instead, the current conceptualization suggests that intimacy requires that vulnerable behaviors (i.e., self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, and emotional responsiveness), despite a history of being met with

aversive consequences, emerge under appetitive functional relations with the context. Appetitive functional relations are observable in both operant form of vulnerability (where behaviors are shaped by a broad range of appetitive consequences and the evocative and discriminative contexts associated with them), and respondent forms of vulnerability (where emotions and their neurological correlates naturally and easily co-vary with the changing interpersonal context). Consequently, the vulnerability repertoire that contributes to intimacy emerges as broad, flexible, and sensitive to expansive appetitive learning experiences and continual adaptation to new interpersonal connections.

Unfortunately, not all contexts that foster vulnerability are appetitive. The present conceptualization of vulnerability also suggests that self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, and emotional responsiveness can emerge in aversive functional relations. In fact, because vulnerable behaviors have, by definition, been historically met with aversive consequences, contexts where vulnerability is available (i.e., situations that are emotionally evocative) necessarily have some aversive functions. Kanter et al. (2020) note the salience of aversives in vulnerable interactions in their discussion of safety, emphasizing that safety-providing behaviors reduce threat and nervous system activation. This conceptualization suggests the importance that safety (i.e., the reduction of threat and activation) be offered as an antecedent for vulnerable behavior, rather than a consequence. To the extent that vulnerability is consequated with reduced contact with aversives (i.e., via negative reinforcement), vulnerability becomes more probable, but the functional relations at play are aversive. Aversive functional relations are observable in both operant aspects of vulnerability (where behaviors are shaped by a narrow range of aversive consequences and their antecedent evocative and discriminative contexts), and respondent aspects of vulnerability (where emotions and their neurological correlates diverge). Thus, the vulnerability repertoire that prevents intimacy emerges as narrow, rigid, insensitive to learning experiences outside of those that foster quicker or more effective avoidance and overgeneralized to any emotionally evocative interpersonal situation.

Certain contexts may include aversive functional relations that call for vulnerability, but vary in the extent to appetitive antecedents and consequences promote intimacy and subsequent well-being. For example, a student may recognize the need for accommodations in a course taught by a new professor, which would require an uncomfortable disclosure of their medical or psychological history. If the professor has not made explicit what accommodations may be available, how they can be accessed, or how they influence learning, the student may be forced to either initiate a vulnerable exchange without the safety of intimacy or simply proceed without the needed accommodations. Conversely, the professor could pre-emptively describe certain easily accessible accommodations as part of the learning environment with clear instructions on how to access them, how to know that they are needed, and how learning outcomes might be impacted by. In doing so, the context, despite having some aversive aspects for some inherently vulnerable students, is now better organized to foster appetitive functional relations with the vulnerable behavior involved in accessing needed accommodations. This allows not only for appetitives available in the intimate exchange, but also access to broader appetitives available in the course.

4.3. Intimacy involves vulnerability with consent

Considerations of functional relations in terms of their appetitiveness and aversiveness bring to bear a behavioral conceptualization of freedom vs. coercion. Skinner (1971) stated that freedom was defined by (1) the absence of aversive control via negative reinforcement or punishment, and (2) the absence of control via immediate positive reinforcement with deferred long-term aversive consequences. Freedom has also been related to the possibility or availability of choice, either choice of response options (Baum, 2017) or choices of alternative conditions (Catania, 1980). Similarly, *coercion* has been defined as control mediated by threats of punishment (Sidman, 1989, 1993), limited availability of choices (Goldiamond, 1975, 1976; Catania, 1980), and reduced access to resources needed to generate responses (Goltz, 2020). Said functionally, appetitive functional relations are associated with *genuine* choices and more *degrees of freedom* by Goldiamond (1975, 1976) – greater the sensitivity to various contexts (antecedents and consequences), greater the alternative accessible behaviors, greater freedom associated with the behavioral repertoire. Likewise, aversive functional relations are associated with limited options and greater *degrees of coercion* (Goldiamond, 1976). According to this conceptualization, contexts that foster vulnerability will only foster intimacy to the extent they maximize degrees of freedom and minimize degrees of coercion.

Kanter et al. (2020) approach this issue by specifying *asking-giving relations* as part of their model of intimacy. In this model, *asking* involves requests by the speaker for relational and/or non-relational needs to be met, and *giving* involves responding to the specific needs of the speaker by the listener. The authors discuss the risks inherent in the asking-giving interaction for both the speaker engaging in a vulnerable disclosure, and the listener accurately and empathically responding with emotional validation for such disclosures. For example, people asking may fear that their expression will result in conflict, rejection, or threats to their autonomy. This heightens the aversive functional relations involved in their vulnerable behavior. Furthermore, individuals giving may respond to the speaker's requests inaccurately, insufficiently, or excessively. Therefore, asking behaviors may function aversively for the speaker. In line with the current conceptualization, the more that aversive functions dominate asking and giving at the individual level, the more likely they are to dominate the IBCs involved in the interaction.

The asking-giving exchange can be extended functionally by considering the negotiation of consent between interacting individuals. Consent is a complex interpersonal phenomenon with ethical implications in a range of contexts (Miller and Wertheimer, 2010). *Affirmative consent*, involving asking for and earning enthusiastic approval for an interaction, was first introduced in the context of sexual interactions (see Mettler, 2018) and is increasingly applied in functionally similar interactions (e.g., online interactions on social media; Im et al., 2021). Behaviorally, affirmative consent is an appetitive functional response class that (1) allows for the interacting people to *tact* (i.e., a verbal response evoked by an event or aspect of an event; Skinner, 1957) appetitive contingencies for themselves and each other, (2) allows for the interacting people to *mand* (i.e., a verbal response reinforced by a characteristic consequence associated with setting events; Skinner, 1957) for others

to do the same, and (3) expands the degrees of freedom for the interacting behavioral repertoires with an ongoing availability of genuine choices that are responsive to shifting contingencies (Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group, 2021). In extension, this conceptualization would suggest that vulnerability fosters intimacy not only to the extent that that vulnerability is under appetitive functional relations, but also to the extent that an affirmative consent process has taken place. In other words, to foster intimacy, asking and giving should involve the naming of and responding to needs (1) under appetitive functional relations, and (2) with specification of not only the aversive but also the appetitive contingencies involved in those needs. Both requesting *and* providing ongoing consent mitigate some of the risks of contacting aversives for all persons in the interaction and increase emotional closeness as consent signals shared values around safety and well-being, both of which are necessary to foster intimacy.

Certain contexts may include aversive aspects that call for vulnerability but vary in the extent to which they foster affirmative consent. For example, two queer therapists (A and B) are having lunch in their practice's kitchen when one (Therapist A) brings up the topic of discrimination at their practice and in the profession broadly. Therapist Aspeaks with great emotion about their past experiences and fears about taking on queer trainees. They also offer to listen and to provide support if Therapist B has similar experiences to share. An affirmative consent process is likely to begin if Therapist A not only tacts the aversive contingencies involved in their present vulnerability (e.g., "I'm feeling really upset by an unpleasant interaction I had with the boss, particularly considering the pressure to hire more queer trainees next term!") but also (1) tacts the appetitive contingencies (antecedents and consequences) present in this context (e.g., "I'd really like to share what happened and how I'm carrying it. I think I'm looking for a sort of gut check.") and (2) effectively mands for the first therapist to do the same (e.g., "How are you hearing all this? Do you have the space to listen? Do you have something you'd like to use lunch today for instead?"). The consent process continues to the extent that Therapist B is able to offer the same tact-mand combination (e.g., "Whoa. I wasn't actually prepared for all that. And I do not know that I've thought about my experiences through the lens that you are asking for. I think I'd like more time to process what you have shared already before we go any further. I'd love to schedule a time to revisit this when I'm not hungry and stressed. Could I also help brainstorm some other ways you could get some support around this? Does that feel ok?"). Such affirmative consent interactions might be even more important when vulnerability is being invited in relationships with apparent disparities in power, such as in challenging training activities, therapy exercises, or employee feedback sessions.

4.4. Intimacy involves vulnerability with empowerment

Relative aspects of interacting repertoires with respect to the availability and accessibility of appetitives may contribute to the likelihood of vulnerability being (1) under appetitive functional relations, and (2) functionally consensual, both of which may be necessary for fostering functional intimacy. Maximizing appetitive functional relations involved in IBCs necessarily involves addressing

and mitigating barriers in access to appetitives, and thus, addressing and responding effectively to privilege and power.

4.4.1. Privilege

A feminist understanding of *privilege* as an "unearned advantage.. [and].. conferred dominance" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1) has enabled a prior contextual behavioral conceptualization of privilege as differential access to important reinforcers (Terry et al., 2010). A similar behavioral conceptualization expands upon this idea, describing privilege as a dynamic ratio of appetitives to aversives accessible in any given context (Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group, 2022). In this way, disparities in privilege can be understood in terms of relative access to appetitives proportional to aversives both in their learning history and brought to bear in the immediate context. Thus, the repertoire of a person with more relative privilege is more broad, flexible, sensitive to appetitives, and likely to enter appetitive functional relations with the context. In contrast, the repertoire of a person with less relative privilege is more narrow, rigid, sensitive to aversives, and likely to enter aversive functional relations with the context. For example, a Black woman serving as the dean of a college may experience microaggressions and tone-policing based on gendered and racial stereotypes (e.g., "angry Black women;" Walley-Jean, 2009) when delivering a call-to-action to a predominantly white faculty body following a publicized occurrence of police brutality and systemic racism. Despite her leadership position as the dean and the appetitives that that position makes available, a learning history involving intersecting dimensions of racism, sexism, and misogyny brings aversives to bear in the current context, including speaking in group meetings, crafting written statements, and even processing their personal emotional reaction to the tragedy. The same gendered and racialized stereotypes contribute to disparate performance evaluations and leadership assessments (see Motro et al., 2022) serving to further the aversive contextual functions that contribute to her lack of privilege in this context.

Power is a central theme in feminist theory defined in a number of ways, including as a resource, as domination of others (i.e., "power-over"), and as empowerment to foster change (i.e., "power-to"; Allen, 2005). Contextual behavioral conceptualizations of power have also varied along similar themes. For example, Baum (2005) defined power as "the control that each party in a relationship exerts over the other's behavior" (p. 235). This access to control remains central to other proposed definitions of power (Guerin, 1994; Biglan, 1995). It has also been specified that this access to control is exerted relationally via control over a relatively greater number of significant reinforcers (Terry et al., 2010). Consistent with the contextual perspective on privilege, *power* has been conceptualized as the degrees of freedom afforded by access to appetitives and the resulting expansive repertoire (Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group, 2022). In this way, disparities in power can be understood in terms of relative degrees of freedom fostered by one's relative privilege. More power involves greater degrees of freedom fostered by greater privilege and the associated ease of access to appetitives relative to aversives. Less power, on the other hand, involves fewer degrees of freedom fostered by less privilege and the associated dominance of aversives relative to a scarcity of available and accessible appetitives.

Thus, power is contextually-bound, where some contexts may function as *empowering* (i.e., fostering greater degrees of freedom via improved access to appetitives and buffering the impact of aversives)

and others may be *disempowering* (foster reduced degrees of freedom via increased salience of aversives, and reduced access to appetitives). For example, a gender-marginalized faculty member working in a graduate school is at increased risk of interpersonal threats, ranging from microaggressions to overt harassment, and self-advocacy in these contexts may adversely impact their work experience and career trajectory (see Blithe and Elliott, 2020). Here, the graduate school could be described as a disempowering context for that faculty member.

Applied to interpersonal interactions, this conceptualization suggests that privilege and power are not static, finite resources allocated in an interaction according to persistent identities. Instead, privilege and power are dynamic, contextually-bound functional aspects of the stimulating context and the current repertoire, respectively. IBCs do not function in such a way as to empower one person (i.e., increasing access to appetitives and increasing degrees of freedom) *by* disempowering the other (i.e., increasing access to aversives and decreasing degrees of freedom). Rather, IBCs could emerge that empower all parties involved in a vulnerable interaction. In fact, this centering of appetitive functional relations that are mutually expansive may be exactly what is necessary for vulnerability to cultivate intimacy.

The less power and privilege a person has in an interpersonal interaction, the more likely they are to respond to invitations to vulnerability under aversive functional relations due to the relative dominance of aversive learning in their history in similar contexts. In other words, the more disempowering an interpersonal context is (i.e., the fewer degrees of freedom available there), the more likely invitations for vulnerability will function aversively, evoking more vulnerability or less, depending on which has historically allowed them to minimize contact with the aversive in similar contexts. The gender marginalized faculty member mentioned above will require more support (i.e., appetitives) in their vulnerable interpersonal interactions with other faculty to overcome the broadly disempowering context to connect intimately.

Promoting mutually appetitive vulnerable IBCs may be most challenging when power and privilege are disparate between people in an interpersonal interaction. Disparities in power and privilege involve disparities in the distribution of aversive vs. appetitive functional relations obtaining in any one moment and, thus, the relative likelihood of aversive vs. appetitive learning opportunities in that situation. Such disparities are problematic in several ways (see Louisiana Contextual Science Research Group, 2022), but perhaps most so in vulnerable interactions, where the probability of vulnerable behaviors occurring under appetitive functional relations can be significantly reduced despite best efforts. While disparities in privilege and power are unavoidable in most interpersonal interactions, introducing vulnerability to those interactions is likely to evoke behaviors that emerge from and maintain such disparities in power and privilege and prevent true intimacy (i.e., sociopolitical problematic behaviors, SP1s; Terry et al., 2010).

The effects of aversive functional relations around vulnerability vary depending on the person's repertoire with such contexts. To the extent that the disempowered person's lack of privilege and power are generalized across interpersonal contexts (e.g., with intersecting identities that limit power and privilege broadly), they are also more likely to have an explicit learning history about the emotions of more powerful people being aversive. For example, the phenomenon of *white tears*, where people of color are oppressed by the emotional expressions of white people, is well documented (Accapadi, 2007).

Here, a less powerful person may learn to engage in vulnerability (i.e., self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, and emotional responsiveness) as a way of calming the more powerful person, not in pursuit of connection or soothing for themselves, but as a way to escape a historically threatening interaction (see Menakem, 2017).

This dynamic would also be considered problematic when the more powerful and privileged person's vulnerability is under aversive functional relations. This can occur due to some aversive aspect of context outside of the interpersonal interaction (e.g., an upsetting conflict with a family member, a stressful financial challenge, a frightening storm outside). This can also occur when a learning history where interacting with people with less power is aversive in and of itself, reducing degrees of freedom without equalizing the disparity. For example, some conceptualizations of racialized trauma highlight the pervasive socialization in the U.S. around Black bodies as impervious, dangerous, hypersexual, and dirty, along with the resulting physical, emotional, and mental constriction experienced in their presence (see Menakem, 2017). If the more powerful person's current behavior is being dominated by aversives, the interaction is likely to be increasingly and rigidly focused on reducing their distress. In other words, if the emotional expressions and responsiveness of the person with relative ease of access to appetitives is still under aversive functional relations, those functional relations are likely to dominate the IBCs for both members of the interaction.

Consider the example of a professor serving as a thesis advisor arriving late for a meeting with their graduate student. The interaction may begin with the professor apologizing and explaining to the student that they had been fighting with their partner, which resulted in them leaving home late. As they are sharing this story, the professor offers some background as to why their conflict with their partner is so upsetting, becoming teary-eyed and expressing other overt signs of emotional distress. The professor is demonstrating vulnerability and may struggle to contact the empowering appetitives available in the thesis work, the mentoring relationship, or the pride in their professional position. Meanwhile the student is confronted with the professor's vulnerability without the power and privilege that would allow them to contact their own empowering appetitives. For example, it is unlikely that the student would have the degrees of freedom, shaped by an appetitive learning history, to initiate a consent process in which they could name their desire to return to the meeting's original agenda (their thesis), their need for support around that work, and their preference to reschedule the meeting if their professor cannot meet that need. The student's learning history may also involve specific aversive consequences for engaging in such behaviors such as acute punishing feedback or longer-term damage to the relationship. So instead, the student is likely to find themselves trying to calm their professor to allow them relief.

Such aversive functional relations around vulnerability could also arise with the more empowered and privileged person inviting vulnerability. For example, a therapy trainee finds themselves in a clinical supervision meeting, being asked by their supervisor to share their painful feelings, self-deprecating thoughts, and patterns of unworkable action. The supervisor is alarmed by the trainee's rigidity and wants to offer them an opportunity to build their repertoire before it negatively impacts their therapy work. The therapy trainee is aware of their suffering and how important their personal growth could be to their professional development but finds themselves feeling overwhelmed by their supervisor's softened tone and intense eye

TABLE 1 Conditions necessary for functional intimacy.

Intimacy involves...	Relevant terms
Vulnerability	*Vulnerability*–socially risky behavior; behavior that has been previously punished; has aversive antecedents
Vulnerability under appetitive functional relations	*Appetitive functional relations*–seeking, exploring, and engaging behaviors; broad and flexible repertoire, broad and flexible context; subjective experience of choice; strengthening of appetitive learning vs. *Aversive functional relations*–running, fighting, and hiding behaviors; narrow and rigid repertoire, narrow and rigid context; subjective experience of coercion; strengthening of aversive learning
Vulnerability with consent	*Affirmative consent*–requesting and receiving enthusiastic approval for an interaction; appetitive functional response class involving a tact-mand combination; interacting people tact appetitive contingencies at play and mand for others to do the same; expands degrees of freedom with an ongoing, shifting availability of genuine choices vs. *Coercion*–interaction persists with absent, limited, or threatening communication; aversive functional response class focused on promoting the interaction with little attention to current function; if tacted at all, appetitives are presented in ways that suggest scarcity or otherwise, narrow degrees of freedom
Vulnerability with empowerment	*Empowerment*–positions one with the power to act to resource current needs; fosters greater degrees of freedom via improved access to appetitives and buffering the impact of aversives vs. *Disempowerment*–positions one to act to resource the needs of the more powerful person; fosters reduced degrees of freedom via increased salience of aversives, and reduced access to appetitives

Functionally intimate contexts will, in the presence of aversive antecedents: (1) evoke behavior that functions to increase ongoing contact with shifting appetitives, (2) involve tact-mand combinations that make appetitive contingencies salient, and (3) include behaviors that support increasing degrees of freedom across IBCs.

contact. The therapy trainee may additionally experience concerns about their vulnerabilities (e.g., painful feelings, self-deprecating thoughts, unworkable actions) being used against them in formal evaluations. In this way, both the supervisor's and the trainee's repertoires are dominated by aversive functional relations. The disparity in power and privilege further limits the trainee's capacity to object to the line of questioning. The trainee discloses as requested by the supervisor but leaves the meeting confused about what the purpose of their disclosure was and how to move forward with their therapy sessions. On the one hand, the trainee feels heard and accepted by their supervisor, but on the other hand, they are primarily dreading having their personal psychological struggles present in their future meetings. Further, this dread may be founded, as the supervisor experienced relief at the trainee's openness and their probing was reinforced.

5. Elaborated contextual behavioral conceptualization of intimacy

This conceptualization builds on existing behavioral and contextual behavioral approaches to understanding and intervening on intimacy. From this perspective, intimacy involves vulnerable behaviors, or responses to aversive antecedents, that are under appetitive functional relations, consensual, and empowered (see Table 1). To this end, contexts that aim to intervene to increase intimacy will, in the presence of aversive antecedents: (1) evoke behavior that functions to increase ongoing contact with shifting appetitives, (2) involve tact-mand combinations that make appetitive contingencies salient, and (3) include behaviors that support increasing degrees of freedom across IBCs. Implications for creating

contexts for intimacy vary across power and privilege disparities, relational goals, and time points within the interaction.

5.1. Creating contexts for intimacy

According to this conceptualization, the person with more relative power and privilege in an interaction and overall relationship bears responsibility for managing vulnerability in such a way as to promote intimacy instead of coerced vulnerability. A person with more relative power and privilege is likely to be more sensitized to available appetitives and have appetitive learning as a more robust aspect of their repertoire. Sensitivity to appetitives is necessary for consensual interactions and empowerment, both being critical features of training or intervening on intimacy. In this way, the reader is invited to reflect upon the relational contexts in which their ratio of appetitive to aversive functional relations (i.e., privilege) maximizes their degrees of freedom (i.e., power), and to consider the following recommendations for fostering appetitive functional relations when aversives (i.e., conditions for vulnerability) are present. Figure 1 offers a process for moment-to-moment assessment of conditions for functional intimacy along with response options based on observed conditions.

5.1.1. Modulate mands for intimacy according to relative power, the consented relationship, the consented purpose of the interaction, and other aspects of the immediate context

Disparities in power and privilege will always be present in relationships and will fluctuate across the different contexts in which relating occurs. Further, relationships, both personal and professional, come with distinct responsibilities that may or may not involve intimacy. For example, a Psychology professor's responsibilities to their

FIGURE 1
Ongoing assessment of conditions for functional intimacy.
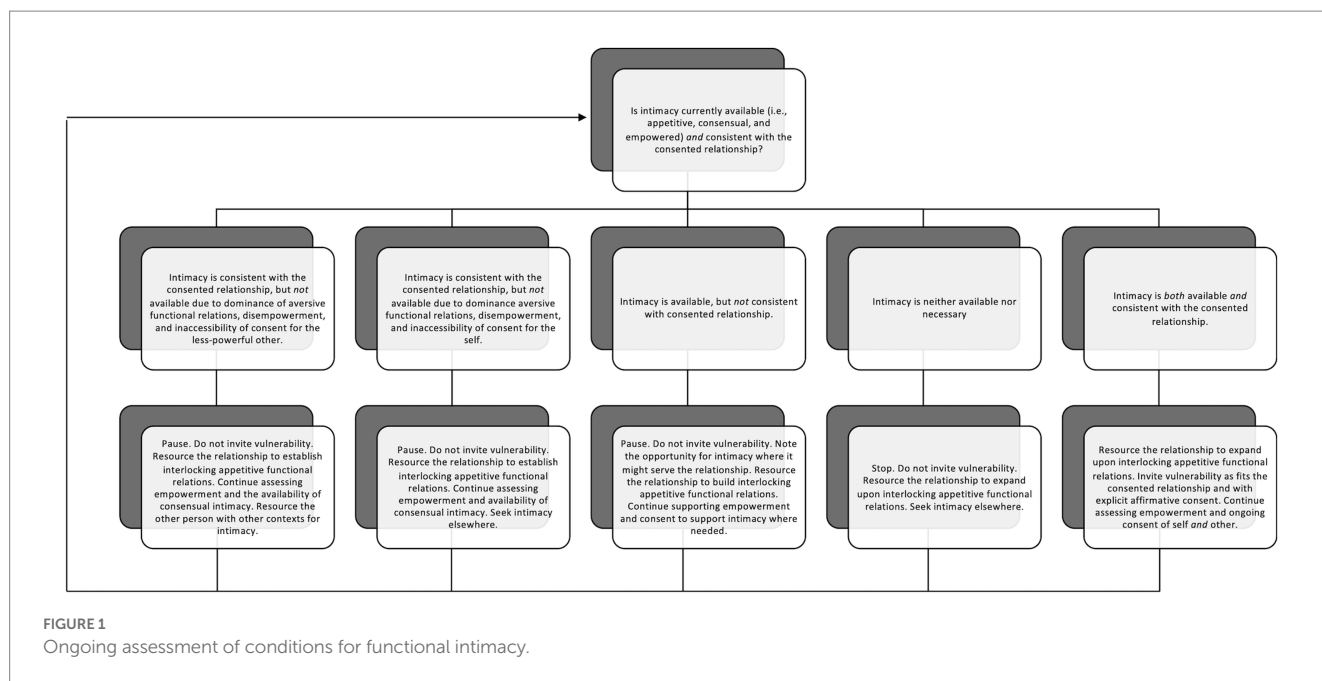
students differ from those to their applied supervisees, which differ still from those to their clients in their therapy or consultation work. While intimacy is central to well-being, this conceptualization suggests that intimacy is simply not always available or necessary, and vulnerability should only be invited where it is. The responsibility for determining if intimacy is available in a particular relationship and context fall to the person with more power, and involve moment-to-moment assessment of: (1) power dynamics as the relative ratio of appetitives to aversives available for each member of the interaction, (2) consistency of intimacy with the consented relationship p and the purpose of the current interaction in terms of explicitly tacted interlocking appetitives, and (3) other aspects of the immediate context in terms of their appetitiveness or aversiveness. We might ask: How much breadth, flexibility, and freedom do they seem to have in this interaction? How much breadth, flexibility, and freedom do I have? What are we each working for here? Is there anything we seem to be working to minimize, delay, or escape? Is there anything we seem to be grasping? Is building our intimacy an aspect of why we are in a relationship with one another? Is building our intimacy an aspect of why we are interacting right now? What seems to be supporting or limiting my freedom? What seems to be supporting or limiting their freedom? When this assessment suggests that the context offers limited support for intimacy – that is, that either the relationship or extrarelational aspects of context are limiting empowerment, consent, or overall access to appetitives, invitations to vulnerability should be tempered or withdrawn. When this assessment suggests that the context supports intimacy – that is, that the relationship is appetitive, empowering, and consensual, invitations to vulnerability have the potential to foster intimacy.

5.1.2. Foster accessibility of appetitives in terms of the detection, discrimination, and tacting appetitives with contextually appropriate resourcing

Sometimes the consented relationship and purpose of the interaction does involve intimacy – that is, sometimes intimacy is

an explicitly-tacted appetitive process or outcome for the relationship broadly and the current interaction. For example, a psychotherapy relationship is, by definition, intimate. However, just because intimacy is a consented part of the relationship and the interaction does not mean it is available from its initiation. For example, a psychotherapist may have to put significant effort into establishing the context for vulnerability to foster intimacy. Repertoires involved in accessing appetitives (both relational and otherwise) vary considerably between people and contexts, and are challenged by vulnerability. Thus, the person with more power in the consented intimate relationship and current interaction bears responsibility for fostering the accessibility of appetitives for the person with less power, both prior to and during the introduction of aversives involved in vulnerability intended to promote intimacy. This involves creating a context that evokes and reinforces the detection of appetitive functional relations, the discrimination of behavior necessary to access them, and the tacting of shifting appetitive functions as the interaction unfolds. The psychotherapist working from this perspective might invite the client to contact appetitives in their interaction from the most simple (e.g., inviting the client to give themselves a kind and resourcing breath) to fairly complex (e.g., inviting the client to share what life is or has been like when they were not struggling or to react to the therapist's shared intentions for psychotherapy). Here, the psychotherapist bases their invitations on the client's responses, interacting to support the gradual cultivation of this skill of detecting, discriminating, and tacting appetitive contingencies in the therapy interaction. It is also necessary for the more powerful person to determine if the current context can be appropriately resourced with appetitives salient to the person with less power to foster accessibility for them and promote intimacy in the relationship. If a psychotherapy client struggles to interact appetitively in a particular session, in the therapy relationship, or at all, the vulnerability of the interaction might already be outstripping the appetitives available, and the appetitive

learning repertoire and/or the therapeutic relationship may need to be developed before vulnerability is explicitly invited.

5.1.3. Foster one's own access to appetitives in terms of the detection, discrimination, and tacting appetitives with contextually appropriate resourcing

As vulnerability necessarily involves contact with aversives, contexts that evoke vulnerable behavior can disempower even people with more relative power in the interaction. To the extent that the more powerful person continues to engage vulnerably, then, their behavior is likely to come under aversive functional relations. In other words, their behavior is likely to narrow and become increasingly rigid, reducing their sensitivity and responsiveness to the varying context created by the less powerful person's behavior. In this way, individual-level aversive functional relations are likely to extend into IBCs and further limit access to appetitives for all members with varying degrees of power in the interaction. Thus, the person with more power in the interaction is responsible for fostering ongoing accessibility of appetitives not only for those with less power, but also for themselves. This involves assessing one's own current repertoire for the detection, discrimination, and tacting of appetitives both prior to and during the interaction. Prior to initiating a vulnerable interaction, the person with more power may find themselves rigid, narrow, and highly oriented to aversives (i.e., aversive functional relations may be dominant in their repertoire). For example, a highly paid keynote presenter who is jet lagged, hungry, and dehydrated may find themselves struggling to connect fully with an emotionally compelling personal story they planned to use to introduce their talk. Despite them being positioned to have the most power and degrees of freedom at the event, they simply do not have the resources to interact with the memories, the images on slides, and the audience appetitively. They rehearse the opening again and again, noticing themselves feeling more and more distracted, anxious, and disconnected from the memory with each attempt. If they are not able to engage appetitively with this vulnerable expression, it is highly unlikely that any of their audience members will. Here, the vulnerability is likely to be alienating instead of connecting. Such an effect might be even more pronounced if the audience is small and intended to be intimate.

In such a situation, intimacy is unavailable and should not be pursued. Instead, the person with more power may focus temporarily on resourcing themselves (i.e., engaging in behavior to increase salience of and contact with appetitives) to reassess the importance, availability, and necessity of intimacy. This might include actions that vary in complexity, including those that address physiological needs (e.g., resting, breathing deeply and mindfully, eating or drinking, exercising), interpersonal needs (e.g., seeking consultation, validation, or support from a similarly powered peer), or intrapersonal needs (e.g., reflecting on relevant values, affirming relevant aspects of identity). If there is sufficient time, instead of rehearsal, the talk might be better served by resourcing the speaker themselves with some fluids, a snack, and a nap. If time is limited, the speaker might replace the story with one that is less personal or emotionally compelling that they can interact with effectively. Notably, accessibility of appetitive functional relations for the person with more power is necessary *and insufficient* for intimacy. If self-assessment reveals increased breadth and flexibility and corresponding access to appetitives, they may initiate the intimate interaction, with careful attention to ongoing accessibility of appetitive functional relations for themselves and other members of the interaction, and a commitment to resource themselves as needed to initiate, maintain, or withdraw intimacy.

5.1.4. Assess for increasing prominence of aversives in the ongoing intimate interaction and intervene to maintain the dominance of appetitive functional relations

Interactions are a dynamic process (as are consent and power), and an interaction can shift at any point in such a way as to increase the prominence of aversive functional relations, increasing the likelihood of disempowerment and withdrawal of consent. For example, a parent may invite their adolescent child to talk about a long-term friendship that seems to be preoccupying them. The child accepts, disclosing a number of quite dangerous things their friend has been doing. As the parent's concern increases, they may notice the child becoming defensive and sounding like they might try to end the conversation. The responsibility for ongoing assessment of aversives associated with vulnerability falls to the person with more power, as does the responsibility for shifting the context to maintain the dominance of appetitive functional relations. This involves watching other members of the interaction for narrowing or increased rigidity of their repertoire, and resourcing them as needed (i.e., shifting the context as needed to increase salience of and contact with appetitives). This might begin with inviting actions that address physiological needs (e.g., inviting resting, breathing deeply and mindfully, eating or drinking, exercising) and extend into interpersonal needs (e.g., inviting validation-seeking, or support from a similarly powered peer), or intrapersonal needs (e.g., inviting reflection on relevant values, affirming relevant aspects of identity). For example, the parent may express gratitude for the disclosure and invite their child to pause to see if they need a hug or a glass of water before they go on. If ongoing assessment reveals increased breadth and flexibility and corresponding access to appetitives, they may re-initiate the intimate interaction by inviting vulnerability (i.e., re-introducing aversives), with careful attention to ongoing accessibility of appetitive functional relations. For example, the parent might acknowledge how hard it must have been to keep these secrets about someone they care so much for, and invite them to discuss it further. The parent might also stop short of sharing their own concerns for the friend, noticing that their child does not seem well-positioned to respond appetitively to their expression. Ideally the increased prominence of aversive functional relations is detected prior to their dominance, allowing for a shift in functional relations to maintain the dominance of appetitive functional relations before the person engages in avoidance behavior. Otherwise, intimacy may become unavailable for the remainder of the interaction, as the capacity to contact aversives associated with vulnerability without them becoming dominant is limited.

5.1.5. Establish interlocking appetitive functional relations

Many relationships call for some degree of consented intimacy (e.g., coworkers, neighbors, colleagues, community members, etc.), even if that is not the primary purpose of the relationship. In the context of such relationships, interactions that are not particularly vulnerable can provide a foundation for future intimacy through the development of robust and easily accessible interlocking appetitive

functional relations (i.e., appetitive IBCs). Members of the interaction can learn early on in a relationship how to behave in ways that are mutually appetitive. In other words, people can learn to engage in behaviors that are under appetitive functional relations with the behaviors of the other, where each is evoking and reinforcing others' behavior appetitively. Even if there is no apparent power differential associated with respective roles in the relationship, power will still vary across contexts and interaction dynamics. Thus, here too, fostering interlocking appetitive functional relations is the responsibility of the person with more power in the interaction. This involves the person with more power introducing appetitives that evoke and reinforce a range of behaviors for the person with less power, increasing the breadth and flexibility of their unfolding behavioral stream and sensitizing them to a range of appetitives in the context. Once the relationship is established to serve appetitive functions, the person with more power can specifically evoke and reinforce behaviors to support their own repertoire of assessing and intervening on appetitive functional relations (i.e., to evoke and reinforce improved sensitivity and responsiveness of the person with more power to the behavior of the person with less power). If possible, vulnerability should not be introduced until these interpersonal appetitives are well-established and easily accessible to both members of the relationship, in order to optimize the likelihood of intimacy. If not possible, vulnerable interactions should be resourced as described above and interspersed with interactions that are more exclusively appetitive, so as to continue to establish interpersonal appetitives to the point that intimacy is more readily accessible.

5.1.6. Aversive consequences are not used to train behavior and aversive antecedents are limited to the consented relationship

In any relationship, there are behaviors in both people's repertoire that are aversive to the other. In other words, there are behaviors in one person's repertoire that narrow and rigidify the behavior of the other, and motivate the other person toward running, fighting, or hiding to decrease that behavior of the other. The quickest, most acutely effective way for a person to decrease a behavior of another is to punish it by presenting aversive consequences. For example, if a research assistant is dominating conversations in lab meetings, the quickest and most effective way to stop it would be to consequate it with an aversive. The research supervisor might, having seen how the assistant seeks the other members' approval, admonish them firmly and publicly, watching them grow red with shame and withdraw. Regardless of whether the dominating behavior was under appetitive or aversive functional relations prior to the admonishment, aversive functions will now be prominent in lab meeting–for that assistant, and perhaps also for the supervisor and even other lab members on the team.

Similarly, the quickest, most acutely effective way to increase alternative, more desired behaviors is to reinforce them by removing aversive consequences. For example, a supervisor may lead their team in a way that is quite intimidating, offering only intermittent praise for employee work and frequently demonstrating high level skills with fluency instead of offering instruction or for how to reach that level. Here, the supervisor's intermittent praise for technical improvements may actually function not as an appetitive, but as a temporary removal of threat, allowing the praised team member some relief from the constant intimidation. Aversive functions, however, will still be most prominent, as that relief is temporary, and technical improvements will

be overly focused on supervisor reactions. Indeed the quickness and acute effectiveness of aversive functional relations to change another's behavior allows for the behaviors that serve aversive functions to emerge quite easily and with the characteristic narrowness and rigidity. In short, the use of aversive functional relations by the person with more power, even when used with intention and care, fosters their dominance in the IBCs. Further, the quickness and acute effectiveness of behavior change via aversive functional relations is accompanied by serious costs to the availability of intimacy. To the extent that a person uses the application and removal of aversive consequences to train desired repertoires, they are increasing the likelihood that their presence will function aversively for the other person such that aversive functional relations easily become prominent in IBCs. This risk is elevated in vulnerable interactions, which necessarily involve the presence of aversives, and further elevated when power disparities emerge. Here, the use of aversive consequences is associated with decreased availability of appetitive consent and increased probability of disempowerment, both of which are necessary for intimacy. In both examples above, the researcher and the supervisor might find their teams not only struggling to grow expansively and flexibly, but also failing to meet the kinds of vulnerabilities that show up in any workgroup (e.g., errors, interpersonal conflicts, etc.) with intimacy.

Thus, according to this conceptualization, it is the responsibility of the person with more power in a particular interaction in any relationship to approach behavior change in terms of expanding repertoires under appetitive functional relations. When the person with less power engages in behavior that is aversive to the person with more power, the role of the person with more power is to evoke and reinforce a range of new, more effective behaviors. When aversives are introduced by a person with more power, they are preceded by foundational interpersonal appetitives and presented as antecedents to expand repertoires in vulnerable situations, instead of as consequences to limit the behavior they find aversive. In both situations above, the researcher and the supervisor's teams would be well served by discussions to establish appetitives in the work, to nurture interpersonal appetitives, to develop appetitive functional relations in team processes, and to support self-resourcing with appetitives outside of the work.

6. Conclusion

Intimacy is considered integral to personal and relational well-being (see Reis, 1990), and, in most models, involves bidirectional vulnerability (see Gaia, 2002; Timmerman, 2009). FAP (Kanter et al., 2020) has provided a strong contextual behavioral foundation for the ongoing development of intimacy-based interventions, emphasizing contexts that foster vulnerability, intimacy, and safety. This conceptualization expands on that foundation suggesting that safe intimacy is only possible in contexts that use appetitive functional relations to promote consensual, empowered vulnerability. Most crucially, this conceptualization of intimacy places responsibility on people with more relative power to create appetitive contexts for intimacy and to avoid vulnerability where intimacy is not possible. It is our hope that this conceptualization may both guide intentional responses to the needs that vulnerable interactions present, and inform future empirical and applied developments in the science of intimacy in research, practice, and community culture.

Author's note

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Check for updates

The intersection of race and femininity in the classroom

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This vignette told in eight graphic panels illustrates a story about how emotional responses associated with White femininity are used to derail a classroom discussion about racial injustice in a university setting. The panels show how this weaponization of femininity occurs and how it shields those who wield it from external criticism while centering themselves in conversations about race. Women of other races typically cannot access this psychological tactic, thus it constitutes a strategic intersectional use of race, psychology, and privilege to access a power position. In offering suggestions on how to respectfully engage in situations in which racial injustice is a topic of discussion, we unveil how failure of emotional regulation is part of the core psychological framework that leads to these kinds of power dynamics.

Highlights

- Race as a discussion topic is actively avoided or derailed by White students; women strategically use their gender to this end.
- There is societal deference toward the visible distress made by a White woman in public that is not afforded other racial groups.
- This knowledge is used strategically by White women with and without their conscious intent to decenter people of color and center themselves.

"Between the intersection of whiteness, womanhood and patriarchy stands the white woman. She is seen as vulnerable, feminine, and emotional. A figure in need of protection" – Phipps (2021).

1. Introduction

The intersection of race and femininity is a complex and multifaceted topic that has received increasing attention in recent years. Research has shown that the actions of women of color are perceived differently than those of White women in the same contexts (McCormick-Huhn and Shields, 2021). Women of color are more likely to experience sexual harassment, for example, and may be more vulnerable to other forms of violence and abuse due to the juxtaposition of their race and gender identities (Cassino and Besen-Cassino, 2019). Studies have also shown that women of color often face unique challenges and discrimination due to this intersection of race and gender. For example, a nationally representative survey ($N = 2{,}009$) found that Black and Latina women are likely to receive less support after reporting harassment than their White counterparts (Raj et al., 2021). Further, White women are less likely to give aid to women of color,

as illustrated in a study by Katz et al. (2017) on bystander responses to a Black woman at risk for sexual assault when incapacitated ($N = 160$). White women in contrast, may be more likely to be able to rely on their gender to protect them from certain types of violence and harassment, while women of color may be more vulnerable to these types of harms due to their race (Accapadi, 2007; Butler et al., 2022).

These are however not the only ways that race, and gender intersect. The knowledge that an individual develops growing up socialized as White results in an understanding that Whiteness grants power that others of different races cannot easily access. Growing up female and White, an individual will have observed a deference granted to specific emotional states that are unique to her race and gender. This societal deference provides White women with a set of tools that can be used to garner sympathy in high-risk situations, shielding her physically and mentally from external threats (Armstrong, 2021; Phipps, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). These tools of sympathy and protection of the psyche are then wielded consciously or unconsciously in moments where the user finds herself under physical threat or emotional stress (Butler et al., 2022). Recent examples of how White women have attempted successfully and unsuccessfully to use their Whiteness and their femaleness to protect themselves from perceived threats by people of color have become widely available in the media (Armstrong, 2021). These scenarios have emerged in a spectrum of examples from police encounters in which a White woman attempts to blame-shift her shoplifting crime onto a Black woman, to an incident in which a White woman attempts to have a Black man arrested after he asks her to leash her dog while bird watching (Armstrong, 2021). Indeed, many people of color report experiencing more racial aggression from White women than White men (e.g., Blow, 2020; Williams, 2021).

When students are coming into contact with individuals from diverse cultures and are exposed to course material about privileged social identities, blindness to racial privilege can become a source of classroom conflict that exposes fault lines that have been previously hidden (Boatright-Horowitz and Soeung, 2009; Bergkamp et al., 2022; Todd et al., 2023).

1.1. Positionality

The authors of this paper have witnessed this phenomenon occurring at universities in different countries and from both sides of the classroom. The first author is a Black German American woman attending a competitive liberal arts college in the United States. The second author is a tenured psychology professor and research chair of mental health disparities who studies racism and psychopathology at a bilingual French-English urban university in Canada. This paper is informed by the authors' lived-experience, expertise in the subject matter, scientific research, and the scholarly literature.

1.2. Classroom disruption

As an example, in the summer of 2022, one of the authors was curating a class for approximately 25 graduate students at a Canadian university. There was a section on cultural competence in psychology, and the discussion centered on the experiences of people of color and societal privilege. Instead of accepting the sources and experience of the instructors, four White students made the point that White

French-speaking Canadians are also the subject of discrimination by English-speaking Canadians, and that they would like to find out how this topic would be integrated into the material. They furthermore expressed a general disbelief that there were differences between the opportunities of people of color and White people in Canada, even after being confronted with data and evidence showing the contrary (e.g., Cénat et al., 2021). The topic of discussion became negatively focused on the students of color in the class, their opportunities, and qualifications, and by implication, their humanity. The students of color felt unsafe and insulted, and expressed this to the instructor after the class was over.

When these White students were asked by the instructor to save further discussion for a later date they refused, continuing to monopolize class time, and then after the class they posted their opinions on the class discussion forum and complained to the administration that their academic freedom was being suppressed. They had managed to halt the lesson and prevent the course material from being covered in the allotted time. In particular, some White female students spearheaded the backlash, often becoming emotional or even insulting during discussions. One of the White female students asked a guest lecturer how she deals with "being advantaged on the basis of being a Black person," although this was not expressed anywhere in the lecture; rather the material covered societal advantages of Whiteness. It eventually became necessary to bring in two additional instructors and increase the class time to resolve the conflict. Meanwhile, the students of color were asking why the course was being derailed to coddle the White students.

This kind of classroom disruption during discussions on topics of race are an oft observed issue that occurs around the intersection of gender and race (Sue et al., 2009a; Sue, 2013). Sue et al. (2009b) conducted a qualitative study of racially-charged classroom conversations with eight White professors. Loss of control over the classroom was a major theme, as was uncertainty for how to address these conflicts, as "White students crying in response to a difficult dialogue was a common observation" (p. 1099). Likewise, in their focus group study ($N = 14$), Sue et al. (2009a) note that "the most common" reaction to difficult classroom discussions about race was crying" (p. 187).

2. Powerplay in the classroom: graphic representation

The college setting is a particularly volatile venue in which intersectionality between race and gender often comes to a head (Sue et al., 2009a; Sue, 2013). In the vignette illustrated in Figures 1, 2, based on classroom situation described by Sue (2013), a White university professor attempts to address the topic of racial injustice in a classroom when his lecture is derailed by several White students. Students of color are forced to interfere when the White students refuse to address racial injustice being described by the professor. The professor is surprised by the antagonism and his inaction allows the argument to escalate.

Several White students employ strategies to put an immediate end to the conversation and leave the arguments of the Black students unaddressed (Figures 1A–C). Some White women students in the class take personal offense then one begins to cry (Figure 1D) thereby refocusing the center of attention and creating a visible classroom
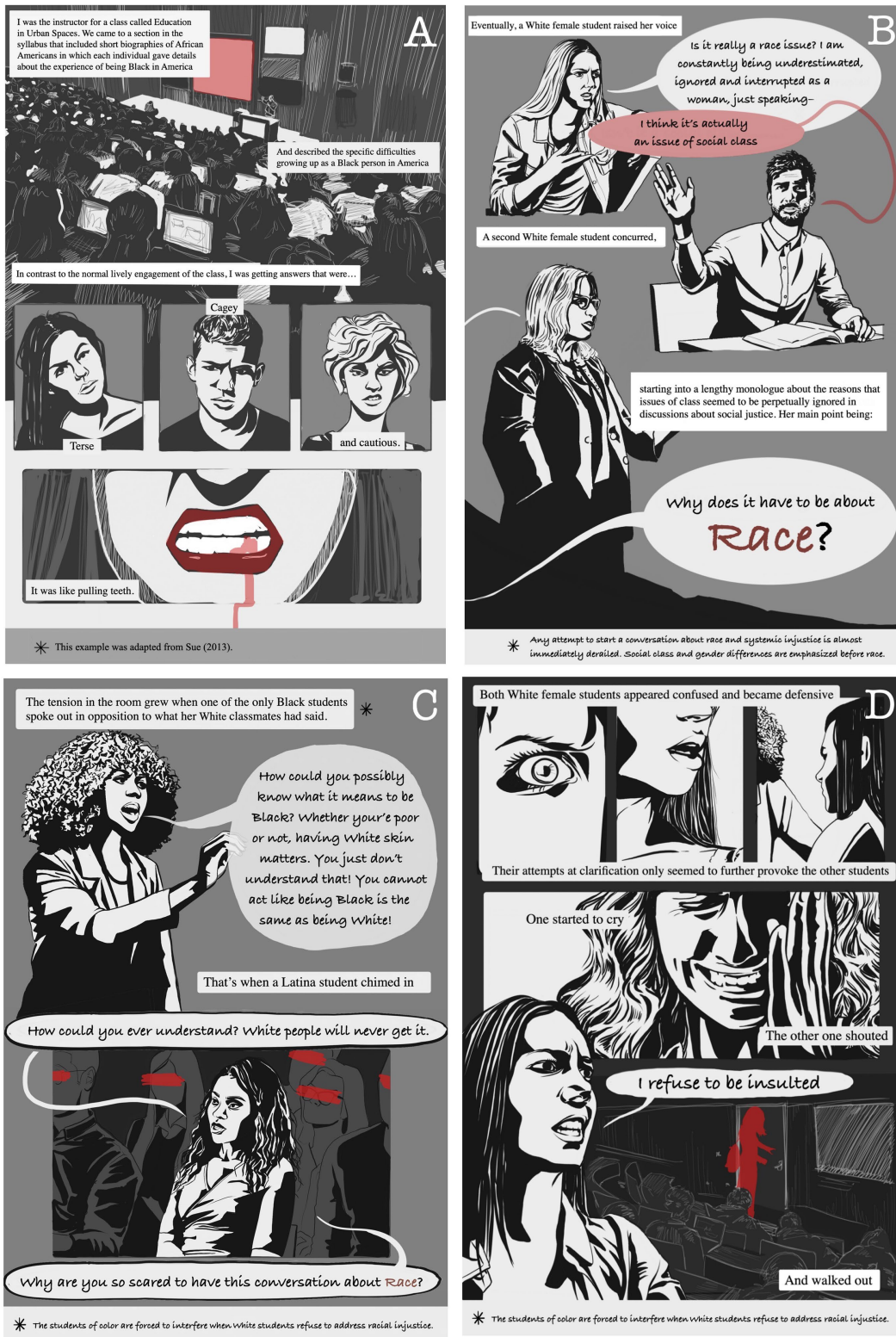
FIGURE 1
Powerplay in the classroom: weaponizing femininity in a discussion about race. **(A–D)** Instructor notices differing reactions between White and non-White students to a discussion about race.

disruption. Another White female student becomes defensive and leaves, putting an immediate end to the discussion. The emotions of the White female students are validated by her peers while the Black student's emotions remain ignored (Figure 2A) (e.g., Cooper, 2018). The Black student furthermore is villainized through the actions of the White student and her argument is viewed as invalid.

FIGURE 2
Powerplay in the Classroom: Loss of control in a discussion about race - analysis and recommendations **(A)** Instructor closes discussion which has been derailed. **(B)** Politicization of trauma is possible in White concepts of femininity, but more difficult for women of color. **(C)** Suggestions for engaging in discussion about race. **(D)** Lecturer corrects students and maintains control of the lesson.

This is a scene that is not new. Historically, Black women have been denied their femininity by society and are not afforded the same protections as White women (Césaire, 1950; Sharpe, 2016; Truth, 2020; Williams, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). This history influences how Black students are seen by their peers in many settings including the college classroom. The discussion topic in this case has created a racial divide in the class; in such cases White students and students of color have different levels of power that can be applied to promote understanding,

and students of color would have needed an ally. An ally is a person who advocates for the inclusion of marginalized people groups, not as a member of that group but in solidarity with its struggle and perspective (Williams et al., 2021). In this case, any meaningful discussion or conclusion is stifled by the professor who has become uncomfortable by the antics of the problematic White students, putting an end to the argument after exhibiting an unwillingness to demonstrate allyship or courage on behalf of the students of color in his classroom.

3. Discussion

White women, as in the graphically depicted situation in Figures 1, 2, have the ability to weaponize their pain and claim victimhood in situations where they feel threatened, an option that has not been accessible for women of color (Truth, 2020; Phipps, 2021). Certainly, other types of identities will also moderate this ability (e.g., age, income, religion, disability), but all things being equal, race and gender typically advantage White women in these situations. This use of vulnerability has been described as a staple of White feminism leading to discussions about 'toxic femininity' (Accapadi, 2007; Hamad, 2019; Williams, 2021), whereby patriarchal social norms are enacted by White women to gain power in certain situations (patriarchal femininity, Patton, 2018; McCann, 2022). Underscoring feminine stereotypes about weakness and vulnerability can help enlist assistance by more powerful actors. Although it can be used to enlist support for important issues (i.e., as in the #MeToo Movement) the cost of this kind of enactment is the exclusion and alienation of women of color, whose cultural concept of femininity may be less inclusive of weakness or vulnerability (Césaire, 1950; Hamad, 2019). The idea of the 'White woman', who is seen as a victim in need of protection, has been used in the past to justify aggression, anger, and violence toward people of color (Patton, 2018; Phipps, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). Historically, a colonial-era pretext for subjugation and violence by White men against people of color has been protection of the damsel-in-distress.

One of the most galvanizing historic examples of such aggression is the 1955 murder of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old African American boy who was horrifically murdered by White men after being falsely accused of whistling at a White woman (Pérez-Peña, 2017). This type of violence was not uncommon in the segregated South in that era; however, in this instance, the widely publicized photos of his mutilated body resulted in such national notoriety, that to this day the commemoration markers of his death are continuously vandalized (Threatte, 2016; Pérez-Peña, 2017; Paz, 2021). Likewise, the Tulsa Race massacre, leading to the destruction of Black Wall Street (Greenwood) and deaths of up to 300 people, was caused by a White female elevator operator who was upset by a Black man. The Oklahoma Historical Society determined that the cause of her distress is that he stepped on her toe. The National Guard assisted in the destruction of the town (Messer et al., 2018).

Many are shocked to learn that the same weaponization of White femininity reaches into the present day, when in 2020, as previously noted, a White woman made a calculated call to 911 to punish a Black man who was birdwatching in New York's Central Park. On the call she started screaming and said that an African American man was threatening her life, after he merely asked her to leash his dog. Before calling the police, she made sure to threaten him with what they both knew was an invitation to a potentially lethal police confrontation in

a powerful example of the way White Women can arm themselves with their identity (Perez-Pena, 2017).

In the graphic classroom anecdote, similarly, the White woman becomes the victim, and by default the Black person becomes the persecutor or the villain (Accapadi, 2007). The distress of a White woman is a cultural trigger that sets off a specific emotional response that can lead to emotional dysregulation and protectionism in some White people (Liebow and Glazer, 2019; Phipps, 2021).

The decision by the White female student to cry in the classroom is a cultural and psychological response made an acceptable strategy to (1) distract from any accusations of personal racism, (2) refocus the center of attention, (3) control the narrative and the room, and (4) seize the position of power, and (5) control the emotions of White men, generally the most powerful people in a setting (Liebow and Glazer, 2019; Butler et al., 2022).

The expectations and treatment of students by instructors has been demonstrated to vary by social class as well as race and gender (Griendling et al., 2023). Further, White female students in particularly may experience marginalization differently based on social class (Silver, 2020; Todd et al., 2023). As such, it can be hypothesized that class may also play a role in these classroom dynamics. However, although research has found that access to extracurricular clubs and groups is impacted by class, it is primarily race and gender that shape the overall student experience, beyond mere access (Silver, 2020). Nonetheless, because White students tend to experience the impact of class differences more keenly than race, they may be more motivated to raise this issue during classroom discussions about race.

White women wielding their status in situations as depicted in the figures are thereby effectively weaponizing their femininity to shield themselves from criticism and control the conversation about race. Figures 1, 2 are designed to help recognize the emotional triggers and emotional dysregulation that are part of the psychological framework that leads to these kinds of outbursts and thereby aid in the understanding and mitigation of such occurrences (DiAngelo, 2011; Armstrong, 2021). Some of the oft hidden or unexamined emotional regulation issues which can arise when confronted by conversations on issues of race include avoidance, narcissism, defensiveness, feeling threatened, and fear (Sue et al., 2010; DiAngelo, 2011).

3.1. Creating safe and equitable classroom discussions

There are specific approaches that can be employed to create a safe and equitable classroom space dedicated to learning. The unfolding of events can itself be a teaching tool. Strategies that lecturers and students can use to transform such situations include the following (Sue et al., 2009b, 2010; Williams, 2019; Hochman and Suyemoto, 2020; Williams et al., 2021).

Students:

- *Engage:* White students should allow the discussion about race and racial injustice to unfold. Resist any impulse to become defensive and exit the conversation. Do not derail conversation by refocusing on your own or someone else's victimhood. Avoid using your authority to stop discussions about race to maintain "peace."

- *Listen*: No one should sidetrack the conversation to one about social class or gender as this will devalue the experiences of racialized people who are living daily with systemic racism.
- *Center* the voices of students of color. If you are White and find yourself in a conversation about race, WAIT (Why Am I Talking?) Ask yourself if you should be planted in the center of the conversation. Ask yourself if the topic is about you or should be about you at all (e.g., Kuo et al., 2022).
- *Accept criticism*: Discussing the facts about racial injustice should not be seen as a personal attack on your character, your family, or yourself personally. Discussions about race are a prerequisite for greater empathy, self-growth, and true education about systemic injustice.
- *Empathize*: Understand that your personal experiences may be different from someone of a different race. Cultivate compassion toward those who are marginalized by society and try to understand their stories.

Professors can additionally:

- *Regulate* White women attempting to center themselves with displays of emotional distress. Invite these students to step outside the class until they feel ready to re-engage. This disempowers them by removing them from center stage and shows your faith in their ability to regain control of their emotions without assistance.
- *Correct* any students who advance false stereotypes, make racist statements, or work to derail conversations about racial justice; they should be gently corrected during the class as a learning exercise for everyone.
- *Check-in* with any affected students individually after class or during office hours to show that you care, make them feel heard, and gain valuable feedback that you can use to improve the classroom experience.

For instructors, it is important to understand that when issues related to race are discussed in class, expect disruptions to occur and be prepared to defuse the situation from the start by describing in advance the types of dynamics (e.g., outlined in this piece) that can occur. Some White students may never have been involved in a discussion about race or have even thought through the implications of being socialized as a White person (Todd et al., 2023). If students shift the focus from the material and use the class as a forum to deny that Whiteness confers privilege, or even imply this, it is a disservice to students because ultimately the ugly implication would be that people of color are disadvantaged because they are inferior. The instructor should therefore not allow the students to control the class through displays of emotion (Sue et al., 2009b). These conversations can be difficult, and so it may help for instructors to work to increase their own capacity for interracial dialogue (see Williams et al., 2022 for practical exercises to facilitate personal growth).

Professors can also preemptively prevent many such issues by adding material to their syllabi about expectations for classroom behaviors, such as the importance of prioritizing (centering) the voices of people of color when issues of racism are discussed and mutually respectful behavior. Adopting these suggestions should help in facilitating equitable discussions about racial injustice. This will not be easy, as some students will be uncomfortable and may even complain, but this can all be used as an educational opportunity, ultimately fostering greater racial aid in creating harmony and promoting allyship (Liebow and Glazer, 2019; Williams et al., 2020).

4. Conclusion

It is crucial to continue researching the complex ways in which race and gender intersect and impact the lives of individuals (Armstrong, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). This power and privilege become evident in the societal deference granted to specific emotional states and experiences that are unique to White women (Armstrong, 2021; Phipps, 2021). Although there are many media reports of this occurring, there is very little contemporary scholarship on the extent, psychology, situational awareness, and deliberation White women go through when exercising these privileged behaviors (Accapadi, 2007; Blow, 2020; Armstrong, 2021).

The issues described are not universal truths, but rather cultural phenomena focused on American and Canadian society. Further research is needed to address the ways in which race and femininity intersect, and the impact that this intersection has on the lived experiences of both women of color and White women broadly (Armstrong, 2021). More research is also needed on the intersection of other identities as well (e.g., religion, age, income, disability, nationality). The escalation of conflict when a White woman uses emotional vulnerability to inflame the passions of onlookers can have life-threatening consequences (Armstrong, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). It is therefore particularly important to dismantle the racism and sexism embedded in the myth of White feminine victimhood to create a more equitable and just society.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Abuse of power in the disciplinary actions of a state psychology licensing board: inequitable outcomes and early career psychologists

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The field of psychology has established high professional standards which have become a cornerstone of the practice of psychology. However, powerful boards tasked with administering these standards can operate with little oversight, making it difficult to monitor whether these institutions are operating in a fair and impartial way. In particular, early-career psychologists who have less experience and power in their initial years of independent practice may be singularly vulnerable as they have relatively little experience to navigate the profession, including fielding complaints that may be made against them to a licensing board. While it is essential to ensure early-career psychologists are upholding their commitments to the practice, there are risks in policing their activities without orienting toward growth, learning, and professional development. Even the smallest disciplinary action may never be expunged from a psychologist's record, resulting in long-term implications for insurance coverage, reputation and future professional viability in the field. Overly-punitive approaches can be distressing or even traumatizing. In this paper, we examine disciplinary actions of the Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology (KBEP) from the years 2000 to 2020 (*N* = 65) to determine the methodology by which the Board administers its oversight function. We analyze the nature of the discipline received (fines, suspensions, continuing education, supervision) revealing a two-tiered system of punishments, and provide context regarding the nature of the disciplinary process and its impacts. We report on qualitative interviews of early career psychologists subject to disciplinary actions by the Board, and psychologists who supervised early career psychologists investigated by the Board. We compare legislation governing KBEP and make comparisons to the workings of licensing boards in three other states. Using these findings, we make recommendations for revisions to the applicable legislation and administrative processes of the Board to establish an improved balance between public safety, the well-being of new psychologists, and equity considerations such as race, and the development of the practice of psychology in Kentucky. This work brings to light previously unexamined injustices that can knowingly or unknowingly be perpetuated by licensing Boards, and can be used to inform the creation of more just, balanced and inclusive professional Boards.

KEYWORDS

early career psychologists, state boards, disciplinary action, equity, governance, psychology licensing boards

1. Introduction

The field of psychology has established high professional standards for the people who choose to enter the practice, and these standards help to regulate and hold accountable those who have dedicated their careers to caring for people navigating relational and mental health needs. Given the intimate and essential character of this work, accountability and ethical conduct has become one of the cornerstones of the practice of psychology. However, the professional oversight, accountability and rigor demanded from psychology professionals should also inform the conduct of those providing that professional oversight. In short, who is watching the watchers?

To explore this question, in this paper we examine the methodology by which a single state Board– the Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology (KBEP or "the Board") – administers disciplinary actions. We uncover how early-career psychologists have been particularly harmed by the very body meant to oversee their professional development. We outline some of the challenges faced by early-career psychology professionals in the state of Kentucky. We describe disciplinary actions of KBEP including their outcomes and implications, while offering an analysis of the methodology of the Board based on their rulings in previous cases. We also note the lack of diversity of the Board and how this may contribute to an unacknowledged culture of discrimination and inequitable treatment.

We conclude by making recommendations to help ensure the Board is more accountable for their work and has mechanisms in place to ensure equitable treatment of all psychologists operating in the state. Understanding the power dynamics between accountability boards and the people they are meant to hold accountable is an under researched topic in academia generally, and in the psychology profession in particular. It is hoped that this case study can also inform the development of more equitable psychology licensing Board practices across the country. The methods introduced in this paper can be used to make similar assessments in other States where power is wielded without the opportunity to monitor, evaluate and adjust practices to best serve the public as well as the evolving field and practice of psychology.

1.1. Purpose of the Kentucky board of examiners of psychology

The purpose of KBEP[1] revolves around two main functions: (1) managing the administration and oversight for licensing professional psychologists in Kentucky; and (2) monitoring client needs and public safety regarding the practice of psychology in the state. To fulfill these functions, the Board engages in regular meetings to review new and ongoing issues, verifies the qualifications of incoming psychologists, conducts formal hearings, and implements disciplinary actions when necessary. It also makes recommendations to update the laws, policies and procedures governing the practice in Kentucky to ensure fairness and equality.

In 1948, Kentucky passed the "Certification of Clinical Psychologists" law and became the third or fourth state to recognize psychology as a regulated profession (Schuster, 2011). The Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology (KBEP), initially consisting of 5 doctoral-level psychologists, was created to help regulate the practice on behalf of the state. In 1964, the statute was revised to limit who could be called a "Psychologist" to only individuals who had a doctoral degree or equivalent in psychology (Schuster, 2011). In the mid-1970s, the Board implemented more restrictive policies, refraining from issuing certificates for Autonomous Functioning which made it difficult for Master's-level psychologists to practice independently (Schuster, 2011).

Since that time, the composition of the Board has been updated (HB 330/CI, 1992): they now have 8 psychologists and 1 citizen at large for a total of 9 members (Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology, 2022). However, in the state of Kentucky, none of the psychologist seats have ever been held by a person of color, and currently, neither the psychologists nor the citizen at large is a person of color (Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology, 2022). There are also no board seats occupied by early-career psychology professionals.

1.2. Early career psychologists

The American Board of Professional Psychology defines an early-career psychologist (ECP) as someone who already has their doctoral degree but earned it less than 10 years ago (American Board of Professional Psychology [ABPP], 2022). Alternatively, the Kentucky Psychological Association (n.d.) defines early-career psychologists as "someone who has completed a master's or doctoral degree within the last 7 years." For the purposes of this paper, we apply the KPA 7-year window after degree completion to qualify as an ECP.

Like all new practitioners to their chosen field, for early-career psychologists there is a learning curve as people get practical experience applying the theory and research they have gained during their studies and translate the knowledge into successful day-to-day practice. These psychologists are in need of monitoring and mentorship as they navigate their entry into the profession, as well as receiving understanding and navigating the inevitable failures that come as they learn and grow into mature clinical practitioners.

Early-career psychologists represent the future of the field and provide unique perspectives to the discipline and practice of psychology (Hall and Boucher, 2008). Without new psychologists joining the practice, the future of psychological practice is vulnerable not only to decreasing membership but ultimately decreasing relevance (Forrest, 2012). Early-career psychologists evolve the current state of psychology in order to ensure the practice can meet the demands of the changing needs of its members and the public (Forrest, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). The psychological issues confronting upcoming generations include the internet, globalization, COVID-19, and rising diversity, many of which are not the same issues that led to the need for a psychologist in past generations. In fact, early-career practitioners lead the way in our understanding of how to help clients navigate these concerns

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1 www.psy.ky.gov

due to their contemporary and up-to-date training as well as shared lived experience with younger clients.

1.3. Ramifications of accusations of misconduct and disciplinary actions

After many long years of study and practice to enter the field, receiving formal notice of a licensing complaint can be extremely distressing for practitioners at any time in their career (Kirkcaldy et al., 2020). Shock and surprise are common reactions, and fear and anxiety are pervasive among those accused of malpractice or errors (Schoenfeld et al., 2001). A primary reason for severe anxiety revolves around potentially losing the ability to earn an income. For some, this type of disciplinary notice early in their practice can be traumatic. In a study of psychologists' experiences of a misconduct complaint, one accused practitioner shared: "I think I was traumatized. it consumed me. I never want to go through it again, in my life. it is beyond devastation" (Kirkcaldy et al., 2020, p. 405). Complaints of professional misconduct, whether substantiated or not, can cause a loss of professional confidence and capacity. Speaking about their experience of receiving a complaint, one person said: "I felt worthless, [like] I cannot do this job, I am totally incompetent. I need to relook at the degree whether this is supposed to be my life, or should I be doing something else. I questioned everything that I did" (Kirkcaldy et al., 2020, p. 407).

Early-career psychologists may be particularly susceptible to this sort of traumatization and loss of confidence when faced with accusations of professional misconduct. However, the risk of traumatization can increase when these harsh accusations are received from the regulatory body that is meant to oversee their practice, and especially without some basic supportive guidance about the administrative process to understand what is happening, why it is happening, and that they are going to be accompanied collaboratively and compassionately to address the situation. This effect is amplified by the negative professional exposure this type of early-career reprimand can bring and the increasing availability of disciplinary information online (e.g., Szalados, 2021). **Table 1** below outlines the possible disciplinary actions that the KBEP can take, and even a public reprimand can have long-term negative implications for a psychologist's ability to get insurance coverage, receive licensing approval in other jurisdictions, gain professional society membership, secure clients, and affect their overall reputation within the field (Jesilow and Ohlander, 2010; Coy et al., 2016; Szalados, 2021). Despite the enormous impact of even the mildest of these disciplinary actions, the reality is that most of the accusations of potential misconduct by early-career psychologists (as with any early-career professional) are in reference to actions committed through honest error or misunderstanding, not malicious intent or gross negligence (Novotney, 2020). In contrast to policing serious ethical code violations that are a result of willful misconduct, a different approach to support people new to the profession and teach and nurture them as they grow into their role as a well-informed and ethical member of the psychological community would improve the nature of this process.

The emotional turmoil that can result from accusations of professional misconduct intersect both the personal and

TABLE 1   Disciplinary actions utilized by the Kentucky board of psychological examiners.

Disciplinary actions the KBEP can invoke	What it entails
Probation	This is a disciplinary action that entails supervised practice, where the license can be revoked if the board finds that the imposed conditions are not being followed.
Reprimand	This is a disciplinary action by the Board, and it does appear on the psychologist's public record. It seems to signify that the Board has formally and publicly recognized the psychologist's wrongdoing and the settlement agreement equates to the psychologist "agreeing to the wrongdoing."
Private admonishment	This is not a disciplinary action and is used for statistical purposes. If a private admonishment is invoked, it is not publicly accessible but remains in the psychologist's file and can be used as evidence if new issues arise in KY.
Suspension of license	This is a disciplinary action by the Board, and during the suspension the psychologist cannot practice.
Revocation or refusal to renew license	The license is lost and the psychologist can no longer practice as long as the license remains revoked. Three years after the date of revocation, a person can appeal to the Board for reinstatement (319.082), unless indicated otherwise in the order.
Fine	If a fine is invoked, it cannot exceed $1,000 per violation. The fine stays on their disciplinary record. The purpose of a fine is not typically punitive, rather to reimburse the board for their investigation and administrative costs. Fines however also have been levied to redress court costs or compensate plaintiffs and in such cases could be considered punitive.

professional life of a psychologist as it casts doubt on their abilities, credibility, competency, and integrity as an individual and a practitioner (Thomas, 2005; Kirkcaldy et al., 2020). The stress of trying to navigate the accusations being made against them, while also preserving their reputation and high-level of client services while they continue to practice, can have a severe negative impact on their emotional and psychological state (Thomas, 2005). Accusations of professional misconduct can also result in significant issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, all of which can lead to impaired professional abilities, judgment, and acute distress (Thomas, 2005).

1.4. Psychology in Kentucky

Psychologists are fundamental to the vital backbone of mental health services nationwide. In addition to their crucial role in mental health care delivery, they provide leadership in community mental health centers and hospitals. Psychologists in primary

health care may administer and interpret clinical assessments. Important psychological tests and assessments include determining functioning and aptitude, making diagnoses, and identifying treatment needs for complex psychopathologies. Outside of medical settings, psychologists spend considerable time teaching and training all types of mental health care providers. They serve as mentors in post-secondary institutions – contributing to success within academia and institutional culture. Additionally, through research, these professional psychologists find evidence-based solutions to mental health disorders, and sometimes they venture beyond clinical settings and contribute to policy and legal work. For the most part, psychologists receive high quality education and are well-prepared for their varied professional roles (e.g., Mikail and Nicholson, 2019).

Although the APA estimates that 106,000 psychologists are licensed in the United States, the distribution and subsequent access to these psychologists by the public is quite geographically heterogenous (Lin et al., 2020). In some areas with high accessibility there are up to 3,600 in a county, and in other less well-prosperous locales, there are zero psychologists and no access to mental health resources. Kentucky has the fourth highest number of counties (120) among US states and counts the most number of counties with zero psychologists (Lin et al., 2016). Across the US, the areas with the highest access to licensed psychologists include the Miami and Seattle areas, California, and the Northeast. There is a notable dearth of access in the heart of the nation, and in Kentucky specifically.

According to the APA, in 2018, there were approximately 785 active doctoral-level licensed psychologists in Kentucky, which are a subset of the approximately 1,120 clinical, counseling and school psychologists in the state (American Psychological Association, 2020; U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). The concentration of licensed psychologists was low compared to the nation as a whole, with only 17.5 per 100,000 persons, compared to 32.0 per 100,000 in the US as a whole, notably lower than the national average. This number is not adequate to meet the demand for mental health services in Kentucky, as 22.14% of adults experienced mental illness (of any kind) in 2020 in Kentucky, which was higher than the national average (19%) (American Psychological Association, 2020). In addition, approximately 4.65% of the Kentucky population ages 12 and older had alcohol use disorder in the previous year which although lower than the national average (5.37%), did not eclipse the alarmingly high number of drug overdoses. The drug overdose mortality rate in Kentucky in 2018 came to 30.9 deaths per 100,000, compared to only 19.8 deaths per 100,000 nationally. Data shows that many counties, particularly in the south and east of the state, have a lack of professional psychologists despite a high need for them (American Psychological Association, 2020).

1.5. Purpose of this investigation

Some contributors to this report have practiced in Kentucky and feel a great affection for the state and its people. They have served as members of the Kentucky psychological community and share the concerns expressed by others that disciplinary measures taken by the Board against psychology credential holders

have done damage to the practice of psychology in Kentucky, and have been at times overly harsh, inconsistent, aggressive, or lacking in transparency. As an example, consider the Board's legal response to the 35-years running advice column of the syndicated board-certified psychologist, John Rosemund (NC), who was threatened and censored by KBEP because they disagreed with his perspectives. Institute for Justice Attorney Paul Sherman opined that, "Kentucky's definition of the practice of psychology is so broad, and the board has demonstrated itself to be so aggressive, that we don't know what they think the limits on their power are" (Burrows, 2013). Dr. Rosemond sued the Kentucky Psychology Board, charging them with attempting to suppress his First Amendment rights. They refused to back down, and in October 2015 ended up losing the case Rosemond had brought against them in the courts. Consider this was a prominent esteemed psychologist with enough resources and reputation to sue and resist the Board's overreach in order to enforce his rights. However, most psychologists, and especially early-career psychologists, do not have the power or resources to engage in such a battle.

It is hoped that an analysis of the disciplinary methodology of the Board can shed light on this issue and ensure that improvements are made to the functioning of the Board. Given the relatively low numbers of psychologists in the state, it is of concern that new psychologists may be deterred from careers in Kentucky if the risks are deemed high and the psychological community unwelcoming. The purpose of this paper is to better understand the disciplinary procedures utilized by the Board, statistically assess if these measures have been applied consistently, and elucidate their effect on early-career psychologists. Finally, we make recommendations for improvement to eliminate potentially arbitrary implementation of punishment and better balance the needs of new psychologists with the public safety for the greater public good, with an eye to considerations of fairness, accountability and equity.

2. Materials and methods

This investigation utilized both quantitative (licensing board records) and qualitative (interviews) as data, as described in the following sections. The methods utilized were approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (REB).

2.1. Quantitative

The primary source of data for this investigation was the disciplinary records posted on KBEP website from 2000 to 2018 ($N = 63$), in addition to records obtained through an open records request from 2019 to 2020 ($N = 2$) for a total of 65 records. We read each disciplinary report and extracted the data of interest. Variables examined included: Severity of KBEP Accusations; Early career status of psychologist (binary); Months of license suspension; Months of probation; Fine/Payment amounts; License remanded (binary); License suspended/revoked (binary); Ethnic/Racial minority status (binary); and gender.

Some of the items were difficult to code due to inconsistencies in Board orders and missing documentation. For the category

of "Months of license suspension" it was unclear how to rate revocations, as the Kentucky code allows people with revoked licenses to reapply after 3 years. In these cases, we rated "Months of license suspension" at 36 months (unless the order specified otherwise), and added an additional 4 months for the application process which can be expected to be more complicated given the psychologist's disciplinary history (total 40 months). In some cases, licenses were revoked permanently, in which case Months was entered as 150 (~13 years) – 30 months more than the longest revocation that included a stated option to later reapply (10 years).

Severity of harm/risk to clients was rated on a scale of 0–5 by the first and third authors (senior doctoral-level health scientists), based on the details of the case, with issues related to failure in administrative matters receiving a low score (0 or 1), issues surrounding incompetent practice scoring in the middle (about a 3), and issues involving abuse or high risk of harm to clients receiving the highest score (5).

Demographics (White/Person of Color, gender) were determined based on the psychologists' names, gender pronouns, and publicly available information on the internet. No rating was made for racial status when race could not be determined.

The statistical analysis conducted included simple descriptives (means and standard deviations), correlations between disciplinary outcomes and severity of KBEP accusations (Pearson and point biserial), and T-tests and Chi-Square tests to compare variables of interest between ECP psychologists and mid/late career psychologists. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24.

2.2. Qualitative

To better understand the qualitative aspects of being investigated by KBEP, we conducted interviews with three (3) early-career psychologists who had been investigated by the Board, and two (2) supervisors of early-career psychologists who themselves had also been investigated by the Board in conjunction with their supervisees. Two of those interviewed later withdrew their approval due to fear of retaliation by KBEP. The authors used public records and word of mouth to recruit the psychologists. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim using the transcription feature provided by Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and then verified/corrected by a research assistant. Summaries of the experiences were produced from the interviews and presented as case studies. These case studies were supplemented and confirmed with related documentation from KBEP. Based on our observations and conversations with Kentucky psychologists, including many in governance positions, and the literature (e.g., Kirkcaldy et al., 2022), these accounts are to be considered examples of typical experiences interacting with KBEP and their impact on the accused.

3. Results/findings

3.1. Disciplinary case demographic data

By 2018, 785 licensed practicing psychologists could be found in Kentucky. If the national prevalence of Black psychologists follows the national average (4.2%) there should be about 34 Black

psychologists practicing in Kentucky (American Psychological Association, 2020; U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). As noted, it was difficult to obtain information about the ethnoracial identity of our study subjects as this information was not included in the data available from the state. As such we were only able to provide information on 71.2% of files, and the vast majority were White. This likely speaks to the demographics of psychologists in Kentucky over the 23-year study period. We also noted that many cases emerged out of complaints related to work in legal cases, which we also enumerate below. See Table 2 for details.

In our review of the disciplinary data, we noted six primary types of allegations actioned upon by the Board, which are loosely in keeping with categories found by Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (2022). These are not mutually exclusive as most had allegations in more than one area. The main areas that incurred disciplinary actions were as follows:

1. Failure to maintain Adequate Records/Administrative issues (24.2%)
2. Unprofessional Conduct (87.1%)
3. Improper or inadequate supervision of trainees (9.7%)
4. Misrepresentation of credentials (22.6%)
5. Incompetence/Practicing psychology poorly (51.6%)
6. Exploitation/Physical or sexual abuse of clients (24.2%)

There were a number of different types of disciplinary actions taken toward psychologists, which included some or all of the options listed in Table 2. See Table 3 for details.

Next, we compared ECP to Mid/Late Career Psychologists on several key variables, including demographics and severity of disciplinary actions. For the most part, ECP's received more punishments but had less severe offenses. ECP were given significantly more hours of continuing education than their Mid/Late career counterparts ($p = 0.048$), but other comparisons did not reach significance. See Table 4 for details.

3.2. Harm/risk and severity of offense by disciplinary action

Our ratings of harm/risk to clients were positively correlated with independent ratings of overall severity of offense ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). Further, harm/risk to clients was moderately but significantly correlated to months of probation, months of suspension, and whether the license was revoked or suspended. However, there was no correlation between harm/risk to clients or severity of offense and fine amounts, hours of CE required, total

TABLE 2 Subject descriptives.

	N	Total	Percent
Early career psychologists	22	64	34.4%
Women	22	65	33.8%
People of color	2	45	4.4%
Involved legal issues/family court	17	61	29.5%

TABLE 3 Various disciplinary actions.

Disciplinary actions	N	Total	Percent	Mean	SD
License suspension (not incl. 10 revoked)	17	54	31.5%	7.74 (months)	19.00
License suspended or revoked	29	64	45.31%	NA	NA
License probation	30	54	54.55%	11.49 (months)	16.57
Requires supervision	30	64	46.88%	36.44 (hours)	61.33
Requires continuing education	19	64	29.69%	2.80 (hours)	5.45
Must pay fines/costs ($)	44	60	73.33%	$1572.36	2322.80
License reprimanded	19	64	30.16%	NA	NA

TABLE 4A Comparative findings.

	Psychologist stage	N	Mean	Std. dev.
Months' probation	ECP	18	13.33	18.81
	Mid/late career	37	10.59	15.56
Months suspension (including revocation)	ECP	22	24.05	40.44
	Mid/late career	42	20.40	43.97
Fine/cost amount ($)	ECP	21	1099.29	1528.70
	Mid/late career	39	1827.10	2637.58
Hours of education*	ECP	22	4.66	7.10
	Mid/late career	42	1.83	4.12
Total supervision months (hrs/week × no. mos.)	ECP	22	11.18	17.40
	Mid/late career	42	7.00	12.01
Total severity of offense score (rating 1–8)	ECP	22	3.41	2.68
	Mid/late career	38	3.68	2.19
Harm risk to clients (rating 0–5)	ECP	21	2.14	2.15
	Mid/late career	39	2.41	1.50

$*p < 0.05$.

TABLE 4B Comparative findings – crosstabs.

		No		Yes	
		N	%	N	%
License suspended/revoked	ECP	11	50.0%	11	50.0%
	Mid/late career	24	57.1%	18	42.9%
Settlement agreement	ECP	1	4.8%	20	95.2%
	Mid/late career	6	16.2%	31	83.8%
Reprimanded	ECP	16	72.7%	6	27.3%
	Mid/late career	29	69.0%	13	31.0%
Legal/family court involvement	ECP	16	72.7%	6	27.3%
	Mid/late career	26	68.4%	12	31.6%

hours of supervision required, or if final judgments listed the license as being remanded. See **Table 5** for details.

3.3. Interview data

Included here are summarized accounts from psychologists interviewed about their experiences with KBEP. To help preserve anonymity, the names of the participants and some non-relevant details are changed. Below is a summary of their experiences and how they were impacted.

3.3.1. Early career psychologist accused of practicing without a license

Case Study A: Andrea started as an assistant professor in a large urban university, where her work was focused on the mental health of marginalized people. She was in the process of applying for a temporary license in Kentucky.

TABLE 5 Pearson and point biserial bivariate correlations.

		Harm/Risk to clients	Overall severity of offenses
Months of probation	Correlation	0.370**	0.261
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.006	0.061
Months suspension (including revocation)	Correlation	0.379**	0.189
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003	0.148
License suspended/revoked (binary)	Correlation	0.358**	0.422***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.005	(0.001
Fine/cost amount ($)	Correlation	0.200	0.143
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.132	0.284
Hours of education	Correlation	−0.106	0.049
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.414	0.709
Total supervision hrs (weeks × no. mos.)	Correlation	0.194	0.207
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.135	0.110
Reprimanded (binary)	Correlation	0.048	−0.085
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.713	0.517

N = 53–61 due to missing data.

**p < 0.01 and ***p 0.001 (two tailed).

According to the regulations, there is a grace period of time in which Andrea could practice psychology without having a temporary license.

Following the regulations for Kentucky, Andrea made a plan for supervision with a licensed psychologist for her clinical hours. Eventually, the supervisor told Andrea that they were missing some paperwork for Andrea's temporary license, and she needed to apply for it. Andrea sent in her application with the appropriate paperwork. For 5 months, she did not receive any correspondence from the Board. During this period, Andrea emailed and phoned the Board continuously in hopes of receiving a response. Eventually, Andrea learned that her application was incomplete, that she was practicing without a license, and that the Board would commence an investigation. Andrea promptly turned in additional documents that she had been unaware of, but nonetheless an investigation ensued. To Andrea's relief, the investigator had found that she was not at fault because she had contacted the Board so many times and within a reasonable timeframe where the Board could have replied to her. Nonetheless, she found the process distressing and punishing. Although she was not at fault, the Board decided to punish her by giving her a reprimand in the form of a private admonishment and not to count the year of supervised hours that Andrea had completed, forcing her to repeat the supervised year. In conclusion, Andrea stated that this experience was "probably one of the major reasons why I left the state of Kentucky as because I had such a terrible experience at the Board."

The situation set Andrea back academically, professionally, and financially. Andrea was not paid for her services because she was being supervised. Because of experiences like this, a valuable asset for the university and an important voice for the trans community in the state was lost. Andrea moved away as soon as she could, asserting, "I'm never going back to Kentucky." She later found a new position at a top university in another state.

3.3.2. Disciplined for favorable assessment of black father

Case Study B: The following experience of a supervisor (Francesca) and her postdoctoral supervisee (Claire) was first recounted by Claire's former supervisors, and then verified with legal records and additional sources. Claire was an associate director of a mental health clinic. During her time as a postdoc, under supervision, Claire completed a parental fitness report for a low-income Black father who was seeking visitation of his daughter from his ex-wife – a White woman who had since become affluent. The ex-wife was able to use her financial resources to create legal challenges to all of the father's attempts to have a relationship with their daughter, which was facilitated by advancing unmerited stereotypes representing known biases against Black fathers in family court (e.g., Donohue, 2020). Based on the records of the case and a thorough assessment of the father, Claire and her supervisor wrote a culturally-informed parental fitness report that was favorable to granting parental visitation. As a result, the ex-wife hired a senior forensic psychologist expert to suppress the report findings through legal challenges. After making several threats against Claire and demanding she rescind her report, the ex-wife and her hired psychologist filed a Board complaint against Claire. They claimed Claire's report was wrong and reckless and that Claire, being an early career psychologist, was unqualified to have made a determination of parental fitness. The ex-wife claimed the report made her feel suicidal.

The Board conducted an inadequate investigation whereby the investigator interviewed the White mother but not the Black father, then included the mother's salacious and unsubstantiated accusations against the father in the report to the Board. These accusations were anti-Black stereotypes guaranteed to resonate with White individuals socialized into Southern culture who held unchecked biases. The Board accepted this incomplete account as fact and disciplined Claire, who was fully licensed by this time.

Disciplinary actions included rescinding Claire's ability to supervise students and placing her under supervision for a year. Initially, Claire was told by the Board that she could choose her own supervisor but then the Board changed their mind and appointed a sitting member of KBEP. Therefore, in a conflict of interest, Claire was supervised by a Board psychologist who had been involved in her case and would ultimately determine if Claire had successfully completed the supervision process, putting pressure on Claire to concur with the Board's version of events. Claire was also ordered to pay weekly supervision fees to the Board-appointed/Board member psychologist, putting her both in further financial distress and creating unethical financial incentives for the supervisor. Claire was traumatized by the experience and left in debt from legal expenses as she defended herself from these accusations.

Shortly after Claire was disciplined, KBEP began an attack against her supervisor, Francesca. Francesca had provided the initial oversight of Claire's work due to her expertise in multicultural psychology. She was no longer licensed in KY, having moved to another state years ago, but in an unprecedented maneuver, the Board began actions to retroactively revoke Francesca's license. The Board had never pursued such an extreme penalty against anyone for alleged inadequate supervision, and never toward someone who was not license holder in the state. The Board also broke several of their own rules in an attempt to punish her (e.g., using Claire's inadequate investigator's report as a basis for their actions rather than doing their own investigation of Francesca).

As a Black person, Francesca felt she was being targeted by the all-White Board due to her race. She also believed that Claire had been disciplined in part because she refused to implicate Francesca and because Claire was part of a stigmatized religious faith. Francesca was not licensed in Kentucky nor practicing there, and thus posed no risk to the people of Kentucky. Based on state regulations, the Board could have opted to bar Francesca from licensure in Kentucky should she ever reapply in that state, and as such their crusade from afar felt pointedly vindictive. If the Board succeeded in their machinations to retroactively revoke Francesca's license, Francesa would no longer be able to do her much-needed work for the courts in assessing people of color who were suffering from trauma due to discrimination. She also stood to potentially lose her ABPP certification, Interjurisdictional Practice Certificate, professional memberships, and face an investigation in the states where she was licensed in good standing.

3.3.3. Early career psychologist punished for no reason at all

Case Study C: Daria was an early-career child psychologist who had been practicing under supervision at a local outpatient clinic when she received a letter from the Board accusing her of practicing without a license 2 years prior. The letter, received the week before Thanksgiving, was frightening and confusing as Daria had submitted all the proper paperwork within the necessary time frame required by the Board. The Board also sent a separate letter to her subsequent supervisor, Francesca, accusing the supervisor of encouraging Daria to practice without a license and threatening disciplinary action. Daria was bewildered, "You [the Board] are investigating myself and my supervisor, who wasn't even my supervisor at the time." The Board could have easily cleared this

matter by reviewing their own files or with a phone call to Daria. She was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. After some months of no response or updates about her case, Daria reached out to the Board administrator and was told that "somehow, your case had not been voted on yet at the board meeting." She said, "They had forgotten about my complaint." Nonetheless, in a miscarriage of justice, she was given a private admonishment by the Board that was made part of her permanent file.

It was odd to Daria that her original supervisor of record (a White man) was not also sent a threatening Board letter, as he had provided oversight for her during the majority of her unlicensed practice while under the allowable grace period. She suspected that the attack was actually an attempt by the Board to find fault with her new supervisor due to racial bias. Daria subsequently moved away from Kentucky. Her feelings of mistrust and uncertainty with the Board stops her from coming back to Kentucky.

3.4. Quantitative findings – a two-tiered system

The assessment of 65 disciplinary cases heard by KBEP between the years 2000 and 2020 allowed us to examine the methodology by which the Board is disciplining members, to locate any inconsistencies, and to impute a possible reason for these inconsistencies. It is notable that a high percentage of cases involve children or child custody, as these types of cases have long been noted to be particularly inclined to result in disciplinary complaints (Kirkland and Kirkland, 2001).

We found a positive correlation between harm/risk to clients and independent ratings of overall severity of offense, which is what one would expect to find if the Board was operating in a just and impartial way in its disciplinary responsibilities. Additionally, the significant correlation between risk/harm to clients and punishments having to do with *duration of exclusion from active practice* (months of probation, months of suspension and revocation and suspension of license) gives some initial assurance that there may be a measure of fair functioning in the action of the Board. Unfortunately, the correlations in this area were only small to moderate.

Furthermore, although the severity of punishment is consistent and prudent at the highest level of harm or risk of harm (i.e., Figure 1D), there is a near random application of punishment at levels below four. There are problematic inconsistencies that point to a second class of punitive actions of the Board, which indicates they may be acting contrary to a fair methodology in the cases of specific psychologists. Notably, we found no correlation between severity of offense or harm/risk to clients and a number of other punishments (fine amounts,[2] hours of CE required, total hours of supervision required, or if final judgments listed the license as being remanded) which also tells us that the administration of these specific punishments is more arbitrary.

The Board is therefore in reality operating a two-tiered punishment system in which a more just ruling for egregious and obvious harm is given in regard to probation, suspension, and

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2   *Fines are not supposed to be punitive, although based on the readings of the cases, and statistical analysis, it appears they are often used that way.
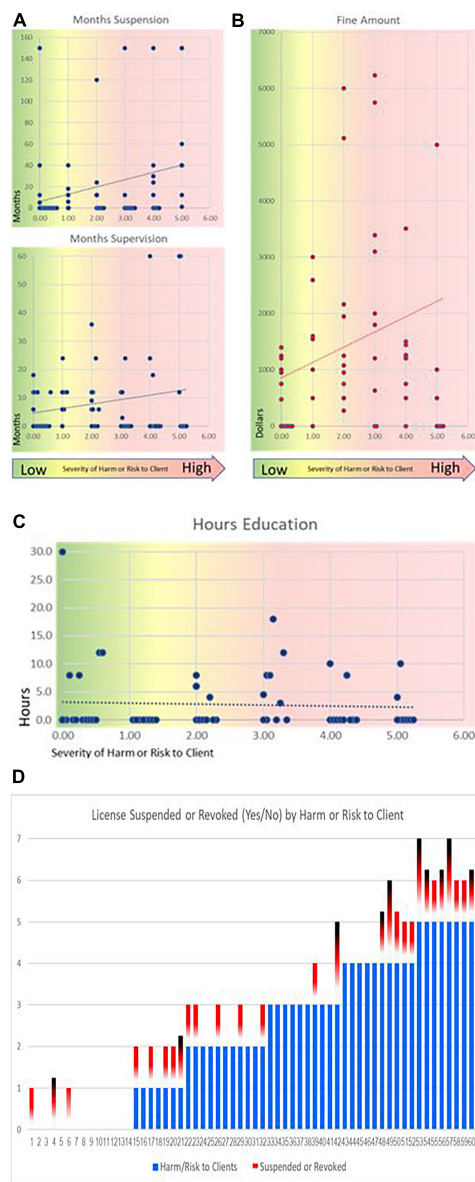
FIGURE 1

Correlation and outlier analysis. **(A)** Months of suspension and supervision. **(B)** Fine amount. The x-axis is harm or risk of harm and the y-axis is dollars (red dots) or months (blue dots). As the harm or risk of harm to the client increases the expectation is that the severity of the disciplinary actions taken by the board would also increase. Green banded points indicate no harm cases. Independent rating of total severity of offense did correlate with harm or risk of harm. However punitive actions by the board did not always correlate with harm or risk of harm (one outlier, $14,000, **(B)**, not shown). **(C)** The x-axis is harm or risk of harm and the y-axis is hours (blue dots). More severe punishments are at the top. Neither hours of continuing education nor total required supervisory hours significantly correlated with harm. Months of suspension weakly correlated with harm or risk of harm to clients. **(D)** Visualization of inconsistencies: although license suspension or revocation significantly correlated with harm or risk of harm, there remain cases where harm or risk of harm is very low, but licenses were suspended or revoked anyway. A red mark indicates a suspension and black/red is a revocation. Four revocations were permanent (longest black-red bars) and 6 could be appealed (shorter black-red bars). High harm or risk of harm are evident in all 8 cases with a score of 5 (farthest to the right), but also 2 conditionally revoked licenses had lower harm scores and 6 cases of suspensions with lower harm scores are also observed.

revocation, but this is overlaid onto a system in which additional punishments (fines, education hours, supervision hours, public humiliation) are doled out in an inconsistent way to psychologists with less severe infractions. According to the American Psychology Association, the principle of proportionality is a fundamental judicial principle maintaining that the severity of a punishment should be directly related to the seriousness of the crime. However, the data does not show proportionality in the case of these additional punishments.

Arbitrary punishments are also a symptom of bias and abuse of power. Such a two-tiered system would allow members of the Board to uphold a veneer of fairness while at the same time judge and punish psychologists based on overt negative feelings or implicit biases. This type of system can conceal injustice. The parts of the system which are administered in a moderately fair manner can be instrumentalized to provide justification for the unjust outcomes seen in other parts. For example, punishments can be doled out arbitrarily, such as the levying of fines by "feeling" or foregoing the public remanding of license for persons who may have a positive connection with sitting Board members. The KY psychology community is small, and personal or professional connections would be expected (e.g., "old boys" club). We found in this vein a bias against ECPs in the handing out of hours of continuing education. There are equal if not more reasons for older psychologists to be reeducated after a professional transgression, and yet as a class, ECPs appear to be punished more severely.

If a linear scale is utilized by the board to determine the severity of punishment, then for cases with higher risk or more serious infractions, it can be deemed as a "functional" and fair methodology. However, cases that deviate from this norm would require additional scrutiny. These outliers may reveal instances of unjust judgments. Specifically, when looking at particularly unjust cases these will be in the outlier cases in which the harm or risk of harm is low (green band **Figures 1A–C** and inconsistencies in **Figure 1D** above) but the punishment is severe, or conversely when the infraction is severe, and the punishment is not.

Inasmuch as the goal of punishment is to rehabilitate an errant psychologist in cases where the harm/risk (higher risk case or case with more serious infraction) was lower, these punishments failed in many cases. In our research, the disciplinary actions by the Board led many reprimanded psychologists who could have been rehabilitated to eventually leave the state or stop practicing altogether. We found that others with the worst infractions became the most difficult to locate (e.g., moved to another state and/or changed name), which thwarts any of the societal protection goals of publicly posting information about offenders.

In terms of license revocations, notably, several more senior psychologists accepted revocation and retired. Other psychologists had their licenses revoked by default for failing to respond to the Board. Based on what we know about the nature of trauma and the traumatizing effects of being accused (as outlined in the section "1.3. Ramifications of accusations of misconduct and disciplinary actions" and as elaborated upon below), we can expect that some accused psychologists would be unable to advocate for themselves due to overwhelming feelings of shock, grief, and shame (e.g., Kirkcaldy et al., 2022). Indeed, avoidance is a hallmark symptom of PTSD (Honig et al., 1999).

3.5. Discussion of interview findings

The interviews conducted revealed that the discipline process was highly distressing and even traumatizing in some cases. Kirkcaldy et al. (2022) noted "that psychological and physical symptoms will almost certainly occur in the wake of a complaint. If practitioners can be so severely affected by a complaint, it may have implications for their mental health and subsequent coping abilities if not adequately managed. . . practitioners in this position are at risk of becoming patients themselves, with the implication that a stressful complaint process could lead to problems with maintaining professional competency" (p. 406). Profound impacts on practitioner mental health were observed among all those interviewed, including those who withdrew their consent for their stories to be used. Reactions were trauma inducing and similar to those described in the section "1.3. Ramifications of accusations of misconduct and disciplinary actions."

The qualitative data also reveals that some of the disproportionate disciplinary action recounted in the interviews may be due to biases and was perceived as such by the psychologists involved. As Kentucky has a history of racial bias in psychology, and as psychologists, we are aware that *everyone has biases*, the Board would need to have a system in place to mitigate biases to ensure that severities of disciplinary actions are proportional to the transgressions (American Psychological Association, 2010; Smith et al., 2015) and administered equitably and consistently. We think this is particularly salient for custody cases, as discussed below.

Another recurring issue that each interviewee expressed about the complaint and disciplinary process was the unresponsiveness from the Board. Throughout the complaint and disciplinary process, many interviewees stated that the Board does not respond to their requests and submissions in a timely or predictable manner. This unresponsiveness and unpredictability amplified anxiety and stress in an already stressful process. Another issue that made the complaint and disciplinary process unnecessarily traumatic was that letters or notices were sent during the holidays. As during the holidays, the Board would be closed and unlikely to respond to their emails or phones, so individuals who receive these letters cannot correspond to anyone about the letter itself or inquire about what next steps should be taken.

Moreover, during the investigation phase, many interviewees expressed that the investigator who conducted the interviews was often incompetent or unknowledgeable in the interviewees' area of practice. Many of the investigator's questions felt redundant or inappropriate. For example, one individual investigated by the Board expressed that in her area of practice, it was quite common to use exposure therapy, which might include taking their patients to the mall or to a restaurant as a part of their treatment process. However, because the investigator did not have knowledge of this empirically-validated treatment, they interpreted this well-supported therapeutic act as inappropriate (Deacon, 2012; Faber et al., 2022a,b). This process of misunderstandings and needing to educate evaluators on technical matters can cause unwarranted stress for a psychologist who must endure this line of questioning, and indeed this resulted in at least one report from an investigator that was inaccurate at the expense of the accused. For example, Francesca and Claire wrote a culturally-informed parental fitness report about their Black examinee that was ridiculed by the Board

investigator as "unorthodox," despite being reflective of current APA best practices (American Psychological Association, 2011).

3.6. Forensic, legal, and child custody cases: troubles unique to psychology

Complaints arise when psychologists venture into the area of forensic work "with unfortunate regularity" (Kirkcaldy et al., 2022, p. 9). Correspondingly, a number of cases ($N = 15$) that involved children were the impetus or focus of disciplinary actions by KBEP, and most involved the courts. These types of cases can be stressful for psychologists because of the high levels of distress and acrimony associated with the parents in this process. Due to the frequency of complaints, child custody work is often perceived as a high-risk area of practice (Bow et al., 2010). There is a dire shortage of clinicians willing to provide child evaluations to the court due to the (accurately) perceived professional risks of this important endeavor. As such, many courts are struggling to locate qualified evaluators, resulting in a backlog of cases.

These types of cases are one of the most frequent causes of reports against psychologists, to the point where the state of Colorado opted to stop considering complaints in such situations, and instead granted quasi-judicial immunity for child and family investigators, which can be a court-appointed mental health professional (Kirkland and Kirkland, 2001; Supreme Court of Colorado, 2011). Some states have protective laws, where psychologists who are involved in child custody proceedings are given immunity from civil suits, which have been very helpful for protecting those practitioners. For example, the Florida Psychological Association reported that prior to the implementation of a limited immunity law in Florida, *nearly 80 percent of all complaints* filed with the Florida Board of Psychology were for child custody evaluations (Koller, 2005).

In addition, studies have demonstrated that child custody cases are subject to gender bias which originates from stereotypes about gender roles; there is a general preference for maternal primary custody. As everyone is subject to implicit bias on both gender and racial axes, it is important to have mechanisms in place to assess and mitigate these psychological processes that produce biases which can blind impartial reasoning (Maldonado, 2017). In cases such as Claire's, where there is a built-in disadvantage for the father both because he is male and because he is Black, higher scrutiny is warranted on the process by which he was denied an equitable evaluation because *prima facie* in such cases empirical evidence shows implicit biases tip the scales in favor of the White mother (Rachlinski et al., 2009; Costa et al., 2019).

Child custody and family court-related complaints are often quite complex and require expertise in the field. Informed by our qualitative research, and following recommendations from Kirkland and Kirkland (2001), we would suggest that cases related to child and family services not be heard by the Board without expert support being brought in, and/or unless the case involves clear and direct abuse of a patient/examinee by the psychologist (unrelated to the psychologists' findings or purported professionalism). Various states have good faith statutes that protect psychologists from liability. These states include Florida,

Georgia, and West Virginia. Kentucky, tellingly, has a statute granting only board members immunity for blanket good faith acts.

When it comes to cases that involve legal matters, we suggest the Board consider following the example of Florida, Ohio, and New Jersey to adopt the APA Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Activities into the statutes governing the work of the Board, to help provide clarity about the role of the Board vis a vis psychologist who provide expert opinions to the court (American Psychological Association, 2013). Although these laws are designed to protect custody evaluators who act in good faith from baseless legal actions and complaints filled with licensing boards, they do not provide protection to psychologists who are facing complaints filed against them with their state psychological association or the APA Ethics Committee.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Addressing power and privilege

As noted, there are concerns that punitive measures taken by the Board have been at times unduly harsh, inconsistently applied, and lacking in transparency. Our findings support these concerns and show that particularly for many early-career psychologists, the penalties that have been assigned indefinitely impact their professional career, their mental health and their well-being. Kentucky psychologists have the opportunity to consider the purpose and goals of the Board when it comes to early-career psychologists. Is it to guide, teach, and rehabilitate those who have erred, or is it to punish, humiliate, and shame? We believe it should be more of the former and less of the latter, and we hope that most psychologists would agree.

The findings of this investigation support the observations of Woody (2016), that "mental health practitioners serving in monitoring roles seem most prone to adopt a prosecutorial stance and accent the negative and eliminate the positive. The latter may reflect, at least in part, that mental health practitioners, unlike legalists, are not trained adequately in guarding against bias in professional issues." (p. 199) Further, Woody notes that "new members of ethics committees and/or licensing boards acknowledge that their appointments led them to become highly judgmental and narcissistic about professional practices. For example, there is the risk of self-aggrandizement simply by virtue of being appointed by a membership vote, a political process, or a governor. This character flaw can spawn bias, prejudice, and discrimination against members of an out-group (i.e., a practitioner under scrutiny for wrongdoing); consequently, objectivity and justice may be subverted" (p. 199).

Furthermore, Boards such as KBEP and other psychology licensing boards often function as powers unto themselves, operating with little or no meaningful oversight. We posit that to better balance the need for oversight with the need to encourage learning and growth in the profession, the Kentucky Board of Psychology Examiners should: (a) define and outline different consequences for different career stages and for major and minor offenses; (b) ensure the investigation process for grievances is conducted by a neutral and well-qualified third party; and (c) provide a pathway for early-career psychologists who have been

disciplined to prove their development and learning in order to clear their permanent record.

4.2. Defining different career stages and accountabilities

We recommend KBEP adopt a definition for early-career psychologists to provide predictability and consistency regarding relevant categorization and analysis in their duties going forward. For example, the Kentucky Psychological Association currently defines "early-career" as a psychologist who has been licensed for less than 7 years. It is important to have a clear definition for people falling into this stage of their career, since, as we have outlined, a professional's stage of career and the type of alleged offense should have an impact on the kinds of remediations offered by the Board in the case of a complaint.

From our interviews, we found that early-career psychologists were more likely to continue self-education even after their graduation and entrance into the professional field. Early-career psychologists were more likely to incorporate cutting edge research into their practice and attempt to innovate the field by using the most recent evidence-based treatments. More remedial options are needed for early-career psychologists who may commit administrative errors due to confusion with the rules and legislation and lacking concrete experience with much of the administration of clinical practice. More protections are also needed against frivolous complaints so that ill-intentioned complainants are not able to take advantage of the relative inexperience and vulnerability of early-career psychologists, as the case of Claire for example.

If an incidence of misconduct is found to cause significant harm to a client, then the Board should discipline accordingly to ensure public safety is protected. However, if the offense is minor or administrative in nature and/or does not cause harm to a client or the public, then it would be reasonable to suggest that the Board take into consideration the early-career status of the psychologist in determining the consequences of their actions. In these cases, the Board should then avoid administering permanent-record disciplinary actions in favor of other restorative/rehabilitative remedies (see recommendations in Table 7).

4.3. Preventing undeserved disciplinary actions

See Table 6 for examples of such safeguards. As per the existing literature, we have found that poorly managed professional discipline processes can result in severe consequences for psychologists at all career stages, which may include humiliation, disgrace, loss of reputation, and loss of livelihood (Coy et al., 2016; Murphy, 2020; Kirkcaldy et al., 2022). Unfortunately, this sometimes happens on the basis of an unmerited complaint. Procedural due process protections apply to professional license actions to help prevent such errors, but the processes across states vary in the strength of the procedural safeguards they require in such hearings. When procedural safeguards are weak, it is far more likely that an undeserving professional will be unfairly and permanently harmed (Murphy, 2020). A preponderance of the

TABLE 6 Psychologist protections for good faith.

States/Provinces	Laws/Jurisprudence/Act	Comments
Florida, USA	2022 Florida Statutes, Chapter 61, Part 1: General Provisions, s 61.122 https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2022/0061.122	This statute outlines the presumption of good faith that is afforded to court appointed psychologists in child custody evaluations. While full immunity from prosecution is not provided, significant protections include a lack of anonymous complaint filing, and ensuring that a complaint be filed directly to the judge in the case. If a complaint is filed and it is proven that the psychologist did act in good faith, then the complainant must pay the psychologist's legal fees
Georgia, USA	2022 Georgia Code, Title 19 - Domestic Relations, Chapter 9, Child Custody Proceedings, Article 1 - General Provisions ss 19-9-3 Establishment and Review of Child Custody and Visitation https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2022/title-19/chapter-9/article-1/section-19-9-3/	Under GA Code ss 19-9-3 (2022) (a)(7), the judge in a child custody case is authorized to order a psychological custody evaluation of the family or an independent medical evaluation. In such a circumstance, the appointed evaluator cannot be subject to civil liability resulting from any act or failure to act in the performance of their duties unless such act or failure to act was in bad faith. This statute provides full immunity protection to the psychologist, and there is no recourse if the evaluating psychologist can prove their assessment was done so in good faith.
West Virginia, USA	2022 West Virginia Code Article 7, Chapter 55, ss 55-7-21 Creating presumption of good faith for court-appointed licensed psychologists and psychiatrists conducting a child custody evaluation; method for assigning court and legal fees https://code.wvlegislature.gov/55-7-21/	Under WV Code ss 55-7-21 (2022) (a) a licensed psychologist or licensed psychiatrist who has been appointed by a court to conduct a child custody evaluation in a judicial proceeding shall be presumed to be acting in good faith if the evaluation has been conducted consistent with standards established by the American Psychological Association's guidelines for child custody evaluations in divorce proceedings; (b) The complaint cannot be filed anonymously. Anonymous complaints are dismissed; (c) Any filings against court appointed psychologists/psychiatrists must be specific and have evidence otherwise they are dismissed; and (d) If psychologist/psychiatrist is entered into civil proceeding because of their court appointed child custody evaluation, then they will be reimbursed of all reasonable costs and attorney fees expended if it is proven they acted in good faith and in accordance with the APA. Similar to Florida, the psychologist can be sued but can recoup their legal fees if they can prove they acted in good faith

evidence standard provides insufficient due process for licensed professionals in administrative disciplinary hearings when a state has no other safeguards in place. However, preponderance of the evidence may be appropriate when there are additional procedural safeguards in place—a standard termed "preponderance, plus" (Murphy, 2020).

Currently, members of KBEP have an outsized position of power, and in their individual roles on the board can serve as complainant/instigator of case, witness, decision maker and disciplinarian. The lack of scrutiny of power-holding institutions such as these types of boards can create a space in which personal biases can play into the process, and injustices can occur without meaningful recourse for those affected. The overlapping roles can also result in a conflict of interest and become a barrier to due process. In the case of Claire, we noted that a Board member was appointed as a paid supervisor as part of a licensee's discipline. As noted by Murphy (2020), licensing boards comprise colleagues who have ongoing trusting relationships. "The beliefs and recommendations of one member will inevitably influence others when there is no separation between functions" (Murphy, 2020, p. 959). A due process "plus" could take the form of adding additional seats to the Board (see below) to allow for the full removal of complainants/instigators from the rest of the hearing and still maintain quorum, and/or adding additional seats to the Board to allow for the removal of the committee who decides to bring the case forward from the adjudicatory hearing and still maintain quorum.

In the event that an error is made by the Board in terms of disciplinary actions, there must be a workable means of appealing

the decision. Considering the shock and trauma of a negative finding, and the substantial cost of mounting a defense, the 30-day appeal window (noted in KRS Chapter 13B) seems inadequate. Indeed, it is unclear if anyone has ever been able to marshal the emotional and financial resources needed to appeal a Board decision (none were noted in any of the cases we reviewed). As such, the time should be lengthened to give an aggrieved party the necessary time to take this potentially corrective action.

One way we can determine if a practitioner is fairly or unfairly treated is by rating the severity of the offense and comparing it to the severity of the infraction. One would first determine the correlation between these variables in the entire population of disciplined practitioners, as was done in this study. The next task would be to plot the rating of the severity of the infraction by the rating of the severity of the discipline for the individual who was purportedly unfairly treated to see if they fell along the correlation line or if they are an outlier. An outlier would mean the person was punished unfairly, or differently than others.

4.4. Bringing in third parties to assess allegations of misconduct

An additional means of adding safeguards into the work of the Board is for the review and investigation process of grievances to be independently and expertly conducted. This would help bring greater accountability and expertise to the investigation and review

TABLE 7 Recommendations for improved policies and procedures.

TABLE 7 (Continued)

Recommendation table	
Legislative changes	Limit Board members' service to one term
	Require that Board members appointed by the Governor reflect a proportional representation of the racial composition of the Commonwealth.
	Create a permanent Board seat for an "Early Career Psychologist" and define this term in the legislation.
	Create a range of clear processes for different kinds of complaints that take into account a range of external factors as well as harm/risk assessment to the client and society (i.e., administrative issues should be treated differently than complaints connected to court hearings, or complaints that relate to patient exploitation or abuse).
	Create a mechanism for psychologists with disciplinary actions on their record to have these removed.
	Create a mechanism for complaints to be made toward individual Board members for their discipline or removal, that does not involve the sitting Board as part of the decision process.
	Extend the amount of time disciplined psychologists have to appeal the Board's decisions from 30 days to 1 year.
Policy/Procedure changes for KBEP	All complaints should be sent initially for external evaluation to determine the merits of the complaint before being added to the Board's agenda for final determination.
	If a complaint arises from the Board itself, it should include a full written account of the issue, origination of the concern, and name of the Board member advancing the complaint (just as would a complaint arising from a member of the public).
	Separation of those Board members who decide to bring a case to prosecution and those making decisions at the adjudicatory hearing.
	Use investigators with expertise in the professional area of the accused.
	Except for direct client exploitation, early-career psychologists receive no more than a private admonishment or continuing education for a first offense, with no disciplinary (reportable) findings.
	Provide and require anti-bias and anti-racism training for all Board members.
	Revise wording of letters and communications from the Board to accused psychologists to be less threatening, keeping in mind they are innocent until proven guilty.
	Send disciplinary notices, information, and communications around Board processes with reasonable timelines and at times of the year when people will be available to respond in a timely way.
	Ensure that someone can respond to all inquiries to the Board within 24-h.
Policy/Procedure changes for KPA	Establish a peer advocate community to provide additional accompaniment and support to any accused psychologists going through a disciplinary process.
	Work to elicit a more diverse slate of nominees for appointment to the board. Diversity should consider race, ethnicity, religion, training, and occupation. Given the extra service work often required by people with marginalized identities, KPA could provide additional support to these members if elected.

(Continued)

Recommendation table	
	Work with the Board to develop a system that fairly and consistently penalizes wrongdoing in a manner proportional to the offense.

process, as well as helping to manage the overall workload and accountability of the Board.

In the Kentucky Administrative Regulations, offenses are considered "grievances" (201 KAR 26:130, 2021). Grievances can be brought for consideration when there is "a clear and concise statement of the facts giving rise to the grievance" (201 KAR 26:130, 2021). When this has been submitted, the grievance is then reviewed by a complaint committee who, in the case of psychologists, is KBEP (201 KAR 26:130, 2021). We recommend an amendment to the process by introducing an independent complaint committee to review a grievance before it is escalated to the Board. This recommendation is in alignment with the practice in other states. In Massachusetts, for example, they have access to an independent committee that verifies the legitimacy of the complainant's claim before continuing with the investigation process (251 CMR: 1, 2016). An independent committee can bring accountability, expertise, and efficiency to the process by offering a thorough review of the case by people with expertise in the particularities of the context, outlining a clear step-by-step investigation process, and collecting and providing preliminary evidence from both the complainant and from the psychologist(s) in question.

An independent complaint committee can help improve the investigation process by improving the accountability, transparency, and ethics of the review process. Also, the independent complaint committee could help avoid potential conflicts of interests because they are tasked with gathering information and have no considerable influence on the outcome of the case. Finally, the independent committee members would be composed of a diverse membership, and each member's profile information should be readily and easily accessible online. The members of the independent committee should include psychologists with different interests and specializations, psychologists who are in private and research sectors, and psychologists of color and other equity-seeking groups. Individuals who are on the Board should not be a part of the independent committee because there will be a conflict of interest. Board members decide the verdict of the case and so they should only receive information about the case when all the facts have been gathered and confirmed by the independent committee for Board review and adjudication. With an independent committee as an interim step in the process, the Board can focus their efforts more on one of their core purposes: serving and building the practice of psychology in the state on behalf of the public, while an independent committee supports them in the work of assessing the nature of individual complaints. The final decision on a grievance would still lie with the Board, but the independent committee can help filter out relevant and irrelevant claims which improves efficiency, transparency, and impartiality for all involved.

4.5. Ensuring rehabilitation: early-career missteps should not be permanent or career-ending

The Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology should provide opportunities for early-career psychologists to remove disciplinary actions from their private record if they receive an admonishment. A psychologist that makes a mistake early on in their career should not be held to the same weight as a psychologist who has more experience; an early-career psychologist is most likely going to make missteps as it will be their formative years and they will have less experience compared to a more senior psychologist. Indeed, if every early career practitioner in Kentucky who made an error was prevented from practicing, there would be no psychologists in the state. As such, for early-career individuals who have received disciplinary actions or private admonishments, we recommend a process to remove them from their record once appropriate remediations have been fulfilled. This process can be completed through a course or required program or through good behavior after a designated period. Alternatively, private admonishments could have an expiration date, being removed automatically after a given period of time.

Another potential middle ground that the Board could explore is revising the way that the disciplinary action of private admonishment is administered. Currently, the Board can impose a private admonishment or a more severe disciplinary action against the psychologist (see Table 1). The Kentucky Revised Statutes explains that the private admonishment is not to be disclosed to the public and it does not constitute as a disciplinary action (Kentucky Board of Examiners of Psychology, 2022). However, in practice, the private admonishment is a permanent mark on a licensed psychologist's record in Kentucky that inadvertently acts as a form of punishment. It is a consistent reminder that the Board has been surveying their actions long after the investigation and decision has concluded. Disclosing the private admonishment to prospective out-of-state employers might cause unease and uncertainty in their assessment of a candidate's application, while withholding the private admonishment can cause discomfort in the psychologist because they may feel they are not being completely honest with their employer. It can cause an early-career psychologists' immense stress and anxiety knowing that they have a stain on their record that cannot be removed.

A further line of inquiry could be to explore parameters and boundaries around major and minor offenses. Currently, the Kentucky Revised Statutes do not define major or minor offenses. It provides a list of conduct that they deem to be offensive and can lead to disciplinary actions (KY §319.082, 2019). These offenses range from minor, "unlawfully failed to cooperate with the Board by not appearing before the Board at the time and place designated," to ambiguous, "violated any state statute or administrative regulation governing the practice of psychology..." (KY §319.082, 2019). We recommend KBEP define minor and major offenses and the potential consequences that each hold. By providing succinct definitions between minor and major offenses, the Board will be able to clarify the expectations and consequences for breaking an offense, creating a stronger relationship between the Board and the psychologists that they oversee. For example, the Wisconsin Psychology Examining Board defines a "minor violation" as "...no significant harm was caused by misconduct

of the credential holder," such as failing to keep good notes (Legislative Reference Bureau, 2022). The lack of clarity between minor and major offenses in Kentucky can cause anxiety and fear in psychologists who receive threatening notices from the Board; providing a definition between the offenses can help ease their minds in this trauma-inducing process.

A more appropriate consequence for early-career psychologists who commit minor violations would be to require them to complete continuing or additional education courses or provide a letter of warning. In Wisconsin, if the psychologist is found to have committed a minor offense, where the consequences of the actions are unlikely to cause significant harm and the continued practice would present no immediate danger to the public, then the likely result of prosecution would be a reprimand or a limitation requiring the credential holder to obtain additional education (Legislative Reference Bureau, 2020). In California, if the psychologist is found to have committed a minor offense, the Board might mediate an agreement between the complainant and the psychologist, issue the psychologist a letter of warning, or set up an educational conference between the psychologist and an expert case reviewer and/or Board member (Department of Consumer Affairs, 2022).

4.6. Providing support and advocacy

Being formally accused of unprofessional conduct by a licensing board is a life-changing and potentially career-ending event. Because accusations of wrongdoing create a stigma that therapists are unprepared to handle, obtaining support is vital (Coy et al., 2016). Due to the potentially traumatizing nature of the investigation and disciplinary process (e.g., Kirkcaldy et al., 2022), we recommend that KPA invest in the creation of a diverse group of knowledgeable peer advocates to provide ongoing support and administrative guidance for any psychologist accused of wrongdoing. The role of these advocates is not to replace the role of an attorney, but rather to assist and support the accused through the process. Our interviews showed that a significant amount of the stress and trauma generated by the actions of the Kentucky Board revolved around the difficulties in reaching the Board to get information about their situation, and the lack of communication, orientation or conversation around the charges being laid against them. Further, peer support could reduce the shame and trauma of being accused, and help psychologists maintain their professionalism and perspective during a trying process.

Given the potential damage that these processes can inflict on a person's professional life and psychological well-being, we also suggest that there be a clearer process developed for members of the KPA and those governed by KBEP to be able to bring a complaint toward an individual Board member. Right now, removing a Board member involves the Governor reviewing a recommendation for removal from fellow Board members (KRS 319.020), based on "incompetence, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office." As the Board's accountability to the community is strengthened in regard to the performance of their duties, so too should the publicly available mechanisms to hold them to account, individually and collectively. While Board members are immune from personal liability in the good faith execution of their duties (KRS 319.118),

those governed by the Board should have a clear mechanism for bringing a complaint to the Governor or another entity if they experience harm due to a Board members potential incompetence, neglect of duty, or malfeasance.

4.7. Strengthening the board's equity and diversity engagement

Based on the data gathered, it is apparent that KBEP often takes an authoritarian, fear-based approach to its duties that is oppressive toward psychologists in the state. This includes a lack of accompaniment and support in navigating the Board's review process, treating people accused of administrative violations as equal to serious misconduct accusations, frequently withholding information and communication with people under review, and not providing opportunities for learning, reparations, and remediation. All of this creates a blanket culture of accusation, confusion, fear, and punishment that undermines the purpose and function of the Board, with a negative impact on the psychology community in Kentucky.

Further, there were many troubling issues surrounding diverse and stigmatized identities that emerged in the qualitative data. Notably, there were numerous concerns voiced about discrimination and prejudice in the processes. Considering the data and the APA guidelines, in cases where race or other marginalized identities are a factor, the Board should be able to show its processes in regard to how it worked to mitigate its own implicit bias as well as how it explicitly considers racial issues in such cases, as like it or not, they will have an influence on the outcome (Maldonado, 2017).

Two of the authors of this paper (EW and AB) were scheduled to present this report to the KPA annual convention in Louisville, KY in 2022 with a colleague joining as a discussant. However, a preliminary report of the findings in this article was leaked in advance of the conference, which made its way to members of KBEP who were displeased. Rather than attend the scheduled conference presentation or contact the authors to voice their concerns, they forced the KPA to have the presentation canceled with threats of legal action. Although this demand censored diverse voices and represented an infringement of academic freedom, the KPA was too intimidated to resist this injustice. These actions serve as a model example of the type of power abuse reported by those we interviewed and others who were supportive of this investigation but too frightened to come forward publicly. The retaliation of the Kentucky Board against its own state psychology association, KPA, must be seen as a dramatic turn and astonishing response to the public airing of material contained within this report.

For these considerations, experts with experience in equity, implicit biases, and cultural competency should be brought in as consultants to train the KBEP while also providing regular oversight. This would help to ensure that cases in which race, sexual and gender minority status, or culture are a factor are not unduly influenced by biases.

4.8. Equitable composition of the board

In the course of our investigation, a recurring theme was the problematic nature of the composition of KBEP. Although

the current makeup of the Board maintains a balance of gender, all nine members (100%) are White-presenting, which is not representative of the racial makeup of the state of Kentucky as of 2020 (White alone 61.6%; Black alone 12.4%), nor of those who practice psychology in the state (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Implementing a specific and general provision into the current legislation to ensure more diversity in the composition of KBEP would help ensure the protection of marginalized psychologists accused of misconduct, better serve the public and the community of psychologists it oversees and improve equity within the functioning of the Board.

The profession of psychology was originally developed with a racist framing. Psychologists have subjected persons of color (e.g., those of African descent and Indigenous people) to abusive treatment, experimentation, victimization in the name of science, along with racialized theories that attempted to justify their subordinate status (Guthrie, 2003; Dupree and Kraus, 2022; Williams et al., 2022). To illustrate racialized difficulties of practicing psychology in Kentucky is the story of Robert Val Guthrie, who was the only African American in the psychology master's program at the University of Kentucky in 1960 (Smith et al., 2015). He stated that his primary objective was to get his degree and "get the hell off campus" because of the racism he was experiencing (Smith et al., 2015). He later penned the seminal book entitled *Even the Rat was White: A Historical View of Psychology*. To this day, the number of Black practicing psychologists in Kentucky is abysmally low. At a recent meeting, the APA Council of Representatives (2021) adopted an apology for the organization's role – and the role of the discipline of psychology – in contributing to systemic racism. The APA acknowledged that it "failed in its role leading the discipline of psychology, was complicit in contributing to systemic inequities, and hurt many through racism, racial discrimination, and denigration of people of color, thereby falling short on its mission to benefit society and improve lives" (American Psychological Association, 2021). Yet into current times, many of these problems remain.

As previously noted, everyone has biases, which can be implicit or explicit (e.g., Gran-Ruaz et al., 2022). The literature indicates that clinicians deemed "foreign" may receive harsher penalties than those considered part of the in-group (Humphrey et al., 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to put systems in place to mitigate such biases whenever possible. As the field of psychology becomes more diverse, we are seeing increasing diversity among early-career psychologists (Pedrotti and Burnes, 2016). Given that the group dynamics of the licensing Board can be likened to a jury when conducting disciplinary hearings, the same types of in-group biases can be expected to emerge that would disadvantage psychologists of color. As such, deliberate anti-racist approaches should be utilized (Williams et al., 2023).

Our participants and our own analysis found that the Board did not adequately represent the population of Kentucky nor the clients they treat, in part due to the racial makeup of the Board. There were concerns by several interviewees that racial biases were a factor in their experiences. One critical way to address this perception is to promote diversity within the Board by ensuring that the Board has seats dedicated to different equity-seeking groups, such as racialized people, religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQ + community. This approach of having dedicated seats for racialized and equity-seeking groups

can help cultivate more trust in the process, a more representative board, and also keep the importance of diversity and community representation at the forefront of how the Board operates. It is important to note as well that having dedicated seats does not mean that these are the only seats for equity-seeking groups. People of color could occupy all of the Board positions, but this approach ensures that a bare minimum level of representation is established. This practice of dedicated seats has been implemented by other Kentucky boards, and notably by the Board of Trustees of both the University of Kentucky and University of Louisville. They require that the members appointed by the Governor must reflect a proportional representation of the minority racial composition of the Commonwealth and cannot be less (Ky. Rev. Stat. §164.131, 2017; Ky. Rev. Stat. §164.821, 2017).

Diversity can also be promoted by using more holistic and progressive recruitment and selection practices. As the KPA administers the nomination of Board members, it could put focused effort into advocating for a more diverse slate of nominees. For example, the KPA can be more deliberate about where it advertises its call for nominations, and what kinds of information it shares in its postings to help encourage people from diverse backgrounds to apply (such as saying that new members will be mentored by an existing member, governance training will be provided, the Board needs and welcomes new and diverse perspectives on the practice of psychology in Kentucky, special stipends for members of marginalized groups, etc.).

Finally, we believe that there needs to be diversity within the Board members' professional areas of expertise. Currently, the Kentucky Board is mainly composed of psychologists working in the legal and insurance arenas, and as such the composition of the Board does not reflect the diversity of professionals that are accountable to the Board. We also believe that an early-career psychologist should be on the Board. KBEP recognizes the need for the opinion of the public by appointing a citizen at large and should extend the need for different perspectives within the practice of psychology in the state by appointing a new early-career position, as well as a university psychology researcher. This will ensure that there is a specific person on the Board who can provide important insight and perspective to Board decisions relating to this specific phase of every psychologist's career, as well as ensuring the Board is on top of the latest science, research, and up-to-date practices (e.g., culturally-informed assessments, evidence-based treatment approaches).

4.9. Diversity training

Another way of improving the work of the Board is to raise awareness of unconscious bias, especially given the critical power differentials in decision making (Pedrotti and Burnes, 2016). One way to do this is by requiring Board members to engage in anti-bias training. For example, in Michigan, almost all professionals, including psychology professionals, under the Michigan Public Health Code are required to take Implicit Bias Training as a condition for their initial licensure or registration, as well as every time they renew their license/registration (Mich. Admin. Code R. 338.7001-7004, 2021). There are several interventions that have been shown to reduce racial bias, which should be combined with ongoing learning to keep knowledge current (Williams et al., 2020, 2022).

4.10. Limiting power: term limits and complaints

A final suggested amendment to current legislation is to modify the time limits that individuals can serve on the Board. Currently, members are permitted to stay on the Board for 4 years and cannot serve more than two consecutive full terms. We believe that this is not in accordance with best practice, as neighboring states such as Georgia limit Board members to a singular term of 5 years. Furthermore, through our qualitative research, our participants have noted that more turnover in Board members would help bring new perspectives and updated thinking into the work. The Canadian Psychological Association (2018) found that limiting the years that one can serve on a Board promotes fresh and diverse perspectives. With this in mind, KBEP should consider limiting people's engagement to one term. And as discussed above, these new shorter-term limits could be accompanied by an accountability mechanism for the public to be able to bring a complaint to the Governor for an individual Board member's incompetence, dereliction of duties, or malfeasance.

4.11. Humanistic approach

In terms of how the Board works, as mentioned above, a significant portion of the problematic and damaging psychological effects of the Board's engagement with accused psychologists could be tempered by providing a more human-centered and compassionate approach to communication and accompaniment in the disciplinary process. Information is power, and the Board has not shared that power equitably with the people it is meant to accompany and serve. The effects are often felt particularly strongly by the most vulnerable in the psychology community, including psychologists from marginalized groups and early-career psychologists. Treating people with kindness and respect, providing clear information about the process that is unfolding, being available to answer questions as they arise, and sharing resources to help people understand and orient themselves within an already very stressful and potentially career-threatening situation are all basic ways to help improve the way the Board operates with its members and lessen the damage being caused to the profession.

All the recommendations (Table 7) are offered in support of deepening KBEP's legislative oversight role in the state, as well as in support of their overarching mandate to help foster a vibrant, safe, effective and accountable field of psychological practice in Kentucky. While accountability and public safety are of utmost importance in the practice of psychology, so too is the need to increase the sheer number of trained psychologists to meet the increasing demand for mental health services.

Notably, all persons interviewed in this study who were currently residing in Kentucky expressed a deep fear of reprisal from the Board, and none felt able to risk coming forward publicly with their stories. Further, although many Kentucky psychologists assisted with this project, none were willing to be publicly acknowledged out of fear of being targeted by the Board and jeopardizing their livelihood. Given that accusations against psychologists may arise from the Board without explanation (as we saw in Daria's case), and outcomes are uncertain, these fears are not unjustified. This culture of fear makes it impossible for

psychologists in the state to feel safe to collaborate with the Board or advocate for positive change for the profession and people of Kentucky. There is a need for a more humane and equity-based approach that goes beyond procedural or policy changes.

5. Study limitations

Despite best efforts, there are some limitations to this investigation. Low correlations between ratings of danger to the public and disciplinary actions could be due in part to the messiness of the data. It would help to have more standardization in terms of the data collection and categorization to make such analyses more straightforward for future evaluations (Liu and Bell, 2017). The recommendations offered have all been implemented to different degrees in various licensing boards and/or organizations, but more focused research would be needed to determine precisely how effective they are in advancing equity in psychology licensing boards, especially when implemented in aggregate.

6. Conclusion

Although new legislation is likely the best response to these concerns to ensure lasting change, we recognize that such changes can take time, whereas new policies can be more quickly implemented. The issues faced by KBEP, and the Kentucky psychology community did not happen overnight, but much can be done to start turning the tides in a more positive and constructive direction. Just as the APA apologized for its role in promoting racism in psychology (APA Council of Representatives, 2021), we humbly urge the KPA to take responsibility for its role in creating a homogenous and punitive Board and perpetuating or tolerating the harmful, unjust, and biased practices described herein. In the acknowledgment of harm and the plans to do better reside the seeds and momentum to create positive changes and an improvement in services for everyone in the state of Kentucky.

We believe that if the Board promoted fairness and diversity as part of how it operated and conducted itself administratively, the psychology community in Kentucky will be better served by this inclusive culture and approach, and psychologists in the state will be better equipped and supported to treat the diversity of people they serve. The field of psychology is constantly evolving and benefits greatly from the inclusion of new and underrepresented voices who can contribute to the development of the practice of psychology, and the equitable and effective provision of these essential social services in our communities. The methodologies utilized in this report may provide a framework to better understand the disciplinary work of other profession-based oversight Boards in KY or other states. Until such a time as KBEP can implement more equitable and conscientious functioning, individuals finding themselves persecuted by said Board may have no recourse for relief. We hope that larger bodies, such as the APA, the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB), and the Kentucky Governor's office, will support those who might be negatively impacted by the conditions outlined in this report.

The KBEP has operated with a lack of meaningful oversight as complaint, jury, and judge for psychologists in the state

of Kentucky. Our findings are consistent with the operation of a two-tiered system within their oversight activities: one in line with harm or risk of harm to clients, and another which has levied punishments in a way inconsistent with the principles of proportionality. The Board must therefore examine its policies, composition, practices and values to ensure they are fully meeting their legislated mandate, while also ensuring that everyone in Kentucky has the opportunity to access high-quality mental health services. There are changes needed in order for the Board to take full advantage of the benefits that a more inclusive and supportive culture would provide to professional psychology in the state, in order to cultivate a flourishing psychology practice in Kentucky and to better serve those citizens who can benefit from the mental health services psychologists provide.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the REB Research Ethics Board of Ottawa University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

SF and AB contributed primarily to the text. EW contributed to the legal analysis, text referring to legal issues, and references. SF created the figures. All authors contributed to the analysis and the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

SF is employed by the Angelini Pharma and a partner in the company Bioville GmbH.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Postdoctoral researchers' perspectives on working conditions and equal opportunities in German academia

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Postdoctoral researchers (postdocs) are an essential component of the scientific workforce in German universities and research institutions and play a vital role in advancing knowledge and innovation. However, the experiences of postdocs and other early career researchers (ECRs) indicate that working conditions pose a significant challenge to the pursuit of a long-term research career in Germany— particularly for international scientists and those from marginalized groups. We examine how unstable working conditions as well as insufficient structural support for equal opportunities and diversity are significant obstacles for the career development of ECRs in German academia. We discuss these issues with the aid of an extensive survey recently conducted and published by PostdocNet, a target-group network representing the interests of postdocs across Germany's Max Planck Society. The survey drew responses from 659 postdoctoral researchers working at the Max Planck Society and represents one of the few datasets of postdoctoral researchers' perspectives in Germany. Building on these findings, we suggest actions at governmental, institutional, and individual levels to improve the working conditions of postdoctoral researchers in Germany.

1. Academic work in Germany is predominantly fixed- and short-term

Fixed-term employment contracts are prevalent among academic staff, especially early career researchers (ECRs), who include doctoral researchers, postdocs, and principal investigators in third-party-funded projects. In Germany, a 2021 report states that a staggering 92% of academic staff under the age of 45 who have not reached the rank of full professors are on fixed-term employment contracts (Konsortium Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs, 2021). Multiple studies have demonstrated that the fraction employed on fixed-term contracts is significantly higher in Germany compared to other countries (we note, however, that differences in categories and nomenclature make exact quantitative comparisons difficult; e.g., a 2016 report using different data listed a fraction of 87% in Germany; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018; Rahal et al., 2023). In comparison,

approximately 60% of academic or research staff in the Netherlands are on fixed-term contracts (Rahal et al., 2023; Universiteiten van Nederland (UNL), 2023), whereas France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden have between 30 and 35% of fixed-term academic staff (Kreckel and Zimmermann, 2014; Kreckel, 2016; Haglund, 2018; Deutscher Bundestag, 2022; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022; Rahal et al., 2023). Moreover, the duration of German academic contracts is often short. A survey of 5,700 academics by The German Trade Union Confederation (*Der Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*) found that 84% of ECRs are employed on contracts lasting less than 18 months while a quarter of these scientists have already worked on four or more such contracts (Bolenius, 2020).

In Germany's non-academic sectors, fixed-term employment is strongly regulated by the act on part-time and temporary work (*Teilzeit- und Befristungsgesetz*). This law stipulates that fixed-term employment must not exceed a maximum of 2 years, after which the employee is required to transition to a permanent position if they stay within the same organization. In contrast, German academic contracts are regulated by the *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz* (WissZeitVG), which allows for a longer period of temporary employment. In its current form, the WissZeitVG allows for a maximum of 12 years of temporary employment—6 years of temporary employment before and 6 years of employment after the completion of the PhD (these time limits can be extended under certain circumstances such as parental leave or if the employment is funded by third-party sources). The WissZeitVG aims to provide scientists with adequate, but limited, time to attain the necessary qualifications for a tenured position while ensuring a continuous influx of junior researchers bringing new research concepts and ideas (Kubon, 2021; BMBF, 2023). Additionally, placing limits on fixed-term contracts was intended to alleviate the long-term employment uncertainty faced by scientists. In practice, however, the implementation of the WissZeitVG has contributed to precarious working conditions for researchers: the percentage of people employed under fixed- and short-term contracts is significantly higher than the national average, and the WissZeitVG has facilitated the exploitation of ECRs (Kubon, 2021). In addition, unlike rules in Austria and Sweden which impose time limits on postdoctoral work contracts but "reset" them when one changes universities or employers (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, Österreich (BMBWF Austria), 2021; Rahal et al., 2023), the WissZeitVG applies to all pre- and postdoctoral experience gained within the German academic system and thus sets a strict timeframe for German academic careers. Since its inception, the WissZeitVG has undergone several amendments and evaluations and its reform is currently under discussion.

Within the Max Planck Society (*Max-Planck-Gesellschaft* or MPG; a German non-university research organization dedicated to basic research), the PostdocNet represents the postdoctoral community across the 85 associated institutes. The organization is committed to providing strong support to its postdocs in advancing their personal scientific development and in reaching their personal goals for further qualification, within and outside of academia. As part of its target-group network activities, PostdocNet conducted surveys of MPG postdocs in 2019 ($n = 623$) and 2022 ($n =$

659). Both surveys confirm Germany-wide trends regarding fixed-term academic employment among ECRs (we note, however, that compared to university postdocs, MPG ECRs enjoy many advantages, such as teaching exemption and less dependence on third-party funding) (Vallier et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2023). The 2022 survey results show that 85% of postdoc respondents are on work contracts and 10% are funded through stipends or fellowships (remaining 5%: other or no response) (Russell et al., 2023). Notably, in 1976 just about 16% percent of all scientific staff at the MPG were fixed-term, by 2016 that figure had risen to 69% (Leendertz, 2020). However, non-European postdocs reported more frequently to be employed on stipends than European and German postdocs in the 2022 survey (Russell et al., 2023). Stipends have numerous disadvantages compared to work contracts, as they do not qualify as employment *per se*. For instance, stipend holders cannot obtain employer contributions to public health and unemployment insurance. The recent 2022 PostdocNet survey results (Russell et al., 2023) indicate that unequal treatment of postdocs has decreased since the 2019 survey, but still persist (e.g., the percentage of stipend or fellowship holders decreased from 13 to 10% from 2019 to 2022) (Vallier et al., 2020). Since the publication of the 2019 survey, the MPG has introduced measures that favor hiring postdocs with contracts over stipend-based employment. The organization is also working toward standardizing the initial contract length and salaries for incoming postdocs.

2. Working conditions affect both research and researchers

Short-term employment opportunities and uncertainty over contract renewals make it much more difficult for scientists to plan for the future, both in their personal lives and in their research endeavors. This is exacerbated by the fact that while the majority of ECRs aspire to an academic career (∼75% of surveyed postdocs in the PostdocNet 2022 survey, Russell et al., 2023), only a small percentage will eventually obtain a tenured position. Those who do not obtain permanent employment face a countdown until they are forced out of the system. This results in a highly uncertain and competitive work culture that has a strong selection bias against researchers from underrepresented groups and discourages many bright scientists from pursuing an academic career at an early stage. Unreasonably heavy workloads and poor working conditions can also adversely affect wellbeing. PostdocNet's 2022 survey results show, unsurprisingly, that work is the largest stressor for postdocs, with 73% of respondents reporting they are bothered by stress at work (Russell et al., 2023). Furthermore, surveyed postdocs who were not employed on a contract (i.e., those with stipends/fellowships) more often reported higher levels of moderate-severe depressive and anxiety symptoms than postdocs with contracts (depressive symptoms: no contract = 13% (moderately) severe, with contract = 6–10% (moderately) severe; anxiety symptoms: no contract = 13% severe, with contract = 6–11% severe). However, this relationship between working conditions and psychological wellbeing was not significant [Figure 1A; full model fit for depressive symptoms: $t_{\text{Student}}(652) = 0.29$, $p = 0.77$, $\hat{g}_{\text{Hedges}} = 0.04$, $\text{CI}_{95\%}[-0.27, 0.23]$, $n_{\text{obs}} = 654$; full
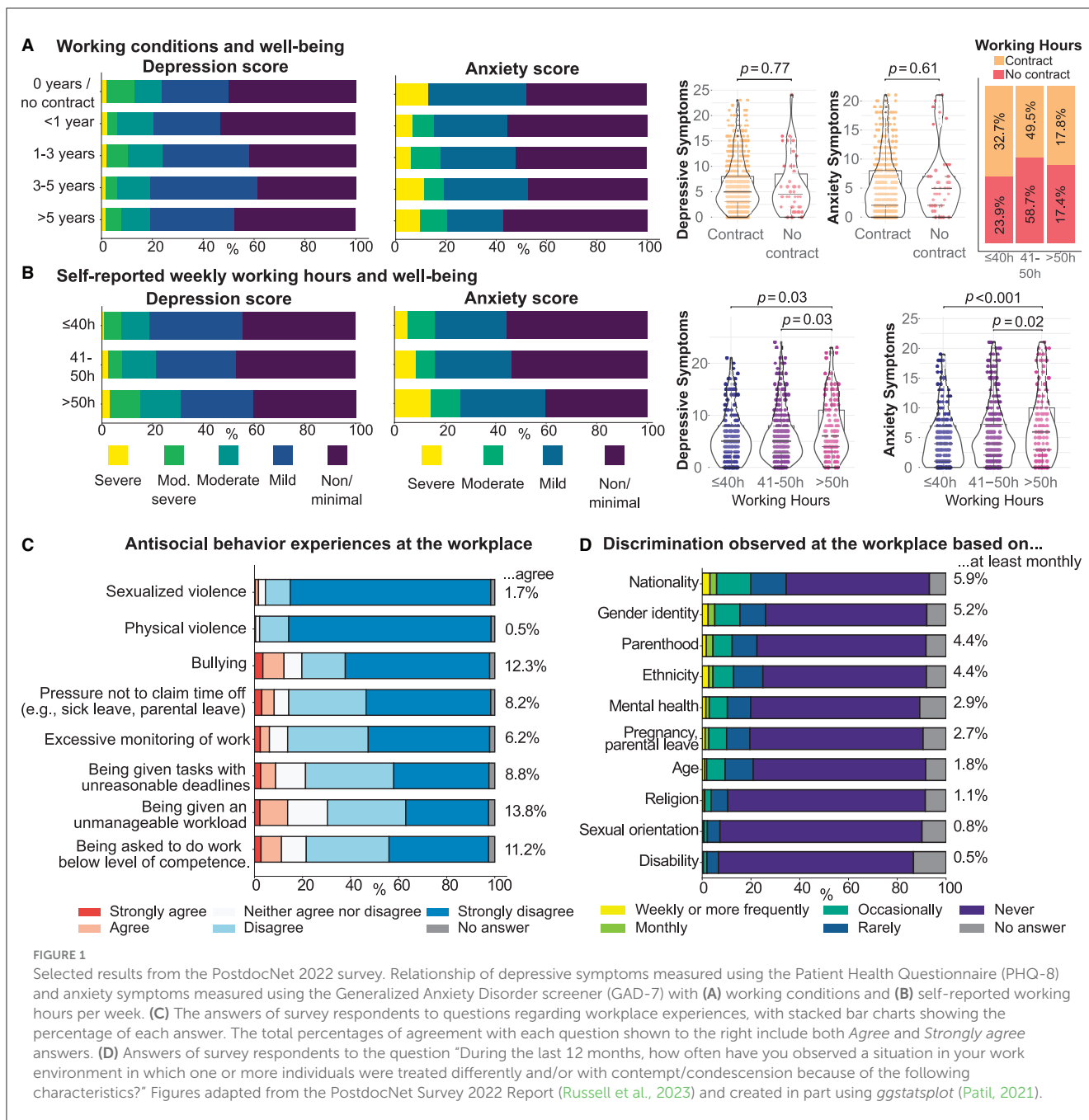
Selected results from the PostdocNet 2022 survey. Relationship of depressive symptoms measured using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) and anxiety symptoms measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder screener (GAD-7) with **(A)** working conditions and **(B)** self-reported working hours per week. **(C)** The answers of survey respondents to questions regarding workplace experiences, with stacked bar charts showing the percentage of each answer. The total percentages of agreement with each question shown to the right include both *Agree* and *Strongly agree* answers. **(D)** Answers of survey respondents to the question "During the last 12 months, how often have you observed a situation in your work environment in which one or more individuals were treated differently and/or with contempt/condescension because of the following characteristics?" Figures adapted from the PostdocNet Survey 2022 Report (Russell et al., 2023) and created in part using *ggstatsplot* (Patil, 2021).

model fit for anxiety symptoms: $t_{\text{Student}}(652) = -0.52, p = 0.61$, $\hat{g}_{\text{Hedges}} = -0.07, \text{CI}_{95\%}[-0.38, 0.24], n_{\text{obs}} = 654$]. Approximately 67% of surveyed postdocs reported working more than 40h per week, despite the fact that contractually agreed working hours are typically 39h per week. The fraction of postdocs without a contract (i.e., with stipends/fellowships) who reported working more than 40h per week was higher than those with a contract, though not significantly [76 vs. 67%, $\chi^2_{\text{Pearson}}(1, n_{\text{obs}} = 654) = 1.15, p = 0.28$; Figure 1A, right]. Working more than 50h per week was reported by approximately 18% of surveyed postdocs, and was significantly associated with more severe depressive symptoms [$\chi^2_{\text{Kruskal-wallis}}(2) = 7.21, p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 0.03, \hat{\epsilon}^2_{\text{ordinal}} = 0.01$, $\text{CI}_{95\%}[1.92 \times 10^{-3}, 1.00], n_{\text{obs}} = 659$; *post-hoc* comparisons using

the Dunn test: $\leq 40\text{h}$ vs. $> 50\text{h}$ $p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 0.03, 41-50\text{h}$ vs. $> 50\text{h}$ $p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 0.03$] and anxiety symptoms [$\chi^2_{\text{Kruskal-wallis}}(2) = 11.99$, $p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 2.49 \times 10^{-3}, \hat{\epsilon}^2_{\text{ordinal}} = 0.02, \text{CI}_{95\%}[0.01, 1.00], n_{\text{obs}} = 659$; *post-hoc* comparisons using the Dunn test: $\leq 40\text{h}$ vs. $> 50\text{h}$ $p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 1.70 \times 10^{-3}, 41-50\text{h}$ vs. $> 50\text{h}$ $p_{\text{Holm-adj.}} = 0.02$; Figure 1B].

Employment uncertainty not only contributes to high levels of stress but may also harm scientific progress: innovative, but also time-consuming, inter- and multidisciplinary research projects are barely possible under the time pressure of a contract coming to an end. Furthermore, projects often face a lack of continuity as experienced researchers are compelled or forced to leave the German academic system. This disrupts the research workflow and

hinders the overall progress of projects (Bradler and Roller, 2023; Rahal et al., 2023). Instead of encouraging scientific innovation, the insistence on short-term contracts discourages long-term or ambitious and cutting-edge projects that challenge status-quo scientific concepts (Park et al., 2023). Projects perceived to carry risks often hold the potential for high rewards and may lead to innovative or ground-breaking outcomes. Employment uncertainty encourages researchers to propose less risky projects that can be completed within typical short-term funding cycles.

3. Academic diversity and equal opportunities are shaped by working conditions

In Germany, a significant portion of the scientific workforce consists of international postdocs. Due to the importance of diversity to the functioning of groups and organizations (Hong and Page, 2004; Page, 2007; Herring, 2009; Woolley et al., 2010; Freeman and Huang, 2014), the unique perspectives and expertise of researchers from diverse backgrounds are necessary to ensure a flourishing academic landscape and address skill shortages in Germany's non-academic sectors. In industry, it is acknowledged that diversity can enhance innovation and creativity (Lee, 2015; Paulus et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2018). In academia, publications with a diverse group of authors tend to receive more citations (AlShebli et al., 2018). There is also an acknowledgment that global perspectives and a broad range of research topics are needed to ensure that scientific research remains robust to address the large-scale problems societies face in an increasingly interconnected world (Graves et al., 2022; Kozlowski et al., 2022). However, recent work has highlighted, for example, that Black, Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Islander scientists face additional barriers within the scientific publishing system (Liu et al., 2023). Other studies and perspectives have noted how women and underrepresented groups face additional obstacles to success in Germany and the rest of the world (Hofstra et al., 2020; Cech and Waidzunas, 2021; Llorens et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2022).

To fully understand the broad implications of how employment conditions and prospects impact diversity in academia, it is important to remember that the postdoctoral phase is not only a time for scientific and career development but often coincides with significant life events such as starting a family or taking care of aging family members. Of surveyed MPG postdocs, 28% are parents, of whom 9% became parents while working as a postdoc (Russell et al., 2023). There are more male than female parents, though not significantly [31 to 25%, $\chi^2_{\text{Pearson}}(1, n_{\text{obs}} = 643) = 2.62$, $p = 0.11$], and the number of German parents is higher than non-German parents [42 to 24%, $\chi^2_{\text{Pearson}}(1, n_{\text{obs}} = 654) = 18.37$, $p = 1.82 \times 10^{-5}$]; this may indicate that combining the demands of a postdoc position with those of caring for family is less attractive for women and international postdocs (Russell et al., 2023). Moreover, 75% of surveyed MPG postdocs come from outside of Germany and 50% come from outside the EU (Russell et al., 2023). This percentage of international postdocs is much higher compared to other German research institutions; for

example, the Leibniz Institutes report that roughly 20% of their postdocs are non-German (Fiedler et al., 2022).

Respondents in the PostdocNet 2022 survey also reported their experiences with antisocial behavior and discrimination at work. Overall, 30% of postdocs (∼200 individuals) reported having experienced some form of antisocial behavior at work (Figure 1C). The overall percentage is in alignment with the results of the Max Planck PhDnet survey, which found that 25% of doctoral researchers in the MPG have faced antisocial behavior at work, including discrimination and involvement in serious conflicts (Majev et al., 2021). Furthermore, 12% of surveyed postdocs observe discrimination at least monthly, and more than 6% of surveyed postdocs report facing discrimination at least monthly. Survey respondents most commonly attributed discrimination to factors such as nationality, gender identity, parenthood, and ethnicity (Figure 1D). Moreover, the 2022 survey showed that women reported experiencing at least monthly discrimination more than twice as often as men [9% of women to 4% of men, $\chi^2_{\text{Pearson}}(1, n_{\text{obs}} = 659) = 6.72$, $p = 0.01$][1] (Russell et al., 2023). We note that data on mental wellbeing and discrimination experiences were not part of the previous PostdocNet survey (Vallier et al., 2020), so we cannot compare how these trends have changed over time.

In summary, ECR's working conditions in academia do not yet provide adequate support for women scientists, researchers from marginalized groups, and all those who take on additional care work. The above mentioned disparities contribute to the gender gap in senior academic leadership positions and have the overall effect of reducing diversity in academia (Morgan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). In addition, academic working conditions have a major impact on the lives of international and non-German-speaking researchers (e.g., in terms of obtaining visas, integration in Germany, and family support). Thus, more effort must be made to include these postdocs' experiences in discussions about the reform of related laws and regulations.[2] To gain a deeper understanding of how the laws impact researchers, as well as directions for possible change, the next section gives an overview of the legal frameworks for diversity and equal opportunities in Germany.

4. Legal frameworks for diversity and equal opportunities in Germany

The legal framework for diversity and equal opportunity is shaped by a number of important statutes in Germany, the most foundational being the country's Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) (1949). There is also the General Equal Treatment Act (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz* or AGG) (2006) as well as the Federal Act on Gender Equality (*Bundesgleichstellungsgesetz*) (2015). Article 3 of the *Grundgesetz* stipulates that "[a]ll people shall be equal before

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1 Thirteen percent of surveyed individuals who have a different gender identity or preferred not to answer gender-related questions have experienced antisocial behavior, but the sample size was too low to be included in further analyses.

2 https://www.postdocnet.mpg.de/148504/Comments-on-WissZeitVG-July2023

the law," and in 3(2) goes further to state that "[t]he state shall promote the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and take steps to eliminate disadvantages that now exist" (Bundesamt für Justiz, 2022). The following provision, Article 3(3), prohibits discrimination based on other characteristics. The 2006 AGG, incorporating the EU's equality directives into German law, seeks to prevent or cease discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, 2010).

While the need to address different forms of discrimination is stipulated in both the Basic Law and AGG, the wording and structure of the law [cf. Article 3(2)] give particular attention and priority to the specific disadvantages faced by women in a way that also addresses empowerment. This has enabled mandatory attention to be given to disadvantages faced by women. One example of these efforts is the 2015 Federal Act on Gender Equality (*Bundesgleichstellungsgesetz*), which has served as a legal basis for promoting an increase in the number of women in leadership roles. Another example is the requirement for public authorities, academic institutions, and private businesses to appoint a Gender Equality Officer (*Gleichstellungsbeauftragte*), who is responsible for ensuring gender equality in employment conditions and opportunities and participates in decision-making processes affecting gender equality, such as recruitment, promotion, and training (Bundesamt für Justiz, 2015).[3]

Beyond gender, other aspects of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, continue to receive insufficient attention and action in Germany. As outlined by the concept of intersectionality, it is essential to consider these factors alongside gender while formulating effective policies. Intersectionality acknowledges that multiple characteristics interact and combine to create distinct forms of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989; Leggon, 2006; Kozlowski et al., 2022).

5. Target-group networks and surveys provide benefit to researchers and institutions

In 2021, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* or BMBF) released a video explaining the WissZeitVG through a fictional archetypical academic character named Hanna. Hanna was used to describe the alleged benefits of the law, such as the notion that a fast turnover of scientists prevents "clogging the system" and drives innovation. Many ECRs felt the video was not reflective of their real-life situation, with many highlighting the pressure associated with the precariousness of short-term contracts and the difficulties of following an academic career path during a time when many would want to start or care for family, in addition to the competitiveness of modern academia. In response to this video, a wave of protests on the WissZeitVG using the hashtags #IchBinHanna and #IchBinReyhan ("I am Hanna" and "I am Reyhan," respectively) sparked a series of heated public debates

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3 Inclusion Officers provide a comparable organizational structure for promoting inclusion of individuals with disabilities.
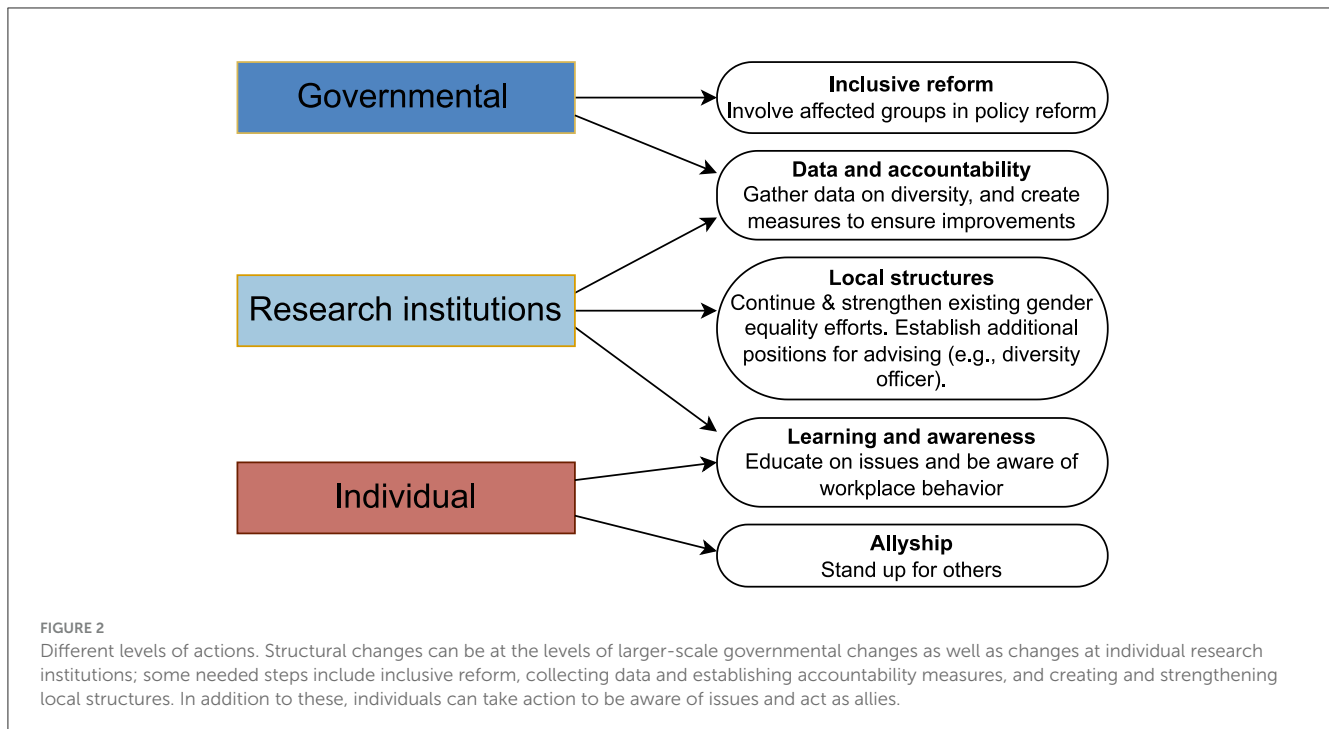
between thousands of researchers and scientific stakeholders on the working conditions in German academia and the structural barriers faced by academics from marginalized backgrounds (Bahr et al., 2021, 2022; Dirnagl, 2022). These discussions have played an important role in motivating Germany-based researchers at all stages of their careers to form interest groups, grassroots initiatives, and target-group networks that facilitate public discourse on the importance of good working conditions as an integral part of a productive research environment (Bahr et al., 2022; Rahal et al., 2023).

Large academic institutions struggle to comprehend the personal concerns and challenges faced by each type of employee. Therefore, target-group networks such as PostdocNet offer a unique service to their institutions by providing a window into the worlds of their employees. Specifically, target-group networks can provide institutions with survey data to enable more streamlined assistance, for instance to address problems whose solutions would most benefit postdocs. Surveys can therefore be a powerful tool to gain insights about employees' work experiences and to identify areas of improvement, which can inform policy.

Making equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) issues visible is crucial to addressing the negative effects of structural biases on individuals who encounter discrimination. Evidence-based policy can be an informed way to address issues related to EDI. In the UK higher education sector, such policy mechanisms have been established by the Athena Swan gender equality initiative (Barnard, 2017) and the Race Equality Charter. Although in Germany data protection measures are strongly regulated, the importance of EDI data has recently come into focus (Aikins et al., 2021; Foroutan et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2022; Boytchev, 2023).

We note that while surveys are a powerful tool for improvement, it is also important to mention the possible biases that can introduce incomplete or skewed understandings of people's experiences. Participants with negative experiences may be more likely to respond to surveys, while those with more positive experiences may provide inaccurate information due to memory biases. Additionally, respondents may provide socially desirable responses even when anonymously recorded. Here, target-group network surveys can supplement organizational employee surveys, as employees may feel less pressure to provide socially desirable responses. Survey responses are inherently subjective and based on participants' current perceptions and interpretations. Therefore, most survey data can reveal correlations but may not determine causality. Yet, comprehensive and longitudinal surveys can provide long-term insight into institutional culture and management practices affecting the work environment and employees' wellbeing. For this reason, PostdocNet intends to conduct regular surveys among MPG postdocs to follow the development of their needs and their work satisfaction over longer time periods. The survey method is also subject to biases from the authors, which can influence the design and analysis. In this respect, the diverse perspectives of survey designers and respondents both play a crucial role. Overall, surveys must be carefully designed and conducted; when done so, and when considered in conjunction with additional qualitative or quantitative data, target-group surveys can provide accurate and comprehensive insights on directions for improvements.

FIGURE 2
Different levels of actions. Structural changes can be at the levels of larger-scale governmental changes as well as changes at individual research institutions; some needed steps include inclusive reform, collecting data and establishing accountability measures, and creating and strengthening local structures. In addition to these, individuals can take action to be aware of issues and act as allies.

6. Future directions and suggested actions

Despite the crucial role postdocs play in conducting research, driving innovation, and training students (Feldon et al., 2019), the current academic system does not prioritize creating working conditions that foster good research practices and inclusivity (Rahal et al., 2023). The PostdocNet's survey results showed that, among other factors, working conditions, wellbeing and anti-discrimination measures should be a primary concern for research institutions (Figure 1) (Russell et al., 2023). Recently, the #IchBinHanna and #IchBinReyhan campaigns in Germany have been instrumental in highlighting the need for better working conditions and career development opportunities for academics (especially those at German universities), regardless of their background (Bahr et al., 2021, 2022; Rauscher, 2023).

Improving laws and institutional policies is a complex process. Although there is no fast-track solution to the issues we have discussed in this paper, we can nonetheless highlight important steps and actions that may pave the way for effective change. In particular, we emphasize the need for structural changes that facilitate good working conditions and experiences for postdocs. Structural changes can be considered on the governmental and institutional (i.e., research institution) levels. In addition to structural changes, individuals can also take action. Figure 2 summarizes actions and steps that can be taken at each level in order to work toward the goals of increasing diversity in German academia and providing working conditions that enable excellent and innovative science while fostering a sustainable work atmosphere.

At the governmental level, we stress the importance of involving all stakeholders, including grassroots initiatives or target-group networks representing postdocs and international

researchers, when reforming and modifying existing laws and regulations. Complementary data collection on the demographics and experiences of researchers from organizations and grassroots initiatives is a key step to monitor the effects that regulations and measures have. One can also draw inspiration for reform from similar efforts in other countries, such as the NSF Advance program in the US and the Athena Swan program and Race Equality Charter in the UK (Rosser et al., 2019; Bhopal and Henderson, 2021; Morimoto, 2022).

Improving working conditions also requires an intersectional approach to diversity, taking into account dimensions of differences and inequalities in addition to gender. It is important to note that women continue to face unique challenges in academia (Nielsen et al., 2017; Llorens et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2022); as a result, existing efforts to promote gender equality should not be replaced with broader diversity initiatives. Rather, they should be strengthened and supplemented.

While the most significant and long-lasting changes will result from structural changes at the governmental and institutional levels, individual actions can also positively affect working environments for others. These actions include learning about issues and educating oneself, as well as being aware of one's own and others' actions in the workplace. Individuals, especially those in privileged positions, can act as allies for underrepresented groups in science by ensuring that the voices of those groups are heard and by standing up against discrimination or inappropriate behavior when observed (Williams et al., 2023).

These future directions are overall part of a multifaceted approach that involves both structural and individual changes. By actively engaging in this process and prioritizing the wellbeing and success of all members of the academic community, we can create a more productive and innovative environment for research and education in Germany and beyond.

Reflective statement

We, the authors of this perspective piece, have been involved in parts in the creation of the PostdocNet 2022 survey, and we are all postdoctoral researchers of the MPG ourselves. Since the first submission of this manuscript, HS has started to also work part-time at the MPG General Administration in the Career Development department, focusing on the postdoc phase. We acknowledge that our own biases may have influenced the survey design and analysis of the results. Our own experiences, perspectives, and assumptions could have inadvertently shaped how questions were posed, and how responses were interpreted. We made conscious efforts to address potential biases by ensuring inclusivity in our language and employing validated scales, and by engaging in iterative discussions among a diverse team of researchers, including those with backgrounds in psychology and anthropology and experience with survey design, while planning the survey and during the writing of this manuscript.

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: data from the PostdocNet's surveys have been referenced in this article. The full reports of the surveys are publicly available. The raw data, however, are not publicly available to ensure anonymity of the participants. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to survey@postdocnet.mpg.de.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Actual and symbolic prisons, Black men, and the freedom-unfreedom paradox: interrogating the bad faith of racialized oppression in a post-accountable United States

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Drawing on systemic racism theory, white racial framing and the notion of bad faith as the connecting, justifying thread between ideals of freedom and equality and actions realizing unfreedom and inequities, this essay explores the alchemy of race, masculinity, and racialized oppression and its consequences for Black men past and present in United States society. This essay's aim is to trace the historical ideologies and cultural practices, relations, and normative standards that have contributed to, and hence must be challenged to confront, the inequitable, race-based relations of power, and privilege at the root of institutionalized injustices. To do so, this essay interrogates the dissonance of bad faith as a corrective mode of truth telling to highlight and tap the equity potential of Black men's collective, historical rejections of the White mainstream's conflicting definitions and deceptive reasonings requisite for pushing toward racial justice, healing, and peace.

KEYWORDS

race, freedom, masculinity, symbolic, Blackness

Introduction

> And, in fact, the truth about the Black American man, as a historical entity and as a human being, has been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a Black American man refuses to accept the white world's definitions. So every attempt is made to cut that Black American man down—not only was made yesterday but is made today (Baldwin, 1962/2021, p. 69).

In the epigraph above, American writer and cultural critic points of Baldwin (1962/2021) to Black men, and their role in United States society, as embodying a threat to the existing racial hierarchy so significant that patterned violence against them at the hands of representatives of the White mainstream has historically been viewed as officially necessary for the public good and thus required no justification. The May 25th murder in 2020 of Mr. George Floyd, a 46-year-old unarmed Black man, by a White police officer, Derek Chauvin, is but one example of a Black man deemed a threat significant enough by the *white world* to merit being cut down with life-ending violence at the hands of official representatives of that *white world* referred to by Baldwin

(1962/2021); Floyd lost his life while handcuffed as the now former police officer Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for nearly 10 min (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2021).

Beyond Mr. Floyd, as a visit to "The Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration" in Montgomery, Alabama (Pierce and Heitz, 2020) captures, there are voluminous recent and less remembered examples of Black men deemed threats to United States society's White mainstream (Whitestream) and cut down by White violence for refusing to accept the *white world's definitions* (Baldwin, 1962/2021). To say the names of only six other Black men also who likewise have more recently gained unwanted membership in this race-based group built on White violence (Cottman et al., 2023): Ahmaud Arbery, Daunte Wright, Jordan Neely, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and Jawan Dallas (Nicholson et al., 2009; Weissinger et al., 2017). That whole groups of people must take to the streets to proclaim "Black Lives Matter" demonstrates the enduring veracity of points of Baldwin (1962/2021) about Black men and their historical role in United States society (Szetela, 2020).

Manifested by the historically, racially patterned murders of unarmed Black men, then, the bodies of Black men in United States society have consistently served as primary targets and repositories of the harms and traumas realized by the deeply systemic, inequitable allocations of power, distribution of valued resources, and consequent abuses incurred by representatives of its Whitestream across generations (Ferreira da Silva, 2009; Feagin and Ducey, 2018). What is it about Black men that makes them a consistent threat deemed so significant to United States society's Whitestream that every effort continues to be made to cut them down using racial violence, for the public good no less (Patterson, 2018; Wilderson, 2020)?

As Baldwin (1962/2021) explains above, it is the violence itself of United States society against Black men that is a site rich with potential answers to this question of the Whitestream's enduring use of Black men as a historical entity and human beings; the patterned, state-sanctioned violence, including threats of violence, against the bodies and lives of Black men are more than simple reactionary responses to racial prejudices, biases, and antipathy for Blackness (i.e., characteristics, aims, goals, histories, and accomplishments associated with Black people; Kelley, 1997; Mills, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Rather, the very degree of the Whitestream's rage and perceived need for elimination-oriented violence against Black men is itself a red flag marking the immensity of the collective potential of Black men to confront and transform United States society's existing racial status quo privileging Whiteness (i.e., characteristics, goals, interests, values, and histories associated with White people as a group) toward more humanized, participatory social spaces and relations (Yancy and Alcoff, 2016; Feagin, 2020).

Specifically, Baldwin (1962/2021) above directs us to answers by highlighting the effects of historical power asymmetries. First, he emphasizes the Whitestream's lethal historical subjugation of Black men in the United States. Next, he emphasizes the dynamic, immense power Black males wield and are endowed with the capacity to challenge White racial dominance. Then, he argues that the severity of White people's violence against Black males is proportional to the power of Black men to confront institutionalized racism and inequality; in short, the degree of United States society's rage and violence against Black men in society matches the degree to which Black men collectively threaten to disrupt and overturn the patterned

imbalances of power and access to resources and opportunities privileging White people collectively across its valued institutions.

If, as Baldwin (1962/2021) observes, above and as the degree of United States society's patterned violence against Black men and their bodies indicate, Black men collectively share this immense transformative potential for humanized living and the disruption of historical imbalances of power and abuses, then how can this equity potential be tapped toward racial healing, peace, and the thriving and wellbeing of individuals and groups and against the patterned oppressions so many continue to endure? Put simply, how is that raced, gendered equity potential constituted today and how can it be applied?

Drawing on systemic racism theory (Feagin, 2006), White racial framing (Feagin, 2020), and the notion of bad faith (Gordon, 1995, 1997) as the connecting, justifying thread between ideals of freedom and equality and actions realizing unfreedom and inequities, this essay explores the alchemy of race, masculinity, and racialized oppression and its consequences for Black men past and present in United States society (Hooks, 2004b; Yancy, 2022). This essay's aim is to trace the historical ideologies and cultural practices, relations, and normative standards that have contributed to, and hence must be challenged to confront, the inequitable, race-based relations of power and privilege at the root of institutionalized injustices (Tichavakunda, 2021). To do so, this essay interrogates the dissonance of bad faith (Gordon, 1995, 1997) as a corrective mode of truth telling to highlight and tap the equity potential of Black men's collective, historical rejections of the Whitestreams's conflicting definitions, and deceptive reasonings requisite for pushing toward racial justice, healing, and peace (Lozenski, 2016).

The freedom-unfreedom paradox, oppression, bad faith, and healing

The United States has always viewed itself as exceptional (Foner, 1999). And, indeed, the United States is exceptional—exceptional as a nation that incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world (Alexander, 2010,2020). How is it that in this land of freedom, entire groups of people feel compelled to take to the streets regularly to assert that their lives matter and that they should not be shot and murdered arbitrarily by police? These apparent contradictions filled with violence reflect American society's longstanding paradox of official, full-throated freedom (for some) coupled with disavowed, racialized unfreedom (faced by minoritized others; Mills, 1997), a kind of herrenvolk freedom (Glaude Jr, 2017).

This seeming contradiction between freedom and unfreedom, in turn, is a manifestation of systemic oppression based on bad faith. Systemic oppression refers to the patterned systems of practices, norms, rules, methods, laws, and relationships that uphold and reinforce the Whitestream's collective group position.

Bad faith informs, operationalizes, and manipulates racial dominance and other difference-based forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia, etc.; Gordon, 1997). Bad faith denotes unconscious or intentional self-deception; the term refers to people's tendency to lie to themselves to protect their feelings, avoid having to take corrective action, and maintain a positive self-image (Gordon, 1995); it also has legal connotations used to describe intentionally dishonest acts committed within contractual obligations

(Tichavakunda, 2021). Importantly, bad faith prevents critical dialogue by purposely or unintentionally evading the truth, choice, and responsibility in favor of deceptive, selective memory, falsehoods, and distortions.

Theorizing systemic oppression and its connections to bad faith

Systemic racialized oppression is rooted in bad faith; it is sanctioned by bad faith; and it is an expression of bad faith. To comprehend and then combat systemic oppression, it is necessary to identify and interrupt the logic of bad faith that binds the apparent paradox of freedom and unfreedom in United States society.

In today's ostensibly post-racial society, the notion of being accused of racism or labeled a racist offends most White Americans. Racism, for many White Americans, is synonymous with racial extremists on the fringes of society (e.g., neo-Nazis); racists are "those" individuals who don white hoods and swastikas tattooed on their arms--individuals who are appropriately far removed from the mainstream of society (Smith, 2005). From this vantage point, race and prejudice are associated with individuals' seemingly irrational actions, thoughts, and decisions; accordingly, from this perspective, friendships with individuals from minoritized groups, then, are sufficient as evidence of anti-racism and good moral character among White people (Jackman, 1986).

To eradicate oppression, however, there is no precedent for correcting people's flawed reasoning (DuBois, 1899/2023; Fanon, 2013). Furthermore, systemic racial oppression is manifested at both the macro- and micro-levels of society (Feagin, 2006, 2020). White superiority is enacted by individuals and groups socialized to apply White racial framings of society to make sense of and guide their actions, interactions, and decisions based on the epistemological reasoning that White ways of knowing and being are superior to those of others (Arendt, 2020).

Unfreedom and Black male bodies

As Baldwin (1962/2021) indicates above, White domination over the Black body has been relentlessly pursued throughout United States history, both physically and symbolically with Black men symbolically demonized as criminal and dangerous and thus negative imagery providing some justification for enacted physical containment of, and violence against, their bodies (Dean, 2000; Wacquant, 2000). Indeed, in the United States, Black men and boys continue to be unfree at much more acutely concentrated rates as compared to their White counterparts (Alexander, 2010,2020); in 2019 at midyear, the incarceration rate for Black people in the United States held steady at 600 per 100,000 individuals incarcerated, a rate more than three times the rate for White people (Zeng and Minton, 2021). Since 2015, the daily incarceration rate for Black men ages 16–34 is 9.1 percent of their identity group or population as compared to 1.6 percent of the population of young White men, and 3.9 percent of the population of young Latinx men (Pettit and Gutierrez, 2018).

Nonetheless, one need not be physically confined to be imprisoned—one's body behind constraining iron bars; symbolic incarceration is likewise a lived realty for far too many Black males in

United States society's Whitestream, a type of imprisonment of the mind that then imprisons the body despite lack of any physically constraining iron bars (Turner, 2019; Lomotey and Smith, 2023). While fatality rates continue to decline among men of other races and ethnicities, they continue to rise among Black men (Mutua, 2006; Dodson, 2021). With Black men consistently represented by United States society's Whitestream as dangerous and potential and budding threats, gun violence is increasingly the primary contributor to the high death rates among Black men (Benjamins and De Maio, 2021). Among males aged 10–25, Black-on-Black homicide is a significant public health crisis as negative images, symbols, and representations are linked to cultural practices and internalized and acted on by larger society and targeting Black men (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006; Sum et al., 2009; Zimring, 2017).

Similarly, the rate at which Black male students are suspended and expelled from public school is three times that of their White peers (Skiba et al., 2000; Bottiani et al., 2018). Despite more than 50 years of racial desegregation and school reform efforts (Boyd, 2009), Black male students are routinely punished more severely, assigned to lower-ability groups, and expelled at a higher rate than their white counterparts (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Seen as likely, emerging, and existing problems or dangerous to others, especially White students, Black male learners are consistently taught by teachers who would prefer not to work with them (Irvine, 1990; Fuller, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Hale, 2001) and subjected to harsher disciplinary practices as compared to their peers in all other racial and ethnic groups (Voelkl et al., 1999; Noguera, 2003; Cook et al., 2018).

The well-documented relationship between United States public schools and prisons creates a "deadly symbiosis" (Wacquant, 2000) between education and the incarceration of Black males (King, 2005; Kim et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2021). How does this unfreedom of Black men persist in the land of the free (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014; Reed et al., 2014)? How does bad faith transform over time to justify and sustain society's paradox of freedom and unfreedom as it mutates into ever varying forms and configurations?

Tracking bad faith historically: European contact and race

The dominant ideologies of Black males as subhuman, violent, criminal, and bad are indications of deeply rooted bad faith (Grant, 2019); bad faith logic enables the Whitestream to maintain a pleasing collective self-image while perpetuating violence against any threat to this pleasing self-image of superiority (Tichavakunda, 2021).

Because evidence is superfluous within the logic of bad faith (Gordon, 1995), these dominant negative ideologies regarding Black people and Black males especially persist across generations (Sullivan and Cross, 2016). No quantity of counterevidence is sufficient to refute anti-Black prejudice. The first contact between Europeans and Africans, during which Africa's natural and human resources were violently exploited, is the source of much of the anti-Black (mis) information used to create the perception of Black unfreedom in a free nation (Karenga, 2002).

Specifically, Western colonial powers created race-based distinctions according to skin color, hair texture, genitalia, facial features, and other phenotypical characteristics to differentiate themselves from Africans and justify violent oppression (Rodney,

1972). Through this White racial lens (Feagin, 2020), Black people were placed at the bottom of a human hierarchy based on their "thick lips, ""flat noses, "and "wool-like hair, "among other physically discernible characteristics (Gossett, 1997).

On a biological level, these racial distinctions were thought to control Black people's conduct and moral foundations (Jordan, 1974). This belief has persisted for centuries (Hall, 1997; Montagu, 1997; Brook, 1999). Biological determinism, still common today, classified Black males as childish, criminals, oversexualized, and more likely to commit offenses (Smedley, 1993; Smith, 2005). This belief held that these characteristics were inborn qualities that required physical punishment, subordination, and containment for the purpose of correction and the protection of society (Dean, 2000; Said, 2003).

United States society has a long history of sending distorted messages of low regard and mistruth to Black men and boys (e.g., Brinton, 1890; Watkins, 2006; Croteau and Hoynes, 2014). Although they change form over generations, these negative images of Black men and Blackness are consistently used for the same purpose over time—to justify Black males' symbolic and material exclusion from full participation within society (Ferguson, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2002; Bell, 2004).

Conclusion

This racialized exclusions of Black men and boys across important social venues in United States society through negative symbolic framing and enacted practices typically has profoundly negative, harmful implications for their lives and life chances (Shujaa, 1996; Lipman, 1998; Kunjufu, 2001; Sullivan and Cross, 2016). As a consistent consequence of the negative symbolic framing and enacted practices targeting Black men and boys, they regularly face challenges related to lower levels of educational attainment, higher rates of mental illness, higher rates of substance use disorders, higher rates of incarceration, and a host of other social problems (Moody, 2001; Waxman, 2021).

Given the role of symbolic and actual, or physically enacted, negative framing and practices (e.g., Guthrie, 2003) applied to Black men and boys (Haller, 1995; Holtzman, 2000), it is important to challenge these negative images and patterns of acting, interacting, and decision-making which together regularly work to symbolically, and physically, incarcerate them and limit their life chances (Hooks, 2004a; Williams et al., 2022). To create a more just and inclusive

society where all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality and more, experience inclusive, safe, and supportive contexts to foster and further the development of their full potential, it is important and necessary to interrupt the bad faith that connects the freedom-unfreedom paradox they consistently face across institutions (Grier, 2020; Brown, 2021). By exposing the bad faith that connects the symbolic and actual practices which consistently contain Black men and boys (Jackson, 2011), it becomes possible to identify possibilities for positive, transformative strategies and points of intervention required to foster the development of each person's fully humanity, potential and wellbeing (Hooks, 2000/2018; Matthew, 2015; Wade, 2021).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Development of the oppression-based traumatic stress inventory: a novel and intersectional approach to measuring traumatic stress

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There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that experiences of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty) are associated with posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. Traditional trauma assessments do not assess experiences of oppression and it is therefore imperative to develop instruments that do. To assess oppression-based traumatic stress broadly, and in an intersectional manner, we have developed the oppression-based traumatic stress inventory (OBTSI). The OBTSI includes two parts. Part A comprises open-ended questions asking participants to describe experiences of oppression as well as a set of questions to determine whether Criterion A for PTSD is met. Part B assesses specific posttraumatic stress symptoms anchored to the previously described experiences of oppression and also asks participants to identify the various types of discrimination they have experienced (e.g., based on racial group, sex/gender, sexual orientation, etc.). Clients from a mental health clinic and an undergraduate sample responded to the OBTSI and other self-report measures of depression, anxiety, and traditional posttraumatic stress ($N = 90$). Preliminary analyses demonstrate strong internal consistency reliability for the overall symptom inventory ($\alpha = 0.97$) as well as for the four symptom clusters of posttraumatic stress symptoms in the DSM-5 (α ranging from 0.86 to 0.94). In addition to providing descriptive information, we also assess the convergent validity between the OBTSI and measures of anxiety, depression, and traditional posttraumatic stress and examine the factor structure. This study provides preliminary evidence that the OBTSI is a reliable and valid method of assessing oppression-based traumatic stress symptoms.

KEYWORDS

trauma, racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, minority stress, assessment

Introduction

Oppression involves systemic discrimination that is specifically directed toward individuals with marginalized identities (Prilleltensky and Gonick, 1996). Occurring at the macro level of governmental policies and the micro level of internalized disdain for individuals solely due to their marginalized identity (Witherspoon et al., 2022), oppression results in cruel and unfair

prevention of access to opportunities and freedoms that non-marginalized individuals can obtain with ease (Prilleltensky and Gonick, 1996). Oppression can occur across all marginalized identities including but not limited to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and ability. Marginalized individuals who experience oppression face significant barriers to accessing similar resources as their non-marginalized counterparts, such as mental or physical health care, employment, or even housing opportunities. In the context of mental or physical health, the barriers can revolve around a lack of trust in health and wellbeing professionals due to fear of continued victimization due to identity-based biases, biases which are commonly known to influence clinical decision making (Williams and Wyatt, 2015).

Psychological health outcomes are often poor for those who routinely experience oppression. In Phillips (1998), discussed the social and cultural contexts of domestic abuse faced by women, and the compounding negative effects caused by intersections of sexism, racism, and classism, while highlighting the importance of healthcare workers understanding this context in order to provide adequate care. Since then a growing body of literature has empirically demonstrated a link between experiences of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty) and posttraumatic stress symptoms. The majority of studies focus on the robust association between racism and posttraumatic stress symptoms (e.g., Loo et al., 2001; Cheng and Mallinckrodt, 2015; Watson et al., 2016; Sibrava et al., 2019) with additional studies examining the impact of sexism (e.g., Berg, 2006; Watson et al., 2016), heterosexism (e.g., Szymanski and Balsam, 2011; Bandermann and Szymanski, 2014; Dworkin et al., 2018), and poverty (e.g., Koenen et al., 2007; Golin et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2021, 2022) on posttraumatic stress symptoms. Notably, the associations between experiences of oppression and posttraumatic stress symptoms persist longitudinally (Koenen et al., 2007; Flores et al., 2010; Cheng and Mallinckrodt, 2015; Golin et al., 2016; Sibrava et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2022) and even when events that meet Criterion A for PTSD are statistically controlled for Loo et al. (2001), Szymanski and Balsam (2011), Bandermann and Szymanski (2014), Golin et al. (2016), Watson et al. (2016), and Holmes et al. (2022).

Recently, several measures have been developed to capture oppression-based traumatic stress. The Race-Based Traumatic Stress Scale (RBTSSS; Carter et al., 2013) and the Racial Trauma Scale (RTS; Williams et al., 2022a), self-report measures, and The UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Scale (UnRESTS; Williams et al., 2018a), a clinician-administered interview, were all developed to assess trauma symptoms associated with experiences of racism among people of color. These measures have been an important step in the field as they go beyond standard trauma assessments and allow for the accurate assessment of oppression-based traumatic stress. However, all three assess oppression-based traumatic stress that is specific to discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity. The Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale (TSDS; Williams et al., 2018b) assesses symptoms associated with a broad range of discriminatory experiences, while also highlighting how having multiple marginalized identities increases the risk for repeated experiences of trauma, thus increasing the risk of such symptoms (Williams et al., 2023). However, the items assess anxiety symptoms broadly, and do not specifically map onto the DSM-5's criteria for PTSD. Thus, there is the need for an instrument that both assesses oppression-based traumatic stress in

a broad and intersectional manner and also assesses symptoms specific to DSM-5's PTSD. Doing so would allow for accurate assessment and referral to appropriate trauma-focused treatments for individuals who may fall through the diagnostic cracks of standard trauma assessments.

Methods

Development of the oppression-based traumatic stress inventory

Based on the UnRESTS, the OBTSI is a self-report questionnaire composed of two parts. In Part A, participants describe up to three examples of (a) major experiences of oppression they have experienced personally, (b) major experiences of oppression experienced by a loved one, and (c) microaggressions. They then respond to a series of questions designed to determine whether the oppression they experienced meets Criterion A for PTSD (i.e., DSM-5's definition of trauma). In Part B, participants are presented with 25 items that describe DSM-5 PTSD symptoms and are asked to keep in mind their experiences of discrimination, as a whole, and indicate, in the past month, how much difficulty they have had with each symptom on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all or almost never) to 4 (severely, or 7+ times a week). Finally, participants are asked to identify the type(s) of discrimination they have experienced (on the basis of racial group, sex/gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.) and, if they have selected multiple types, which type of discrimination they perceive to be a primary source.

The measure is scored by summing items 1–25 in Part B for a total OBTSI score, with potential scores ranging from 0 to 100. Items 1–5 represent Cluster B (re-experiencing), items 6–8 represent Cluster C (avoidance), items 9–19 represent Cluster D (negative alterations to mood and cognition), and items 20–25 represent Cluster E (hyperarousal). See Supplementary material for the full measure.

Participants

The study sample comprised two groups, undergraduate students and clients at an outpatient mental health clinic. After IRB exemption was granted (Protocol #: 2023-0174-CSI), Sample 1 ($n=26$) was recruited through a university's undergraduate psychology department where students could earn course credit through participating in research studies via the program SONA. Sample 2 ($n=64$) was recruited through an outpatient mental health clinic. Outpatients included those who were currently receiving treatment and all incoming clients who newly established treatment during the data collection period. Eligibility criteria included being over 18 years of age and able to read and write English. The combined sample comprised 90 participants. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Given the goal of assessing the psychometric properties of Part B, participants who did not endorse experiences of oppression were excluded. Outpatient participants who were already receiving treatment had their data excluded if their BDI-II and BAI scores were obtained more than 3 months prior to completing the OBTSI, and newer measures were unobtainable.

TABLE 1 Demographics.

Descriptive		Sample 1	Sample 2
N		26	64
Age		20.84 (4.28)	38.08 (10.92)
Gender	Man	6	18
	Woman	19	45
	Transgender/Agender/Non-Binary	1	1
Ethnicity	Latine/Hispanic	5	6
	Non-Latine/Hispanic	21	58
Race	White/ European-American	5	37
	Black/African-American	10	12
	Asian/Asian-American	2	6
	Multiracial	0	2
	Other	9	6
	Did not disclose	0	1
Sexual identity	Heterosexual	23	45
	Sexual Minority	3	16
	Did not disclose	0	3

Measures

A comprehensive demographic form was completed to gather data including race, ethnicity, age, gender, religious affiliation, income, country of birth, sexual orientation, education level, and current occupation. The remaining measures are described below. All measures were completed by participants in Sample 2 via an online HIPAA compliant electronic medical records system as part of a clinical intake battery.

The Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Blevins et al., 2015) is a 20-item self-report measure that assesses PTSD symptoms according to the DSM-5. Participants are asked to rate the extent to which they were bothered by various problems within the past month relating to an index traumatic event identified by the Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (Weathers et al., 2013) on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). The PCL-5 is a psychometrically sound measure of PTSD symptoms, demonstrating strong internal consistency, test–retest reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity (Blevins et al., 2015). The scale can be used to provide a provisional PTSD diagnosis. Although the PCL-5 was based on four DSM-5 criteria, recent studies have shown a 6- or 7-factor structure may be more appropriate (cf. Grau et al., 2019).

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck et al., 1988) is a 21-item, 4-point scale that measures common symptoms of anxiety that participants have been experiencing within the last month, asking participants to indicate how much they have been bothered by that symptom from 0 (not at all) to 3 (severely). The measure is scored by summing items 1–21, with a maximum score of 63 indicating severe anxiety.

The Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1987) is a 20 item, 4-point scale that consists of group statements related to common symptoms of depression such as sadness, guilt, loss of

pleasure, worthlessness, etc. from 0 (not experiencing) to 3 (prominent display of symptom). The measure is scored by summing all of the items, with a maximum score of 63 indicating severe depression.

Data analysis procedure

Cronbach's alpha was computed for the total OBTSI scale and the four subscales representing each of the PTSD symptom clusters as per the DSM-5. Person's correlations were conducted (two-tailed) for the correlations of psychopathology measures (PCL for Sample 1 and BAI and BDI-II for Sample 2) to the total OBTSI score and each of the 4 subscales representing the DSM-5 PTSD symptom clusters. For the correlation analyses, item-level missing data on the OBTSI and the PCL was addressed using available item analysis (Parent, 2013) providing that at least 80% of the items on the measure were completed (Downey and King, 1998). These analyses were conducted in SPSS version 27.

To better understand the structure of the OBTSI measure, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted in Mplus version 8.4 using promax rotation (oblique) and full information maximum likelihood (FIML) to handle missing data. The number of factors was determined by a combination of theory and an examination of the eigenvalues, scree plot, and factor loadings.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The mean total OBTSI score for Sample 1 was 21.97 (19.58) and Sample 2 was 29.97 (25.74). The majority of participants (73.3%) reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of multiple identities ($M = 2.77$, SD = 1.81).

Reliability

The OBTSI showed excellent internal consistency for the overall symptom inventory ($\alpha = 0.97$). When examining the contribution of each item to the overall reliability, only the removal of item #21 improved the value of alpha, and only slightly (from 0.973 to 0.974). All items were highly correlated with the total score, with corrected item-total correlations ranging from 0.66–0.88, except for item #21, which was correlated at 0.42. The four symptom clusters of the symptom inventory also showed good internal consistency, with α ranging from 0.86 to 0.94 (see Table 2).

Correlational analyses

The total OBTSI was robustly correlated to each of the DSM-5 symptom clusters and each cluster was correlated to the other clusters, as shown in Table 2 in the combined sample.

Pearson's correlations were conducted between the OBTSI and measures of psychopathology to establish convergent validity. In the student sample (Sample 1), the OBTSI total score was significantly correlated to the PCL-5 ($r = 0.53$, $p = 0.006$).

TABLE 2 Internal consistency reliability for the OBTSI and correlations among the full OBTSI and the symptom clusters.

	Cronbach's Alpha	Cluster B	Cluster C	Cluster D	Cluster E
Cluster B (Re-experiencing)	0.94	–			
Cluster C (Avoidance)	0.86	0.88**	–		
Cluster D (Negative Mood / Cognition)	0.94	0.81**	0.83**	–	
Cluster E (Hyperarousal)	0.89	0.73**	0.70**	0.87**	–
OBTSI Total (All symptoms)	0.97	0.90**	0.90**	0.98**	0.90**

Sample sizes for Cronbach's alphas ranged from 75 to 90; sample sizes for correlations ranged from 89 to 90. **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

For the outpatient sample (Sample 2), measures of depression and anxiety (BAI and BDI-II) were correlated to the total OBTSI score and most DSM-5 PTSD symptom clusters (Clusters B-E). Table 3 depicts the correlations in Sample 2. Clusters B, C, D, and E, as well as the total OBTSI, score are positively correlated with the BAI, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.43 to 0.51. Similarly, all symptom clusters and the total OBTSI score are positively correlated with the BDI-II, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.39 to 0.61.

Factor analytic findings

Examination of the eigenvalues, scree plot, and factor loadings suggested a 4-factor solution could be used (Table 4). Using a cut-point of 0.35 for each factor, all items loaded on one of the four factors, with no major cross-loading. Further, all factors were correlated (range = 0.54–0.64). The resultant factors did not completely map onto the four DSM-5 symptom clusters. Factor 1 included all of Cluster B (intrusion) items, all of Cluster C (avoidance) items and a single item from Cluster D – overall representing painful thoughts and memories of trauma. Factor 2 can be conceptualized as encompassing depressive symptoms as it included all of the Cluster D items that relate to anhedonia (i.e., feeling detached, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, difficulty experiencing positive emotions, emotional numbing), and nearly all of Cluster E (e.g., difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances). Factor 3 included two items from Cluster D and one item from Cluster E and had the unifying theme of negative feelings about others and viewing the world as dangerous. Factor 4 included four items from Cluster D, with the major theme of negative thoughts about oneself, including self-blame and shame.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide a preliminary validation of the OBTSI, and assess its utility as a clinical tool for measuring posttraumatic stress symptoms rooted in experiences of oppression. A strength of this study was the use of a relevant clinical sample in addition to the non-clinical sample for analysis.

Reliability and validity

The OBSTI showed good reliability across the total scale and each individual subscale – Cluster B (re-experiencing), Cluster C (avoidance), Cluster D (negative alterations to mood/cognition), and Cluster E (hyperarousal). OBTSI scores demonstrated strong positive

TABLE 3 Correlations between OBTSI and DSM-5 PTSD symptom cluster and measures of psychopathology in outpatients.

	BAI	BDI-II
Cluster B (Re-experiencing)	0.43**	0.39**
Cluster C (Avoidance)	0.47**	0.51**
Cluster D (Negative Mood/Cognition)	0.46**	0.59**
Cluster E (Hyperarousal)	0.49**	0.61**
OBTSI Total (All symptoms)	0.51**	0.58**

$N = 56–60$. **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

correlations with the PCL, BDI-II and BAI, furthering the literature of the link between posttraumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, and depression, and supporting the OBTSI's validity as a measure for oppression-based traumatic symptoms. The correlation to the BDI-II was notably high, supporting existing literature that connects experiences of racism and feelings of helplessness (Madubata et al., 2018). Additionally, the moderately strong correlation between the PCL and OBTSI is noteworthy as it suggests that, despite the fact that both measures are assessing posttraumatic stress symptoms, by anchoring the symptoms to experiences of oppression, the OBTSI is assessing a different phenomenon and is not redundant with the PCL.

The reliability of item #21 was somewhat problematic, as it had a relatively low correlation to the adjusted total scare score. We recommend that the description of risky behaviors within item #21 be excluded from future versions of the OBTSI due to its stigmatizing nature, which may be doubly so in cases of marginalized participants, leading to low endorsement of this item. It is worthy of note that similar issues were noted in Grau et al. (2019) study on the PCL-5, and more recently in Williams and Zare's (2022) study on the UnRESTS. Future research might include cognitive interviews to better understand how participants interpret the item and to elicit feedback on how the item might be reworded and subsequent empirical testing of whether editing the item in this manner improves the psychometric properties of the item in relation to the rest of the scale.

As noted, the four factors identified by the exploratory factor analysis did not match the DSM-5 clusters. This is unsurprising as factor analytic studies of the PTSD symptom clusters have been highly variable, with differing numbers of clusters identified and items disbursed differently than they are grouped in the DSM-5 (cf. Grau et al., 2019). In addition, the purpose of this measure was to identify reactions to oppression-based experiences, rather than to map on to the existing DSM-5 symptoms, which are based on clinical consensus and not statistical analysis or with oppression-based experiences as part of the consideration. Other studies focused on

TABLE 4 Exploratory factor analysis.

Item	1	2	3	4
1. Reoccurring, unwanted distressing memories about discrimination- related experiences?	**0.751**	0.162	0.085	−0.034
2. Bad dreams or nightmares related to discrimination, or about feeling powerless or excluded?	**0.698**	0.031	0.133	−0.040
3. Feeling as if past discrimination-related event was happening to you all over again (like a flashback)?	**0.723**	0.198	−0.042	0.042
4. Getting very emotionally upset when reminded of discrimination-related experiences?	**0.806**	0.128	−0.034	0.108
5. Having physical reactions when reminded of discrimination- related experiences (e.g., stomachache, heart racing, shaking, sweating)?	**0.866**	0.007	0.142	0.072
6. Trying hard not to think about upsetting discriminatory experiences you have had?	**0.808**	0.067	−0.286	0.341
7. Avoiding activities, places, things, or situations that remind you of the discrimination-related experiences you have had?	**0.357**	0.075	0.221	0.296
8. Avoiding certain types of people because you worry they will behave in a discriminatory way (i.e., White people, law enforcement, bosses, etc.)?	**0.386**	−0.054	0.284	0.291
9. Difficulty remembering important parts of your experiences with discrimination?	−0.043	0.214	−0.070	**0.687**
10. Viewing yourself in a more negative way because of discrimination (e.g., "I should be a stronger person")?	0.198	−0.041	0.093	**0.794**
11. Viewing others in a more negative way due to discrimination (e.g.," I cannot trust White people," "Religious people will not accept my sexual orientation," "All men are dangerous")?	0.050	−0.047	**0.954**	0.024
12. Viewing the world as a dangerous place because of your experiences with discrimination?	0.162	0.078	**0.591**	0.124
13. Blaming yourself for your experiences of discrimination, or for things that may have happened afterwards due to discrimination?	0.229	−0.024	0.123	**0.676**
14. Blaming others who were not involved for your experience, or for things that may have happened afterwards?	**0.384**	−0.046	0.261	0.123
15. Having ongoing negative feelings such as fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame because of your discrimination-related experiences?	0.256	0.091	0.323	**0.386**
16. Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy?	−0.011	**0.879**	0.065	−0.067
17. Feeling detached or cut-off from other people?	0.210	**0.705**	0.022	0.096
18. Difficulty experiencing positive feelings (like love or happiness)?	0.051	**0.829**	−0.136	0.110
19. Feeling emotionally numb?	0.011	**0.804**	−0.159	0.197
20. Acting irritable or (physically or verbally) aggressive?	−0.090	**0.790**	−0.011	0.097
21. Taking more risks or doing things that might harm you or others (e.g., driving recklessly, taking drugs, having unprotected sex)?	−0.093	**0.426**	0.157	0.028
22. Being overly alert or on-guard (e.g., checking to see who is around you, sitting in places where you can see everyone, etc.)?	−0.012	0.307	**0.421**	0.242
23. Being jumpy or more easily startled?	−0.055	**0.650**	0.218	0.073
24. Difficulty staying focused or concentrating?	0.226	**0.749**	−0.027	−0.027
25. Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep?	0.244	**0.855**	0.085	−0.297

Factor loadings above 0.35 are in boldface. Item numbers for the DSM-5 clusters are Cluster B: 1–5, Cluster C: 6–8, Cluster D: 9–19, Cluster E: 20–25.

racial oppression have also found factor structures that differ from the suggested DSM-5 symptom dimensions (Carter et al., 2013; Roberson and Carter, 2022; Williams and Zare, 2022). These studies noted that those experiencing racial oppression demonstrate higher levels of dissociative symptoms compared to those without racial oppression (Williams et al., 2022a) and race-based trauma reactions were driven by depression, intrusive thoughts, anger, and low-self-esteem (Carter et al., 2013; Roberson and Carter, 2022).

The factors identified in the current study map onto factors identified on other measures of racial trauma. For example, Factor 1 in the current study includes both intrusive and avoidance symptoms which mirrors the factor labeled Intrusion on the RBTSSS (Carter et al., 2013). Similar to the RBTSSS's Depression factor (Carter et al., 2013), the current study's Factor 2 represents symptoms of depression (i.e., anhedonia, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances). Notably, depressive symptoms are a prominent feature of PTSD and also map on to previous factor analytic studies of PTSD symptoms outside the context of oppression-based traumatic stress (Grau et al., 2019). Factor 3, having negative feelings about others and viewing the world as dangerous, is similar to the RBTSSS's Hypervigilance factor and the UnREST's Negative Feelings About Others factor. Finally, the current study's Factor 4 resembles the Low Self-Esteem factor of the RBTSSS (Carter et al., 2013) and the Self Loathing factor of the UnRESTS (Williams and Zare, 2022). It should be noted, however, that the current study included experiences that were not only linked to racial oppression, but included other identity-based oppression experiences and therefore may not perfectly replicate other studies that only assess race-based experiences.

Implications

Experiences of oppression and accompanying oppression-based traumatic stress are relatively common. This paper describes a new intersectional measure of trauma focused on oppression-based traumatic stress that includes all PTSD symptoms in the DSM-5. Experiences of oppression most often involve discrimination on the basis of multiple marginalized identities, which highlights the importance of intersectional approaches to assessing oppression-based traumatic stress.

While there are other measures that assess oppression-based traumatic stress in a broad and intersectional manner (i.e., TSDS) or with items that map onto DSM-5 PTSD criteria (i.e., RTS, UnRESTS), the OBTSI is the first measure to do both. The OBTSI could be used as a screening tool to assess incoming clients for experiences of oppression as a way to begin a discussion about difficulties they may have faced throughout their lifetime, which may have led them to ultimately seek counseling or are worsening other conditions. It also could begin the process of psychoeducation and validation that a wide range of oppression-based experiences are important to mental health, extending the definition of what is traumatic early in the therapeutic process, based on the experience of the client. Additionally, inclusive measures allow clinicians to better engage in allyship behavior with clients whose background differs from theirs by demonstrating competency and understanding, which are known to increase rapport in and outside of clinical settings (Williams et al., 2022b). Finally, given that standard trauma assessments do not assess for experiences of oppression and associated posttraumatic stress, using the OBTSI may help clinicians identify clients who may benefit from trauma-focused treatment but who may have screened negative in standard trauma assessments.

Limitations and future directions

Although many studies create clinical measures based on small, non-clinical samples, future research could address some of the concerns with this study's sample size and make-up. While the current study demonstrated that OBTSI has strong psychometric properties, a larger sample size, with more robust numbers of specific marginalized identities across two time-points would improve the ability to perform more statistical analyses (e.g., a confirmatory factor analysis, convergent and divergent validity by group, test–retest reliability) and explore whether the identified factors generalize across areas of diversity. In addition, larger, more diverse samples could aid in determining the effects of oppression-based experiences on different types of intersectionality. While the study did include some clinical participants, studies looking at treatment-seeking and non-treatment seeking populations would be helpful to better understand the phenomenology of oppression-based traumatic stress, explore possible cutoffs for clinical needs, and further discussions in clinical settings about addressing these symptoms. To accomplish this goal, we are continuing data collection in both our university and outpatient settings. Additionally, we have initiated data collection in a domestic violence shelter and a series of partial hospitalization trauma treatment programs.

The current study is focused on assessing the psychometric properties of the OBTSI's symptom inventory (i.e., Part B). Future research should be conducted focusing on Part A. For example, the OBTSI assesses oppression in an open-ended format. The data could be used to determine which types of oppressive experiences are most reliably linked to posttraumatic stress symptoms which could then be the basis of an inventory of oppressive events (similar to how the Life Events Checklist is used to assess traditional trauma exposure). While the symptoms of PTSD have stayed relatively the same over the past few decades, the types of events that constitute as traumatic and how different marginalized identities experience these events is largely unexplored. Part A of the OBTSI also includes a set of questions designed to determine whether Criterion A for PTSD is met. Future research could use data from these items to determine the frequency with which oppressive events meet Criterion A and the predictive validity of Criterion A for oppression-based traumatic stress (i.e., is meeting Criterion A associated with greater symptom severity and/or likelihood of meeting the other diagnostic criteria?).In addition to the above suggestions, future studies could focus on singular identities (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc.), comparisons and similarities within these identity constructs (e.g., Black, Asian, and Native American; cisgender women and non-binary) and how intersectionality may play a role (i.e., when one possesses more than one marginalized identity).

Conclusion

The OBTSI is a promising new measure that fills a needed gap in the research literature. It provides the mental health field with another tool that helps identify traumatic events based on an

array of marginalized identities and evaluates the impact of symptoms associated with these experiences. This initial study determined that the OBTSI has demonstrated good reliability and validity for identifying oppression-based traumatic stress symptoms and we look forward to future research that will expand its application to other diverse marginalized identities and how intersectionality may influence a person's experience.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by College of Staten Island, City University of New York, Protocol #: 2023-0174-CSI. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The paper was jointly conceived by SH, MW, and CW. The instrument was developed by SH and MW. Data was collected by DZ, MW, and SH. Data was entered and cleaned by DZ and SH. Preliminary analyses were conducted by MW. The first draft of the manuscript was initially drafted by MW and DZ with edits made by SH and CW. Final analyses were conducted by AH and SH. All authors contributed to and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1232561/full#supplementary-material

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The illusion of inclusion: contextual behavioral science and the Black community

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Anti-racism approaches require an honest examination of cause, impact, and committed action to change, despite discomfort and without experiential avoidance. While contextual behavioral science (CBS) and third wave cognitive-behavioral modalities demonstrate efficacy among samples composed of primarily White individuals, data regarding their efficacy with people of color, and Black Americans in particular, is lacking. It is important to consider the possible effects of racial stress and trauma on Black clients, and to tailor approaches and techniques grounded in CBS accordingly. We describe how CBS has not done enough to address the needs of Black American communities, using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP) as examples. We also provide examples at the level of research representation, organizational practices, and personal experiences to illuminate covert racist policy tools that maintain inequities. Towards eradicating existing racism in the field, we conclude with suggestions for researchers and leadership in professional psychological organizations.

KEYWORDS

acceptance and commitment therapy, functional analytic psychotherapy, African Americans, Black Americans, racism, weaponization of policy, organizations, diversity

Highlights

- There is a mismatch between research on Black mental health and actual health needs.
- Black people need help for anxiety and PTSD more than substance abuse.
- Efficacy data on contextual behavioral therapies for Black people is lacking.
- Racist policy tools hinder inclusion and research on the Black community.
- Examples illustrate weaponization of policy and power hoarding in CBS communities.
- Conclusions provide practical steps for anti-racist organizational transformation.

Introduction

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. … The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

— Frederick Douglass

What is contextual behavioral science?

Contextual Behavioral Science (CBS) is a research paradigm that underlies the development of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Relational Frame Theory (RFT), Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP), and other similar third wave cognitive-behavioral modalities that are grounded in Skinnerian behaviorism (Kohlenberg et al., 1993). CBS is a system of philosophical assumptions, scientific values, and methodological commitments that drive theory and practice. With its roots in Western scientism, CBS strives to be objective, empirical, and evidence-based (Vilardaga et al., 2009). In addition to being theoretical, CBS has been adopted by scholar-practitioners and other clinicians in the field of mental health and therefore has a direct effect on client care (Varra et al., 2008). There are several important facets of CBS, but, for the purpose of this paper, we will be using ACT and FAP as examples that are representative of the issues at hand.

Acceptance and commitment therapy

ACT is an approach that is based on Buddhist principles and values such as mindfulness, cognitive defusion, and coping with distressing thoughts and uncomfortable feelings. It encourages people to embrace their current thoughts and feelings rather than avoid them or feel guilty for them, which in turn helps to resolve symptoms associated with a range of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, OCD, addiction, and substance abuse, which have all been found to benefit from ACT (Wetherell et al., 2011; Bramwell and Richardson, 2018; Osaji et al., 2020). In addition to targeting thoughts and cognitive processes, ACT also combines strategies and techniques grounded in behavioral therapy (e.g., meditation, mindfulness) through emphasizing the self-acceptance to develop psychological flexibility, which is one's ability to cope with change and try new things (Fledderus et al., 2013).

The other major tenet of ACT in addition to acceptance of thoughts and feelings is commitment. ACT encourages clients to become committed to acceptance as well as certain behavioral techniques and, through this model, directs clients to act in ways that allow them to face problems directly rather than avoiding stress (Hayes et al., 2013). This can look like committing to actions that help facilitate experiential learning and embracing challenges with a goal being to exercise psychological flexibility. The opposite of psychological flexibility is called experiential avoidance (EA), which is characterized by adversity to change and resistance to trying new things (Biglan et al., 2008). This is when people avoid unpleasant thoughts and feelings, which is believed to help perpetuate symptoms associated with psychopathologies such as anxiety disorders, OCD, and PTSD.

It is important to note, however, that ACT has not been sufficiently studied in all populations and data supporting its efficacy among diverse groups is lacking. While ACT may help a variety of specific behavioral problems, it does not address the fact that individuals from different ethnoracial backgrounds may experience the approach differently (Sobczak and West, 2013). Thus, there is a need for clinicians to be ethnoracially-sensitive when it comes to using ACT with diverse clients.

Functional analytic psychotherapy

FAP is a behaviorally based, experiential and relational approach to psychotherapy in which therapists focus on dyadic interactions in session to shape the interpersonal behaviors, develop emotional awareness, and practice the self-expression necessary for clients to create and maintain close relationships with others (Kohlenberg and Tsai, 2007). In FAP, clinicians model practicing vulnerability and honesty with clients with the goal of identifying a number of different clinically relevant behaviors, which are targets for change (CRB1), behaviors that demonstrate clinical improvements (CRB2), and client interpretations of behaviors (CRB3). Given that interpersonal challenges are common problems across a range of disorders, FAP has broad applicability (Wetterneck and Hart, 2012).

FAP is similar to many other CBT interventions because it focuses on making measurable behavioral change and includes assignments for clients to complete between sessions, but the distinguishing characteristic of this treatment is its reliance on building a strong therapeutic relationship as the primary vehicle for client change. In FAP, a genuine and corrective therapeutic relationship serves as the basis for clients to learn healthy communication and relating, and to repair dysfunctional patterns of interpersonal functioning they may have outside of therapy. This dyadic relationship is collaborative with respect to treatment plans and powerful in promoting learning and change, fostering motivation, and keeping clients engaged in treatment (Miller et al., 2015).

Purpose of this paper

The authors of this paper are a diverse group of clinicians and researchers, living and working in varied cultural contexts. The first author lives in Germany and is an experienced neuroscientist and pharmaceutical professional, specializing in clinical development and social justice issues. The second author is a first generation African American, researcher and licensed clinical psychologist who teaches and provides clinical supervision at Georgia State University, a top research university in the Southeast United States. The third author is a queer White person completing their doctorate in experimental psychology at the University of Ottawa, with a Masters from Harvard University in Religious Studies. The fourth author is an African American behavioral specialist and psychedelic integration therapist in training who completed his Master's in Behavioral Psychology at Pepperdine University. The senior author is a Black clinical psychologist, former member of the Association of Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS) and Canada Research Chair for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Ottawa, where she studies disparities and racialization.

Collectively, the authors have been concerned for many years about the apparent lack of CBS scholarship focused on Black people and about the lack of representation of Black people in ACBS, notably in the ACT and FAP communities. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how those who have developed these modalities have not included the voices and needs of Black people in their work and in the leading professional organization that supports CBS.

The lead authors of this paper are Black women who count themselves fortunate to follow the steps of their foremothers in speaking out for social change. Notably, as soon as Black American women had

access to higher education in the late 19th century, they also began working from within educational institutions as a force for justice (Bell et al., 2021). We note that it is difficult to get papers about the impact of race on power published due to racial bias in the publication and peer-review process (Buchanan et al., 2021; Strauss et al., 2023). The same forces that minimize and exclude Black people in education, psychology, and professional organizations also attempt to silence Black people when they speak up against mistreatment and will assert that Black people are unqualified to provide a true account of their own experiences. We reject this notion and recognize it as yet another form of anti-Black oppression.

The structure of this paper is first to present the empirical evidence regarding the inclusion of Black Americans in research, research priorities, and as participants in studies using these methodologies. Second, we show with examples the power dynamics of the ACBS structure through reports about treatment of Black people, review indications of a lack of inclusion, and note initial inroads for inclusion. Finally, we illuminate racist policy tools used by ACBS through individual and personal stories of Black professionals about their experience in this community, and we offer suggestions for beginning the healing process and promoting positive change in representation and inclusion in the field. This paper is not meant to be a systemic review, rather a critical assessment of Black mental health needs and experiences within the context of CBS.

Race and racism

Racism is a system of beliefs, practices, and policies based on race that operate to provide advantages to those with historical power – White people in the US and most other Western nations (e.g., Canada, Western Europe, Australia, etc.). Race is a made-up social construct used to group people based on shared physical features and presumed ancestry. Race has no biological basis and was born from White supremacy, an ideology that presumes the superiority of White people and inferiority of People of Color (Smedley and Smedley, 2005; Haeny et al., 2021).

Racism, with its roots in White supremacy, operates hierarchically, with White people on the top, Black people at the bottom, and Asian people generally falling in between. This hierarchy is mediated by skin color (colorism), whereby people with darker skin of any race are considered lesser than lighter skinned persons of that same race. Colorism causes people to be devalued in the US, Canada, Europe, Latin America, and many Asian countries (Dixon and Telles, 2017; Jablonski, 2021). For example, White-skinned people in Latin American countries have privilege over darker-skinned persons, even though in the US we tend to consider them all Hispanic. Even so, in the US, White Hispanic Americans are still advantaged over their darker-skinned counterparts, with disparate outcomes (Cuevas et al., 2016). Hispanic used to be considered a racial group in the US, but it is now considered an ethnic group instead, as per the US Census Bureau, illustrating how race is determined by social decisions and not biology (Borrell and Echeverria, 2022).

Anti-blackness is a type of racism focused specifically against Black people. It has been described as a theoretical framework that illustrates and explains the dehumanization of Black people, including disdain, disrespect and disgust of all things connected to Black people (Bell et al., 2021). The field of psychology perpetrates the same anti-Black biases, stereotypes, and hatred that exist in the rest of our society. Due to

experiences with anti-Black racism, Black people in Western society have a well-founded fear of discrimination, a mistrust in health service systems, and suffer due to inaccurate myths about Black people (e.g., pathological stereotypes). Most medical school curricula frame race as a "biological risk factor" rather than a social one, which implies that disparities in health are inborn and the differences we see in mental health are due to natural causes and can be explained without implicating racism (Haeny et al., 2021). This misconception harms both the treating clinician and the client of color because it pathologizes race rather than racism, whereas it is the racism that is the risk factor (Noonan et al., 2016; Alang, 2019). Only addressing the stigma of a mental health disorder without addressing the racism does a disservice to the person seeking treatment (Alang, 2019).

Deficits in empathy have been identified as a correlate of racist behavior, and multiple studies including both White and Black samples, document that people exhibit greater empathic resonance to those with a similar skin color (Azevedo et al., 2013; Hoffman et al., 2016; Harjunen et al., 2021). The converse is true regarding White people's perception of (and perhaps, ability to empathize with) the pain experienced by Black people. Specifically, brain imaging reveals anti-Black racial biases wherein the pain of Black individuals is perceived to be less distressing and more tolerable than the pain of White people or even a purple "space alien" (Berlingeri et al., 2016; Harjunen et al., 2021). This racial bias in empathy has been associated with racial bias in social behavior as well (Han, 2018). In order to work effectively across racial differences and even find motivation to conduct research that will benefit people from different racial groups, cross-racial empathy is vital. These racial biases are with and in us due to our learning history and must be overcome to become ethically and culturally competent researchers and therapists.

In addition to individual biases, organizations and institutions also carry racial biases, and these are built into the rules, policies and procedures. These constructs, called institutional racism, function in the background to arrive at discriminatory outcomes without a single individual needing to engage in explicitly biased behavior. This has been well documented in education, academic publishing, and the discipline of psychology (Williams, 2019; Avery et al., 2022; Dupree and Kraus, 2022).

For the purposes of this paper, we use the term Black in reference to African Americans, dark-skinned Africans, and all people who are descendants of the African diaspora (of partial or full African ancestry). White is being used to describe people who trace their origins to Europe, have lighter skin, and in general who do not have any visible Black African, Asian, or other Indigenous ancestry (Haeny et al., 2021).

Mental health priorities in the Black community

Needs of the Black community

A survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and ESPN's "The Undefeated" explored African Americans' experiences of being Black in America, utilizing a dual-frame (landline and cell phone) random digit dial methodology (N = 777). It was found that a majority of Black men and women, regardless of age, income, and education, believe it is a bad time to be Black in America, with increases in this percentage being 37% among Black men and 44% among Black women from 2006 to 2020 (Hamel et al., 2020).

Authors of this survey suggest that the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black families and the frequent media coverage of police violence towards Black Americans in the summer of 2020 may impact the perception of personal belonging in America. When exploring personal and familial concerns amongst Black respondents, more than a third stated financial concerns and COVID-19-related concerns as their top priority (Hamel et al., 2020). Authors found that in addition to housing affordability, lower cost of healthcare, higher paying jobs, and college affordability, two-thirds of respondents prioritized racism as a major concern (Pougiales and Fulton, 2019).

These stressors can lead to mental health disorders (e.g., racial trauma) that disproportionately impact the Black population in the US (Williams et al., 2021b). Therefore, the mental health priorities of Black communities cannot be expected to be identical with those of White communities.

Differences in mental health between Black and White communities

It is well-documented that there are racial differences in mental disorders in the United States between Black and White populations. Black Americans on average experience higher rates of psychosocial stressors than White Americans, but at the same time historically had the same or better overall mental health than White individuals (Louie and Wheaton, 2018; Thomas Tobin et al., 2022). The validity of this paradox has been consistently demonstrated in adult populations, however, not only do Black communities exhibit lower levels of mental health disorders, but there are also racial differences in the prevalence among categories of mental health diagnoses between Black and White Americans. These racial differences also differ across generational cohorts.

It is important to keep in mind that, although Black people have similar or lower rates of common mental disorders than White individuals, according to the existing published studies, when they do suffer from mental disorders these are of a greater duration, more severe, and more disabling among the Black population; and in addition, Black Americans are less inclined to find and receive competent mental health services. This means that the unmet mental health care needs of Black Americans exceed that of the White community (Noonan et al., 2016; Alang, 2019).

Younger cohorts of Black people have higher odds of being diagnosed with anxiety than White people, and the magnitude of anxiety disorder is higher in younger cohorts (Louie and Wheaton, 2018). In addition, for younger generations, the rate of increase in anxiety disorders exceeded the rate for White individuals over the same time period (Figure 1). The sharp increases in the numbers of Black Americans suffering from anxiety disorders is attenuated for mood and impulse control disorders but also significant.
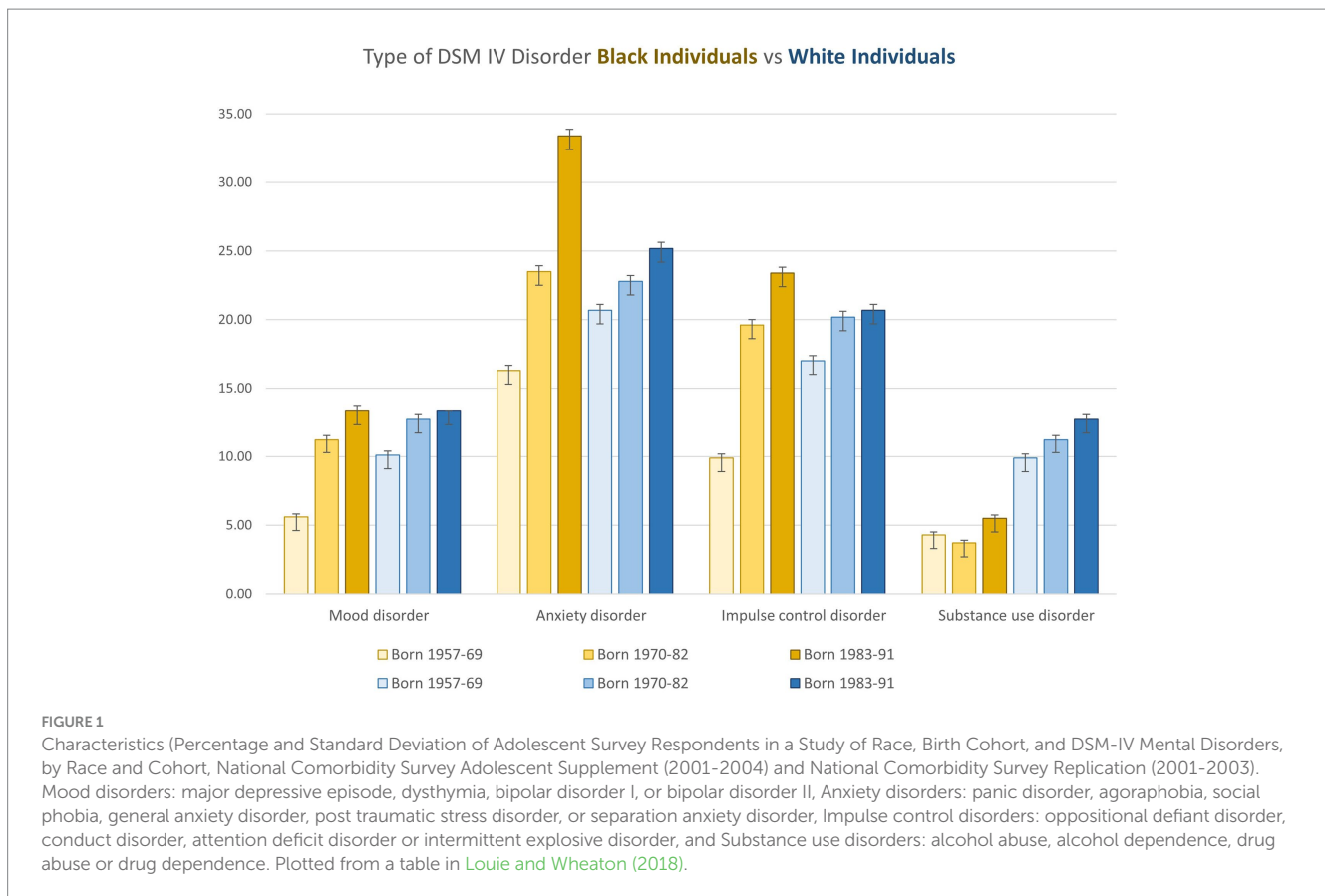
In comparison, Black Americans do not have substance abuse disorders in either past or current generations to the same extent as White Americans, although Black Americans are punished disproportionately more severely by society for drug use (Alexander, 2010). A recent study of 37,860 patients in fact found that Black mothers had a higher likelihood of receiving a drug test during delivery compared with White patients, regardless of their substance use history. Their chances however of a positive test result was *lower* than for White mothers and other racial groups, demonstrating the greater societal emphasis on unearthing and addressing substance use in Black communities based on racist stereotypes (Bor et al., 2018; Jarlenski et al., 2023). A simple PubMed search points to a mismatch between studies on Black mental health and the actual mental health needs (Black "substance abuse" yields 2027 studies versus Black "anxiety disorder" resulting in 297). There is an overrepresentation of CBT RCTs on substance use as compared with all other mental health issues when looking at trials specifically designed for African American participation. This is indicative of a mental health establishment with its own implicit biases in regard to Black people (Jarlenski et al., 2023). Mental health provision may disturbingly be set up to offer services in instances where society at large perceives Black individuals to need treatment (substance abuse) rather than in areas where they are more likely to require competent mental health services, such as anxiety and mood disorders (Smith et al., 2022). It is well-documented that, due to a lack of empathy, White clinicians often misinterpret mood symptoms, resulting in over diagnosis of Black people with disorders such as schizophrenia compared to White patients (Schwartz and Blankenship, 2014; Smith et al., 2022; Faber et al., 2023a).

The increases in diagnoses of impulse control disorder and anxiety in particular for Black cohorts, can be explained in part by historical changes that occurred between 1957 and 2004 (Louie and Wheaton, 2018). Rates of child poverty increased between 1974 and 1983 for both Black and White Americans but had a more profound effect on Black individuals, at the same time the unemployment rate for Black communities grew from 1962 to 1985 from 13 to 22%, with over 38,000 Black school workers fired in retaliation in the aftermath of school desegregation (Lutz, 2017). The percentage of Black parents furthermore with a college degree declined from the middle cohort (22%) to the youngest cohort (19%), and between 1970 and 1990 the number of single mother households increased among Black women with the Black-White difference in nonmarital births growing from 32 to 50% in this period. Many of these trends are a result of the US war on Black people which resulted in imprisonment for Black men in America increasing three-fold between 1969 and 1999. This devastated families and communities who were left to suffer the socioeconomic and emotional consequences of targeted mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Louie and Wheaton, 2018).

Examining the subcategory of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was classified as an anxiety disorder in the NCS-R, there are also differences between Black and White populations. Three studies examining the prevalence rates among the US population of PTSD using large national samples weighted to the population reported similar results (Roberts et al., 2011; Alegría et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2019). In contrast to depression, anxiety, and substance disorders which are lower among Black Americans, PTSD has a higher prevalence among Black people, with a higher odds of lifetime PTSD than White Americans (OR = 1.25) likely due to greater exposure to adversity and discrimination across the lifespan relative to White individuals (Andrews et al., 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2019). Ongoing disparities in treatment indicate a need for investment in culturally competent treatment options (Roberts et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2022).

PTSD is defined by the DSM-5 as a process in which a person has an initial exposure (directly or indirectly) to trauma, followed by symptoms rooted in the exposure causing multiple disruptions in the daily life of the one suffering from the disorder. The DSM-5 guidelines were updated to be more inclusive of the harmful effects of newer aversive or chronic forms of bias than were the previous fourth edition (i.e., chronic exposure to aversive stimuli). This new expanded definition for PTSD provides some room for the reality that the Black

FIGURE 1

Characteristics (Percentage and Standard Deviation of Adolescent Survey Respondents in a Study of Race, Birth Cohort, and DSM-IV Mental Disorders, by Race and Cohort, National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement (2001-2004) and National Comorbidity Survey Replication (2001-2003). Mood disorders: major depressive episode, dysthymia, bipolar disorder I, or bipolar disorder II, Anxiety disorders: panic disorder, agoraphobia, social phobia, general anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, or separation anxiety disorder, Impulse control disorders: oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, attention deficit disorder or intermittent explosive disorder, and Substance use disorders: alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, drug abuse or drug dependence. Plotted from a table in Louie and Wheaton (2018).

community already lives with higher rates of PTSD, in part from chronic stressors in the media (Himle et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2022). A more significant emotional injury for Black people is racial trauma, which is related to PTSD but often has a different etiology and treatment requirements (Williams et al., 2021a; Smith et al., 2022). Racial trauma has been studied for over 20 years by Black scholars, but there has been scarce funding for empirical studies, and only recently have established clinical tools and diagnostic criteria been published (Carter, 2007; Williams et al., 2018).

Faced with these differences, it stands to reason that mental health priorities for Black people should be culturally relevant and cater to those disorders with high prevalence in the population and those that are rapidly increasing. One of the major issues in examining data from studies with data that were collected in the 2000's is that, at that time, there was no recognition or validated measure to assess the effects of racial trauma. The rise in "anxiety disorders" documented in publications is likely to hide the existence of racial trauma which was not considered at the time of these studies.

The appreciation of racial trauma requires a therapeutic remedy whose parameters are only now being defined (Metzger et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021a, 2022). The relevance of CBS for Black people in the future must depend on how thoroughly Black-specific therapeutic structures (paradigms) and skills are imparted to those therapists who will be treating these patients. In effect, all CBS therapists must update their knowledge and vocabulary and seek the necessary retraining and continuing education on these new protocols to be considered proficient to offer meaningful therapy to POC suffering due to racialization.

Why younger cohorts experience greater anxiety

Studies using more recent data from a 2011–2015 National Survey surveyed Black adults with unmet mental health needs (N = 1,237) and highlight some reasons for greater anxiety among younger cohorts. One such study surprisingly found greater unmet needs among Black cohorts with higher education levels (Alang, 2019). Specifically, Black college students ages 18–25 reported stigma as a significant barrier to professional mental health services. Furthermore, across all ages, employment and college education were associated with increased odds of experiencing stigma wherein the more education a Black person had, the greater the increase in the reports of marginalization and ineffective treatment (Alang, 2019).

Younger cohorts have higher education levels and their exposure to White institutes and power structures are currently greater than in previous generations. The fact that younger cohorts are coming into competition with White cohorts for middle class jobs (which in older generations were cordoned off for the White male population) means that Black exposure to professional malice, envy, rancor, resentment, and disaffection is higher than in previous generations (McDonald et al., 2018). Essentially, because Black individuals in the middle class compete, work and are evaluated alongside White persons, and exposure to racial discrimination increases with upward class mobility, the issue of double discrimination based on race and social status exacerbates the resulting mental health consequences of racism (Noonan et al., 2016; Alang, 2019).

Taking this information into account, it may be easier to understand why a Black person may think that a White mental health provider may not have their best interests in mind or even be implicitly working against the client's true mental health needs (Bergkamp et al., 2022).

Meeting the needs of the Black community: how can CBS move these goals forward?

CBS is a research paradigm underpinning therapies ultimately designed to improve treatment of mental disorders. The first study on ACT was published 30 years ago in 1986 and since then, as of 2019, over 325 randomized controlled trials have been carried out using ACT. More than 20 meta-analyses have been published as well, with most studies reporting results that favor ACT with no contraindications for use (Gloster et al., 2020). Although ACT and similar CBS intervention strategies such as FAP have been shown to be effective for treating and managing symptoms associated with a number of mental health conditions, we need to determine if there is evidence for its efficacy and safety in diverse populations, and in particular, racially marginalized individuals. It is possible that ACT and FAP could be helpful to members of Black communities, yet treatment protocols may still need to be tailored and customized for work with clients in a way that creates an ethos of ethnoracially and culturally-safe care.

Relevance of ACT for the Black community

Although ACT has been used in different countries, it cannot be assumed that outcomes are generalizable between US populations of non-White versus White persons given the mental health disparities already documented between US Black and White communities. Black Americans face the same psychological stressors as every other racial group in addition to daily racial discrimination and microaggressions, thus the efficacy of ACT must be tested outside of mostly White frameworks.

ACT RCTs for Black mental health

It is important to distinguish between the few ACT randomized trials that include people of color and the even smaller subset that focused specifically on their mental health. In a recent study, it was found that papers focused on the mental health of non-White individuals were underrepresented, and those specifically for African Americans dropped to only a handful. Out of 100 assessed ACT studies published between 2002 and 2022 in 34 different journals (25 were excluded due to missing demographic information), the remaining 75 included 10,914 participants. Among these participants, 8,010 (73%) were White and 1,212 (11%) were Black. Most studies (84%) focused on ACT interventions for specific clinical concerns, including anxiety, general distress, reducing stigma, and working with mental health professionals. Ten (13%) studies had majority non-White samples and one study had

a fully Japanese sample. The diversity of targets in the selected studies made it difficult to compare results based on race. While the studies reviewed included Black individuals, the relatively small sample sizes of this population across studies precluded the ability to infer the effectiveness of ACT interventions for this group without subgroup analyses. Most studies were not designed to assess mental health in Black communities. Notably, none of the studies provided analyses of outcomes based on ethnoracial differences and only eight (Table 1) studies (11%) had a majority of participants of color or reported on differential outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities, with two of these studies authored by individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Misra et al., 2023).

Although inclusion of Black participants as per the US Census is perhaps adequate, the participation of marginalized ethnic groups per study is too low to assess racial differences in treatment response, and the studies were not designed to do so. This makes the generalizability of the pooled data questionable (Printz et al., 2019; Misra et al., 2023). Of these studies, two specifically examined racial differences and found no differences in treatment efficacy.

A more recent search found 64 studies in which Black patients again were included, however only a handful had a specific focus on mental health of the Black community in the US. Of the few, one is an anti-smoking cell phone app, with findings derived from a secondary analysis. As Black Americans generally suffer from substance abuse at lower rates than White Americans, the more salient mental health need for Black Americans is therapy for anxiety, rather than substance use, yet there is an overrepresentation of the former compared with the latter type of research (Louie and Wheaton, 2018; Banks et al., 2021; Jahn et al., 2021; Santiago-Torres et al., 2021).

A webpage of ACBS identified another study conducted on a non-White population: Lundgren et al. (2006) conducted an RCT showing that a 9-h ACT protocol reduced seizures in people with epilepsy, while a placebo had no effect. The participants were all non-White South Africans from majority ethnic groups with low socio-economic status living in a residential center. Although ACBS inclusion of this on their "minorities" page implies it may be relevant, since these South Africans are not minorities and do not categorize themselves according to American racial norms, the actual relevance of this study for what the title of the webpage terms "minorities" is unclear.

Use of ACT for Black people in other studies (not RCTs)

We conducted a search of the APA PsycInfo Database for additional psychology papers using ACT with Black Americans and found only a handful of relevant journal articles and one book chapter. The book chapter is about utilization of ACT in a case study of a single first-generation STEM African American woman with academic, financial, emotional, and familial stressors (Gant, 2020). The case represents an example of how African American college students' access to STEM careers remains low and highlights how the psychological flexibility model in ACT can address the unique challenges of Black clients if clinicians focus on holistic growth in the counseling process.

TABLE 1 ACT studies featuring participants of color.

Ethnicity or race included	Eight ACT randomized controlled trials including identifiable Non-White samples	Reference
Majority Non-White	Non-White participants in a study comparing ABBT with CT for test anxiety demonstrated improved test scores after treatment.	Brown et al. (2011)
All Japanese ethnicity	Japanese college students studying in the United States experienced improved mental health and increased psychological flexibility after 2 months of ACT bibliotherapy	Muto et al. (2011)
50% Black Mental Health Professionals	Combining ACT with applied behavioral analysis training resulted in improved general distress, particularly in those who actively practiced the ACT skills, and this improvement was greater than applied behavioral analysis alone, especially for those who were initially more distressed	Bethay et al. (2013)
Over 50% women of color	The effectiveness of cognitive-and acceptance-based coping skills to avoid consumption of sweets was compared, and results showed that acceptance-based consumption group experienced reduced rates of cravings and level of consumption, especially for those that reported greater awareness of the food environment and increased emotional eating	Forman et al. (2013)
67% Black college age men	In men with gambling disorder, increased psychological flexibility and present-moment awareness was experienced after receiving 8 h of individual sessions of ACT, compared with no treatment	Dixon et al. (2016)
78% POC 22% White participants	A study comparing ABBT with treatment as usual found that ABBT improved attendance to medical appointments, illness-related experiential avoidance, willingness to disclose HIV status, and number of HIV disclosures in people living with HIV	Moitra et al. (2017)
51% POC 49% White	Both ACT and CBT were found to improve symptoms in a study comparing them for social anxiety disorder, although this improvement was more prevalent in the CBT group	Herbert et al. (2018)
27% Black 25% Latine	A majority non-White sample of individuals suffering from mild to moderate traumatic brain injury had improved psychological distress, increased psychological flexibility, and committed action after receiving eight sessions of ACT	Sanders et al. (2022)

The first ACT peer-reviewed paper examines the feasibility of using ACT in 9 African American adolescents with ADHD, learning disorders, or behavior problems to improve congruence between behaviors and values (Murrell Steinberg et al., 2014). The study (although likely not adequately powered due to its small sample size) found significant reliable change on the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children, suggesting that ACT could be effective in improving behavior and may have clinical use in youth.

The second paper included 11 adolescent patients with depression, only 5 of whom were African American (4 identified as multiracial, and 2 were White). All were given 3 sessions of motivational interviewing and 12 sessions of ACT, and while also underpowered, the results showed some improvements in depressive symptoms (Petts et al., 2017).

The last paper identified in our search was a recent pilot study (N=20) documenting pre-post decreases in internalized racial oppression and shame, and psychological distress in Black women treated with ACT (Banks et al., 2021). ACT is considered a method which is particularly effective for anxiety disorders, and as such this paper is much needed and timely.

In examining these few papers, we see that although the samples were primarily African American, most were not *a priori* designed for African Americans. Further, the sample sizes were very small and the data presented was preliminary. Although these studies make useful contributions, this data is not sufficient to establish that ACT is a relevant and useful technique that will improve the mental health of African Americans, especially as some of these treatments address stereotypical issues (school difficulties, behavior problems) as opposed to priority areas as identified by research or Black communities. The lack of Black participation and leadership in the CBS community contributes to the lack of research relevant for these populations.

ACT to reduce racial prejudice

There is some limited research that ACT can help reduce racial prejudice, which is an issue of great concern to Black Americans. In Lillis and Hayes (2007), undergraduates (N=32) enrolled in two separate classes on racial differences were exposed to ACT exercises and an educational lecture from a textbook on the psychology of racial differences in a counterbalanced order. In this study, only the ACT intervention was effective in increasing positive behavioral intentions after 1-week follow-up. These changes were associated with other self-reported changes that fit with the ACT model, such as greater acceptance and flexibility.

Using some of these same techniques, Williams et al. (2020a) developed the Racial Harmony Workshop (RHW), to reduce racial biases and microaggressions and promote interracial connection among college students in a pilot study. The RHW was designed to increase connectedness across racial groups, using principles and techniques from ACT and FAP. Results indicated positive benefits for both Black and White participants (N=44), including improved mood and increased positive feelings towards Black people for the White students, as well as increased ethnic identity for the Black students. White students in both conditions showed a decreased likelihood of committing microaggressions, and those in the RHW condition also showed a decreased likelihood of having microaggressive thoughts and increased gains over time. A related pilot study to reduce racism in medical students found similar results (Kanter et al., 2020).

It is encouraging that research is being carried out to use ACT creatively to reduce the effects of racial prejudice and bias in society. This is an area that has a pressing need in today's environment that remains understudied, but more problematic is that there are no reports of it actually being implemented in organizational structures (juries, police forces, schools). Further, the fact that there are only 3 papers and no grants for scale-up studies since 2007 speaks to lost opportunities and lack of will to follow-through on these promising initial reports (Gordon, 2022).

Relevance of FAP for Black people

Given the increasing numbers of Black people requiring and seeking mental health care, there is a growing need to enhance cultural competence in therapeutic interventions. Because of its emphasis on reciprocal vulnerability and empathetic responding, FAP is an excellent modality for incorporating sensitive cultural factors into ethnically and racially diverse client-therapist dyads (e.g., Vandenberghe, 2017; Williams et al., 2020b). Use of FAP can make treatment more genuine and relevant for underserved and racialized clients. An assessment of functional and non-functional behaviors of both therapists and clients can be examined from a FAP perspective and used to build alliances across differences, explore experiences of racism and discrimination, identify biases in the therapist or clients, and resolve microaggressions in sessions which can otherwise rupture the therapeutic alliance (Miller et al., 2015). Nonetheless, there has been a notable lack of FAP publications focused on the Black experience. In light of the unique mental health history and specific needs of the Black community as outlined above, it is worth examining how FAP has been failing the Black community and analyzing the context of these experiences through the lens of its Black members.

Retaliation at FAP/ACT workshop and policy weaponization

Although the hope is that mental health clinicians will be more sensitive and aware than most, even professionals who aspire to be anti-racist can cause harm if their biases are unchecked. This can only be remediated through purposeful anti-racist work, otherwise these prejudices cause harm even within the CBS community. It is often difficult for those who do not experience anti-Black racism to envision how these processes actually play out, therefore we provide real examples to illustrate how these issues affect real people and to document these transgressions in the context of the historical struggle for Black equality. In the first of three examples (Box 1), all of which permission to share has been granted by the victim, an anti-racism training was organized by diverse trainers, and the 5 expert clinicians gathered on the West Coast to lead a three-day workshop that included several graduate student clinician attendees and therapists of color.

Apart from the Box, both Black and White involved FAP persons were consulted on the wording of the incidents.

Here it is worth pointing out using this illustrative example (Box 1) how the organization within the current system functioned to protect the White individual who transgressed at the expense of harm to the Black trainer and participants of color (i.e., Gaertner and Dovidio, 2008; Okun et al., 2019). In an organizational shortcoming,

a proposed ACT/FAP follow-up workshop by the White trainer (Box 1), who had publicly demonstrated a lack of cultural-sensitivity, was *accepted by ACBS without POC involvement*. After being confronted by another trainer due to the previous issues, this person refused to step down from the leadership of the workshop and did not add any trainers of color to the planned training.

Following the failure of professional mediation, several of the trainers and participants who had been impacted by the lead trainer's aggressive behavior at the previous workshop reported their concerns directly to ACBS conference organizers, who expressed shock upon realizing their oversight. They also said, "If we had known it was all White people teaching, we would not have approved it," and after some extended deliberation cancelled the workshop for that summer. ACBS had invited the Black trainer (Box 1) to lead the workshop since many people had already registered, but the Black trainer declined, fearing retaliation from the ousted White trainer. As an alternative, they discussed inviting the Black trainer for the subsequent conference. When the next ACBS was planned, however, the Black trainer was not invited to host a workshop but instead told that they were considered *inadequately qualified* by the conference organizers, despite national prominence and having written a CBS book on this topic. This kind of retaliatory action is often observed when whistleblowers shine light on organization misdeeds (Ahern, 2018). While the Black trainer missed out on this opportunity, from a systemic level, it is important to note that the White trainer continued as a CBS trainer and retained his title as an ACBS Fellow and Certified FAP Trainer, despite a subsequent complaint from another co-trainer of color who was also worried about him causing harm to people of color.

This example is important because it illustrates how policy and power dynamics in organizations are used to covertly discriminate (Okun et al., 2019). Most prominent here is "*weaponization of policy*" which can take two forms. In the first, an organization has a lack of clear standards or qualifications for a position, as seen above. This is used to plausibly deny the position to a minoritized person and permits non-White experts to be held to a higher standard than White insiders. If the policies are unclear or there are no written policies, those entrusted with enforcing the rules have the power to apply different standards to arrive at unjust outcomes (Okun et al., 2019; Faber et al., 2023b). The flip side of this is having a defined standard that is only enforced for minoritized individuals, these can be written or unwritten rules. An example of an unwritten rule that applies only when writing about issues such as Whiteness and racism and affects primarily people of color, is the higher burden of proof, which increases the requested references by reviewers, likelihood of rejection, and time to publication (Avery et al., 2022).

The other tool observed here is *power hoarding*, which includes the withholding of information such that decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it. Finally, these are *aversive racism* tactics. A White supremacist culture organization will use these policies repeatedly to arrive at a plausibly deniable discriminatory outcome without explicitly targeting any one individual, although often harming and putting non-White people at a disadvantage (Okun et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021). Aversive rules are based on misdirection or deception and can be difficult to change or perceive because they are constructed to appear, as if they were just, although their outcomes are discriminatory. It is like saying that everyone can appeal to their legal advisor, diversity office, or university, but if only one side has a lawyer or university, or there is no diversity office, the outcome will always be unjust.

BOX 1 Perspective: an incident of racism from a Black educator.

Disturbing issues with a White FAP-certified trainer started in the months prior to the event, when this individual demanded and was eventually allowed to take charge of a FAP/ACT diversity workshop, initially conceived and organized by a Black trainer.

While sharing his own personal antiracist journey during the event, he refused to acknowledge the role of White privilege in his success and described himself as "a crusader." When some participants of color objected to this, he became defensive. At the end of the day, he was confronted by other participants at the event and the White trainer became aggressive, such that the other four trainers had to intervene on the first evening of the workshop. The observed behavior was experienced by participants as rude, insulting, and argumentative. Several of the participants were deeply hurt and a few students cried. The problem was so severe that he was removed as a trainer from the workshop for the second day – a unanimous decision by the other four workshop leaders. Although the White lead trainer was brought back in a lesser capacity for the final day, he persisted in his aggression by making unprovoked bizarre and spiteful comments toward the Black trainer.

This particular individual was now known to the CBS community to be unsafe, but he persisted in trying to conduct more of these trainings. Although academically qualified, the trainer was not consistently capable of cultural humility. This individual shortly thereafter applied to conduct the same ACT/FAP anti-racism workshop for an ACBS conference, without involving any trainers of color. Because of the harm previously caused by this individual, the Black trainer tried unsuccessfully to persuade the White trainer not to proceed, voicing fears that more harm would come to vulnerable participants.

FAP trainings pose barriers to inclusion for Black trainees

Although not nearly as well-known as ACT, the FAP community is growing, with members spread around the world. At face value, it appears to be a very diverse group of empathic clinicians and researchers working to restore to CBT the heart that it seemed to have lost along the way. In fact, one of the two founders of the modality is an Asian American woman, with a fierce commitment to making the gospel of FAP available worldwide through a series of regular gatherings for the community through the MeetUp platform called Awareness, Courage, and Love (ACL). Awareness, courage, and love (also termed "strong caring" or "responsiveness") are said to embody the key principles of FAP.

Many leaders in the FAP community hail from various Latin American countries, creating the appearance of diversity. But a closer look reveals that nearly all of these leaders are considered White in their countries of origin. It is notable that out of more than 100 certified FAP trainers globally, at the time of the writing of this paper there were no Black trainers. There were, however, a handful of Black psychologists who are nearly certified as FAP trainers. One of these "nearly certified" trainers was concerned about feedback from young Black therapists who were so disturbed by Level 1 FAP training, that they broke off or disengaged from the training process. Following interviews with those involved, it was found that the sentiments communicated by some trainees were very similar, despite absence of contact with one another. The issue had to do with the disconnect between the emotional vulnerability that the participants (Black and White) were being asked to display towards each other in the training and the violation of that vulnerability by the White participants from the onset, due to a lifetime of Western conditioning, which often denies the lived Black experience (DiAngelo, 2018; Dupree and Kraus, 2022). Some of the Black therapists who disengaged from the training expressed both reluctance to express emotional vulnerability, as well as negative effects of over-expression of emotional vulnerability in the training. Across these instances, the emotional expression of the White therapists overshadowed the experiences of the Black therapists and furthered their disengagement in the process.

It is important to appreciate that it is not the responsibility of a Black person engaged in training to educate their White classmates to prevent harm or cope with having their experiences invalidated during a training, especially given that those classmates are already therapists. But this issue recurs because many White people have been living a life which requires ignorance of racism to justify an egalitarian self-concept of non-complicity in an unfair system (Azevedo et al., 2013; Bergkamp et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). As such, White trainees tended to reflexively deny or minimize painful experiences of racism shared by fellow trainees of color. Correspondingly, many Black trainees felt it would be unwise to remove their armor to allow themselves to be emotionally injured in the service of experiential learning.

If the FAP leadership had ascribed to an anti-racist process, they would share power and consult Black members with more insight and empathy, and learn about the psychological dangers involved in training for certification, which is an order of magnitude more emotionally draining for Black trainees than White ones (Bergkamp et al., 2022). Issues of power and privilege have been explicated in FAP scholarship previously. Terry et al. (2010) underscore ethical mandates by explaining, "that as therapists we should become aware of power and privilege in the therapeutic context, because without intention or awareness we may be engaging in behaviors that promote inequality and injustice at the expense of our clients," and in this case, trainees as well (p. 98). Problem-solving around this issue could look like anti-racism training instituted as a prerequisite to FAP training, which would have promoted safety and allowed Black and White participants to enter on more equal emotional footing. Although White learners will be more likely to need anti-racism training, research indicates that Black people benefit as well (Williams et al., 2020a), so this would be good for everyone (Williams et al., 2021b).

To bring these concerns to the FAP leadership, in January of 2022, one of the few Black almost-FAP trainers called a meeting of FAP leaders and several Black therapists who had completed Level 1 training. All of the Black almost-FAP trainers were present as well as two White certified FAP trainers who had helped organize the meeting. No other FAP trainers decided to attend. After describing the issue and coming up with some suggestions – among these to institute a Black-only FAP training session, the Black FAP almost-trainers asked to which Black FAP-certified trainer they could submit their suggestions, at which point it was made clear that there were no Black FAP trainers, and therefore, no one in leadership to receive or

implement the suggestions. The lack of inclusiveness which became salient to both White and Black trainers at that moment left all participants discomforted and bereft of immediate solutions.

FAP certification double standards

Interestingly, both of the well-qualified Black almost-trainers were psychologists who had completed far above and beyond all requirements, *except* the submission of a practice sample – a live recording of them conducting FAP therapy with a client. Neither psychologist felt their clients of color would be comfortable being recorded and allowing White people to scrutinize their private sessions; one felt it would be an abuse of power to ask this of their clients, who are keenly aware of the power and privilege gap between minoritized populations. As noted by Terry et al. (2010), "The therapeutic encounter consists of social behavior and its context is vulnerable to the same cultural and societal practices that empower and privilege members of certain social groups while disempowering others" (p. 110). This is why both psychologists were doubtful that White people could assess their work within its proper cultural context. Of note, other certifying bodies, such as the American Board of Professional Psychology, provide several options for providing practice samples (e.g., recordings of supervision activities) but this had not been accommodated in the FAP system. That being said, once FAP leaders became aware that their certification rules created systemic barriers to Black people being recognized as trainers, they took steps to provide alternatives to this requirement and shortly thereafter certified their first Black FAP trainer.

Completing all the requirements to become a FAP trainer is extensive and includes publishing papers and organizing/co-teaching FAP workshops. Part of the training requires the applicant to receive FAP therapy or coaching from another FAP therapist. However, the experience of one of the Black almost-trainers (Box 2) demonstrates two issues which are used to alienate and exclude Black people from positions of power in organizations; lack of empathy and policy weaponization (inequitable application or enforcement of rules based on race; Okun et al., 2019). The lack of care and empathy demonstrated in this example (Box 2) is why many Black trainees have felt reluctant or unable to engage in vulnerable FAP training with White clinicians.

From an organizational perspective however, what is particularly notable is the unjust application of (unwritten) rules. When the FAP almost-trainer reported having completed the training requirements understood to be required for certification to the FAP leadership (Box 2), she was told that her coaching would not count unless she worked with a *female* trainer as well for at least 10 sessions at her own additional expense. A male colleague (White) also working toward

certification, was required to do only 6 coaching sessions with only one individual in FAP leadership, provided for free. As above, this *weaponization of policy* (race-based arbitrary application of unwritten rules) is a critical reason why Black people have a harder time attaining positions of power in organizations (Okun et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021).

Anti-racism approaches require centering the voices, opinions, and perspectives of people of color (Williams et al., 2022). Rather than power hoarding, an equitable system would invite the perspectives and presence of marginalized people and make changes to policies and procedures based on their input. On the other hand, White supremacist structures are anti-empathetic, rigid, individualistic, and do not make space for those with different lived experiences (Okun et al., 2019). Sometimes organizations may make positive changes to appear more equitable, but if White people are making the final decisions, this is still White supremacy. Psychologists should know that strong anti-racist measures are required to steer against the structural racism norms that are historic, deeply rooted, and often invisible to White people (Sue, 2017). As such the FAP certification process has been neither equitable nor anti-racist (Okun et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Dupree and Kraus, 2022). The biased outcome – lack of Black certified trainers – is itself evidence of a biased process.

ACBS shows White bias by excluding Black people from power

ACBS was developed as primarily a professional home for ACT researchers and practitioners, although related therapies like FAP have been tolerated but not similarly promoted (e.g., there is no menu tab for "FAP" on the ACBS website). Established in 2005, the ACBS website boasts 9,000 members, with slightly over half outside of the United States. There are 45 ACBS chapters covering many areas of the world including Canada, Europe, Japan, Brazil, Australia/New Zealand, Turkey, Malaysia, and more. There are also over 40 Special Interest Groups covering a wide range of areas such as children and adolescents, veteran's affairs, ACT for Health, etc. The organizational structure is designed such that the Board maintains tight control over all committees and activities, and Board meetings are closed.

Black people not well represented in the organization

At first glance, it appears that ACBS is a diverse organization, hailing members and organizational leaders from many countries around the globe. But on closer inspection, one notes the

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BOX 2 Perspective: an Incident of racism in a Black-White FAP trainer dyad.

Following a one-year engagement in FAP coaching from a noted FAP trainer and author who was a White man, a prospective Black (female) FAP-trainer was met with a stunning assertion at the conclusion of her training. One of the issues she worked on with him was her fears of being unlikable, which was a by-product of her experiences as a Black woman in America. When the training was over, she took a courageous risk and told the trainer that she would like to remain friends. His response to her was both anti-reinforcing and the antithesis of their work together. He said, "No, you are too much work." This hurtful response undermined the work she had done in trying to feel more confident and acceptable to her professional community and ultimately made it even more challenging for her to connect with the next FAP coach she had to work with, who was also White.

overrepresentation of White members, despite the international celebration, with some Asian inclusion, and little to no representation of Black people, Indigenous people, or non-White Hispanics. There are 9 members of the Board of ACBS for 2021–2022; 8 are White, 1 is Asian, and none are Black, with roughly the same pattern repeated from the inception of the organization in 2005. Every year there are 8 White people and one POC, where the POC is typically Asian and often a non-voting student member. There are no ACBS board members of color who are not Asian. There has never been a non-White president. There is no true democratic process in the election of Board members as an election committee chooses the two candidates that are able to have a run-off for each vacancy. Although the membership votes on the two choices selected by the committee, the rationale behind the choice of candidates is not made public. For the most recent voting cycle (2022), all candidates are White. It seems clear that Black people have been excluded from ACBS leadership, and Hispanic people have been critically underrepresented as well, and the organization is structured such that the membership has little power to rectify the problem.

The first associate editor of color at *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* (JCBS; also not Black, rather East Asian), was an ethnically Japanese person; after a long pause the next was a Southeast Asian and former student Board member only appointed recently. The first Black plenary speaker was Janet Helms who in 2019, spoke about Whiteness – much needed for the largely White audience but clearly not intended for attendees of color. Even so, one Black psychologist who was present was brought to tears, overwhelmed by finally seeing a Black psychologist honored on stage.

JCBS, the scholarly outlet for ACBS and related work, is a top-ranked journal, with an impact factor of 3.1. The journal has one editor-in-chief, 14 associate editors, 66 editorial board members, 3 student editors, and a professional officer. A review of the website reveals only a single Black person, who is on the editorial board. This means that 1.2% of the JCBS editorial board is Black, despite Black people being 12% of the US population. This is a 10x underrepresentation. More disturbingly, it is unclear the extent of involvement in ACBS of the lone Black editorial board member. This board member has a single paper published in the journal from 2015 (about body image in White women) and has not been in recent ACBS conference materials as a presenter. This could appear as tokenizing, which occurs when someone is included for the appearance of inclusion and not actually recognized for their contributions or a member of the group in a meaningful way (Williams et al., 2021d). These numbers of non-White people involved in JCBS are in line with reports and observations of poor attendance of people of color at ACBS conferences.

ACBS has a diversity and inclusion committee, however the structure of this body is different from similar professional boards. All actions must be vetted by or framed as suggestions for the Board and, in line with our previous observations about how policy can be weaponized, the Board's decision-making processes are not transparent. The diversity committee does not get a vote or seat on the Board, and they are not permitted to attend board meetings. There has been little Black representation on this committee and only in the last few years have Black voices been included (there are currently 2 Black members). The committee has observed the Whiteness of featured speakers, mistreatment of the lone Black plenary speaker, and the shunning of Black voices at ABCS. Structurally, this committee is

powerless and exists only in an advisory capacity. It is not a party to the decision-making process nor to why or how decisions are made about the very topic it was called into existence to remedy. It cannot remedy these problems and its voice is generally ignored by the Board. The lack of transparency in Board decisions, lack of power sharing with committees and members, and rigidity is consistent with White supremacist power hoarding in organizational structures (Okun et al., 2019).

Lack of support noted by members

In December of 2015, the ACBS published the results of a Diversity Survey Report on its website. No similar survey has been done since the writing of this paper, however the results from 2015 are informative. This anonymous survey went out to the entire 7,200 members on ACBS as well as 1,700 members of ACT and 680 members of RFT listservs (Afari et al., 2015). About 10% (709) members responded, and of these, 541 had complete responses to every question. A total of 537 responders indicated their race/ethnicity with about 80% (428) identifying as White. The results do not indicate how many of the remaining 20% indicated "Black," as the POC were lumped together into a single monolithic entity.

Although only 10% of the ACBS membership responded, the demographics are similar to what was known of the ACBS membership at the time, with a greater female to male ratio (approx. 60/40) predominantly White, US based (50%) and English speaking, with more than 50% of respondents working in clinical settings.

The report added a caveat in regard to the applicability of the findings to "minority groups" with the statement, "the majority of the respondents who gave us input about inclusivity are not necessarily diverse." So, it is through this lens that the results should be interpreted. Nonetheless, the results of the survey do have something to say about the perception of its members about how the ACBS community is treating its non-White members. These can be seen in responses to the following questions.

ACBS asked if its community provides a supportive environment for racial and ethnic minorities. Although 70% of respondents agreed that the community was supportive of them personally, less than 40% "agreed or somewhat agreed that the community was supportive of non-English speakers, members with disabilities, nurses, physicians, those working in non-MH settings, and ethnic and racial minorities." We find this to be a staggeringly low number. This indicates that although members (mostly White) felt supported, they were able to observe how the most vulnerable members were not. The spread between 70% and "less than" 40% is damning, especially considering that research shows that people in positions of privilege are less likely to notice the suffering of those less fortunate (Stellar et al., 2012). In a follow-up question, respondents specifically indicated that cultural diversity needed to be increased and those groups who are poorly supported and the areas of diversity which needed more work are *Cultural, Professional and Socioeconomic diversity.*

We would like to focus on the way in which the report characterized the results of the 73 comments focusing on how ACBS is not supportive of its members, who described how their experiences were demotivating and unhelpful. The report notes, "Prominent unsupportive experiences included predominating male gender, non-transparent organization, lack of cultural/developmental

adaptation, predominance of English, inaccessible events, and perceived micro-aggression." No other category was prefaced by "perceived" therefore this can be read as an indication that the writers did not believe that the microaggressions were relevant or real (or were required to use this wording to placate White leadership). Here, we would like to make the implicit racism in this phrase explicit. Notably, this report is freely available online, and Black Americans who may be interested in learning more about diversity issues as they relate to ACBS, perhaps for the purpose of joining the organization, may read this page, understand this wording to be a coded threat, and reconsider their involvement.

Finally, when asked how ACBS could improve support for diversity, 81 comments made suggestions which included: Encouraging more participation for new and diverse members, improving supervision, mentorship, and consultation for members supporting local events, and affordability as well as promoting professional diversity. After 8 years, there is no visible follow-up on how any of these suggestions may have been implemented, despite the existence of a diversity committee. The ACBS leadership understood the gravity of this feedback, but, to-date, there is no public sign of committed action on this front, and no further studies. The afore-described White supermajority Board is the body with the power to order a follow-up or make the changes advanced in the survey.

Recently, ACBS leadership produced a report of the ACBS Task Force on the strategies and tactics of CBS research, and made 33 recommendations (Hayes et al., 2021). There was very little mention of diversity issues, although Recommendation 24 stated: "CBS research needs to address diversity issues (gender; language; race, ethnicity; sexual orientation and identity, etc.) in treatment and process of change research," with a warning about bias and noting that diversity variables need to be "thoroughly considered" (p. 180). But these recommendations rang hollow in light of the orphaned 2015 survey, a historically super-majority White board, and the absence of any acknowledgement of the human suffering caused by racism or other forms of oppression and marginalization, even within ACBS.

In our investigation, we did learn that in the aftermath of George Floyd's extra-judicial murder and the subsequent global racial reckoning, there were shifts in the climate at ACBS that made more space for Black inclusion due to what one Black member described as "White guilt." For example, there is a new set of clinicians of color brought in by members of the diversity committee through MEND, a group of trauma experts focused on healing communities of color[1] using ACT. They had better experiences because the ACBS diversity committee and the related special interest group found ways to make them feel welcome, such as having a social event for people of color at a recent conference. There has been some thought and action around these issues, although members feel there is still a very long way to go in making ACBS truly inclusive.

Is ACT relevant across races?

In a misguided attempt to showcase the diversity of ACT research, Steve Hayes (2015) posted an article on the ACBS

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[1] www.mendminds.org

website (listed third on Google with search terms "ACT therapy Black") with the headline "*Does ACT work for minorities or the poor?*" The webpage and even the title is offensive, and full of implicit bias. The wording implies that racial "minorities" and the "the poor" are comparable groups that can be lumped together as if they are the same. Most Black people in the US are not poor and would be offended to be stereotyped in this way. What kind of statement would it make to have a page titled "*Does ACT work in White People or the entitled*?" or "*Does ACT work for Asian People and math geeks?*" Here we would like to make the implicit, explicit, and point out pathological stereotypes that stigmatize non-White groups. Further, the inclusion on the webpage of a study carried in South Africa on the *majority* population shows a confusion about the difference between race, ethnicity and culture. Efficacy in a majority Black, culturally and ethnically South-African population does not automatically mean that it will have efficacy in an American Black population – any more than in an ethnically Han Chinese or Indian Sri-Lankan population. Black people who are trying to learn more about ACBS will read this page and discern that this is not a safe professional home for them.

To better understand the human toll that results from racial bias, it is important to share and analyze some recent experiences that Black people have encountered within the organization. ACBS missed an important opportunity to provide allyship and support in a report of misconduct involving ACBS leaders (Box 3). White researchers published data collected by a Black researcher without the person's consent or any acknowledgement in a contested but now published work appearing in JCBS.

This paper was the result of a collaboration between several senior primary investigators and their graduate students on a project to develop a new scale for which they agreed to share authorship. The project was set up by the investigators so that the data collected at the Black researcher's institution would flow straight into the data collection survey system at the university of a White lead researcher.

This authorship dispossession (Box 3) represents another example of how systemically applied weaponized policies can favor White individuals in power at the expense of a minoritized person (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2008; Okun et al., 2019; McFarling, 2021). Following a complaint to the journal, the contested article was put on hold, but the researcher was told it had to be resolved through university channels, with no help from ACBS or their ethics committee and no appreciation for the power dynamics that make it unlikely for Black persons to prevail in such disputes (Williams, 2019; Dupree and Kraus, 2022). The Black scholar had no university resources to resolve the dispute since the data was collected at their former university and they had been hired, but not yet started, at a new university. Absurdly, due to these demands, the scholar was forced to file a complaint with *the perpetrators*' university to stall the process. In this example of policy weaponization, because they had no rules for such a situation, JCBS created *ad hoc* arbitrary rules which required that the researchers appeal to their universities. *However, it is impossible to appeal to a resource that you do not possess.* The editors used their own indifference and the ambiguity of the situation to allow a discriminatory outcome. This is aversive behavior weaponized into a policy because it allows a

> **BOX 3** Perspective: an incident of racism against a Black scholar and ACBS member.
>
> In this incident, a Black researcher was reassured that after the data was collected they could be included as an author. A lead author had said by email, "There's room for many authors as we want to be collaborative." The Black scholar however, was shocked to later see the finished paper "in press" at JCBS. Despite intensive involvement and collecting a third of the data for the paper (over 400 subjects), the Black investigator had been completely omitted. White PIs were listed as the first several authors, followed by a number of their graduate students and junior colleagues. (To justify the exclusion of the Black scholar as an author, one of the scholar's former graduate students of color was included as a ninth author, which is neither customary nor appropriate.)
>
> When queried, the lead White investigator claimed in an email that it never occurred to him that the Black researcher might possess the expertise needed to meaningfully contribute to the paper – despite that the scholar had over 100 academic publications, including a dozen on psychometrics. The assertion that the scholar was underqualified is a common racial trope used to excuse exclusionary racist behavior (McDonald, 2021). What is worse is not only was the scholar excluded, but they were also manipulated into doing free work, which is another problematic racial dynamic whereby Black people are expected to work without fair compensation because their labor carries less value than labor by White people (Pettit and Ewert, 2009). The Black scholar was understandably distressed by this situation and felt exploited and deceived. Holding the position of power, the White lead authors refused to meet, compromise, or engage in mediation with the Black scholar for co-authorship, even though adding the author would not have harmed the lead authors in any way.

racist outcome on the institutional level while maintaining plausible deniability for the organization (McGillicuddy-De Lisi et al., 2006; Okun et al., 2019; Faber et al., 2023b) and uses arm's length injustice to withhold organizational resources that could have made a difference (Okun et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021). The incident was never reviewed or judged by an ethics or diversity committee or other impartial body. In any dispute, the institution having an interest in the outcome cannot also be the judge. As such, in a Kafkaeske process, JCBS ultimately published the paper based on the judgment of a White complaints officer at the university *of the perpetrator* without representation or a hearing for the Black researcher. As such, the data was published against their will, without acknowledgement or apology, and the journal washed their hands of the whole incident. A White lead author went on to use the data in his thesis, also without permission.

This type of issue is not an isolated incident in our field. One recent article listing multiple similar incidents to the one in Box 3 explains how the failure of White scholars to acknowledge the contribution of people of color is "intellectually dishonest and echoes a history of White people in power refusing to credit Black scholars and activists for their work" (McFarling, 2021). There is a well-documented failure to credit scholars of color, and more than enough evidence to show that publication and citation practices reproduce this institutional racism (Avery et al., 2022).

Most White people in the US and other Western nations have both explicit and implicit pro-White, anti-Black biases (Faber et al., 2019; Harjunen et al., 2021; Gran-Ruaz et al., 2022). Research shows us that White people will rarely advocate for Black people in the presence of other White people, even if this means operating against their own values (Williams et al., 2021c). Research and experience also show us that because overt racism is stigmatized, it is unlikely that the aforementioned persons are aware of the role of racism in their decision making (Williams et al., 2022). Furthermore, White solidarity will require a very high burden of proof, question over and over if racist events really happened, and look for non-racial explanations for the cause of the conflict (McGillicuddy-De Lisi et al., 2006). Persons confronted about these incidents will profess that they did not intend for the outcome to appear racially discriminatory although

the outcome *is* racially discriminatory. Racism, however, does not require intent to harm people of color. Experiences such as these alert Black people and their networks to the level of care and allyship they can expect from the CBS community and contribute to low numbers of Black people in ACBS.

ACBS and the illusion of inclusion

In an attempt to address issues such as these, the ACBS diversity committee was excited to invite an accomplished Black psychology professor to join the committee in 2019. This candidate has been a part of many organizational diversity committees in other organizations and was a founder of the Diversity Advisory Council for another large professional association. She is routinely asked to serve on diversity committees for organizations, even ones where she has not been involved.

Based on all objective criteria, such a prolific and influential scholar would be a top candidate for inclusion, however, the Board of ACBS rejected the recommendations of their own diversity committee. The justification provided to the candidate was that she had not been a member of ACBS long enough or been to enough conferences to be considered for committee membership. Yet the scholar had fulfilled all of ACBS' specific internal qualifications for expertise in this field including a standing-room only talk at ACBS own conference, served as a grant reviewer for ACBS own grants, was a peer-reviewer for JCBS (ACBS own journal), organized an ACT (ACBS own therapy) training at Yale, and was lead author on an edited volume with New Harbinger (ACBS own publisher) about mental health equity from a CBS perspective. The rejection is consistent with the aforementioned *policy weaponization*, where unclear standards disadvantage the qualifications of Black people, regardless of how accomplished they might be due to stereotypes of inadequacy or aggression. This negative experience left the rejected Black scholar feeling further alienated from the organization, so she stopped attending conferences and eventually dropped her membership. This helped to maintain the White power imbalance by preventing a strong person of color from having even a small leadership role in the organization as it threatened the status quo.

This experience also underscores how, as aforementioned, the ACSB diversity committee suffers from a lack of power in the organization, exemplified through its inability to even choose its own members regardless of their qualifications. MIT scholars note that DEI committees "must be sufficiently empowered to implement their initiatives meaningfully and successfully" (RISE MIT, 2020). Disempowered committees cannot bring about change and are commonly used by organizations as window dressing to provide the illusion of inclusion (Okun et al., 2019).

Discussion

Black Americans have highlighted the importance of anti-racism education and community driven practices to address the mental health needs in the Black community. The current authors contribute to these collective voices and offer to the literature our reaffirmation of the long-held position that organizations *must* confront racism and address the contemporary and historical racial paradigms within that affect Black people. Black communities emphasize that critical self-reflection at the individual level and racial equity analysis at the level of the organization is long overdue (Alang, 2019). The utility of CBS must be considered with these imperatives in mind.

However, this paper demonstrates that CBS has failed to address the needs of the Black community. This is a result of individual biases that have been enacted through the research conducted and the policies and procedures of the organization dedicated to its advancement. As key examples, the most critical mental health needs of Black people have been misunderstood and unaddressed in ACT scholarship, and Black trainees have experienced barriers to learning FAP due to lack of equity in the training process. Further, ACBS as an organization has failed to be inclusive of Black people, and it has failed to act on known problems underscored in its own investigation. Racially biased policy structures are left to exist and continue to cause racially disproportionate harm.

Psychology as a discipline is overwhelmingly White and this is not an accident (Stewart et al., 2017; Faber et al., 2023b). This disparity was pointed out in Roberts et al.'s (2020) influential paper which laid out the evidence that the topics studied, the editorial decisions, the participants in research, the influencers, professors and decision makers are overwhelmingly White. This situation influences every level of psychological science, however most profoundly, results in a state of self-deception, an inability for the beneficiaries of this White-biased system to impartially see and quantify the problems, and rose-colored glasses about the effects and outcomes of this Whiteness. More succinctly put, "White people benefit from obscuring the existence of racial inequality from which they benefit" (Bergkamp et al., 2022; Dupree and Kraus, 2022, p. 271). Pointing out facts like these generates defensiveness, which functions to deflect attention from the real issues (Howell et al., 2017; DiAngelo, 2018).

One of the main tasks for anti-racist advocates is to drag hidden and covert racism into the light, not so that people can be shamed but so that problems can be seen and resolved. This is an essential pathway to healing and reconciliation with non-White communities. That which cannot be seen cannot be treated. This mindset is fundamentally at odds with White supremist structures that benefit from racism, particularly when it remains unacknowledged, stigmatized, or covert (Okun et al., 2019). As researchers and practitioners, we understand how and why it is not in the best interest of therapists or clients to allow these ingrained cultural impulses to go unchecked. Without transparency, Black practitioners and researchers will continue to be at odds with ACBS.

Further, misconduct and reports of discrimination should be monitored and mediated by the ACBS community. It is critical that some level of protection and oversight is put in place to remedy the ongoing enactment of racism in its professional circles. As psychology researchers, senior voices in the field should be well-aware that structural racism remains embedded in every structure from client care to membership to the publication process, to review and be ready to confront racism as it arises (Williams, 2019; Dupree and Kraus, 2022). There is no naturally occurring racial progress. Gains are brought about only by struggle (Dupree and Kraus, 2022).

It can be expected that some who read this will rightly assert that it is easy to point out problems but hard to come up with solutions. We do have a solution, and it can be summarized succinctly as *power-sharing*. In Table 2, we provide some practical examples of steps that can be taken to make CBS spaces more inclusive and equitable. If ACBS is interested in systemic organizational changes, they can take note of these anti-racist steps being taken by many similar professional organizations, in particular the apology of the APA to People of Color for their failure to challenge racism within the organization (APA Council of Representatives, 2021). Notably, other organizations with similar problems might also implement these solutions where applicable.

Conclusion

To date, there are no signs that the warning bells of the ACBS 2015 diversity survey have been followed by relevant actions or even a new survey. Further, there does not seem to be any accountability structure toward POC in regard to culturally-informed research, anti-racist practice, diversity grants, publishing, certification, or ethical behavior in psychology as it pertains to executive leadership, decision-making, and structural organization. Anti-racism approaches require an honest examination of the problems, despite discomfort and without experiential avoidance.

Existing structures will resist change, and as such implementing equity will take courage and persistence. This may be uncomfortable, but within this solution is also where ACT and FAP principles can be helpful. Those who care to do better can *accept* they have been participating in a racist system, *accept* the unpleasant feelings that accompany that level of honesty, *commit* to becoming anti-racist allies, and take valued actions to create equity. They can become more *aware* of their impact on Black people, have *courage* to make a change, and show *love* by being better human beings through tangible acts of care (Tsai et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2022).

TABLE 2 Practical steps for anti-racist organizational transformation.

Governance	Revise ACBS organizational bylaws to require 50% of all board and committee seats occupied by people from marginalized groups (including Black people).
	To increase transparency, ACBS can post board minutes on the organizational website (redacted where needed for confidentiality).
	Increase the ethnic and racial diversity of the journal's editorial board composition.
	Implement anti-racist practices in JCBS editorial processes, including appointing designated associate editors with expertise in diversity issues (as was done by the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies; Sanders et al., 2022).
	Empower the ACBS diversity committee to improve their ability to affect change in the organization (e.g., they appoint their own members, are provided with a budget and funding for projects, have at least one DEI-informed board member who actively participates in the committee, etc.)
	Have open and free elections (i.e., rank ordered vote for Board seats and officers), based on members getting signatures of other members in support of their candidacy, for example, rather than having candidates hand-picked by the current super majority-White Board.
	Hold Annual General Meetings (AGMs) with ACBS members, to allow the Board to report back to the membership about their progress towards the mission and strategic priorities of the organization, including equity goals, and to encourage dialogue and discussion within the ACBS community on key issues affecting members.
	Anti-racism and organizational culture change is everyone's responsibility. Equity and anti-racism goals should be woven into ACBS's foundational documents, policies, and practices (i.e., how we put our values into practice as a goal in the strategic plan, reporting on progress in annual reports, developing operational policies that explicitly reference equity and inclusion as core to the functioning of the organization, etc.) rather than sitting as a stand-alone initiative.
Metrics	Collect racial, ethnic, and other identity data to quantify disparities at ACBS (membership, grant recipients, conference attendees, etc.) and be able to create a baseline to track progress moving forward (ABCT Board of Directors, 2021).
	Collect racial, ethnic, and other equity seeking data on JCBS editors, reviewers, and authors to ensure equity in publishing and to track progress moving forward (Else and Perkel, 2022).
	Re-administer the 2015 survey, use it as a springboard for updating Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timed (SMART) goals, led by the diversity committee (Bjerke and Renger, 2017).
Research	Organize a special issue of JCBS focused on research about non-White groups (as done by APA and APS; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2017; King, 2021).
	Provide annual grants and awards for CBS research focused on people of color and researchers of color (as done by the American Board of Professional Psychology).
	Require all submission to the organization's journal to include an author positionality statement and sample race and ethnicity data (with an explanation for non-diverse samples).
Teaching	Organize listening forums where leadership will hear the concerns of Black members to direct change [as was done by the National Institutes for Mental Health (NIMH; Gordon, 2022)].
	Implement annual anti-racism training for all Board members and those in leadership positions.
	Organize a conference focused on issues impacting non-White groups (i.e., Kouame et al., 2021).
Recon-ciliation and mitigation	Publish a Board statement apologizing for perpetuating racism in psychology, as done by the APA Council of Representatives (2021), and outline the initiatives being implemented to change the situation.
	Task the diversity committee or a DEI consultant with reviewing all rules, policies, practices and procedures to identify and excise institutional racism and propose updates to ensure the organization has the internal infrastructure needed to become more equitable.
	Reach out to Black people who have left the organization and find out why they left and what it would take to meet their needs and be able to return to the ACBS community.
	Create a confidential process to investigate complaints of discrimination whereby members can choose a liaison or investigator from their own identity group (Charkoudian and Wayne, 2009).
	Provide free ACBS membership to Black and other marginalized people until the organization achieves representative levels of diversity in its membership.
	Add current, useful, and non-demeaning diversity content to the ACBS website with help from the diversity committee (as was done by the International OCD Foundation; Gimber, 2020).

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SF and MW contributed primarily to the conception and overall writing. IM was involved in refining and editing the text as well as adding commentary on critical events narrated in the text. JT drafted the sections on FAP and ACT as well as checking the references, and CF contributed to the early drafts to the first half of the paper on the needs of the Black experience. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Effects of salient factors on the pursuit of higher education among multicultural youth in Hong Kong

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This study presents novel and compelling evidence of the disparities in factors influencing the beliefs and aspirations for higher education among mainstream and immigrant youth in Hong Kong, particularly those who are underprivileged. We developed and validated a psychometric questionnaire, known as the Post-Secondary Education Pursuit Instrument (PSEPi), which was administered to 4,850 students aged between 15 and 18 years old from 23 secondary schools. The objective of this study was to explore the factors that impact students' choices and plans for higher education. The results of the one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) analysis deepen our understanding of the differential effects of success and obstacle factors on students' higher education pursuits across various cultural groups. The underprivileged mainstream, Chinese immigrant, and ethnic minority South Asian youth reported a perceived glass ceiling effect associated with their ethnic backgrounds, as well as financial aid barriers, while pursuing higher education, in contrast to their average Hong Kong mainstream counterparts (mean Cohen's d = 0.40). The direct effects and multiple mediation analyses demonstrated that significant others' influence, particularly the influence of parents, and locus of control are prime determinants of the perceived usefulness of higher education for all student groups. The implications are that educational policies should be implemented to level the playing field in higher education admissions for both privileged and underprivileged youth in Hong Kong and other international countries. Overall, this study provides robust empirical evidence that can be utilized to enhance educational policies and practices to bridge the gap between mainstream and underprivileged immigrant youth in their pursuit of higher education.

KEYWORDS

educational functionalism beliefs, higher education, underprivileged mainstream students, Chinese immigrant students, South Asian students, Hong Kong

1 Introduction

Access to higher education is a crucial aspect of upward social mobility and personal growth (Sandmann et al., 2019). The journey toward higher education starts in secondary school and intensifies in senior secondary education. However, researchers (Kim, 2014; Sandmann et al., 2019) note that the institutional hierarchies within higher education often perpetuate social inequalities. The expansion of higher education has only widened the gap between privileged and underprivileged students, with the latter still struggling to access these institutions. In England, despite recent efforts to increase access to higher education, disadvantaged students from low socio-economic backgrounds continue to face significant barriers (Chowdry et al., 2011).

Higher education has expanded significantly in Asia and brought a more diverse range of programs and students. However, taking China as an example, higher education choices and fee structures still reflect social stratification, making it difficult to achieve social inclusion and educational equality (Ding et al., 2021). This is a global issue that requires urgent attention to remove the socio-economic and financial barriers that prevent underprivileged youth from accessing, proceeding, and completing their studies successfully (Nutt and Hardman, 2019). Previous research (Dave et al., 2019; Kalu, 2022; Refaeli et al., 2023) has shown that students' higher education choice hinges on multiple factors, including personal factors (academic capability and self-esteem) and social factors (family socio-economic status, parental expectation, school quality, and resources). The transition from senior secondary school to higher education is complex and affected by individual and social factors, some of which are within and outside of an individual's control (O'Donnell et al., 2016), calling for creating favorable conditions for different minority groups. The Combined model for higher education choice highlights the importance of personal and contextual factors in determining higher education aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). Essentially, the combined model underscores the prime roles of the individual (e.g., academic ability) and social (e.g., social capital, parental support) factors in determining higher education aspiration. Several antecedents of higher education pursuits, such as the perceived usefulness of education and family influence, have been well-documented in Western and Asian literature. Therefore, it is essential to consider these factors when developing policies and programs that aim to increase access to higher education for all students (Turner, 2018; Guan and Ploner, 2020; Sier, 2021; Abdalla et al., 2022).

1.1 Chinese immigrant and ethnic minority students in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was once regarded as a haven by Chinese immigrants (Chan and Chou, 2016) with around 90% being Han Chinese. The Chinese immigrants are heterogenous groups, with a wide range of backgrounds, dialects, customs, beliefs, and socio-economic status, and different from local Hong Kong. The significance of these factors cannot be underestimated when considering the experiences and challenges their children face in Hong Kong schooling. Research (Yuen, 2010; Yang et al., 2020) has shed light on the complex interplay between cultural

identity, social status, and educational opportunities for Chinese immigrant students (CIS). CIS admitted to secondary schools grew steadily from 2644 in 2014/15 to 3804 but dropped sharply to 2340 in 2019/20 due to intercultural conflicts associated with social unrest. The pedagogical approach adopted by CIS has been known to elicit frustration among students (Yuen, 2022). The requirement to acquire fluency in the mainstream dialect of Cantonese, coupled with the need to transition from simplified to complex Chinese characters, are significant obstacles to learning. Additionally, the placement arrangements for overage students are one major impediment, as it often necessitates repeating 1–2 years of academic coursework to improve one's English proficiency. Such policies can have the detrimental effect of eroding their academic self-esteem as teachers are significant figures, and their perceptions of model students shape the expectations and behaviors of students (Chee, 2012). Moreover, leaving their mainland peers leads to a sense of disconnectedness. Disjointed social networks and limited homework support from family members, both lead to underachievement (Pong, 2009; Yuen, 2022).

Ethnic minorities with South/Southeast origins in Hong Kong recorded a 120% increase between 2006 and 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). The South/Southeast Asian students (SAS) whose parents are from the Philippines, India, Nepal, and Pakistan are gaining attention regarding their access to higher education (Bhowmik, 2019; Keung and Ho, 2020; Te, 2020; Yuen, 2022). Sharing the frustrations of the assimilationist approach, SAS students face intersectionality challenges (Cho et al., 2013), in their pursuit of higher education. Race, religion, identity, and language are known factors that cause them to lead an isolated lifestyle and hold a stereotyped perception of society (Crabtree and Wong, 2013; Gao et al., 2019; Loh and Hung, 2020). Language proficiency defines failure and success. Many Hong Kong-born Pakistanis, Indians and Filipinos are native Cantonese speakers but have limited proficiency in the Chinese Language, impeding their academic performance (Loh and Hung, 2020; Yuen, 2022). A deeper understanding of the unique circumstances of these individuals is essential for developing policies and interventions that can effectively support their integration and well-being. While some studies have addressed systemic inequalities and structural barriers in the education system (Chee, 2012; Bhowmik, 2019; Gao et al., 2019; Te, 2020), only a few have examined the differential impacts of factors affecting higher education pursuits on different ethnic groups.

Since 2006, there has been a significant upsurge in post-secondary education (PSE) in Hong Kong. Notably, the offering of self-financed 2-year sub-degree programs, such as higher diplomas and sub-degrees, has experienced substantial growth, providing access to over 60% of the HKDSE graduates (Kember, 2010). Between 2000 and 2010, student enrollments in sub-degree programs increased from 9,549 to 34,949, surpassing the increase in degree program enrollments, which only rose from 14,209 to 18,766. Currently, 22 higher education institutions confer degrees, as well as 22 post-secondary institutions that offer sub-degree programs. These institutions afford a diverse range of study options, featuring multiple entry and exit points. Each institution is characterized by its own unique mission and vision, striving for geopolitical significance (Sandmann et al., 2019). However, Lo (2017) criticized the education hub strategy, contending that it dissuades underprivileged students from pursuing higher

education due to concerns about student debt, intense competition from non-local students, and dim employment prospects following graduation. Meanwhile, Chiu and Siu (2022) claimed that the current neoliberalism of higher education in Hong Kong exacerbates the marginalization of ethnic minority students. Institutions are drivers for the marketization of education, which treats the purpose of learning as a commodity and exacerbates the disparities between the privileged and underprivileged in terms of education outcomes.

To address the prevalent social and educational inequalities within Hong Kong's higher education system (Manning and Yuen, 2023), it is imperative to engage in collaborative institutional research endeavors that incorporate perspectives from diverse stakeholders representing various disciplines. This approach will foster synergistic efforts toward developing a comprehensive understanding of the systemic barriers confronted by underprivileged students. By generating a big dataset, valuable insights can be gleaned into the issues faced by these students, thereby facilitating the development of effective interventions aimed at enhancing their educational outcomes.

Existing research in this field has primarily relied on case studies and qualitative investigations (Bhowmik, 2019; Gao et al., 2019; Te, 2020). Hence, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive empirical evidence from quantitative studies that can provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of personal and social factors that shape the experiences of the entire student population (Queirós et al., 2017). This study is, hence, highly trendy and significant to fill these research gaps by employing a validated survey questionnaire to identify the prime success and obstacle factors influencing the three ethnic groups: mainstream students, Chinese immigrant students, and ethnic minority students to pursue higher education within Hong Kong. Furthermore, this study is novel to examine the mechanisms underlying the formation of educational functionalism beliefs that are associated with success and obstacle factors. Given its significant and timely nature, the findings of this research endeavor will shed new light for policy makers and educators, as to how to eliminate educational inequalities and promote inclusivity in higher education.

1.2 The conceptual models

The primary objective of this study is to scrutinize the crucial variables that influence students' inclination and endeavor toward attaining higher education, particularly across diverse student groups. In order to accomplish these research aims, we have identified the factors espoused by the Combined model (Hossler et al., 1999) and Harris and Halpin's (2002) model as instrumental in shaping our study. Both models share overlapping and complementary factors. For instance, the economic perspective of Hossler et al.'s (1999) model concentrates on the cost-benefit aspect of the financial burden and contributions of higher education to high-paying jobs and social status. This perspective overlaps with the relative functionalism factor advocated by Harris and Halpin (2002), or the instrumental values of education, compared to other non-educational choices. Scholarships and financial aid are crucial in enabling low-income students to attend college

and cultivate their talent. The sociological model analyses the interaction of sociological and psychological factors in terms of financial feasibility and individuals' academic ability, when determining whether to pursue higher education or not (Hossler et al., 1999). Students weigh economic and sociological factors when continuing education beyond high school. They research different institutions, gather information, and enroll in the ones that best meet their needs. Self-determination and perceived ability have a direct impact on academic aspiration. Family influences mediate their attitudes toward the value of higher education. Hence, providing sufficient financial aid and scholarships can increase the chance of lower-income students to pursue higher education.

Harris and Halpin's (2002) model offers a comprehensive approach that complements Hossler et al.'s (1999) work by examining economic, social, cultural, psychological factors, and educational processes in pursuit of a holistic understanding of the factors that motivate individuals to pursue higher education. The two models highlight the importance of job opportunities, social status, income, and prestige as key motivators for higher education enrollment. This study, guided by Harris and Halpin's (2002) model, focuses on seven primary factors, including significant others' influence, glass ceiling, relative functionalism, locus of control, self-efficacy, preparation for college, and financial aid among different student groups. An in-depth analysis of each of these factors will be presented below.

1.2.1 Significant others' influence

The influence exerted by parental expectations, warmth, and financial support is one critical determinant of students' educational aspirations and motivation. Family matters. Bourdieu et al.'s (1990) capital theory underscores that family is a valuable social capital and a habitus for the privileged to situate their children in a conducive learning environment to form their aspirations for future success. Compared to working-class parents, middle-class parents subscribe to school expectations to arm their children with the essential skills and knowledge for higher education and vertical social mobility (Lareau, 2011). The capital theory offers a vital lens to uncover the thought process behind Chinese youth's aspirations for higher education. Influenced by the Confucian heritage culture in Hong Kong (Katyal and King, 2011), the strong family-oriented culture and moral values of filial piety, deference, kinship ties, self-efficacy, and academic success to honor parents are systematically instilled in their children through family socialization. In contemporary Chinese society, good parenting is primarily about assisting children in academic success, which often translates into pursuing higher education and obtaining high-income jobs (Xiang and Chiu, 2022). The concerted cultivation approach to maximizing the opportunity for children's academic success is phenomenal (Ho et al., 2018). Singaporean students' educational aspirations are closely related to their parents' socio-economic status, which is a typical example (Ng and Choo, 2021).

1.2.2 Glass ceiling

The glass ceiling effect is a term used to describe the societal obstacles that impede the career advancement of women and people of color based on their gender and race (Jackson et al., 2014). In the context of education, students from marginalized

backgrounds, such as those who are deprived, immigrants, or belong to ethnic minority groups, face various barriers that hinder their academic progress (Chowdry et al., 2013). Research has indicated that a significant number of students encounter the glass ceiling effect, which is a phenomenon that arises when they perceive a lack of adequate preparation, knowledge, resources, and confidence to pursue their desired paths of higher education (Harris, 2015; Yuen et al., 2021). A critical factor leading to lower participation rates in higher education is the lower attainment rate of secondary education. The relationship between academic performance and educational aspirations is complex. Chowdry et al. (2011) argue that increasing the aspirations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds alone is unlikely to eliminate the socio-economic differences in higher education participation. In Hong Kong, the glass ceiling effect is prevalent among low-income mainstream Hong Kong Chinese, Chinese immigrants, and ethnic minority Hong Kong youth (Yuen et al., 2021). These groups face the challenge of low levels of self-efficacy belief, limited support from parents and teachers, and inadequate financial assistance to realize their higher education aspirations. Consequently, they remain an underrepresented group in higher education institutions.

1.2.3 Relative functionalism

This term refers to students' belief in and subjective assessment of the functions and usefulness of education in generating cultural and socio-economic capital for individuals and families compared to alternative pathways (Sue and Okazaki, 1990; Harris and Halpin, 2002; Coy-Ogan, 2009). Research has demonstrated that the significance of a particular life choice holds a pivotal role in shaping students' aspirations for higher education (Harris and Halpin, 2002; Coy-Ogan, 2009), which subsequently motivates them to pursue it further (Sier, 2021; Bataeineh, 2022; Vietze et al., 2022). The usefulness of higher education includes the acquisition of career prospects, vertical mobility, improved life chances, and social status, which are among the benefits of pursuing higher education, as posited by Bourdieu et al. (1990). Furthermore, higher education has been noted by Sue and Okazaki (1990) to promote greater self-efficacy due to its relative functionalism. However, it is important to recognize that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds may ascribe varying degrees of value to higher education. Turcios-Cotto and Milan's (2013) study, for instance, revealed that Latino students tend to view higher education as a means of achieving individuality and material gain more so than their White counterparts.

1.2.4 Self-efficacy and locus of control

This term refers to students' perception of self-efficacy and perceived control over their educational goals and motivation to pursue higher education (Lawrence and Nkoane, 2020). The issue of negative racial stereotypes faced by ethnic minority students from dominant groups has been extensively researched in academic literature (Ku, 2006; Crabtree and Wong, 2013; Brown et al., 2017; Sier, 2021; Abdalla et al., 2022). These stereotypes can have a detrimental effect on the self-perception and academic success of minority students, leading to a reduced sense of control over their educational outcomes and a lack of motivation to pursue higher education (Brown et al., 2017). Conversely, when disadvantaged students feel empowered and in control of

their academic success, they are more likely to value education and be incentivized to pursue further studies (Nordstrom and Segrist, 2009). Recent studies conducted in Hong Kong have shown that low-income students with positive academic self-efficacy beliefs are better equipped to build resilience and inner strength, which in turn helps them in their pursuit of higher education (Yuen, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of addressing negative stereotypes and empowering students to take control of their academic success (Lawrence and Nkoane, 2020). Conversely, disadvantaged students may perceive limited opportunities for accessing quality education compared to their mainstream counterparts, as evidenced by international studies (Reay et al., 2001). Negative beliefs can discourage working-class students from aspiring to attend university (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). Research suggests negative beliefs can deter working-class students from pursuing higher education (Hutchings and Archer, 2001). Additionally, ethnic minority students may face detrimental racial stereotypes that diminish their sense of control over academic achievement (Brown et al., 2017). However, fostering internal control over academic success can inspire disadvantaged students to value education and strive for higher learning opportunities (Nordstrom and Segrist, 2009). Moreover, positive academic self-efficacy beliefs can empower low-income students to develop resilience and inner strength to pursue higher education (Yuen, 2022).

1.2.5 Preparation for college

Access to program information is a critical factor for students when determining which college to attend. Nowadays, college preparation has emerged as a key policy priority, and many parents have turned to expert consultants to help guide their children through the complex pathways of higher education. Schools offer academic mentoring services, organize campus tours to post-secondary institutions, and host seminars and talks on university program applications. These programs have become increasingly essential in preparing high school students for the rigors of college enrollment. For example, according to Gale and Parker (2014), students who are the first in their families to attend college experience a significant cultural shift between secondary school and college regarding learning and pedagogy. Consequently, college induction programs have become a pivotal component in assisting these students in navigating the complex pathways of higher education. Past research (Yuen, 2022) has demonstrated that low-income mainstream students in Hong Kong, Chinese immigrant students, and South Asian students face more significant obstacles than their mainstream counterparts in pursuing higher education due to limited access to college program information, language barriers, and inadequate financial support.

1.2.6 Financial aid

The question of college costs has regained attention in academic discourse. The provision of formal financial assistance, such as bursaries, studentships, or scholarships, can assist underprivileged students in covering their tuition fees and is a crucial factor in promoting their enrollment in college. However, in the current era of marketization and neo-liberalism, higher education is increasingly viewed as a commodity, and the availability of financial aid can significantly impact the access of socially disadvantaged

students to higher education (Woodall et al., 2014). As a result, the expansion of higher education has exacerbated class-related educational and employment disparities.

1.2.7 Interrelationship among success and obstacle factors affecting higher education pursuit

Beliefs in the function of higher education and the broader societal values of education are shaped by personal, educational experiences and culture (Gorard et al., 1998). Addi-Raccah and Israelashvili (2014) investigated the effect of a university outreach program on the enrollment of low-income students in higher education. They concluded that increasing their personal capability would motivate them to pursue higher education. There seems to be a compensatory effect of personal capability on poverty. Literature has reiterated the role of significant others' influence on students' higher education aspirations. Parental care and teacher support are enablers to boost students' academic self-efficacy and educational choices and planning (Wang and Neihart, 2015). Woelfel and Haller's (1971) classic work on the impact of significant others and attitude formation among 100 high school seniors in the United States, theorized that interpersonal influence (significant others), self-reflexive activity (the categorization of the information), and related attitudes (valuable or not) toward objects have a strong influence on the attitude formation toward educational and occupational aspirations. Such influences are not linear or direct as the decision process in educational aspiration is complex, right from access, participation, and success.

However, there is limited understanding of the interplay of these factors on students' college decisions. Harris and Halpin's (2002) model on factors influencing post-secondary education (FIPSE) categorizes the factors into different domains, including educational processes, and personal, social, and cultural factors. The model has been adapted for various cultures to assess the factors affecting students' higher education decisions, such as for examining first-generation college students (e.g., Coy-Ogan, 2009). It was nevertheless imperative to adapt the instrument to suit the social fabric of Hong Kong society. In achieving the research objectives, this study examined the dynamic interplay between personal and contextual factors affecting the choice of students from diverse backgrounds in higher education pursuits (Hossler et al., 1999).

1.3 Access to higher education in Hong Kong

Following the internationalization and rapid expansion of PSE, the number of PSE students rose from 25.8 percent in 2010 to 34.5 percent in 2020 (Census and Statistics Department, 2021). The sharp increment has escalated educational stratifications across institutions and privileged and underprivileged student groups and widened social and educational inequalities (Lam et al., 2019; Wong, 2021). Both 2016 and 2011 census data have shown that over 48 percent of students enrolled in competitive research-intensive institutions came from the top 10 percent of the wealthiest families. Over 30 percent of students enrolled in self-financed, private/vocational-oriented institutions lived below the poverty line. The clientele of self-financed institutions is

mainly from low-income families, and they anticipate heavy student loans, keen competition from non-local students, and dim employment prospects upon graduation (Yip and Peng, 2018). The PSE expansion is driven by a neoliberal ideology (Lo, 2017), celebrating the free-market economy, and survival of the fittest (Lo, 2017; Wong, 2021). Only a small number of elite students from community colleges are able to transfer to the more resourceful government-funded universities. This leaves many less affluent students, who invested heavily in their second chance at higher education, without any certainty about the economic returns of their bachelor's degree (Wong, 2021). Additionally, due to their inadequate proficiency in Chinese Language, the majority of ethnic minority South Asian students are unable to study beyond senior secondary education in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Unison, 2018).

Segmented educational pathways of under-represented groups such as low-income mainstream and ethnic minority students have led to stratified educational and career outcomes (Yip and Peng, 2018). The social equity and educational equality gaps in higher education indicate a necessity for collaborative institutional research, leveraging the synergies of various researchers to construct a comprehensive understanding of higher education in Hong Kong. However, there remains a dearth of research concerning the educational experiences and well-being of higher education students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, particularly during their initial and transitioning years of college (Gao, 2017; Yuen et al., 2021). Recent findings as reported by Yuen et al. (2021) and Yuen (2022), reveal that underprivileged Chinese immigrant and South Asian students are confronted with more obstacles and fewer opportunities before, during, and after their higher education, in comparison to their more affluent mainstream Chinese peers.

Against this backdrop, this study first seeks to ascertain significant factors that influence the aspirations of senior secondary students in Hong Kong toward higher education, including average and low-income mainstream, Chinese immigrant, and South Asian students. Second, the study examines the interactional effects of these factors and, third, delineates how diverse groups of students are impacted by them.

Consistent with the objectives, the study has three research questions:

(a) What factors impact students' aspirations and pursuits in higher education? And which of them has the most significant impact?
(b) How do these factors interact with each other, directly or indirectly?
(c) What are the differences in higher education aspirations and pursuits among South Asian and Chinese immigrant students and local Hong Kong students from low and average income families?

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Participants and procedures

To examine the characteristics of the study participants, a purposive stratified sampling technique was utilized. Secondary

TABLE 1 Demographic profiles of students in each student group.

Student group	South/Southeast Asian students	Chinese immigrant students	Low-income HKMS	Average HKMS
Gender				
Male	355 (47.7%)	352 (52.4%)	515 (47.5%)	954 (49.4%)
Female	390 (52.3%)	320 (47.6%)	570 (52.5%)	977 (50.6%)
Age [Mean (SD)]	16.52 (1.24)	17.44 (1.26)	16.52 (1.15)	16.49 (1.13)
SES				
Subsidized	183 (26.6%)	279 (46.3%)	1086 (100%)	0 (0%)
Non-subsidized	506 (73.4%)	324 (53.7%)	0 (0%)	1942 (100%)
Mother's highest education level				
Secondary or below	535 (72.5%)	570 (87.0%)	974 (91.2%)	1534 (80.4%)
Post-secondary or above	203 (27.5%)	85 (13.0%)	94 (8.8%)	374 (19.6%)
Father's highest education level				
Secondary or below	505 (69.6%)	535 (81.8%)	956 (91.5%)	1438 (75.9%)
Post-secondary or above	221 (30.4%)	119 (18.2%)	89 (8.5%)	456 (24.1%)
Religion				
Religious	692 (92.51%)	137 (20.6%)	775 (71.8%)	595 (31.0%)
Non-religious	56 (7.49%)	528 (79.4%)	304 (28.2%)	1325 (69.0%)
Academic performance				
English				
Pass	694 (93.8%)	342 (51.4%)	720 (67.2%)	1408 (73.2%)
Fail	46 (6.2%)	324 (48.6%)	352 (32.8%)	516 (26.8%)
Chinese				
Pass	621 (83.4%)	598 (89.7%)	906 (84.4%)	1568 (81.5%)
Fail	124 (16.6%)	69 (10.3%)	168 (15.6%)	355 (18.5%)
Mathematics				
Pass	456 (62.1%)	555 (83.5%)	767 (71.5%)	1426 (74.1%)
Fail	278 (37.9%)	110 (16.5%)	306 (28.5%)	498 (25.9%)

The sample size for SAS, CIS, Low-income HKMS, and Average HKMS is 753, 673, 1086, and 1942, respectively. The data shown in the table is calculated by excluding unreported cases.

schools were chosen based on two criteria: (1) having a minimum of 20% representation of a particular student group, such as low-income mainstream, Chinese immigrant, or South Asian students, and (2) being located in different districts across Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories. The selected schools were sent formal invitations and consent forms, and students had the option to decline participation while maintaining confidentiality. The Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee of the lead author's university granted approval. The study included a total of 4,850 students from grades 10–12 in 23 secondary schools, with the sample demographics shown in Table 1.

2.2 Measurement of variables

As indicated previously, this study developed and validated the Post-Secondary Education Pursuit Instrument (PSEPi) to assess the success and obstacle factors influencing students to pursue higher education in Hong Kong. Seven factors that can impact this

pursuit, namely, significant others' influence, glass ceiling effect, locus of control, self-efficacy, relative functionalism, preparation for college, and financial aid, were established. In addition, the PSEPi also considers demographic information, including age, gender, grade level, ethnicity, religious affiliation, recipient of the School Textbook Assistance Scheme, and parental occupation and education, as independent variables.

2.2.1 Item selection

The items included in this study were selected through a rigorous examination of relevant literature, empirical research, and policy documents. While certain scales such as the college-going self-efficacy scale and perceptions to barriers scale have been previously published, their psychometric properties were not reported (Fore and Chaney, 1998). Consequently, these scales were not utilized in the present study.

Utilizing Harris's (2015) scale, we developed a culturally and educationally specific questionnaire for the context of Hong Kong. Following international practice (Yuen and Lee, 2013), the scale

was translated into Chinese and back-translated to cater to Chinese students. Based on literature and student interviews, we adapted the scale to fit the Hong Kong context. Our questionnaire focused on five key factors in FIPHE, namely relative functionalism, the glass ceiling effect, self-appraisal, preparation for college, and financial aid concerns. To identify the most influential person in a student's pursuit of PSE, we designed the questionnaire to inquire about significant others' impact, using four items for this purpose. The questionnaire can be found in Appendices 1 and 2. Students were asked to respond on a 4-Likert point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) for all subscales except for the significant others' influence subscale, which is in a 4-Likert point (1 = never to 4 = often), and preparation for college subscale, which is in a 2-Likert point scale (1 = false; 2 = true). The construct validity of PSEPi for Hong Kong youth has been supported (Chi-square (χ^2) of 959.5 with 413 degrees of freedom (df), $p < 0.001$, NNFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.042 and SRMR = 0.056). The composite reliability of the subscales is good (from 0.75 to 0.93).

2.3 Analytical strategies

This study aims to identify the factor that has the most influence on students' educational aspirations by examining the construct validity of PSEPi and comparing the means of different factors in each group. To conduct the analysis, the CFA model was analyzed with LISREL 8.54 using diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS) estimation, treating the data as ordinal (Mîndrilă, 2010). The measurement models were evaluated using several fit indices, including Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), in conjunction with chi-square test statistics. To measure the model fit, we employed a set of criteria, with NNFI and CFI values greater than 0.90 and >0.95 indicating a good fit (Kline, 2011), and an RMSEA value smaller than 0.05 and SRMR smaller than 0.08 considered adequate (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The results showed that the relative functionalism factor had the highest means and, thus, exerted the most significant impact on students' pursuit of higher education across all groups.

To determine how various factors affect students' pursuit of PSE and how these factors interact with relative functionalism, directly or indirectly, the structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques were utilized to perform direct effects models and multiple mediational models. The direct effects models involved using six correlated success factors and obstacles simultaneously to predict the relative functionalism of each student group. Each latent factor was predicted by its corresponding indicators, with uncorrelated uniqueness specified among the indicators. In the multiple mediational models, specific attention was given to the influence of significant others and locus of control as independent variables and how they affect relative functionalism as dependent variables, with the remaining factors serving as mediators. Finally, one-way MANOVA was conducted to explore the perceived differences in the factors affecting students' aspirations and pursuit of higher education among different student groups.

TABLE 2 Goodness-of-fit indices of the seven-factor model of PSEPi and factor means in each group.

	CIS	SAS	Low-income HKMS	Average HKMS
1. Goodness of fit indices				
χ^2	2561.33	2496.74	3817.13	4955.43
df	413	413	413	413
p-value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
NNFI	0.98	0.98	0.97	0.97
CFI	0.98	0.98	0.97	0.98
RMSEA	0.042	0.041	0.050	0.044
SRMR	0.062	0.060	0.058	0.052
2. Factor means (SD)				
Significant others influence	2.95 (0.03)	3.09 (0.03)	2.81 (0.02)	2.85 (0.02)
Glass ceiling	2.29 (0.02)	2.56 (0.02)	2.25 (0.02)	2.14 (0.01)
Relative functionalism	3.24 (0.02)	3.34 (0.02)	3.16 (0.02)	3.12 (0.01)
Locus of control	2.94 (0.02)	2.98 (0.02)	2.90 (0.02)	2.89 (0.01)
Self-efficacy	2.70 (0.02)	2.98 (0.02)	2.58 (0.02)	2.59 (0.01)
Preparation for PSE	0.47 (0.33)	0.49 (0.33)	0.43 (0.31)	0.43 (0.31)
Financial aid	2.44 (0.02)	2.64 (0.02)	2.48 (0.02)	2.31 (0.01)

χ2, chi-square; df, degree of freedom; NNFI, non-normed fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual.

3 Results

3.1 Factorial validity of PSEPi in different student groups

Table 2 presents the factorial validity of the seven-factor model of the adapted questionnaire instrument across all groups of students. As all values of NNFI and CFI were greater than 0.95, and all values of RMSEA were equal or less than 0.050, the seven-factor model of PSEPi fitted the data of each student group well. Seven conceptually distinct factors, namely, significant others' influence, glass ceiling, relative functionalism, locus of control, self-efficacy, preparation for college, and financial aid were identified in each student group. The mean score for relative functionalism was the highest, ranging from 3.12 to 3.34 out of 4.00, among all the factors in each student group.

3.2 Predictions for relative functionalism among different student groups

Table 3 illustrates the significant direct effects of the significant others, locus of control and self-efficacy factors on the relative

TABLE 3 SEM Direct effects model examines the relationships between the six factors and relative functionalism across groups.

	Relative functionalism			
	Chinese immigrant students	South/Southeast Asian students	Low-income Hong Kong mainstream students	Average Hong Kong Mainstream students
Significant Others' Influence	0.30*	0.31*	0.06*	0.21*
Glass Ceiling	0.17*	−0.01	0.08*	0.01
Locus of Control	0.43*	0.52*	0.28*	0.37*
Self-efficacy	0.19*	−0.18*	0.19*	0.17*
Preparation for PSE	0.14*	−0.10*	−0.07*	0.01
Financial Aid	−0.10*	0.24*	0.10*	0.02

*$p < 0.05$.

functionalism (utilitarian educational values) of students across all groups ($p < 0.05$). Particularly for Chinese immigrant students and low-income Hong Kong mainstream students groups, all factors were significant predictors (βs ranged from −0.10 to 0.43 in Chinese immigrant student group while from −0.07 to 0.28 in low-income Hong Kong mainstream student group) with the locus of control (βs equaled 0.43 and 0.28 in Chinese immigrant and low-income Hong Kong mainstream student groups, respectively) being the most important contributor ($p < 0.05$). For South Asian students, all factors, except for the glass ceiling factor, were significant predictors (βs ranged from −0.18 to 0.52) ($p < 0.05$) and among which the locus of control and significant others were the most important contributors. Average Hong Kong mainstream students have a significant effect on the locus of control, significant others, and self-efficacy (βs ranged from 0.17 to 0.37) ($p < 0.05$). To summarize, significant others and locus of control were the common positive predictors of relative functionalism, across all cultural backgrounds. Financial aid and preparation for college were essential predictors of relative functionalism for all underprivileged groups, except for the average Hong Kong mainstream students.

3.3 Mediational models between significant others and locus of control, and relative functionalism

The direct effects analyses revealed that the significant others and locus of control factors were the main contributors to the relative functionalism of students in all groups. Deliberations were made to examine whether other factors (e.g., glass ceiling effect, self-efficacy, locus of control, preparation for college, and financial aid) transmit the effect of the influence of significant others on the relative functionalism among the mainstream, immigrant, and minority groups of students. Likewise, the interplay between locus of control and other factors on educational functionalism beliefs was further explored. A multiple mediation model using significant others as an independent variable, other factors like self-efficacy as mediators, and relative functionalism as a dependent variable was specified and analyzed across each group. In a similar vein, another multiple mediation model was conducted using the locus of control factor as an independent variable, other factors like preparation for college as mediators, and relative functionalism as a dependent

variable across all groups of students. Table 4 illustrates the good fit of the multiple mediational models. All values of NNFI and CFI were higher than 0.95 and all values of RMSEA were equal or less than 0.050. Both significant others and locus of control factors were critical mediators with significant mediating effects (βs ranged from 0.05 to 0.12) ($p < 0.05$), which had noticeable impacts on the relative functionalism belief among different groups of students. The findings also revealed their reciprocal relationships in determining the relative functionalism beliefs of students from diverse backgrounds.

3.4 Group differences in the seven factors of PSEPi among student groups

To assess the differential impacts of the salient factors affecting higher education pursuits across groups of students, a one-way MANOVA test was administered. Table 5 reveals significant student group differences in seven factors associated with educational aspirations. South Asian students scored higher than average Hong Kong mainstream students in all factors ($p < 0.05$) (Cohen's d values ranged from 0.16 to 0.72). Similarly, Chinese immigrant students scored higher than average Hong Kong mainstream students in all factors ($p < 0.05$) (Cohen's d values ranged from 0.13 to 0.27), except for the locus of control and preparation for college. There was a slight difference between low-income Hong Kong mainstream students and average Hong Kong mainstream students; the former scored higher on two obstacle variables, the glass ceiling ($d = 0.20$) and financial aid ($d = 0.28$).

4 Discussion

This study deepens our understanding of the differential impacts of various factors on higher education beliefs and aspirations across different groups of students in Hong Kong. Along with international studies (e.g., Hossler et al., 1999), the findings confirmed that the college and university enrollment gaps between local Hong Kong, underprivileged Chinese immigrant, and South Asian students correlated to multiple personal and contextual factors with differential effects. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis results revealed that the adapted seven-factor

TABLE 4 SEM – Fit indices and standardized total direct and specific indirect effects of multiple mediation analyses.

Multiple mediation models	Total direct effect (95% CI)	Specific indirect effect (95% CI)	χ2 (df)	NNFI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
CIS							
Locus of control → Significant others' influence → Relative functionalism	β = 0.38* (0.18, 0.58)	β = 0.07* (0.02, 0.12)	2561.33(413)	0.98	0.98	0.042	0.062
Significant others' influence → Locus of control → Relative functionalism	β = 0.23* (0.11, 0.35)	β = 0.12* (0.01, 0.23)	2561.33(413)	0.98	0.98	0.042	0.062
SAS							
Significant others' influence → Locus of control → Relative functionalism	β = 0.34* (0.15, 0.53)	β = 0.07* (0.02, 0.12)	2496.74(413)	0.98	0.98	0.041	0.060
Low-income HKMS							
Significant others' influence → Locus of control → Relative functionalism	β = 0.10 (−0.02, 0.22)	β = 0.07* (0.02, 0.12)	3817.14(413)	0.97	0.97	0.050	0.058
Average HKMS							
Locus of control → Significant others' influence → Relative functionalism	β = 0.29* (0.18, 0.40)	β = 0.05* (0.01, 0.09)	4955.43(413)	0.97	0.98	0.044	0.052
Significant others' influence → Locus of control → Relative functionalism	β = 0.18* (0.13, 0.23)	β = 0.08* (0.03, 0.13)	4955.43(413)	0.97	0.98	0.044	0.052

Sobel tests were applied for total, direct and specific indirect effects. 95% confidence intervals were also reported. *$p < 0.05$.

TABLE 5 MANOVA – Mean comparisons of the Low-income HKMS, CIS, and SAS against Average HKMS.

Reference group:	average HKMS	Significant others	Glass ceiling	Relative functionalism	Locus of control	Self-efficacy	Preparation for PSE	Financial aid
Low-income HKMS	Mean differences	−0.04 (−0.06)	**0.11*(0.20)**	0.04 (0.08)	0.01(0.02)	−0.01 (−0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	**0.17*(0.28)**
CIS	Mean differences	**0.10*(0.13)**	**0.15*(0.27)**	**0.12*(0.23)**	0.05(0.09)	**0.11*(0.19)**	0.04(0.12)	**0.13*(0.21)**
SAS	Mean differences	**0.23*(0.33)**	**0.42*(0.72)**	**0.22*(0.41)**	**0.09*(0.16)**	**0.39*(0.65)**	**0.06*(0.19)**	**0.33*(0.53)**

Effect size (Cohen's d) is indicated in the parenthesis. (0.2 small, 0.5 medium and 0.8 large) *$p < 0.05$.

questionnaire was sensitive and valid to the Hong Kong study. Particularly, students' belief in the utilitarian function of higher education (relative functionalism) is the most critical factor in determining their aspirations and pursuits of higher education. The findings aligned with international studies (e.g., Sier, 2021; Bataeineh, 2022; Vietze et al., 2022), and suggested that instilling a sense of meaning and hope in students can encourage them to pursue further studies.

While students' belief in the values of higher education is influenced by their parents, teachers and peers, the study confirmed that socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors interact to impact students' beliefs in the function of education. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Chiu and Walker, 2007) this study delved deeper into the impacts of the mechanism of the glass ceiling effects among the disadvantaged mainstream, Chinese immigrant, and ethnic minority South Asian students and their advantageous mainstream peers. Despite recognizing the value of higher education for personal advancement, systemic barriers associated with the lack of social and economic capital, language proficiency and self-efficacy in pursuing higher education led these students to be trapped in the vicious cycle of early dropout, low educational aspirations, and entry into the labor market without marketable qualifications (Bhowmik, 2019; Lam et al., 2019; Chiu and Siu, 2022).

4.1 Intersectionality confronted by underprivileged students

Our direct effects analyses confirmed that significant others' influence and locus of control were salient factors facilitating the higher education aspirations of South Asian and Chinese immigrant students. These findings affirm the studies (Wang and Neihart, 2015; Lam et al., 2019; Keung and Ho, 2020) that family socio-economic status and personal capability are dominant factors affecting their education aspirations. Hong Kong is a collective Asian society, parents and teachers are the youth's dream keepers and life anchors. Family influence and locus of control accounted for the most variance in mitigating the financial barriers of Chinese immigrant students' higher education pursuits. Compared to economic factors, parental care and educational aspirations for a brighter future are the essential student-centered enablers in promoting their resilience and self-efficacy (Hossler et al., 1999). To this end, school personnel need to recognize the systemic barriers

different student groups confront (Yuen et al., 2021), give academic planning advice, and address such immigrant family concerns by tackling different barriers.

By contrast, the glass ceiling factor links with relative functionalism among Chinese immigrant and low-income mainstream students, suggesting it to be a common obstacle with heterogeneous items in these two student groups. The glass ceiling factor encompasses a range of issues, including family backgrounds, ethnic culture, financial situation, language ability, lack of expert advice and guidance, and societal expectations on gender. This study is in parallel to prior international research (Hossler et al., 1999; Harris and Halpin, 2002; Chowdry et al., 2011; Ding et al., 2021) by elucidating the various hurdles that underprivileged mainstream, Chinese immigrant, and ethnic minority scholars encounter while pursuing higher education. Factors such as family's socioeconomic status, ethnic customs, and societal gender norms can pose significant challenges, particularly for female students from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds who aspire to higher education. Given the educational segregation and stratification of these student groups in higher education, this study presents the latest evidence of how the complex social and cultural capital dynamics play out. On the one hand, social and economic vulnerabilities may prevent these students from applying to university due to their lack of academic readiness, and cultural and social capital. On the other hand, underprivileged Chinese immigrants and South Asians value higher education and have high expectations for their future earnings and life chances. These beliefs and aspirations are deeply rooted in Confucian culture and Asian family values (Ho et al., 2018; Yuen, 2022). Although South Asian students face language and financial barriers, they attribute higher utilitarian values to university degrees than their mainstream peers in order to mitigate their disadvantageous social circumstances and achieve upward mobility. The prevalent Hong Kong government policy measures are narrowly concentrated on remediating the limited Chinese proficiency of South Asian students, with little attention paid to enhancing the English proficiency of Chinese immigrant students. A comprehensive social and educational policy is needed to enable success for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. This should include measures such as quality parent-child relationships, raising agentive and educational aspirations, and targeted higher education subsidies.

4.2 Parents, self-beliefs and higher education pursuit

Delving deeper into the intricate relationship between various factors and their influence on students' belief in the functional values of higher education, the mediation analysis highlighted the pivotal role of the locus of control factor in mediating the impacts of significant others on relative functionalism. It is evident that students' parents, friends and teachers directly affect their belief in the value of higher education, along with themselves. Notably, Asian parents are their children's dream keepers and exert an affirmative mindset on their commitment to higher education pursuits. Moreover, the reciprocal dynamic between parents and students plays a critical role in determining relative functionalism. The evident family influence calls for functional home-school

collaboration in high schools to prepare, advise, and support underprivileged mainstream and immigrant students to enhance their locus of control and self-efficacy. Strong family involvement is part of school capital in mitigating the glass ceiling effect caused by adverse social conditions (de Lugt, 2020; Yuen et al., 2021).

The influence of parents on their children's educational aspirations and the sense of control was also illustrated. The family serves as a perennial institution for mediating the negative or unproductive mindset and increases youth self-efficacy and agency in accepting disappointments, challenges, and unpredictable changes in life (Patfield et al., 2021). The roles of parents and teachers in students' educational aspirations have been well-documented (Ng and Choo, 2021; Xiang and Chiu, 2022). This study underscored that the mothers are the primary caregivers and, in most cases, account for the greatest explanatory power for children's desire to pursue higher education. Parents are valuable community partners, albeit they represent a highly heterogeneous group in terms of education, socio-economic status, linguistics, and cultural traditions. Governments should provide specific education for parents to help foster their children's aspirations for higher education and boost academic confidence (Gamble and Crouse, 2020). This also calls for further deliberations from the government to transform the power of familial habitus for underprivileged students whose parents have no knowledge of higher education but have high expectations of their future. Additionally, students who possess a strong sense of internal control are more likely to take responsibility for their academic decisions, seek guidance actively, and ultimately succeed in achieving their higher education goals (Nordstrom and Segrist, 2009).

Contrary to a common belief, although echoing prior studies (Yuen et al., 2021), local students in Hong Kong have more reservations about the value of their higher education credentials in terms of advancing their academic and career goals compared to their non-local peers. This suggests that they may be disillusioned about the future. The negative attitudes toward university education in Hong Kong among local students may result from witnessing emigration following the social unrest in 2019. The survey was conducted between late 2018 and mid-2019 during a period of major social conflicts between local and non-local students in higher education institutions. This was further compounded by increasing competition from cities in the Greater Bay Area of mainland China.

In comparison to their typical Hong Kong mainstream counterparts, low-income Hong Kong mainstream students rated all factors as less significant. Despite being local, poor mainstream students do not face the ethnic acculturation challenges they have limited aspirations for upward social mobility. The segmented pathways in higher education coupled with the competitive job market do not promise marketable qualifications (Wong, 2021). The government is obliged to address this unacceptable social inequality. Similar to other regions (Davies and Ercolani, 2021), negative beliefs and perceptions about higher education may lower the motivation of local students and perpetuate existing educational stratifications and segmented pathways for struggling students.

The glass ceiling effect is particularly prevalent among South Asian students due to financial hardship, language constraints, limited social networks, and inadequate higher education guidance services. Such intersection coupled with a self-reliant discourse under the impacts of neoliberalism only perpetuates the prevalent

systemic barriers to achieving meaningful higher education dreams. A recent study revealed that South Asian students exhibited the most profound difference from Hong Kong mainstream students concerning language proficiency, ethnic culture, self-efficacy, and knowledge of financial aid (Yuen et al., 2021). Prior research (Gao et al., 2019; Yuen and Leung, 2019; Loh and Hung, 2020; Yuen et al., 2021; Yuen, 2022) has established that South Asian students perceive their ethnic culture, lack of Chinese proficiency, and gender roles as obstacles to pursuing higher education, which ultimately lowers their aspirations.

That is said, it is evident that students' beliefs are drivers of their pursuit of higher education. A positive social image and empowered self-agency can help mitigate their disadvantage. As revealed by the findings, Chinese immigrant students scored higher in success factors (significant others influence, relative functionalism, and self-efficacy) and barriers (glass ceiling and financial aid) than the average Hong Kong mainstream students. They face comparable obstacles to higher education as South Asian students, albeit to a different extent. Despite facing fewer ethnic and language barriers, Chinese immigrant students frequently balance work and study to support their families and be academically self-reliant (Yuen and Leung, 2019). Future research should examine the interplay between personal resilience and the influence of significant others to comprehend the mechanisms underlying the structural relationships among the factors.

The findings by direct effects and mediation analyses call for tailored guidance plans involving home-school collaboration, self-advocacy skill development, and emotional and mental support, which are necessary to address their diverse educational journeys. Increasing local students' hope for the future deserves further investigation as they are the future pillar of society. At the core of higher education is talent development. Policy-makers are concerned with producing efficient and competitive citizens and the labor force for economic development. Efforts to improve access to higher education for disadvantaged youth should focus on creating nested and genuine home-school-community partnerships to empower parents to provide concrete support and advice to their children regarding matching their abilities, career aspirations, and needs. Implications for restructuring the hierarchy of the higher education system (Xiang and Chiu, 2022) include broadening the choice of specialization programs for different ethnic student groups to promote both vertical and horizontal development. Additionally, cultural-specific parental education programs can be developed to align parental expectations with college preparation strategies.

4.3 Limitations and future research

Our research methodology dictates our findings. The cross-sectional findings can be used as a starting point for future studies on higher education trajectories of diverse Hong Kong youth over time. However, it is important to note that this study cannot establish a direct causal effect relationship between each factor and a student's decision to pursue higher education. The findings should be interpreted within a specific context and time period. Hong Kong has turned a new chapter after the 2019 social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. The higher education options

available to middle-class and working-class families, as well as mainstream or non-mainstream students, vary greatly. The former navigated their children to diversified overseas education pipelines while their working-class counterparts struggled to support their children by applying for local self-financed higher education programs. To gain a deeper understanding of the educational pathways of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, future research should adopt a longitudinal design. It is worth noting that only self-reported data were collected and utilized for analysis, which may have introduced some bias that could affect the validity of the findings. To overcome this issue in the future, we suggest employing multiple research methods that can incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that the sample size of each student group was not equal. We had fewer socially disadvantaged students than the average mainstream students. Hence, our findings should be interpreted with caution, and future research should make an effort to recruit a larger proportion of socially disadvantaged students.

5 Conclusion

This research delves into the complex issue of segmented educational pathways for underprivileged students in pursuing higher education. It examines the various contextual and demographic factors that influence a student's decision-making process, taking cultural and socio-economic insights into account. The study highlights the divergent values placed on higher education by mainstream and non-mainstream, privileged and underprivileged youth in Hong Kong. Parental care and a student's inner strengths and self confidence are critical factors that significantly impact a student's likelihood of pursuing higher education. Additionally, the language barrier (primarily academic English) faced by low-income mainstream students remains the crux of the problem for pursuing higher education. This issue, along with financial aid, requires language-focused initiatives from the government to improve English language proficiency rather than letting these youth bear the impacts of structural inequalities imposed by the neoliberalism of higher education. Economic capital is a critical factor in educational aspirations, and designated financial assistance schemes can alleviate the financial burden on low-income families. The findings of our research demonstrate that a student's educational beliefs and aspirations are positively impacted by their locus of control and the influence of significant others. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the effects of these factors can vary among diverse student populations. Thus, it is crucial to avoid applying a blanket solution to underprivileged student groups and instead recognize the distinctiveness within and between these groups. Policy makers must consider the unique socio-cultural context of Hong Kong when designing interventions aimed at promoting social inclusion and addressing the exclusion of disadvantaged students. It is noteworthy that this issue is not exclusive to Hong Kong but is prevalent in other societies where underprivileged groups experience comparable systemic discrimination in higher education. Our study sheds light on the intersectionality issues encountered by underprivileged youth in education, providing potential avenues to promote equity in secondary and higher education.

Data availability statement

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethic Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

CY: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft. AC: Methodology, Writing – review and editing. KL: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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An introduction to the basic elements of the caste system of India

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Oppression, systemic bias, and racism have unfortunately long been part of the human experience. This paper is a review of basic elements of the Indian caste system, understanding its impact on the daily lives of different caste members, the role of colonialism in perpetuating the caste system, the Indian reservation system for mitigating disadvantages created by the caste system, and how categorization and labels can affect individual identity. This paper then discusses the global relevance of the caste system and its impact on mental health and psychological functioning. In India, the caste system is a comprehensive, systematized, and institutionalized form of oppression of members of the lower castes, particularly the Dalits. Formalized during the British colonial period, the caste system brings together two related Indian concepts of *varna* and *jāti* to create four social orders and multiple subunits. Sitting outside the traditional four orders are the Dalits, who experience social, economic, and religious discrimination due to an inherited status related to traditionally polluting occupations. Since the caste system extends beyond India to other South Asian countries, as well as to communities around the world that are home to the Indian diaspora, the inequities created by the caste system are a global issue. India's affirmative action system provides important insights to policy makers, as well as researchers in the social sciences for how to counteract the effects of systematized oppression. Collectively, this can aid in a better understanding of the effects of discrimination and oppression on identity, self-esteem, and mental health, and how we can develop more targeted policies and procedures in our own local contexts.

KEYWORDS

caste, class, South Asia, India, Dalit, justice

Introduction

There have been many re-ignited calls for anti-oppression, anti-racism, and justice in society, with the emergence of the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, and Every Child Matters. However, these calls are not new. A related need for genuine reconciliation between diverse groups has echoed throughout our history across the globe. One group seeking to overcome historical and current discrimination are the Dalits within the caste system of India, a notable case given its long duration, its intersection with colonialism, and the connections between local religion, social norms, and economics. At the time of Indian independence in 1947, caste discrimination was recognized as one of the most pressing issues of this free and democratic nation, and the government instituted processes of reconciliation and justice. Today, given the international reach of the South Asian

diaspora, the issue of caste is increasingly being recognized as a global issue. The history of the Indian caste system and the country's strategies for justice and reconciliation are of interest in themselves, but can also provide many lessons for other nations. A study of the caste system can provide lessons for understanding psychological impacts on identity as an effect of marginalization.

An overview of the Indian caste system

The Indian caste system is one of the oldest systematized and institutionalized forms of oppression, having been in existence for over 3,000 years (Thapa et al., 2021). At the bottom of this hierarchical system are groups such as the Dalits who experience caste-based discrimination, which impacts their access to health care, education, employment, and other social determinants of health (Thapa et al., 2021). To understand caste-based discrimination, it is important to understand the complexity of the caste system, the "book-view" and "field-view" perspectives of caste, and the role of colonialism in shaping the caste system as it exists today.

The complexity of the caste system

The word "caste" is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word *casta*, meaning lineage, breed, or race, and *casto,* meaning pure and unmixed (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). In the 15th century, Portuguese seafarers used the term for the first time in the Indian context, when they arrived to trade (Sahoo, 2017). Two Indian concepts frequently equated with caste are *varna* and *jāti*, though neither word captures the full structure currently known as the caste system.

The concept of *varna* – a term sometimes used interchangeably with caste-translates to "colour," although within this historical context, it refers primarily to order and classification (Beteille, 1996). The hierarchical classification encompassed by *varna* entails a more flexible system of movement between four specific orders based on a person's intrinsic nature (*svabhāv*) and qualities (*guna*) (Kumar, 2018). In the system clearly delineated within Hindu sacred texts, there can be only four *varnas* – that is, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra – since the *varnas* collectively represent discrete parts of the first being, Purusha. The Brahmins are the priests and teachers and were born from the head of Purusha; the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers, were born from the shoulders; the Vaisyas, or traders and merchants, were born from the thighs; and the Sudras, labourers and craftspeople, were born from the feet. The first three *varnas* were considered twice-born and hence purer than the fourth category, the Sudras, who were once-born. An unofficial fifth category, *avarnas*, existed outside the *varna* categories and were historically referred to by many names, including *achooots, Harijans,* or "untouchables." Individuals from this lowest stratum of castes were considered to be impure and polluting since their inherited occupations often involved tasks considered to be physically and ritually polluting, such as working with dead bodies and animals or removing human waste (Thorat and Joshi, 2015). Dalit, meaning "broken" or "scattered," is the term commonly used now to refer to this lowest of castes; the Indian government uses the term Scheduled Castes to refer to this group. The

Adivasis, the Indigenous peoples, also known as Scheduled Tribes, also existed outside the four *varnas* and, like the Dalits, are the focus of affirmative action in India.

Second, the concept of *jāti* is more closely linked to the typical western concept of caste, originating as it does from the word *jana* (birth) and to the social identity ascribed by birth (Beteille, 1996). While *varna* is more about the system as a whole, *jāti* is more about the units, such as castes and communities, and is flexible in the sense that more categories can be created to meet societal needs (Beteille, 1996). Within each *varna,* there are many *jāti*s forming a complex hierarchy of occupational communities (Sahoo, 2017); consequently, it is estimated that 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes exist in India (Kumar, 2018). The Dalits comprise different castes based on various occupations and have their own hierarchy, as do the various other orders of the four *varnas*.

Defining the functions of caste is difficult given local variations. Acknowledging this, Ghurye (1969) delineated six defining characteristics of caste: (1) a society segmented into a system of groups that are predetermined at birth; (2) the system is hierarchical, although the hierarchy is often disputed; (3) the system restricts social interactions between upper and lower castes, such as eating together; (4) different castes are segregated, with lower castes living on the periphery of town with restricted access to resources such as wells; (5) occupations are generally inherited; and (6) endogamy (marriage within one's own caste) prevails, although hypergamy (marriage into a higher caste for women) is permitted. However, formal definitions of caste have been criticized in view of regional variations in practice and the flexible nature of day-to-day interrelations between castes. As B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit activist who chaired the committee to draft the constitution of India, stated: "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind" (Ambedkar, 2014). As Ambedkar highlights, to bring true integration, policies need to change the culture, and thereby the mindset of people.

Balancing our understanding of caste through multiple sources of evidence

In understanding the caste system, it is important to recognize that a distinction exists between the "book-view" understanding of *varna* and *jāti* from Brahmin-authored sacred Hindu texts, such as the Vedas and Manusmriti, and the real-life practice of the caste system, which one can learn from regularly speaking with and observing members of different castes (Sahoo, 2017). From the book-view of Hinduism, scholars surmise that caste is a religious and cultural construct – a social practice of the Indian subcontinent and distinct from practices within Western societies. For example, focusing on Hindu sacred texts can promote an overemphasis on purity/impurity dimensions of the caste system. The "field-view" perspective, on the other hand, focuses on how caste is practiced in everyday life (Sahoo, 2017). Studies of caste through local traditions and customs suggest that, in addition to or instead of traditional notions, caste is also shaped by numerical strength, economic and political power, and even Western education and occupations (Sahoo, 2017). For example, Srinivas (1984) discusses how the nuances of caste play out by discussing the limitations and permutations of power within each

caste. He notes that the Kshatriya had power, while Brahmins, though powerful themselves, had to subjugate themselves to kings and perform any rituals the kings desired. Furthermore, to solidify their role, Brahmins had to make themselves essential to kings through knowledge of law, ethics, and religion. Srinivas (1984) also points out that notions of impurity sometimes transcended caste divisions: not only are Dalits viewed as impure, but Brahmins who performed funeral rites were sometimes also referred to as "untouchables" – degraded and made impure by that work despite being Brahmin.

The concept of Sanskritization, which was introduced by Srinivas (1956), also exemplifies how the nuances of caste play out in everyday life. Sanskritization refers to the process through which caste upward mobility was made possible; albeit, upward mobility through Sanskritization was more possible for the middle than lower castes. In practice, Sanskritization was the process of taking on aspects of the Brahminic way of life (e.g., adopting vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol), as well as adopting Brahminic rituals and beliefs (e.g., concepts of karma, dharma). It is noteworthy, that such strategies are not guaranteed to work, and if the strategies do work, it typically takes one to two generations before the change in status is accepted by other castes. Unfortunately, Dalit groups are unable to transcend their "untouchability" even through Sanskritization; though that did not stop that process in these groups (Srinivas, 1956).

Some scholars have argued that the Dalits accepted their societal role because they believed that their position would improve through reincarnation into their next life. However, anthropological fieldwork conducted in India demonstrates that these concepts of rebirth (samsara), karma, and dharma were rarely used by individuals from lower castes, who might not have understood their meaning (Deliege, 1993). For instance, Kathleen Gough reported that when she asked a group of older Pallars, a Dalit community, about concepts of death, duty, destiny, and rebirth, they apparently replied:

> "Mother, we don't know! Do you know? Have you been there?"
> I said, "No, but Brahmans say that if people do their duty well in this life, their souls will be born next time in a higher caste."
> "Brahmans say!" scoffed another elder. "Brahmans say anything. Their heads go round and round". (Gough, 1973, p. 234)

Analysis of origin myths within Dalit communities shows a high degree of consistency in ideology. While caste is portrayed as a given, Dalit origin myths do not frame caste as strictly hierarchical, unchangeable, or necessarily imposed by God (Deliege, 1993). Myths contain elements that explain lower caste status as resulting from misunderstanding or trickery. Deliege (1993) recounts an example:

> In the beginning, there were two brothers who were poor. Then they went together to pray to God. God asked them to remove the carcass of a dead cow. The elder brother answered: "Een thambi pappaan" (My younger brother will do it) but understood: "Een thambi paappaan" (My younger brother is a Brahman); since that very day, the younger brother became Brahman (paappaan) and the elder brother became a Paraiyar. All castes originate from these two brothers. (p. 536)

Hence, based on a misunderstanding the older brother in this myth becomes the Paraiyar, while the younger brother becomes the Brahmin. Since by tradition, older brothers are considered heads of

households after their father and stand hierarchically above their younger brothers, the reversal of fortune in this myth arguably promotes the subversive view that the Paraiyar's status exceed that of the Brahmin.

Deliege (1993) notes that such origin myths are difficult to uncover and are not part of the core identity of Dalits today as they are more concerned with social, political and economic issues than with ritual purity. Given such nuances, it is important to use caution in accepting analyses of caste based strictly on Hindu and/or Brahmanical scriptures or texts, including academic work. Overarching statements about the caste system typically fail to capture the complexities of caste-related local practices, the views of Dalits, customs and necessities, or their evolution over time.

The role of colonialism in perpetuating caste

Although the caste system is typically viewed as intrinsic to India and presented in contrast to Western customs, it is important to acknowledge the role of European colonialism in cementing the caste system. Under British rule in the Indian subcontinent (the British Raj), "caste" became a way to organize and systematize India's diverse forms of social identities and communities, and was used for all government executive actions (Dirks, 1992, 2001). Technological innovations spearheaded by British colonizers – such as roads, railways, telegraph, newspaper and mail systems, and printing – enabled castes to organize themselves in new ways through travel and correspondence. For example, printing allowed castes to print and formally record their constitutions rather than leave them in malleable form (Srinivas, 1957). Riser-Kositsky (2009) writes that "colonial policies, through their structuring and politicization of caste, were one of the direct causes for the incessant and often deadly caste conflicts in India today" (p. 31).

Moreover, it is problematic to use Western conventions as a baseline by which to judge the "correctness" of Indian conventions or behavior, and apply it with broad strokes. Many conceptions of the Indian caste system originate from colonial British perceptions of the structure. For instance, Riser-Kositsky (2009) quotes senior British officials who, from the beginning, viewed caste as a problematic institution that allegedly embodied "indolence, avarice, lack of cleanliness, venality, and ignorance" (p. 31) Furthermore, the British officials viewed the caste system as emblematic of the moral inferiority of the Indian character compared to their own, given its supposed "lax hold of facts, its indifference to action, its absorption in dreams, its exaggerated reverence for tradition, its passion for endless division" (pp. 35–36). Hence, views of the caste system were used to justify negative views of Indians compared to the British.

Despite their views of the caste system, the British officials made minimal effort to dismantle the system directly; indeed, they tied caste intricately to Hinduism, thereby framing caste as an insurmountable convention (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). Instead of dismantling the caste system, the British tried to appease and accommodate the lower castes by digging separate wells, setting up special schools, and starting reservation policies. Although this had positive benefits for lower castes, it did not overhaul the system. Moreover, many scholars (see for review, Riser-Kositsky, 2009) cite the British census efforts to capture caste categorization as creating more rigid caste identities and

promoting caste identity over other social identities. New incentives such as scholarships or military recruitment motivated various groups to have their caste classified in a particular way. Riser-Kositsky quotes Ambedkar, who in 1943 acknowledged the entrenchment of caste in Indian institutions and day-to-day life, writing that "today the census is a matter of first rate concern to everyone, as Indian politics devolved into a numbers game in which every side tried its best to cook the books" (p. 42).

It is therefore important not to base notions of the Indian caste system solely on portrayals by British colonials, given their lack of holistic understanding of Indian regional identities. Furthermore, even positive British accomplishments such as technological implementations, may have also had unintended negative consequences in solidifying caste identities and inter-caste conflict in ways that continue today. Finally, continuing to define caste as a solely Hindu construct impedes progress for other South Asian religious groups as well as for Dalit Hindus who have converted to different religions to escape caste discrimination, but continue to face it regardless.

The relevance of studying the Indian caste system

The caste system is a global issue as it exists across communities in the growing South Asian diaspora (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). Recently, caste-based discrimination has been recognized as an issue in North American city councils, companies, and academic institutions, with some of these institutions implementing measures to prevent caste-based discrimination (Dave, 2022; Venkatraman, 2022; Singh, 2023a,b). As a system that categorizes and stratifies individuals, caste influences self-identity and has adverse effects on self-esteem and mental health (Jaspal, 2011; Komanapalli and Rao, 2021). It is important to understand how caste features and functions across communities in the South Asian diaspora given the global reach of caste, the problem of caste-based discrimination in schools, workplaces, and other institutions, and the impact of caste on identity and psychological functioning. Moreover, understanding the Indian affirmative action system, especially for policy makers and other groups that are advocating for equity, diversity, and inclusion in their local contexts, could generate new ideas.

Affirmative action in practice: reservation system

The Indian Constitution outlined three primary strategies to reduce caste discrimination: (1) Legal and regulatory measures that introduced penalties for caste based discrimination (e.g., The Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955; The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993); (2) Allocation of resource and benefits to develop measures to reduce the socio-economic gap between Scheduled Castes and higher castes and (3) compensatory discrimination, including a reservation system for public and government institutions (Saxena, 2004).

India has the oldest affirmative action program in the world, launched in 1950 just a few years after India's independence from colonial rule. India's reservation programs, which is largely a quota-based system, is referred to by many terms, including affirmative action, positive discrimination or compensatory discrimination. Quota systems existed in a different domain during the British Raj, including reserved electoral seats for different religious groups as well as lower castes (Saxena, 2004). In independent India, the compensatory discrimination program focused at first on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the public and government sector, namely education, employment, and legislative bodies. At first these provisions were supposed to be in place for only 10 years; however, they are still deemed a necessity with no sign of dissipating (Haq and Ojha, 2010). In the 1980s, "Other Backward Classes" (i.e., communities that were identified as below the national average on social or educational indicators; Ramaiah, 1992) were added to the program. In 2019, "Economically Weaker Section" (EWS) of society was also added to the program (Pillalamarri, 2022). This category included individuals of higher castes who needed social and economic assistance, as other groups already had provisions in the Constitution.

In 1992, the Supreme Court of India ruled that reservation quotas could not exceed 50 percent of total seats. Anything above 50 percent, the Court judged would violate equal access as guaranteed by the Constitution, thus they placed a cap on reservations (Pillalamarri, 2022). However, in 2022, the Court ruled to uphold the 10% reservation for the EWS, even though the constitutional amendment to include these provisions meant that up to 59.5% of seats in central institutions could be reserved for disadvantaged groups. Justice Jamshed Burjor Pardiwala wrote in his verdict that:

> "Reservation is not an end but a means—a means to secure social and economic justice. Reservation should not be allowed to become a vested interest. Real solution, however, lies in eliminating the causes that have led to the social, educational, and economic backwardness of the weaker sections of the community". (Pillalamarri, 2022)

One of the criticisms of the reservation system is that benefits accrue to the most economically and socially advantaged of the disadvantaged groups. The term "creamy layer" was first coined by Justice Krishna Iyer in the case of the State of Kerala vs. NM Thomas, wherein he observed that "benefits of the reservation shall be snatched away by the top creamy layer of the backward class, thus leaving the weakest among the weak and leaving the fortunate layers to consume the whole cake" (Gupta and Giri, 2015). To mitigate this issue, in 1992, the Supreme Court defined "creamy layer" and what constituted "backwardness." For reservations for the Other Backward Classes, certain restrictions were put into place to take advantage of the reservation system: those for whom reservations applied could not be (1) children of high officials as per the constitution, (2) children of civil servants in high positions, (3) children of high-ranked armed-forces officials, (4) children of professionals and those engaged in trade and industry, (5) children of property owners, and (6) children of people with an annual income exceeding 8 lakh (National Commission for Backward Classes, 1993). This was to prevent the economically, socially, and educationally advantaged members of the Other Backward Classes from reaping all the rewards from the reservation system.

Overall, reservations for Scheduled Caste communities within public sector employment, as well as in higher education have helped

individuals from communities that would have previously been unable to access or benefit from these spheres (Haq and Ojha, 2010). In central government services, the percentage of employees from the Scheduled Castes increased from 11.31% to 16.18% from 1977 to 1987 and many of the gains were for professional and managerial jobs (10.23% to 18.63%) (Haq and Ojha, 2010). In the public sector enterprises from 1977 to 1980, the number of Scheduled Castes increased from 7.42% to 17.44% (Haq and Ojha, 2010). In higher education institutions from late 1970s to late 1990s, the number of Scheduled Castes increased from 7% to 7.8% (Haq and Ojha, 2010). However, in all sectors, the data also showed that reserved seats continued to go unfilled.

Helping the most disadvantaged and rural communities remains a further goal, and programs to improve elementary and high school education to better prepare candidates for higher education are also warranted (Haq and Ojha, 2010). Similarly, making workplaces more inclusive will make the experience of work better for individuals from underrepresented communities and facilitate integration (Haq and Ojha, 2010). Deshpande and Yadav (2006) outline how India's reservation policies could be re-formulated to target those most in need. The authors outline the many merits of the quota system, including creating political solidarity and loyalty, being comparatively easy to administer, and being generally robust to misuse. As Deshpande and Yadav (2006) very eloquently state:

> "Of course, all affirmative action is inherently contentious because it seeks to alter the status quo of inter-group power equations. Issues like this form the very stuff of politics, and better policy design alone will not make these contestations vanish. On the other hand, bad policy design will certainly make things much worse, because it will ensure that political costs are much higher than they need to be and that the social benefits are either too meagre, or badly targeted, or both. Thus, apart from its primary objective of enabling the attainment of social objectives (such as equality of opportunity or elimination of unjust inequalities), policy design also has the important responsibility of ensuring efficiency in the sense of minimising unavoidable costs and maximising potential benefits." (p. 2419)

Deshpande and Yadav (2006) argue the second point has not received sufficient attention. The authors suggest four principles be included in the design of such affirmative action policies: (1) be evidence-based; (2) incorporate multiple dimensions of disadvantaged status, in addition to caste; (3) be attentive to the intersectional effects of the different status dimensions; and (4) be attentive to the severity of disadvantage. By including these principles in policy, Deshpande and Yadav (2006), stress not only will greater social justice be achieved, but the sole focus on caste as identity will be dissuaded. By focusing on indicators that are related to disadvantaged identities, rather than the identity itself, it breaks down the focus on caste. Also, by now focusing on measurable indicators of disadvantage, it allows for those indicators to be debated, measured, and studied; hence, progress for different disadvantaged groups can be monitored and changes can be made in a non-contentious way. This will also allow the extremely contentious politicization of caste quotas, especially for Other Backward Classes, to be reduced, as progress can easily be monitored of included groups, as well as the inclusion of new groups as necessary. This will bring transparency and

accountability to decision-making, which will help reduce caste politics.

Necessity and adverse reification of categorization and labels

One problem arising from emphasizing caste as the main mechanism of identity is that caste may become more central to identity than other underrecognized and intersectional factors. Hence, measures taken to promote economic and social equity within caste systems may themselves perpetuate the system, since caste identity is already a determinant of economic outcomes and social standing (Srinivas, 1957). One factor cited in promoting caste is that caste has a political dimension, and hence politicians who want to abolish caste also vie for votes from these different electorates (Srinivas, 1957).

Also, given the politicization of caste and that benefits through the reservation system are largely based on caste classification, some castes have sought to be re-classified as lower castes. For instance, some groups in the Other Backward Classes category have wanted to be reclassified as Scheduled Castes or Tribes, with one prominent example being the Gujjars in Rajasthan seeking to be reclassified as a Scheduled Tribe (Many die as Indian caste demands lower status, 2008; Goswami, 2019). Similarly, the Jats in Haryana, the Patels in Gujarat, and the Marathas in Maharashtra, three groups that are prominently involved in agriculture, have held prominent demonstrations, at times violent, to be re-classified as Other Backward Classes to access benefits of the reservation system. This push to be reclassified as lower castes has occurred despite these groups being closer to the dominant groups in social and economic indices than the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, or Scheduled Tribes (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2017). Surprisingly, the Jats and Marathas did receive legislative support to be re-classified as lower castes; however, this was later overturned by different courts to protect resources for the most disadvantaged groups (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2017). This process of seeking downward classification is in contrast to the traditional process of Sanskritization to seek upward mobility, and a result of economic unrest and competition for quotas in India's affirmative action system. For India, it will be quite the task to have strategies to deal with legitimate economic and social concerns of more dominant classes, while maintaining protection for disadvantaged groups.

A humorous parable which circulated in the Times of India (Deshpande, 2007) highlights one view of how identity in the caste system works in practice. In the scenario, India sends a 20-member space exploration team to the moon. The caste quotas for the crew are decided immediately: six SC [Scheduled Castes], four ST [Scheduled Tribes], eight OBCs [Other Backward Classes], and last but not least – if possible – two astronauts. The joke surmises that one can learn the castes of the "astronauts" and that the most vital piece in describing them is their qualifications and occupation – not their caste. However, members of the other categories are referred to with their caste as the focal point despite also being qualified astronauts. In this way, members of upper castes are entitled to an explicit identity that exists outside of their caste, whereas the identity of members of the lower castes is always tied to their caste first and foremost in the public sphere. As Satish Deshpande eloquently writes in his article that highlights this parable:

> This, then, is the predicament of caste today: its invisibility – or persistent denial – in one context versus its hypervisibility – or constant invocation – in another. India is split into two irreconcilable parts. One part appears to be divesting itself of caste, having climbed on to a plateau of economic and educational security where the normal rules of the game are now in its favour. But the larger part of society is still heavily invested in caste, because it is trying to climb the steep slope of inherited disadvantage, and caste is the only lever it has to reduce the tilt of the playing field. These unequal and opposed parts are also mutually reinforcing in a strange way. It is as if each must weave what the other must unravel.

Deshpande (2007) concludes that in order to annihilate caste, it must be formally acknowledged and spoken of, and that members of the upper caste must lead the way in doing so because they wield the most power in the public sphere.

Beteille (1996) echoes similar sentiments that while caste continues to provide security and attachment in a chaotic world, the continuation of the system is not a natural inevitability. He agrees with Srinivas that caste ultimately would evolve more into a form of ethnicity. Beteille (1996) also argues that the reason the caste system has continued is due to the failures of the Indian government to fulfill its promises of equal access in education, health care, and other public institutions, which would help to develop necessary connections between different communities. Hence, caste identity has become more entrenched as people rely on economic support from members of their own communities, which consists of people with shared identities such as caste, religion, and the village or district where they were born in India. However, as we discuss in the next section, the caste system exists on a global scale, not just in India. Therefore, its continued existence cannot in current times be due solely or primarily to the failures of the Indian government in providing equal access to public institutions and economic opportunities.

The process of self-identification and group formation is complex, and by singling out caste identity as the core factor to use primarily for categorization for affirmative action in India, although unintentional, has further solidified caste identity as legitimate; thus, making it more difficult to eradicate. Given that caste is categorization based on division of a traditional labour system, it is difficult to see the value in retaining this unfair arbitrary system; hence, the ultimate goal of the Indian government has been its eradication. However, over time, caste identity has come to represent a shared communal and cultural background. Moreover, similar to other marginalized groups, different Dalit groups are re-absorbing their own identities in a process of re-appropriation and pride in their resiliency and history. Hence, it does not seem that caste as an identity is anywhere close to eradication, and perhaps the goal should first shift to eradicating caste-based discrimination.

Caste discrimination as a global issue

One compelling reason for social scientists and other academics outside of South Asia to learn about the caste system, is that it is a global issue. Although traditionally discussed and treated as an issue specific to India and Hinduism, caste also exists in other historically and geographically related South Asian countries

(Jodhka and Shah, 2010). Jodhka and Shah (2010) have noted that although variations exist between South Asian countries, caste-based forms of social and economic discrimination are present in all these countries. Nepal, a majority Hindu country, openly recognizes caste discrimination and, like India, has a National Dalit Commission to identify Dalit castes and ameliorate caste-based discrimination. By contrast, Sri Lanka does not recognize a caste system, although it does exist in a relatively less rigid form and is practiced differently by the country's three main ethnic groups: Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, and Buddhist Sinhalas. Similarly, both Bangladesh and Pakistan have scheduled castes that apply only to their Hindu populations, although caste discrimination is also found among both country's Muslim and other religious populations. Particularly in Pakistan, for example, the small religious minority of Christians who largely converted from Hinduism, did not lose their traditional Dalit status and face intersectional discrimination (Jodhka and Shah, 2010).

Acknowledging the global reach of caste, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar noted that "if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem." Accordingly, North American countries have begun to include caste as a protected identity alongside gender and racial identity, sexual orientation, etc. Caste discrimination in North America first came to public attention through the technology industry. For instance, the California State Court will hear a case in which a Dalit ex-employee of Cisco claims that he was a victim of caste discrimination by his supervisors who allegedly denied him promotion opportunities and excluded him from meetings (Moreno and Smith, 2022). The claimant also alleges that Cisco retaliated against him for complaining about how he was being treated. The claim was originally filed in 2020. In that same year, Apple added a prohibition of caste discrimination to its conduct policy (Dave, 2022). Earlier in 2023, the city of Seattle, USA, became the first city to outlaw caste discrimination (Singh, 2023a). The public school board in Toronto, Canada, has also recently recognized that caste discrimination operates within the school system and has requested that the Ontario Human Rights Commission create a framework to address the issue (Singh, 2023b). Similar to other academic institutions such as Harvard, the California State University system has added caste as a protected identity across its 23 campuses (Venkatraman, 2022). These examples acknowledge the widespread experience of caste discrimination across communities in the South Asian diaspora.

To study this issue, a Dalit civil rights organization called the Equality Labs[1] administered a web-based questionnaire to members of the South Asian diaspora in the United States – that is, individuals originating from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Trinidad/Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Tanzania, and Kenya (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). Results of the survey, which was open to people of different religious, political, tribal, and caste affiliations, demonstrated a picture of caste discrimination in North America. Twenty-five percent of Dalits who were surveyed reported that they faced verbal or physical assault based on caste; 33% reported experiencing discrimination during their education; 66% reported being treated unfairly at their workplace; 60% experienced caste-based derogatory jokes or comments; 40% were made to feel unwelcome at places of worship; 20% felt discriminated against in a

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1 https://www.equalitylabs.org/

business; over 40% felt rejected in romantic relationships due to caste; and 50% lived in fear of their caste status being "outed" (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). This data clearly demonstrates that caste discrimination is not restricted to India or even to South Asia, it affects the diaspora in North America and likely beyond; therefore, not only do more studies need to be done on caste discrimination in North America, but it is important for people to be aware of the system. Indeed, this awareness is only a first step, as parents, supervisors, peers, social acquaintances, etc., might be dealing with issues of caste discrimination in the workplace or in their social circles.

The impact of caste status on psychological functioning

A greater number of studies that investigate the impact of caste status on psychological functioning are necessary. Existing studies have generally found people who are classified as members of lower castes to have poorer mental health (e.g., self-reported feelings of depression and anxiety) compared to people who are classified as higher caste members. For instance, in a population-level ($n = 960$) study of depression and help-seeking amongst people in the Uttarakhand district in north India, Mathias et al. (2015) found higher rates of depression among people who were classified as Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes compared to those who were classified as members of higher castes. Gupta and Coffey (2020) found similar results in a population-level analysis of the effects of caste-based discrimination on the mental health of people who were classified as Scheduled Castes in India, using data from the World Health Organization's Survey of Global Aging and Adult Health (WHO SAGE). Specifically, Gupta and Coffey (2020) found that respondents who were classified as Scheduled Caste members were more likely to report being mildly, moderately, severely, or extremely depressed in the last month. These individuals were also more likely to report experiencing anxiety in the last month. In contrast, the respondents who were classified as higher caste members were more likely to report having good mental health. When Gupta and Coffey (2020) controlled for differences in socioeconomic status (i.e., educational attainment and asset wealth such as owning a car, a motorcycle, a refrigerator, or livestock) between the respondents who were classified as Scheduled Caste and higher caste members, they found that while the gap in reported feelings of depression could be explained by differences in assets and educational attainment, the differences in reported feelings of anxiety still remained. This indicates that socioeconomic disparities might not entirely account for differences in mental health outcomes. Caste has an impact on mental health even when controlling for differences in socioeconomic factors. It should also be noted that discrimination is often an underlying cause of differences in socioeconomic status (Williams, 1999; Gupta and Coffey, 2020). Hence, caste-based discrimination can indirectly impact mental health outcomes by leading to disparities in economic and educational attainment.

Discrimination has long been identified as a risk factor for mental illness (see for review, Williams, 2018; Vargas et al., 2020). As it relates to caste, studies point to caste-based stigma, social exclusion, violence, and unfair treatment as factors that contribute to poor mental health as well as suicides in Dalits (Jaspal, 2011; Komanapalli and Rao, 2021). In biographies and ethnographies in which Dalits provide accounts of

their experience of caste-based discrimination, the feelings that are often described include feelings of shame, inferiority, exclusion, isolation/loneliness, and servility to those who are considered as higher caste members (Paik, 2014; Gidla, 2017). Jaspal (2011) reports that the perception that one's in-group is stigmatized or devalued by society can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of those who are members of that group. This is particularly likely as individuals are often seen as "interchangeable exemplars" of their in-groups. Hence, the caste system's devaluation of people who are classified as Scheduled Castes threatens the self-esteem of individuals in those groups. The caste system stigmatizes and dehumanizes them as "untouchable," and creates a climate where they can be judged and devalued for being members of those groups.

Lessons and future directions

Our motivation for writing this paper was to inform social scientists about the global reach of the caste system and the need for more studies to illuminate how caste-based identity and discrimination features and functions not only in South Asia, but also in North America and other parts of the world. Given the long history and adaptation of the caste system over time as well as the attempts at reconciliation and justice, there are many lessons that are applicable to our attempts at equity, diversity and inclusion today. These lessons include:

(1) Being cautious about basing knowledge on a complex issue solely on a "book view" rather than the day-to-day lives of individuals. In the case of India's caste system, a sole focus on Brahaminical Hindu texts provides a one-sided view of caste, with an over emphasis on the purity and pollution dimension of the caste system. Field work demonstrates that Dalits have their own origin stories of caste that are different from the Brahmanical scriptures. While these origin stories may also serve to legitimize the system, they give a different view of caste by focusing on how being assigned a lower or "untouchable" caste was through error or treachery, rather than any fault or intrinsic nature of a caste. Therefore, it is important to understand the caste system from different points of views as well as how caste is implemented in daily life through the interactions of different castes. An extension of this is the need to understand how the caste system has changed with time.

(2) Being cautious about basing knowledge of a system solely on colonial writings or sentiment as well as not recognizing the role of colonialism on the cultures of colonized nations. In the case of India's caste system, viewing the system solely as a Hindu anomaly, neglects to recognize the role of the British Raj on taking a more informal system and concretizing it.

(3) Learning from India's process of trying to reduce systemic discrimination against the Dalits through policy that is largely based on quotas. While the reservation system has been helpful in addressing some of the socioeconomic disparities between Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the higher castes, it has not completely closed the gaps in socioeconomic outcomes between these groups nor has it stopped caste-based discrimination or its impact on the mental health outcomes of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The reservation

system also serves as a case study of how a redistribution system can have the unintended consequences of intensifying identities and perpetuating a system (i.e., the caste system) that should be eradicated.

(4) Learning more about group identity formation and how it affects groups differentially in a complex hierarchical system over time. In the case of India's caste system, over time, caste identification has become politicized and impacts upper and lower castes differentially, with upper castes getting to become "caste-less" to some extent, whereas to accrue government and public benefits, lower castes are still defined by their caste. In addition, with caste identity now intricately tied to accrual of government and public benefits, upper castes seek to be reclassified as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Otherwise Backward Classes, which is a change from the past when castes were pursuing upward mobility through Sanskritization.

(5) Learning more about the globalization of discrimination and oppression through the experiences of the diaspora. In the case of the caste system, experiences of the South Asian diaspora and responses of the different communities in which they are embedded, provides an opportunity to better understand caste-based discrimination. It also highlights the need for more knowledge about how caste-based discrimination manifests in these global communities and how we might enact reconciliation in the international context. Moreover, the South Asian diaspora is heterogenous with recent immigrants, international students at Colleges and Universities, first- and second-generation individuals, people with more distant South Asian ancestry, and individuals with different caste identities. It would be helpful to know what caste discrimination looks like in these populations. Is it present in all the different subgroups and to what extent?

(6) Research is also needed to understand the impact of caste on the psychological functioning of South Asians. Similar to other identity variables such as age, gender, race, and sexual orientation, a better understanding of caste status could further the understanding of psychological factors such as self-esteem, mental health, coping, etc., in South Asians. Moreover, understanding the interaction between caste and socioeconomic status and other identify variables, such as gender and age, would be beneficial.

Conclusion

India's caste system has captivated individuals both locally and globally as a divisive and highly discriminatory categorization system. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Dalits, who face the most extreme discrimination, due to the traditional polluting occupations they were born into. Although the caste system is intrinsic to Hinduism with its strong link to content in Brahmanical scriptures, it is found in different religious and cultural groups in South Asia, and even Dalits, who convert to different religions, continue to be stigmatized and discriminated against due to their lower caste status. The caste system is changing with time, functioning more as

ethnic groups. Categorization infiltrates all orders, and even Dalits have a hierarchy of castes and traditionally practiced social, economic and financial exclusion of lower castes within their own order. The caste system was inherently more flexible prior to colonialism and the process of labelling and categorization started in the British Raj has, in a double-edged way, intensified caste identities, which continues on today.

As caste is a system found beyond India, more needs to be done in recognizing the needs of Dalit communities in other South Asian countries and in the diaspora. Currently, in North America, there is more attention on caste-based discrimination, under the broader lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion. However, Dalits are finding that there are not enough outlets for complaints of bias as most equity, diversity, and inclusion policies in North America do not cover caste as a protected identity. Moreover, most North Americans are not knowledgeable about the caste system and how it is a global issue.

Often when thinking of issues of justice and reconciliation, we think predominantly within our local context and Euro-Western ideologies. Issues of anti-oppression and reconciliation are global issues and it can be helpful to learn lessons from other systems and ideologies. Given that the caste system of India is one of the oldest and all-encompassing forms of hierarchical discrimination, it is a system that we should study in terms of its function, features, and impact on those who have been classified, stratified, and devalued under the system. Indeed, many comparisons have been made regarding racial bias in the United States to the caste system of India, with Black Americans being classified at the bottom of the hierarchy and treated in a similar manner to the Dalits of India. One prominent example of this view is the book by Isabel Wilkerson (2021), *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. In summary, the caste system of India, South Asia, and the world is an evolving entity, which provides many lessons of both individual and systematized discrimination, as well as lessons about reconciliation and justice at a global level.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

Conflict of interest

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Conducting research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada: ethical and policy considerations

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The international context of Indigenous mental health and wellbeing has been shaped by a number of key works recognizing Indigenous rights. Despite international recognitions, the mental health and wellness of Indigenous Peoples continues to be negatively affected by policies that ignore Indigenous rights, that frame colonization as historical rather than ongoing, or that minimize the impact of assimilation. Research institutions have a responsibility to conduct ethical research; yet institutional guidelines, principles, and policies often serve Indigenous Peoples poorly by enveloping them into Western knowledge production. To counter epistemological domination, Indigenous Peoples assert their research sovereignty, which for the purposes of this paper we define as autonomous control over research conducted on Indigenous territory or involving Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous sovereignty might also be applied to research impacting the landscape and the web of animal and spiritual lives evoked in a phrase such as "all my relations." This narrative review of material developed in the Canadian context examines the alignment with similar work in the international context to offer suggestions and a practice-based implementation tool to support Indigenous sovereignty in research related to wellness, mental health, and substance use. The compilation of key guidelines and principles in this article is only a start; addressing deeper issues requires a research paradigm shift.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous, policy, ethics, research, methodologies, First Nations, principles, guidelines

1 Introduction

The International context of Indigenous mental health and wellbeing has been shaped by a number of key policies and guidelines recognizing Indigenous rights. Most significant among these is the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP, 2007), whose 46 Articles outline "minimum standards for the survival, dignity and wellbeing of the Indigenous Peoples of the world" (p. 28, Article 43). A motion to adopt the Declaration was passed by the UN General Assembly over the objections of four states (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States), each of which have reversed their objections. The UNDRIP recognizes that Indigenous Peoples are distinct and come from self-determining nations who require free, prior, and informed consent when interacting with other countries, nations, and foreign governments. UN Declarations are generally not legally binding; however, they represent

the dynamic development of international legal norms and reflect the commitment of nations to move in certain directions, abiding by certain principles. Canada was the last to sign on to adopt the UNDRIP into Canadian law in June 2021, this process being led by the Province of British Columbia in 2019.

International declarations such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007) supersede and encompass national or regional guidelines designed to govern research, and are frequently invoked in arguments at the national and regional levels. Despite such International recognitions, the wellbeing and mental health of Indigenous Peoples continue to be negatively affected by policies and guidelines that ignore Indigenous rights, that frame colonization as historical rather than ongoing, and that minimize the impact of assimilation (George et al., 2019). Nor is the tokenization and deprioritizing of Indigenous health limited to policymakers. A systematic review of academic literature from 2000 to 2015 found that of 210 articles about circumpolar environment-related Indigenous health, only 39 (19%) reported engaging with Indigenous Peoples (Jones et al., 2018).

Research institutions of all kinds have a responsibility to conduct ethical research, yet institutional engagement of principles and guidelines often has served Indigenous Peoples poorly, enveloping them inside Western knowledge production. As stated by Cree scholar Willie Ermine and his colleagues, "the way research is talked about assumes that all research is properly undertaken from the perspective and under the auspices of Western centers of authority" (Ermine et al., 2004, pp. 28–29). To counter this epistemological domination, Indigenous Peoples assert their research sovereignty, which for the purposes of this paper we define as autonomous control over research conducted on Indigenous territory or involving Indigenous Peoples. Given the relational worldview of many Indigenous nations, Indigenous sovereignty might also be applied to research impacting the landscape and the web of animal and spiritual lives evoked in a phrase such as "all my relations." This narrative review essay draws from guides and documents developed in the Canadian context to offer international policy and practice lessons to support Indigenous sovereignty in mental health and substance use health-related research.

The compilation of key principles and guidelines[1] in this article is only a start; addressing deeper epistemological issues requires a research paradigm shift. Traditional goals of extensive and frequent publishing, the reality of short deadlines for grant applications, and the urgent demand for results do not always mesh well with the requirements for conducting research ethically (Castleden et al., 2015). As discussed in Willie Ermine et al.'s (2004) work for the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre (IPHRC) and in Smith's (1999) seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, the term "research" represents a negative and harmful enterprise to many Indigenous Peoples. As Smith (1999) noted, it is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism, making it "one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (p. 1). Indeed, settler directed research has exhibited a lack of knowledge about Indigenous histories, methodologies, and worldviews, subsequently aligning poorly with the goals and values of

Indigenous Peoples (Fournier et al., 2023). As a result, research has produced little or no benefit for Indigenous communities and their members (Hyett et al., 2018), and in some cases has reinforced deficit-based views of Indigenous Peoples (Mashford-Pringle and Pavagadhi, 2020). Mosby (2013) has drawn attention to research conducted without consent on Indigenous children held in Residential Schools; and a 2021 class action lawsuit filed against two Canadian medical researchers (Moore, 2021) charged that they conducted magnetic resonance imaging of the livers of Indigenous Peoples (including a First Nation Chief) without their knowledge or consent.

2 Methods

While working for the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)[2] in Toronto, Canada, three of the authors for the present paper conducted a narrative review of over 120 scholarly articles, policy-oriented documents, books, and online resources that offered guidelines for Canadian settlers conducting mental health research with Indigenous Peoples. This work was summarized in a CAMH internal report (Morisano et al., 2018). To facilitate feedback on that report, a large advisory committee of First Nations and Métis scholars and clinicians was recruited from CAMH and from other non-profit institutions in Toronto (see Acknowledgments section of Morisano et al., 2018), and the current article draws upon their contributions.

For both the original report (Morisano et al., 2018) and this paper, considerable efforts were made to seek and prioritize Indigenous voices and authorship in the collected works. Sources were identified via mixed methods, including works known to the authors themselves, queries with online search engines (Google, DuckDuckGo), academic databases (Scopus, Google Scholar), bibliographic review of found documents, and via original books and non-published works recommended by the advisory committee and external scholars. Source criteria included that each document was (a) in active use in health research circles during the time period of our review (2012–2023, for this paper); (b) developed by or with considerable engagement from Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) Peoples; and (c) relevant to health research work being conducted with Indigenous Peoples in the fields of substance use and wellness, and/or mental health.[3] The majority of sources for this paper were published[4] by Indigenous researchers for the purpose of changing dialogue and practice when conducting health research with Indigenous Peoples.

The original report (Morisano et al., 2018) aimed to provide CAMH researchers with a comprehensive overview of relevant research guidelines and principles and provide a synthesis to guide their work. The report identified four foundational documents and 14 principles to guide mental health research, and examined nine

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[1] Consistent with the literature to be summarized we use the terms "principles" and "guidelines" interchangeably, both being distinct from policies which are mandatory in nature.

[2] See https://camh.ca

[3] Biomedical research is beyond its scope, although such research is also associated with serious problems (e.g., using leftover blood samples from Indigenous Peoples without consent; First Nations Centre, 2005)

[4] The words of the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre (IPHRC; Ermine et al., 2004) are relevant here: "Not all knowledge and viewpoints have been recorded, particularly as they are embedded in the oral tradition of the Indigenous community" (p. 11). Many documents, practices, and pieces of oral knowledge exist off the Internet.

Indigenous-led research projects for how they embodied those principles. It also provided an overview of three Indigenous-developed ethical review systems (i.e., Institutional Review Boards) and six methods commonly used in Indigenous health research.

The current article differs from the report from which it evolved (Morisano et al., 2018) in several important ways. Not only has it expanded to address specific policy considerations, but it has also been heavily updated, significantly condensed, and synthesized into themes for an international research audience. Although the focus is on works most relevant to health research, the principles may apply across a range of research disciplines. Thematic analysis aided the authors in distilling key principles and themes from the original sources.[5] The present paper focuses on four themes common to the Canadian literature and policy context, and their implications for international work: (1) respect for Indigenous governance and culture; (2) meaningful engagement and collaboration; (3) utility of research; and (4) collective ownership. We also provide a supplementary tool: a list of reflective questions to support planning and implementation of ethical research with Indigenous Peoples.

3 Themes in the Canadian literature on mental health and wellness research with Indigenous Peoples

Our analysis of Canadian research guidelines identified four common themes, the first of which is respect for Indigenous governance and culture.

3.1 Respect for Indigenous governance and culture

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) spend approximately $1 billion annually to fund health-related research, and that research is guided by policy published jointly with two other national funding bodies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) (collectively referred to as the Tri-Council). Their document, *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,* 2nd edition (Tri-Council Policy Statement or TCPS-2; Tri-Council, 2022), contains a section titled "Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada."[6] That chapter—colloquially referred to as 'chapter nine,' offers guidelines akin to Australia's *Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and*

Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018a).[7]

The authors of the TCPS-2 note that working with Indigenous communities or organizations may entail navigating "complex authority structures" (Tri-Council, 2022; article 9.5). In some communities, authority to permit and monitor research lies with individuals designated via custom rather than appointment or election. The Tri-Council suggests researchers engage community processes and Elders to determine how to secure approval for research activity in a community (article 9.15). The Tri-Council recommends securing approvals from both customary authorities and formal leaders. Engaging authority figures often involves presenting tobacco,[8] sage, or other small gifts; offering honoraria, a donation in their name, and/or name recognition; covering travel expenses; and/or using an interpreter so authorities can speak in their Indigenous language (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003; Wilson, 2008; First Peoples Cultural Council, 2021; Kovach, 2021; Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.15). The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC, 2020) released a *First Nations Data Governance Strategy* with a mission to assert "data sovereignty and support the development of information governance and management at the community level through regional and national partnerships" and to "adhere to free, prior and informed consent, respect nation-to-nation relationships, and recognize the distinct customs of nations" (p. 2).

The authors of the *Principles of Ethical Métis Research* (Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011) discuss the importance of respect for individual and collective perspectives in research processes (and the straddling of these perspectives depending on the research proposed). They suggest that researchers seek out and follow community practices and protocols. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and Nunavut Research Institute (NRI) guide (2006) recommended researchers "assign the same value, credibility, and respect to local expertise (from recommended Elders, or others) as that assigned to peer-reviewed scientific findings" (p. 5). From an Inuit perspective, the authors pointed out the importance of not disturbing families "on particular days of the week, times of day, or in the wake of a local tragedy" (ITK & NRI, p. 8) and reminded researchers that for most communities, "research is fairly secondary as local life and activities continue" (ITK & NRI, p. 8).

In situations where work with Indigenous Peoples is planned but no Indigenous governance structures exist (e.g., in an urban community), community agencies or institutions can be consulted. As an example of a local consultation process, Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC), a group of members from service agencies in the Toronto area, oversaw a large community-based research initiative called the Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP) from beginning to end. TARP was initiated to provide an "extensive picture of the current situation, successes, aspirations, and

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5   Two of the authors identified key threads or principles within the sources (MR; DM), and shared these with the team. The team then discussed the principles and categorized them into broader themes (MR; DM; BR). The results were checked by a fourth team member (RL). An Indigenous author was involved in each of these steps.

6   The authors wish to note that Indigenous Peoples have objected to the use of terminology such as "First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada" as undermining the sovereignty of Indigenous nations by framing them as possessions of Canada.

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7   See also the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies or Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2020).

8   A note that Inuit elders and knowledge keepers traditionally do not accept tobacco as an offering as it is not used ceremonially; see https://carleton.ca/indigenous/wp-content/uploads/Guidelines-for-Working-with-Indigenous-Elders.pdf

challenges facing Aboriginal People in the Greater Toronto Area" (McCaskill et al., 2011, p. 17). As of the time of publication of this article, the collection of data by TASSC for TARP 2.0[9] was in process. Additionally, the Noojimawin Health Authority (n.d.) (NHA) was a Toronto-based Aboriginal Health Planning Authority that aimed to improve health conditions for rural and urban Aboriginal People. Before closure, they published an *Ethical Research Policy for Urban and Rural Aboriginal Health* (n.d.), offering principles and procedures to guide themselves and their partners in "respectful research practices in urban and rural areas in the province of Ontario with respect to Aboriginal health" (p. 3). Their document reviewed multiple domains: protecting Indigenous Knowledge, respecting Indigenous Knowledge and experience, the idea of research as partnership, the use of research agreements and the creation of memoranda of understanding, consent processes, collecting and sharing data, ensuring the community benefits and the sharing, dissemination and publication of research results, and implementation of findings in the communities. Furthermore, The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), which comprises Ontario's largest urban service network, released the 2nd edition of their *Utility Self-Voicing Access Inter-relationality (USAI) Research Framework* in 2016, to guide all Indigenous research projects involving the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (2016). In 2018, the Urban Indigenous Health Research Gathering was hosted in Manitoba by the Ongomiizwin-Indigenous Institute of Health and Healing at the University of Manitoba to "engage urban Indigenous People with a variety of perspectives and experiences to learn about engaging urban Indigenous communities in health research" (p. 4) and report on the findings (Morton, 2019).

Indigenous Peoples in urban environments generally exhibit interhousehold variation in socioeconomic status and the extent to which they engage in traditional practices—the definition of "traditional" itself is also dependent on one's context and lens (Lindstone, 2014). Some individuals may have stronger affiliations to their First Nation, Inuit, or Métis community or to a national or regional representative organization; others might be disconnected from those organizations. Similarly, a number of Indigenous Peoples do not make use of or consider themselves to be represented by Friendship Centres[10] or other Indigenous service providers. Furthermore, there are issues even in the identification of issues faced by many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis persons in Canada (see Smylie and Firestone, 2015), given how data are collected for major health and social data sources. The authors noted a need for revision of core data health services in Canada, "in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and their representative and governing organizations" (p. 67).

3.1.1 Respect for diversity

A set of *Guidelines for Ethical Aboriginal Research* localized to Manitoulin Island, Ontario, called the GEAR (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003) made note of the need for research projects to "respect the diversity between and within communities" (p. 7). These concerns were echoed in the Métis research community (Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011). It is

important not to make assumptions about language, worldviews, beliefs, politics, geographic orientation, cultural values, history, religion, or a variety of other factors when approaching individuals, organizations, or communities in the name of research. Many times, individuals engaged in research with Indigenous Peoples fail to consider the complex intersections of identity that are present, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. An intersectional lens is required to understand the diverse experiences of Indigenous Peoples. There is diversity in diversity, and the multiplicity of documents reviewed in this paper is a testament to this fact. Even source documents focusing on specifically First Nations, Inuit, or Métis Peoples as distinct groups reminds us of the heterogeneity of Indigenous Peoples, and reinforces the idea that we are not working with a single homogeneous North American Indigenous category; but rather groups of people who stretch across a vast swath of land, with regional variances, and whose interactions with state, provincial, and federal governments have differed.

3.1.2 The research team

Many current ethical guidelines recommend the research team of any project include members of the population of interest in meaningful roles (e.g., Ermine et al., 2004; Tri-Council, 2022). This should be negotiated at the outset of proposed research, as appropriate, and depending on the interest of the communities involved.

3.1.3 Research design

The research design process in an Indigenous research project may differ from Western research processes taught in most Canadian educational institutions. Several guideline documents strongly encourage researchers to involve and/or partner with Indigenous community members in project design and delivery (Ermine et al., 2004; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; First Nations Centre, 2007; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). Individuals or communities may not be interested in being involved at this level, but in a collaborative context, the option for such involvement should be available.

A key in this process is that researchers approach communities with research questions that are open to change, refinement, or correction (Nakamura, 2010). Ray and Cormier (2012) argued, for example, that the practice of designing an interview guide based on a pre-constructed hypothesis or research question conflicts with the Anishinaabe view in which knowledge is controlled by the knowledge holder rather than the knowledge seeker. Within such an approach, it would be the interview participants who determine what is important to share, based on their sense of the researcher's level of understanding and readiness to carry the teaching. Therefore, taking the time to develop trust and mutual understanding with knowledge holders, before requesting knowledge, will result in better data.

Bartlett et al. (2007) suggest that Indigenous knowledge begins with a narrative that is transformed and personalized, whereas Western knowledge begins with data that are transformed into abstract knowledge. Indigenous Peoples might differ in their beliefs about what constitutes data and might include dreams, visions, intuition, and cellular or blood memory as sources of knowledge (Cordero, 1995; Castellano, 2000; Cardinal, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002; Loppie, 2007; Braun et al., 2013; Kovach, 2021). Research design

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9   https://tarp.indigenousto.ca

10   See the National Association of Friendship Centres at nafc.*ca*.

should therefore incorporate relevant Indigenous views on information gathering and the nature of knowledge.

3.2 Meaningful collaboration

Despite variation in approaches to research among Indigenous nations, the importance of meaningful collaboration emerges as a highly significant theme. Attending to process--how collaboration is done and how knowledge is generated--comes across as a value embedded in multiple documents. For example, the Ojibwe phrase *Kinoo'amaadawaad Megwaa Doodamawaad,* which means "they are learning with each other while they are doing" (Cormier, 2016, p. 229), encapsulates the importance attributed to participatory approaches to research creation and could be taken as a description of meaningful collaboration itself. Below we detail six starting points for such collaboration.

3.2.1 Use of community guidelines

The use of relevant community research guidelines is framed as necessary. Such guidelines require researchers to interact with the people they are seeking knowledge about, take training in cultural competence, learn new protocols and traditions, and create a culturally relevant research process (Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism, 2000; Ermine et al., 2004; First Nations Centre, 2005, 2007; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Kovach, 2021). The onus is on the researcher to familiarize themselves with the growing body of literature on the topic. Many research ethics documents have been developed at the local, regional, and national levels by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. Several of these guidelines have been published online, and additional guidelines are housed locally; some may be preserved through oral tradition only. In any case, local processes must be sought out and respected when conducting research in any community.

3.2.2 Collaboration

Research conducted in Indigenous contexts must be collaborative and seen as building a meaningful partnership with communities. The TCPS-2 emphasized community engagement prior to embarking on specific research projects with those communities (Tri-Council, 2022). In many documents written by Indigenous researchers (Ermine et al., 2004; First Nations Centre, 2005, 2007; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Bull, 2010, 2016; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011), relationship building is framed as something that should occur prior to design development and institutional approval. Investigators must see their projects as being both community-based and "community-paced" (First Nations Centre, 2007). According to the National Inuit Strategy on Research (NISR) from the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) (2018), "Inuit and researchers have reaped the benefits of research relationships premised on respect for Inuit self-determination and are seeking coherent and consistent research relationships across Inuit Nunangat" (p. 3). Communities should be consulted for their involvement, participation, and consultation (First Nations Centre, 2005, 2007; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 2016; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018). Examples of

this kind of work have come from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2010). The AHF was established in 1998 to fund "community-based Aboriginal directed healing initiatives which address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse suffered in Canada's Indian Residential School System, including inter-generational impacts" (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2017). While the AHF ceased operations in 2014, its approach to research collaboration "require[d] a participatory process in which Aboriginal People determine how the AHF can most effectively respond to their healing needs" (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2017).

The TCPS-2 notes that "although researchers shall offer the option of engagement, a community may choose to engage nominally or not at all, despite being willing to allow the research to proceed" (Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.10). This is something that researchers must understand and of which they must be considerate. In cases where communities disengage because they lack the capacity (financial or otherwise) to participate fully, the TCPS-2 recommends that researchers spend additional resources supporting these communities in capacity building (see article 9.14). If there is no possibility for gaining community consent, collaboration, or a research agreement, but the researchers are still allowed to proceed, individual consent guidelines still apply.

3.2.3 Consent, inclusivity, and approvals

Many ethical issues stem from the category of "research consent and approvals" in Indigenous contexts. Some of these relate to the appropriateness of gathering oral versus written consent. In general, any kind of information being collected from an individual must be explained in a language (with translation, as needed or desired) and manner that ensures fully informed consent (First Nations Centre, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; Tri-Council, 2022).

Other issues that relate to consent concern the idea that a signed consent form does not represent a completed process (Ermine et al., 2004; Tri-Council, 2022). Many of the documents that discuss the ethics of conducting research with Indigenous Peoples frame the consent process in a circular and continuous manner that extends beyond a one-time signature.

Piquemal (2001, as cited in Ermine et al., 2004) makes four ethical recommendations for an informed-consent process: to negotiate responsibilities at the outset, to obtain consent from both collective and individual authorities, to confirm consent throughout the process to ensure that it is ongoing, and to provide the community with data at the end of any project. The TCPS-2 includes the idea that:

> "Indigenous codes of research practice go beyond the scope of ethical protections for individual participants. They extend to the interconnection between humans and the natural world, and include obligations to maintain, and pass on to future generations, knowledge received from ancestors as well as innovations devised in the present generation." (Tri-Council, 2022, chapter 9, "Introduction").

In the Inuit context, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute (2006) guide suggests that any study be discussed first with local authorities (e.g., Hamlet Council, local Hunters and Trappers Organization) regarding requirements for consent,

confidentiality, and adherence to institutional ethics protocols. Guidelines developed in response to the OCAP®[11] principles of *ownership, control, access, and possession* that relate to consent have included the following: "Researchers should provide ongoing explanations of all aspects of the research project, including its purpose, sponsorship, anticipated benefits and risks, methods, community and individual involvement, and reporting plans" (First Nations Centre, 2005, p. 12). Secondary use of data that can be identified as coming from a particular Indigenous community or Peoples are still subject to requirements related to informed consent and/or community engagement, depending on the circumstance (see TCPS-2 article 9.20; Tri-Council, 2022). Ermine et al. (2004) noted that researchers should obtain approval to do research in Indigenous communities from the appropriate national Tribal authorities. In the case of requesting consent from urban, non-status, or displaced Indigenous Peoples without a governance structure, researchers may navigate the consent process with local community agencies or Indigenous urban organizations to assure an appropriate process is followed. Research involving historical, genealogical, or secondary data analyses on publicly available information that does not involve new data collection may not require Research Ethics Board (REB) review or community engagement, but it is suggested that "culturally informed advice" be sought before the use of such data to determine potential harms and other considerations (see TCPS-2 articles 9.15 and 9.21; Tri-Council, 2022).

Article 9.6 of the TCPS-2 discusses the importance of recognizing "diverse interests within communities," including the inclusion of groups or individuals in research who may have been excluded from previous research opportunities due to vulnerability or marginalization within a community (Tri-Council, 2022). The Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization (2011) also noted the importance of "safe and inclusive environments" in research, and specified that age (youth and Elders), gender, sexual identity, multiple concepts of "Aboriginality," and a "balance of individual and collective influence" be considered in research settings with Métis People (p. 2). Decisions for research exclusion or inclusion of a group or community must be made with care. In this same regard, when "critical inquiry" is made regarding First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governments, institutions, or authority structures, the Tri-Council (2022) suggests researchers consult regional or national organizations that are culturally relevant to Indigenous Peoples for guidance (see TCPS-2 article 9.7).

There are controversies related to the concept of "informed consent" that should be addressed. According to Ermine et al. (2004), "For Indigenous Peoples, the Western paradigm of individualism that recognizes the right of the individual to give knowledge through 'informed consent' is contradictory to the concept of collective ownership understood by Indigenous Peoples" (p. 30). Some guidelines suggest obtaining group or community consent before moving to obtain individual consent for research participation (see Ermine et al., 2004; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; First Nations Centre, 2007). Ermine and colleagues propose that the concept of free and informed individual consent is

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11 OCAP® is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (see FNIGC, 2017; https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/)

problematic in Indigenous contexts as it "rests on the condition of Western sensibilities of the legal individual and individuality" (2004, p. 31).

3.2.4 Community advisory boards

Community advisory boards for research are often composed of Elders or other traditional knowledge keepers familiar with Indigenous ethics and protocols, interested community members, and other volunteers (Ermine et al., 2004; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006). Indigenous Peoples may be sought as co-principal investigators, co-investigators, consultants, or collaborators on research projects (First Nations Centre, 2007; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; ITK, 2018). To date, many boards developed for Indigenous research are largely informal structures created by the researchers involved. Indigenous organizations and communities may create their own research advisory boards to ensure protocols are followed, and some communities have done this already (e.g., the Native Council of Prince Edward Island and NunatuKavut Community Council; see "Our Health Counts: Urban Aboriginal Health Database project," below; Smylie et al., 2011). The Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism's (Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism, 2000) *Indigenous Research Protection Act* suggests it is "in the best interest of the Tribal community to establish a research review mechanism to prevent the continued abuses, to protect the People's traditional knowledge and properties, and thereby to ensure our rights to continue to practice traditional lifeways and long-term survival thereof" (Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism, 2000, s. 1.5). The IPCB was established to help "Indigenous Peoples in the protection of their genetic resources, Indigenous knowledge, cultural and human rights from the negative effects of biotechnology" (Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism-b, n.d.). They also recommend that an administrative fee be set by the community or organization to charge researchers for proposal review (see *Indigenous Research Protection Act*, section 6.3). In the Métis context, "community involvement" is framed as coming in the form of "knowledge of local customs, input into the research design, utilizing community members in the research process... etc." (Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011, p. 1). In general, it is key to re-envision the way in which "experts" are defined and valued in traditional Western academic and non-academic research contexts, and to imagine the term "expert" encompassing a broad range of individuals with an expansive and diverse range of skills, knowledge, and ideas.

3.2.5 Agreements or memoranda of understanding

In general, Indigenous research guidelines in Canada exhibit a move toward embracing "research agreements," including "data sharing agreements." The Tri-Council (2022) states, "Where a community has formally engaged with a researcher or research team through a designated representative, the terms and undertakings of both the researcher and the community should be set out in a research agreement before participants are recruited" (see TCPS-2, article 9.11). Ermine et al. (2004) connect research agreements with their concept of ethical space:

> Formal research agreements are products of the ethical space where negotiation, dialogue, and discussions have taken place

> between cross-cultural entities. The aim of the negotiation process is to come to a clear understanding, which results in a formal agreement (preferably written) about research intentions, methods and potential results.… Issues like written documentation of consent from communities; status of ownership, control, access and possession of knowledge, data, information, and dissemination of findings through reports, and publication can be covered under these agreements (Ermine et al., 2004, p. 41).

There is a general sense in Indigenous research guidance documents that when it comes to research agreements, "there are no right answers, only options to explore and practical decisions to be made considering the nature of the information and the interests of the parties" (First Nations Centre, 2005, p. 32). The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute (2006) guide to working in Inuit communities suggests that any negotiated research relationship involves being honest, humble, informed, open, patient, and that researchers be willing to learn; educate locally; hire and purchase locally; maintain communication; respect local cultures, customs, and authority; try new things; and use or try to learn the local language. The Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism (2000) *Indigenous Research Protection Act* proposes that any good research agreement be based on mutual respect between "the researchers and the Tribe" (see section 5.1 h) and includes a section discussing guidelines for any created agreement (see section 8). The TCPS-2 notes that minimally, "the agreement should address the ethical protections that would apply to securing individual consent for a comparable project, and should specify any commitments regarding collective community participation and decision making, sharing of benefits and review, and updating of the agreement" (Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.11). Such agreements would "maximize the distribution of information while protecting sensitive information" (First Nations Centre, 2005, p. 25). An example cited by First Nations Centre (2005) included a discussion and template for negotiating research relationships prepared for Dene and Métis Peoples in the Northwest Territories in the early 1990s (Masazumi and Quirk, 1993). Research agreements can clarify the relationship between a community or organization and any research partners. The TCPS-2 makes multiple references to the incorporation of mutual expectations and obligations into a research agreement and suggests a research agreement may be one form of "evidence" for an REB to consider whether a researcher's chosen plan of community engagement is appropriate (see Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.10). In discussions of informed consent, it states, "Where researchers and organizational communities or communities of interest collaborate in research (e.g., through a research agreement), prospective participants shall be informed about the extent of such collaboration (including how data will be shared) as part of the initial and ongoing consent process" (article 9.4). Where data-sharing agreements exist that allow community partners access to identifiable personal data, consent processes must reflect the disclosure (Tri-Council, 2022).

Under the now-retired Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2010) *CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People*, the use of research agreements was emphasized for projects conducted with or about Indigenous groups. A template example is provided on its website (see Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010). The IPCB's website also provided a template for use in creating academic contracts or research agreements (see Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism-a, n.d.).

For a variety of reasons, not all communities will be interested in signing a contract with researchers regarding impending projects. It is possible to keep research agreements brief and open to clarification, particularly in less formal arrangements (TCPS-2; Tri-Council, 2022). Furthermore, allowances can be made for semi-regularly revisiting such agreements to ensure that Indigenous research collaborators remain satisfied and fulfilled.

3.2.6 Research ethics boards

In conjunction with institutional REBs, formal research ethics approval by local ethics boards may be required. For instance, in Ontario, the Six Nations Elected Council (2015) published a formal research ethics policy that applies to all research conducted on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. The Six Nations Council Research Ethics Committee had already implemented a formal protocol and review process to be completed prior to any study's initiation (see Six Nations Elected Council, 2009). As an example of impact, in 2018 McMaster University (Ontario) published its own *Guidelines for Students working with the Six Nations of the Grand River*,[12] noting an intention to build closer research relationships with Six Nations Polytechnic, the Woodlands Cultural Centre, the Six Nations Language Commission, and Onkwawenna Kentyohkwa. These guidelines noted a "fundamental" need for student researchers to follow the ethics policies of the Six Nations Ethics Committee. In turn, the Manitoulin Anishinaabek Research Review Committee (MARRC) uses the previously mentioned GEAR for research conducted on Manitoulin Island, as well as a customized research ethics application (updated in late 2021)[13] and a fee-for-service ethics review process (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003). Maar et al. (2012) put together an *Ethics and Research Review Workbook* to accompany the GEAR and to provide the MARCC and local First Nation communities with a tool to assist in their assessment of research proposals.

Both the First Nations Centre (2007) OCAP® document as well as the Tri-Council (2022) TCPS-2 states that usual ethical requirements for research, such as individual informed consent and confidentiality, still apply to work with Indigenous Peoples (see the TCPS-2 articles 9.9 and 9.16). However, Indigenous Peoples may experience ethical precautions differently. Martin-Hill and Soucy (2005) observed that in their work with First Nations Elders "confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms to conceal the identity of informants were seen as dehumanizing, colonial and patronizing" (p. 8). Bartlett et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of giving credit for Indigenous knowledge to Indigenous People. This may entail attaching identifying data, including full names, to their quotes, a practice that challenges conventional research expectations around confidentiality.

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12   https://linguistics.humanities.mcmaster.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/12/Guidelines-for-students-working-with-the-Six-Nations-of-the-Grand-River-final.pdf

13   https://www.noojmowin-teg.ca/images/2021_10_17_-_MARRC_Ethics_Application_Form_BLANK.pdf

The Tri-Council (2022) notes that "the fit between institutional policies and community customs and codes of research practice may be unclear, requiring researchers to adapt conventional practice or negotiate a resolution" (TCPS-2, article 9.9). OCAP® (FNIGC, 2017) states that any policy divergence must be resolved before research begins, and the TCPS-2 suggests that communication between the institutional REB and responsible community agencies may help in doing so. At times, resubmission to both (or multiple) review bodies may be required.

Where conflicts exist in gaining approval from formal community leaders and customary authorities, the TCPS-2 suggests researchers inform their institutional REB (and presumably allow that REB to suggest a course of action). The TCPS-2 authors (Tri-Council, 2022) suggest it would be inappropriate for an institutional REB to insist on "uniformity between community practices and institutional policies," or to "impose language and processes that may be experienced as culturally inappropriate or awkward" (article 9.9). For example, when recruiting participants, if it is not culturally appropriate to have individuals sign consent forms, researchers must work with the communities involved and their REB to designate and document culturally relevant processes of informed consent.

The TCPS-2 (Tri-Council, 2022) states that when an REB is regularly asked to review research on topics related to Indigenous Peoples or affecting Indigenous communities in Canada, membership of that REB should be modified to reflect relevant expertise and knowledge, for example, by asking Indigenous or First Nations, Inuit, and Métis scholars or community members to be a part of the review board (Tri-Council, 2022). When less frequent reviews are required, the TCPS-2 authors recommend "consultation with *ad hoc* advisors or delegation to a specialized or multi-institutional REB" as appropriate (article 9.9).

The TCPS-2 authors also suggest researchers be able to provide their REBs with documents that outline attempts at community engagement, if they are not seeking an allowable exception to engagement with the community (see article 9.10), with examples provided. Researchers must clarify with the REB who would be responsible for signing off on research agreements (see articles 9.11 and 9.18, Tri-Council, 2022).

3.3 Utility of research

Any research conducted in an Indigenous context should be culturally relevant (Ermine et al., 2004; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006), and support "cultural preservation and development" (First Nations Centre, 2005, p. 27). This principle is also supported by the Tri-Council (2022) in its TCPS-2 reinterpretation of "Concern for Welfare." The First Nations Centre (2005) OCAP® document states that local and traditional knowledge should be incorporated into the development of research projects, and notes that "research must respect the privacy, protocols, dignity, and individual and collective rights of Aboriginal Peoples. It must also derive from Aboriginal culture and validation methods" (p. 13).

Indigenous knowledge is embedded in a web of relationships between people (e.g., researchers and participants), but also with animals and plants, with the spirit world, and with the earth itself (Wilson, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002; Ball and Janyst, 2008). Indigenous research principles recognize that cultural concepts, values, and social

mores are foundational to Indigenous knowledge and are essential for grounding research (Steinhauer, 2002; Martin, 2003).

3.4 Collective ownership

3.4.1 Research agenda

In discussing the research agenda, reference must be made again to Smith's (1999) book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, in which she reviews the development of Indigenous research initiatives and ways of articulating an "Indigenous research agenda" at broad and local levels.

In Canadian documents that discuss ethics for conducting research with or alongside Indigenous Peoples, there has been a significant shift in discussions of the research agenda. In the First Nations context, as discussed by the First Nations Centre (2005), research agendas should no longer be shaped by areas of personal, academic, or societal interests, but be inspired by First Nations' priorities. These concerns are also expressed in Métis and Inuit research ethics dialogues (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; ITK, 2018). According to Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute (2006), "Communities often complain that there are no tangible benefits for communities who are nearby, or even involved in, the project" (p. 4). Indigenous individuals and communities in Canada have priorities regarding what kinds of projects might serve their needs. In 2020, the Government of Canada released a 3-year strategic plan for *Setting New Directions to Support Indigenous Research and Research Training in Canada: 2019–2022*, guided by four principles: decolonization of research, accountability, equitable access, and self-determination (or, "fostering the right for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples to set their own research priorities," p. 8).

3.4.2 Research benefits

In general, "the most elegant study design in the world is only as valuable as the impact that it makes in people's lives" (First Nations Centre, 2005, p. 22). Research conducted with Indigenous Peoples must be explicitly and directly useful or beneficial to participants, with tangible and practical outcomes for them and their communities (Ermine et al., 2004; Kovach, 2021). Community interests should be respected, benefits should be clear, and potential harms should be minimized or eliminated (First Nations Centre, 2005; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; ITK, 2018). The need for clear and explicit benefits from research is echoed across documents authored by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups (First Nations Centre, 2005, 2007; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; ITK, 2018). The TCPS-2's "Mutual Benefits in Research" (Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.13) details the importance of community benefits, which may include education and training, efforts to increase community empowerment, the reclamation of Indigenous identities and cultural property, financial compensation for participation, and the provision of local employment (e.g., via "train-the-trainer" models in clinical or health services research, research assistantships, co-investigatorships) (Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism, 2000; First Nations Centre, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006). Researchers

should understand from the onset that cultivating collaborative research relationships is time consuming and resource intensive, and funding proposals should reflect development and participation costs (see Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.11). A barrier to this work is the scarcity of funding sources for collaborative relationship building; by the time the grant is written, it is often too late for a collaborative relationship to be built (i.e., one where community members participate in the design of the study and choosing of research questions). This should be a part of discussions moving forward.

3.4.3 Capacity building

Research should be used for meaningful capacity building (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003; First Nations Centre, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; ITK, 2018). The Tri-Council (2022) TCPS-2's article 9.14 addresses this and frames researchers as responsible to incorporate capacity building into their projects, for example, by providing trainings (see the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute National Centre of Excellence, which offers culturally-adapted, online, ethical research trainings)[14] or helping community members to enhance their skills in research methods, ethical review and monitoring, or intervention delivery. The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) includes on their website[15] a variety of "guides, toolkits and workbooks created by First Nations organizations and researchers, aimed at helping communities do research for their own benefit."

Often, researchers can hire individuals in the community as research assistants, translators, clinicians, or project managers, among other roles. Grant funding may allow research teams to budget for training for students or post-doctoral fellows in the community. The ITK's National Inuit Strategy on Research (2018) notes that capacity building "also includes investments in built infrastructure and human resources" (p. 27), including working towards an Inuit Nunangat university. In 2018, Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) launched a funding opportunity for multi-disciplinary Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Grants on National Indigenous Peoples Day, and along with the NSSRC and CIHR, awarded 116 Connection Grants to fund community gatherings, workshops, and events that mobilized and exchanged knowledge on Indigenous research and reconciliation (Government of Canada, 2020).

Capacity building could also involve training research team members in the history and culture of the Peoples with whom they are working, to increase their proficiency in the local language, and to develop skills in Indigenous methodologies (see Lambert, 2015's Spider Conceptual Framework[16]). Resources for such work include the Intercontinental American Indigenous Research Association, which trains researchers, the public, and Indigenous communities to conduct respectful and ethically sound investigations. As well, the University

of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney has published a web-based searchable database of "anti-colonial" research that is free to peruse, with links to videos and downloadable documents.[17] The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI, 2020) discusses its own efforts to build fundamental capacity for collaborations with Indigenous Peoples. CIHI notes its intentions to (1) become "culturally responsive" by "training and processes to promote cultural safety and humility," (2) connect with local, regional and national partners; (3) to "align policies, practices and procedures with Indigenous data sovereignty principles" and (4) to "enable actionable analyses and capacity-building" through collaborative work and increasing the relevance of their "analyses, products, services, training, data infrastructure and tools" for Indigenous partners (p. 5).

3.4.4 Insider and peer researchers

Most Canadian documents aim to guide research conducted by settler researchers employed at settler institutions, and few offer directions to "insider researchers" (in this case, Indigenous scholars who conduct studies with their own or another Indigenous nation). For example, an Indigenous scholar who was themselves apprehended during the Sixties Scoop, may choose to research the impact of the experience on Indigenous adoptees in Canada. Edwards defines someone as a "deep insider" if they have belonged to the community under study for at least five years (Edwards, 2002, p. 71), and Sinclair (2007) defines a "peer researcher" as someone with lived experience of the issue under study. While the label "insider researcher" is often applied to people who have extensive training as researchers, the term "peer researcher" is usually applied to those without previous training, who learn research skills during the study itself. Both types of researchers bring what Kayrooz and Trevitt (2005) describe as "an intimate knowledge of [a community's] culture, structures, systems and processes" (p. 335).

3.4.5 Collective ownership of information and research

A United Nations resolution (1993/44 of 26 August 1993) acknowledges Indigenous Peoples as holding collective rights. "Indigenous Peoples' ownership and custody of their heritage," notes the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, "must continue to be collective, permanent, and inalienable, as prescribed by the customs, rules, and practices of each People" (p. 4; cited by Ermine et al., 2004). The Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism (2000) echoes this sentiment in their *Indigenous Research Protection Act* under sections 1.3 (which recognizes the Tribe as exclusive owner of traditional knowledge) and 6.2 m (which affirms the rights of Tribes to hold raw data and research materials and to make decisions about its storage and preservation). Ideally, research done with Indigenous Peoples should heighten their control of information and research processes. The people from whom data are collected should have access to their data, not merely to reports summarizing their data (First Nations Centre, 2005, 2007; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; ITK, 2018), with

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14 See http://iwri.org/research-area/research-training/

15 See https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/research-knowledge-exchange-and-evaluation/research-resources

16 See https://www.americanindigenousresearchassociation.org/mission/spider-conceptual-framework/

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17 See https://www.anticolonialresearchlibrary.org/library/

protections for confidentiality and privacy of individual participants (e.g., de-identified datasets, summaries, figures, tables). Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute (2006) guide notes that often, "information is placed in a database in a southern institution and communities find themselves unable to gain access, or having to pay for data that they provided" (p. 4).

The First Nations Regional Health Study (First Nations Information Governance Committee, 2007) created a collective ownership protocol for First Nations, and stated that permission must be obtained from local authorities before community- or regional-level data or statistics may be released. In 2010, the Tripartite Data Quality and Sharing Agreement was signed by the First Nations Health Society, now the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), the BC Ministry of Health, and Health Canada to "continually improve the quality and availability of First Nations Data," "facilitate the sharing of FNCF[18] Data in response to research questions approved in accordance with this Agreement," and to ensure that federally and provincially [BC] held information on First Nations is appropriately "compiled, used and shared" (see Tripartite First Nations Health Plan, 2013; updated in 2022, see Tripartite First Nations Health Plan, 2022). The GEAR document (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003) affirms "collected data is owned by local communities and agencies" (p. 7).

The TCPS-2 stresses the necessity of determining privacy and confidentiality processes for communities and individuals early in any collaboration (see article 9.16), and, throughout Chapter 9, repeats the importance of consistency among research agreements, informed consent procedures, and disclosure (Tri-Council, 2022). The Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism (2000) *Indigenous Research Protection Act* includes requirements for protecting confidentiality in section 6.2d. CIHI (2020) notes working to align its organizational policies and procedures with principles of Indigenous data sovereignty (e.g., First Nations principles of OCAP; First Nations Centre, 2007), Métis principles of *ownership*, *control*, *access*, and *stewardship* or OCAS (see CIHI, 2020; Indigenous Innovation Initiative, 2021) and *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit*[19] or IQ (Tagalik, 2009-2010). The CIHI authors state, "We have learned that these principles reflect "the right of Indigenous Peoples to control data from and about their communities and lands, articulating both individual and collective rights to data access and privacy." Kukutai and Taylor's (2016) edited volume on *Indigenous Data Sovereignty* reviews emerging data management practices for how they support Indigenous self-determination, and considers the implications of the UNDRIP for how data are collected, stored, and accessed, and what data handling practices imply "for Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty over data about them, their territories and ways of life" (p. 2).

3.4.6 Dissemination and publication

Researchers should include opportunities for a community's leaders or members to review any publications of research involving their community, as well as provide community members with the "right to dissent" by offering divergent interpretations of findings in the publication (First Nations Centre, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Tri-Council, 2022). Shawn Wilson, author of *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), suggests "continuous feedback with all the research participants," supporting each person involved in the study to "check the accuracy of the analysis," to "elaborate upon ideas," and "to learn from other participants" (p. 121). The TCPS-2 guidelines note that community representatives in collaborative research should be included when reviewing findings and interpreting data, before final reports or publications are issued (Tri-Council, 2022, see article 9.17).

Any reports, presentations, or publications about community members or knowledge should be provided to that community, regardless of whether they were involved in creating those works or not. Researchers should ensure that community members understand these documents by making translation or plain language versions available (Noojmowin Teg Health Centre of Manitoulin Island, 2003; First Nations Centre, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Tri-Council, 2022). The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute (2006) guide offers several examples of communications plans for researchers (with benefits and drawbacks to each), such as local radio, focus groups, websites, posters, and written publications. In 2019, MARRC hosted a free research conference[20] for researchers and community members to discuss research conducted over the previous 5 years. Lunch was provided and the group aimed to share research outcomes and discuss how projects and their findings impacted the community. The IPCB's *Indigenous Research Protection Act* states that "communications should be carried out in the local language, using translators as necessary" (2000, section 5.1). This assumes financial resources (see "Grant writing," below), as well as a research review committee with whom researchers are communicating. The latter issue is related to capacity building and should be a part of building collaborative research relationships with communities. Opportunities to discuss authorship and acknowledgment of community leaders should be provided to participating community parties (collective and individual). Similar discussions should occur regarding intellectual property rights and be specified in a research agreement prior to the onset of the research (see TCPS-2, Tri-Council, 2022, article 9.18).

It is suggested that researchers spend time thinking outside of the "box" of peer-review publication when transmitting what they have learned to knowledge seekers. Some Indigenous researchers (e.g., Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach) have translated their research through personal narrative, storytelling, and conversation, as well as academic books and articles. Other examples of accessible dissemination methods might include radio communications, websites, posts and reels on social media, videos, and illustrated materials or infographics.

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18   FNCF – First Nations Client File. The First Nations Client File is a cohort of BC Resident First Nations People registered under the Indian Act, and their unregistered descendants for whom entitlement-to-register can be determined.

19   "*Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ is the term used to describe Inuit epistemology or the Indigenous knowledge of the Inuit). The term translates directly as that which Inuit have always known to be true'" (Tagalik, 2009-2010, p. 1).

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20   https://www.manitoulin.com/conference-seeks-to-develop-stronger-communication-on-indigenous-research/

4 International application of Canadian lessons

Our goal has been to examine resources supporting the conduct of ethical research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, with a view to synthesizing the key principles and guidelines, and offering lessons for similarly intentioned international work. With no ambitions towards a systematic global review and synthesis, our scan of relevant peer-reviewed and grey literature identified four broad categories of work relevant to ethical Indigenous research.

The first category is Indigenous scholarly papers and reports. A prime example is the aforementioned seminal book by Smith (1999), but important works also stem from the *United States* (Lomawaima, 2000); *Peru* (Milmaniene, 2009); *Colombia* (Urrego-Mendoza et al., 2017); *Canada* (e.g., Wilson, 2008; Tuck and Guishard, 2013; Drawson et al., 2017; Kovach, 2021); and *Pacific Asia* (Mataira, 2019). These works share a critique of dominant research methodologies and stress the importance of research that originates from within Indigenous knowledge systems, rather than merely incorporating Indigenous perspectives or knowledge into otherwise colonial research. Another theme that emerges is the need for Indigenous sovereignty to extend to research, including control over research data collected from Indigenous Peoples (e.g., Rainie et al., 2019; Walter and Suina, 2019; Walter et al., 2021). The work of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)[21] on data governance is particularly noteworthy for centering Indigenous Peoples as decision makers regarding how their data are collected, accessed, stored, and used. The IWGIA recommends Indigenous Peoples establish and use policies for community data governance and negotiate mechanisms to ensure that the treatment of any externally stewarded data reflects their Indigenous values (Carroll et al., 2021; Robyn et al., 2022).

The second category is works authored by Indigenous scholars or organizations, some developed with community members and Elders. This category includes works in the *Canadian* context (e.g., Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and Nunavut Research Institute, 2006; Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011); and examples from *South America* (e.g., Meza Guzmán et al., 2021) and from Tribal councils in the *United States* (see Lomawaima, 2000). The work of Huria et al. (2019) represents an important collaboration and synthesis in *New Zealand* and *Australia*. More recently, an international team led by Yuira Celidwen contributed an Indigenous-specific framework of ethical research principles to guide Western-led psychedelic science (Celidwen et al., 2023). These works focus on research approaches that emerge within *specific* Indigenous communities and offer recommendations to incorporate culturally specific values (including territorial knowledge) into research.

The third category is work that proposes formal ethical guidelines or requirements. These works, which closely approximate policy documents, include *Canada's* TCPS-2 (Tri-Council, 2022) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010). The former's span of policy control is bounded by the three Canadian research funding bodies (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC) and is mandatory for Indigenous research funded through the Tri-Council. Its closest parallel internationally is Australia's Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (updated in 2020), developed in consultation with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). Compliance to this Code is required for all research funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), AIATSIS, or the National Health and Medical Research Council (NMHRC). For the *United States,* applicants seeking funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are encouraged to follow guidance offered by Walters et al. (2019), although this does not appear to be formally mandated or monitored. The United States also released a *Final NIH Policy for Data Management and Sharing*[22] in early 2023, but official recommendations appear to be in the draft stage:

> "The NIH Tribal Consultation Report – NIH Draft Policy for Data Management and Sharing[23] provides more detail on the Tribal Consultation process relative to the development of the final DMS Policy and NIH's response. Briefly, three themes emerged from Tribal Nations' input: (1) Strengthen engagement built on trust between researchers and Tribal Nations; (2) Train researchers to responsibly and respectfully manage and share American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) data; and (3) Ensure research practices are aligned with the laws, policies, and preferences of AI/AN community partners."

Works in this category (formal ethical guidelines) offer high-level recommendations for research with multiple Indigenous communities, rather than focusing on specific communities in greater depth. Chapter 9 of the TCPS-2, for example, applies to work with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples (Tri-Council, 2022). For this reason, the implementation of guidelines may require an evaluation of which aspects are relevant locally. Where formal guidelines differ from local or territorial practices, those which are specific to the Indigenous community involved should override practices designed for a broader context (e.g., national or international). Both the TCPS-2 and the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* acknowledge that recommendations may sometimes be superseded by local practices as part of the process of tailoring research to meet the needs of the communities involved (see AIATSIS Code of Ethics *for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* Section 1.7c and TCPS Section B and articles 9.2 and 9.3).

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21   The IWGIA is part of the International Indigenous Data Sovereignty Interest Group, which developed the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance in consultation with Indigenous Peoples, scholars, non-profit organizations, and governments. The CARE Principles are as follows: Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics. These principles complement the approach of the FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship, which proposes that data be Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable. (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

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22   Available at: https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-21-013.html (Accessed October 13, 2023).
23   Available at: https://osp.od.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/Tribal_Report_Final_508.pdf (Accessed October 13, 2023).

The last category of work relevant at the international level offers guidelines, policy, and legislation to protect Indigenous rights in research. Such works address environmental protection, health, and social justice. This includes the UNDRIP (2007, p. 28, Article 43) and its policy and legislative adoption in signatory countries. For a national example, see Hepburn's (2020) review of Peruvian legislation protecting individuals and communities from infringement of rights for purposes of commercialization. Through its Environmental and Social Framework, the World Bank also provided guidance and key principles for funding applicants to its program "ESS7: Indigenous Peoples/Sub-Saharan African Historically Underserved Traditional Local Communities" (World Bank, 2018), although scholars note the program leaves many gaps to be addressed (Lewis and Söderbergh, 2019).

Consistency across internationally relevant documents has developed partly as a result of the widely-read work of Indigenous scholars (e.g., Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021). Important similarities across International documents include a focus on (a) acknowledging and respecting Indigenous ways of knowing and the use of culturally appropriate research methods and tools; (b) ensuring that research benefits Indigenous communities and addresses their needs and priorities; (c) ensuring that free, prior, and informed consent is obtained (sometimes balanced by collective forms of consent); and (d) empowering Indigenous communities in the research process.

When ethical considerations specific to Indigenous research are compiled into an organizing framework, they are typically articulated as a whole rather than as principles in isolation from each other. This approach is consistent with a holistic worldview. Flexibility is consistently identified as critically important for applying principles and guidelines in different jurisdictional and community contexts. Chapter 9 of Canada's TCPS-2 highlights such flexibility by acknowledging "the role of community in shaping the conduct of research that affects First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities" (see section on Context, Tri-Council, 2022). Australia's previously mentioned *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2020) is required for funded research, and encouraged to be "mandatory" for institutions and organizations. The National Health and Medical Research Council (2018b) provides a companion document for the AIATSIS Code and its related Guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018a) to support application. Arguments for increasing community participation in Indigenous research in Australia also stress a need for flexibility at the community level in the evolution of the research agenda and processes (Dudgeon et al., 2010; Butler et al., 2022). The Métis Centre of National Aboriginal Health Organization (2011) describes research principles as "not intended to be enforceable rules that must be followed but rather are a well thought out starting point to engage Métis communities in ethical research" (p. 1). Such flexibility also is articulated well in the context of urban/rural considerations, such as in the report from Manitoba's 2018 Urban Indigenous Health Research Gathering (UIHRG), in which authors reject "a one-size-fits-all approach" for one where researchers "walk alongside communities with one simple instruction: nothing about us, without us" (Morton, 2019, p. 4). In short, the principles and guidelines are framed as adaptable and evolving.

Lastly, while our global scan finds consistency in content and intention, there is considerable inconsistency in terminology, which presents challenges for international comparisons through a policy lens. For example, the terms "principles" and "guidelines" reflect something different from "policy" or "legislation," with policy being what one "must do" and principles and guidelines reflecting what one "should do." Policies are formalized requirements that apply to a specific area or task and comprise a written document that establishes a standard by which an institution manages its affairs (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022). A policy mandates, specifies, or prohibits conduct to enhance an institution's mission, ensure coordinated compliance with applicable laws and regulations, promote operational efficiency, and/or reduce institutional risk. Going further, a policy framework typically includes not only policy statements but also the rationale, principles, and guidelines that explain the policy as well as considerations for implementation and evaluation, including procedures to be followed and relationship to strategic directions. While creation of policy entails commitment for evaluation and, ideally, quality improvement activities, evaluation of adherence to policy is often lacking in the international landscape of ethical Indigenous research [see Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and The Lowitja Institute (2013), for a notable exception from Australia].

The vast majority of documents related to ethical research with Indigenous Peoples articulate guidelines, recommendations, and/or key principles that establish what "should be." It may be tempting for jurisdictions and organizations to go beyond guidelines or principles to produce policy with a view to enforcement. However, there are challenges in recommending enforceable policies for formalizing and operationalizing ethical research guidelines with Indigenous Peoples. For example, there are often multiple communities, organizations, and institutions to involve when developing and enforcing a policy or policy framework. The more organizations and institutions involved, the greyer becomes the span of policy control and enforcement. In addition, the need for flexibility and adaptation, given widely varying cultural norms and mores within and across Indigenous communities, including community members living outside their home communities, challenges the use of formal mandatory policies. This diversity is multiplied in an international context.

5 A planning guide

We suggest Indigenous scholars, organizations and community leaders/Elders themselves consider the pros and cons of moving from guidelines and principles to formal mandatory policy with respect to Indigenous ethical research. Rather than advocate for Canadian or international policy development *per se*, we draw on our narrative synthesis and recommend a common set of questions that a jurisdiction, organization and/or research team can use when engaging in Indigenous research collaborations (see Supplementary Table S1). To facilitate alignment with international guidelines, we have organized these questions according to the eight research domains identified by Huria et al. (2019) for reporting research involving Indigenous Peoples.

6 Conclusion

Academic researchers, regardless of institutional affiliation or context, have a responsibility to conduct ethical research with an intersectional lens that benefits the populations under study. By responding to the aforementioned calls to action, researchers will advance toward fully ethical, respectful, and collaborative research with Indigenous Peoples. It is hoped that this paper will open dialogue at Canadian institutions and beyond regarding how researchers can embed respect for Indigenous cultural protocols and philosophies into research design.

Furthermore, in approaching the shift of research paradigm alluded to in this paper's introduction, it is important to focus on the strengths of Indigenous communities, and ways to increase Indigenous wellbeing, rather than produce statistics about negative issues or problems faced. Much of the scientific literature has produced disparity-focused research rather than strengths-based research, which reinforces the subordination of Indigenous Peoples by bolstering stereotypes rooted in white supremacy. There is an inherent power difference in the "researcher–researched" dynamic (First Nations Centre, 2005) that must be minimized so Indigenous nations may lead and direct research that affirms their sovereignty and supports their cultural survival.

Positionality statements

Dominique Morisano, PhD, CPsych (she/her) is of Italian/Balto-Slavic descent and a dual Canadian/US citizen raised in rural Connecticut. She is a clinical psychologist and Adjunct Professor at the University of Toronto/University of Ottawa and engages in teaching, practice, research, and consultation in North America and Europe. Her research has focused on research ethics, addiction and mental health services, goals/motivation, implementation science, and more recently plant medicines. As a child, she became very interested in learning about and protesting injustices against Indigenous Peoples in North America, and asked her parents to bring her to local powwows to connect with area Indigenous Peoples and learn about the histories and traditions of those who had traditionally populated the lands she occupied. She continued her learning exploration through and beyond graduate school, studying the intersections of spirituality and science, including Native American religions; volunteering at Montreal's First Nations Friendship Centre; participating in ceremonies and forming healing relationships with several Elders (in both the North and South); and via ongoing collaborations with Indigenous colleagues. While working as an independent scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), she was seconded to an appointment with the unit formerly known as Aboriginal Engagement and Outreach (now Shkaabe Makwa), and continued collaborating with her colleagues there after leaving.

Margaret Robinson, PhD (she/her) is a Mi'kmaw (L'nu) scholar and a member of Lennox Island First Nation. Her mother's ancestors were Scottish and Irish, and Margaret holds status under section 6.2 of the Indian Act of Canada. Raised in Sheet Harbour, in the Eskikewa'kik district of Mi'kma'ki, Margaret completed her undergraduate studies at Saint Mary's University in Halifax/Kjipuktuk, and earned a PhD in Theology from the University of Toronto in the homeland of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. She now works as an Associate Professor at Dalhousie University in Mi'kma'ki, where she holds the Tier II Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity. Margaret identifies as two-spirit, bisexual, and queer, and her research with sexual and gender minority people examines substance use, mental health, and how culture and identity support wellbeing. Margaret served on the Indigenous Advisory Board of the Institute of Indigenous People's Health at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and now serves on the Tri-Council's Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research.

Brian Rush, PhD (he/him) is of Irish and Welsh descent and born in Canada in 1951, He is a health services researcher whose work has focused on the planning and evaluation of mental and substance use health services and systems with a focus on the synthesis and translation of evidence into practice. This work has involved significant consultations with Indigenous communities and organizations working on their behalf and specific recommendations for improving access and coordination, inclusive of traditional land-based healing (e.g., provincial strategic plan for the province of Manitoba). Other work has aimed to develop and evaluate tools and processes for culturally relevant and trauma informed screening and assessment tools for Indigenous Peoples seeking mental health and substance use health services and support [e.g., Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Aboriginal Engagement and Outreach (now Shkaabe Makwa]. Recent work has also been in support of Indigenous communities (from the North to the South) to gain access to traditional entheogenic substances for healing and overall individual and community wellness. Through all of these and other experiences Brian has gained a deep appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing and how to work collaboratively from a position of respect and reciprocity.

Renee Linklater, PhD (she/her), is of Anishinaabe and Scottish/English ancestry and a member of Rainy River First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. She has much lived experience as a First Nations person in Canada. Two generations of her family attended Indian Residential Schools—both her grandparents and her mom - and as a baby, she was apprehended by the Children's Aid Society and became part of what is now known as the 60s scoop. Renee reconnected with her family and community in 1988. Over the last 35 years she has developed very strong relationships in her personal, community, and professional life. In her academic studies, she explored the impacts of trauma and delved deep into the cultural knowledge that exists within Indigenous communities. Renee has extensive experience with Elders, healers, and in ceremonies. She has a thorough understanding of Indigenous research ethics and protocols. At the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), she is Senior Director of Shkaabe Makwa and leads the first hospital-based Centre in Canada designed to drive culturally-responsive systems initiatives to achieve health justice and wellness for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis through the advancement of research, workforce development, and innovative healing models that harmonize traditional knowledge and medical expertise. She has over 25 years of experience working with Indigenous healing agencies and First Nation communities. Renee has worked across the health and education sectors as a frontline worker, program evaluator, curriculum developer, educator/trainer, and researcher. She is an international speaker on trauma and

healing and is the author of *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies* and editor of *Connected in Creation: A Collection of Lived experience through Cultural Expression*.

Author contributions

DM, MR, and RL contributed to conception, design, and outline of the research project and manuscript. BR contributed to the manuscript. DM wrote the first draft of the manuscript. DM, MR, and BR wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the collection of source materials, contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

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Legal violence: the struggles of Thai women in Thai massage businesses

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Prior studies of legal violence concerning minority groups in the United States are often linked to Immigration Law. Drawing primarily from 30 interviews with Thai massage business owners in Los Angeles, this article reveals how the implementation of local and federal regulations and laws regarding massage businesses constitutes legal violence. Using Crenshaw's structural, political, and representational intersectionality, this article demonstrates how Thai women's race, ethnicity, and gender affect their experiences in countering the state regulations. The analysis focuses on two interrelated areas of Thai massage business owners' and Thai massage therapists' lives—the strict government surveillance of Thai massage business operations and the enforcement of professional certification. This legal violence toward Thai massage owners and massage therapists is rooted in a legal system that aims to protect consumers. Nevertheless, the effect of legal violence is not limited to undocumented Thai immigrants but also affects Thai American citizens and legal permanent residents.

KEYWORDS

legal violence, policy weaponization, intersectionality, government surveillance, Thai massage business, U.S. immigrant communities

1 Introduction

The term "legal violence" dates back to Cover (1975). Cover (1986) shows that criminal law can damage individuals' lives through, for example, the subjects' loss of freedom, property, children, and/or life. Menjívar and Abrego (2012) establish that legal violence is more comprehensive and can go beyond the obvious and direct violent consequences of the law. The term "legal violence" is employed in this paper akin to Menjívar and Abrego (2012), asserting that the convergence of local and federal regulations with criminal law leads to the practice of legal violence. To highlight the nuanced ways through which laws and regulations exert power and control, this manuscript examines the detrimental impacts of laws that can hinder and disrupt immigrants' pathways to economic mobility and incorporation. The term legal violence is used to describe these consequences because they frequently take detrimental forms that affect immigrants' livelihood. Further, while there are recorded incidences of physical violence and interpersonal aggression, this article focuses on those that do not result in bodily damage. The analysis focuses on the accumulation of those negative incidents that are not only instantly excruciating but detrimental to immigrants' long-term chances in the U.S. society. This article traces Thai massage business owners and therapists' experiences to the execution and the discourses of the laws. To theorize about legal violence, this paper links specific laws and

regulations and their implementation to Thai massage business owners and therapists' work lives.

The notion of legal violence encompasses the diverse and reciprocally strengthening types of violence that the legal system facilitates and intensifies. Through this lens, this article is able to depict the exacerbation of the law's ordinarily "normal" impact. Furthermore, the legal violence lens highlight the inconsistencies that underly the creation and application of local and federal laws and regulations. The laws and regulations aim to penalize unlicensed massage therapists and massage business owners who violates laws by offering sexual services; yet, unintentionally force them into areas outside the legal system.

Legal violence is both structural and symbolic. Structural in that it is encrypted into the formal legal structures, and symbolic because it is executed by the social order in a way that it becomes normalized, publicly accepted, and respected. Legal violence thus describes the suffering that results from, and is made possible by, implementing laws and regulations that restrict and shape individuals' daily routines. The existing literature on legal violence concerning minority groups in the United States is often linked to Immigration Law (Takaki, 1990; De Genova, 2004; Miller, 2005; Espiritu, 2008; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012; Cervantes and Menjívar, 2020). Looking beyond Immigration Law, this paper opens up new terrain for studying legal violence within the immigrant community. This article demonstrates how and why federal and state laws lead to injustice and hinder Thai women's access to economic mobility.

The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is utilized to understand how legal violence constitutes within the Thai massage community. In many of her works, Crenshaw (1991, 2017) illustrates that experiences and lives cannot be considered separate identities of class, gender, and race; instead, those identities overlap and intersect depending on the context and situation. Consequently, this article considers not only the gender of Thai women, but also their race and ethnicity, and how these affect their experiences when encountering state regulations. This article illustrates how the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender prevents Thai massage owners and therapists[1] from blending into U.S. society, and to achieve the American dream by operating a legal business. The concept of structural, political, and representational intersectionality is utilized to do so (Crenshaw, 1991, 2017).

Although the laws and regulations regarding massage and spa businesses may not target any particular group, Thai women are greatly affected as they are highly concentrated in this sector. This article shows how government surveillance shapes the operation of Thai massage businesses, in the cause of maintaining community standards, and consumer protection. Legal violence embedded in law enforcement practices hinders Thai massage owners and Thai massage therapists by creating (1) fear and anxiety in operating their businesses, which is harmful to their mental health, (2) conditions that make it nearly impossible to obtain legal professional certification, and (3) constraints to their economic mobility. These difficulties lead Thai

women to activate their informal networks, producing instant but temporary solutions. Furthermore, some Thai women are exploited by their coethnics.

As such, the critical scholarly contributions this article makes are twofold. First, the article contributes a new dimension to the scholarship on immigrant ethnic businesses by highlighting the significance of state and federal laws in the type and level of violence against ethnic business operators. Further, the article contributes to applying intersectionality to understand the significance of legal violence in ethnic businesses. On a broad level, this article opens up new avenues for theorizing and critiquing the relationship between state and federal laws, and violence against marginalized groups.

2 Literature review

2.1 Legal violence in the Thai community

Currently, the literature on the role of the state in regulating immigrant businesses reports three main streams. First, some scholars recognize that the state can be viewed as a resource for ethnic businesses because the state grants visas to immigrants (Zhou, 1992; Seals, 2015). Secondly, the state can be viewed as a source of interethnic and/or racial conflict in ethnic businesses. Many native-born U.S. citizens resent what they see as the government providing certain groups of immigrants a hand up in their quest for mobility with financial resources such as small business loans, tax breaks, and welfare (Portes, 1987; Lee, 2002). Lastly, many scholars examine the role of state surveillance and repression against ethnic businesses. Min (1996), for instance, discusses how the New York State surveilled Korean nail salons in New York when the city began to regulate nail salons in 1991. Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2011) discuss how street vendors, who are not permitted to operate in Los Angeles, fear police and city authorities. Dhingra (2012) discusses how local government authorities target Indian motel owners because they suspect that the owners allow illegal activities, such as drug dealing and prostitution, on their premises. This article contributes to this literature as it examines how the U.S. government surveils Thai massage owners as well as Thai massage therapists and how that affects business operations. This article discusses how Thai massage owners negotiate and navigate their ways within U.S. laws and regulations.

The constant government surveillance of the Thai community in the United States is not without reason. While the Thai population comprises less than 0.1% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), the number of lawsuits for human trafficking against Thais is relatively high. For example, between 1998 and 2003, the largest number of foreign victims of trafficking in California came from Thailand (Human Rights Center, 2005). Further, while U.S. human trafficking statistics show that victims came from 47 countries, Thailand is the top source country (Center for Public Policy Studies, 2013).

Another reason for the continual government surveillance of the Thai community could be that massage business is the second largest business sector in which Thai people operate in the United States. According to Bales (2012), massage businesses are one of the many places in Thailand where sex services are available. Kara (2009) claims that Los Angeles has Asian massage businesses that are fronts for prostitution. In addition, he claimed that he had met a sex trafficking

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1   The word "massage therapist" is intentionally used instead of "masseuse" or "masseur" as it is gender-neutral. While all the terms refer to a person who provides massage professionally, they have different connotations. The latter two are often linked to sexual services.

victim in a Thai massage business. Between 2012 and 2016, there was a rise in sting operations in massage businesses. The number of Asian-identified people arrested in New York for unlicensed massage and prostitution increased by 2,700% (Dank et al., 2017). Therefore, in the eyes of the U.S. government, Thai massage businesses are perceived as illegal operations, and potential sites for human trafficking.

Under the current regime, inequalities and abuses toward Thai massage owners and therapists are made possible by specific laws and regulations. These structural violence leads to not only instant social suffering but also impede their economic success and integration. Further, these violations are constitutive of symbolic violence. Viewing symbolic violence in accordance with Bourdieu (2001), Thai massage owners and therapists, who are deemed as less dominant in the U.S. society, internalize the existing laws and regulations which leads to social inequality as normal and legitimate. The dominant perpetuates and makes believe that the laws and regulations regarding massage business are legitimate and to be followed. As it is the law, injustices and breaches of rights within the social structure go unchallenged. Thai massage owners and therapists are fully well aware of the power inequalities yet they endure it as the structures are omnipotent and overwhelming. Thai massage owners and therapists learn to accept that their marginalized status is natural and do not try to alter those conditions.

Drawing from structural and symbolic violence concepts, this article contends that legal violence provides the clearest explanation for the experiences of Thai massage owners and therapists. Legal violence captures the suffering on an everyday life caused by and made possible by the corpus of laws and regulations. While the effects of laws and regulations can be considered as both structural and symbolic violence, the author refers to it as legal violence as it is embedded formally and legitimately in legal practices that are perceived as normal and natural. While the laws and regulations aim to maintain community standards and consumer protection, they harm a particular social group—Thai community.

The concept of legal violence is utilized to demonstrate how federal and state laws lead to injustice, and hinder Thai women's access to economic mobility. Legal violence occurs when laws that aim to control behavior for the general good simultaneously marginalize and harm groups of people. This makes the marginalized groups unprotected, and subject to abuse. Even though the state is not the direct agent of violence, the law permits violence against the targeted group (Abrego and Menjívar, 2011; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). Legal violence has damaging effects on individual immigrants and their families, both in their everyday lives and in long-term incorporation processes (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012).

Further, intersectionality is applied to understand how and why Thai women are marginalized by their race, ethnicity, and gender. Intersectionality describes the multiple social identities, social forces, and ideological instruments through which power and disadvantage are expressed and legitimized. Intersectionality investigates intersecting power relations of different categories such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, and race as interrelated and mutually influencing one another. Thus, intersectionality is a valuable tool in understanding the complexity of society, and of individuals within a society. The concept allows us to understand social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins and Bilge, 2020). In this article, the concept of structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991,

2017) is utilized to illustrate how the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and gender prevents Thai massage owners and therapists from blending into U.S. society, and to achieve the American dream by operating a legal business.

3 Data and methods

This research is based primarily on semi-structured interviews with 30 Thai massage business owners in Los Angeles from 2015 to 2017. Interviews and informal conversations with the workers (e.g., managers and therapists) were also used. Research participants were found through phone inquiries and referrals. For diversity, 30 Thai massage business owners were selected from different neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. The interviews included questions on the business owners' migration histories, motivations for opening an ethnic business, business operations, employment processes, perceptions of gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace, strategies of market competitions, and plans for the future. The interviews, on average, lasted for an hour. They usually took place at the respondent's business establishment, in a public setting such as a café or, in a few cases ($N=4$), by phone. All but one interview was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted entirely in Thai, except for one case which was conducted in both Thai and English because the American spouse was present. Atlas.ti software was used to code the interviews and fieldnotes, relying on inductive analysis and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Given the semi-structured interviews, the main themes in this article emerged unprompted.

While most of the respondents were massage business owners and workers, some research participants hold positions of authority in Thai commercial and cultural organizations, which helped understand the community's perspectives on government surveillance and its effects on Thai society.

The research was supplemented with 5 years of participant observation. Detailed fieldnotes were taken when the author attended Thai business events and gatherings such as the Songkran Festival in Hollywood, and Thai festivals at Thai temples. The author also spent time with Thai people, and had lunch and dinner at local restaurants. In this way, the author observed, interacted, and engaged with people in the Thai community.

3.1 Sample characteristics

Table 1 shows the characteristics of sample. Most of the respondents are first-generation immigrants. Seventy-three percent are female, and 27% are male. The respondents' ages range from 32 to 70, and the average age is 46. Most of them are married with diverse levels of education, ranging from primary education to Ph.D. Forty-seven percent of the respondents have a bachelor's degree.

About a third migrated to the United States to further their education, either English language classes or higher education, but most were side-tracked as the work/business opportunity arose. Twenty percent came straight from Thailand for business or work opportunities, hoping to achieve the American dream. Seventeen percent came because they have family members already living in the United States. In terms of travel documents, most Thai business owners first came to the United States on a tourist visa (45%) or a

TABLE 1 Characteristics of sample.

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Marital status	Education	Visa type to the U.S.	Current status	Length of stay (years)	Business in operation (years)	Business type	Initial business investment ($)	Annual earnings ($)
1	Bussaba	60s	Female	Divorced	Primary education	Tourist	U.S. citizen	32	16	Family business	20,000	-
2	Dusadee	50s	Female	Married	Bachelor degree	Tourist	Permanent Resident	15	12	Family business	100,000	100,000
3	Kittima	30s	Female	Divorced	Diploma	Student	Permanent Resident	10	3	Family business	21,000	15,000
4	Hatairat	30s	Female	Married	Primary education	Other	Permanent Resident	7	3	Family business	30,000	-
5	Pongsathorn	60s	Male	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Student	U.S. citizen	36	12	Family business	45,000	-
6	Piyanuch	50s	Female	Married	Bachelor degree	Tourist	Permanent Resident	18	7	Family business	15,000	66,000
7	Mingkwan	30s	Female	Married	PhD	Student	U.S. citizen	12	8	Family business	30,000	120,000
8	Korkaew	30s	Female	Single	Bachelor degree	Tourist	Student	9	3	Has shareholder(s)	50,000	60,000
9	Kasem	30s	Male	Married	Bachelor degree	Student	U.S. citizen	10	9	Has shareholder(s)	50,000	65,000
10	Duangdao	40s	Female	Divorced	Master degree	Student	U.S. citizen	10	5	Family business	50,000	30,000
11	Kanokwan	30s	Female	Single	Bachelor degree	Student	U.S. citizen	11	6	Has shareholder(s)	50,000	60,000
12	Duangjai	30s	Female	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Tourist	U.S. citizen	11	11	Family business	25,000	85,000
13	Thongchai	30s	Male	Single	Bachelor degree	Student	Student	10	4	Has shareholder(s)	48,000	144,000
14	Suphanee	60s	Female	Divorced	Junior high	Tourist	U.S. citizen	17	5	Family business	40,000	45,000
15	Suthida	40s	Female	Married	Bachelor degree	Tourist	U.S. citizen	7	3	Family business	60,000	20,000
16	Jaruwan	50s	Female	Married	Diploma	-	U.S. citizen	13	9	Family business	60,000	19,000
17	Boonchai	30s	Male	Married	Master degree	Tourist	Permanent Resident	8	7	Has shareholder(s)	30,000	96,000
18	Premika	30s	Female	Married	Bachelor degree	Student	Permanent Resident	7	3	Has shareholder(s)	30,000	65,000
19	Sureeporn	30s	Female	Married	Master degree	Student	Permanent Resident	11	7	Family business	90,000	100,000
20	Sadudee	60s	Female	Widowed	Primary education	Tourist	U.S. citizen	28	7	Family business	60,000	18,000
21	Chomchanok	50s	Female	Single	Master degree	Tourist	Permanent Resident	10	4	Family business	55,000	-
22	Kornkanok	50s	Female	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Tourist	U.S. citizen	10	9	Family business	30,000	-
23	Anchalee	40s	Female	Married	Junior high	Tourist	U.S. citizen	13	7	Has shareholder(s)	20,000	96,000
24	Panupong	50s	Male	Single	Junior high	Tourist	Permanent Resident	17	6	Family business	50,000	-
25	Pinmanee	30s	Female	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Other	Permanent Resident	9	1	Has shareholder(s)	60,000	54,000
26	Sakorn	50s	Male	Seperated	Senior high	Other	U.S. citizen	24	4	Family business	20,000	-
27	Arisara	40s	Female	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Student	U.S. citizen	20	17	Family business	40,000	60,000
28	Jenjira	40s	Female	Single	Master degree	Student	Permanent Resident	11	5	Family business	30,000	43,800
29	Kaokla	30s	Male	Single	Bachelor degree	Student	U.S. citizen	11	4	Family business	130,000	42,000
30	Jatupong	70s	Male	Married	Diploma	Permanent resident	U.S. citizen	34	8	Family business	45,000	30,000

Pseudonyms and age range are used in this article to preserve participant confidentiality. One person denied telling the visa status when first arrived in the U.S. and seven respondents opted out of telling their annual earnings.

student visa (41%). Fifty-seven percent now have dual citizenship (Thai-American), and 43 % have a green card. Thai business owners have been in the United States for an average of 15 years (median = 11 years), and many speak English fluently.

Thai massage business owners opened their businesses because it requires a relatively small investment compared to other businesses (40%), they have the knowledge and skill in the field (37%), and it yields high profit (27%). On average, the businesses have been in operation for 7 years (median = 6.5 years). While some are relatively new businesses that have been open for only a year, the longest business has been in operation for 17 years.

Most respondents started their businesses using personal savings (80%), while some received loans from their family members, friends, and/or a bank institute. Only one mentioned rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs). This is in contrast to Korean and Chinese business owners (Light, 1972; Light and Bonacich, 1991). The initial investment in their massage businesses ranges from $15,000 to $130,000, with the mean being $46,133 (median = $ 45,000). After deducting all related expenses, the business earnings per year range from $15,000 to $144,000. However, the mean is $62,339, and the median is $60,000.

Business scales range from small family-owned businesses that hire no workers to larger establishments with 30 employees. On average, Thai massage business owners hire 10 workers, of which 86% are female. It is common for massage businesses to hire only women, and most (97%) Thai massage businesses hire only Thai staff.

It is important to note that the sample consists of Thai business owners who voluntarily agreed to an interview, so there may be some selection bias. For example, business owners who responded may be law-abiding, while those who break the law by offering sex services, or in some other way, chose not to respond.

4 Results

4.1 Government surveillance and legal violence toward Thai massage businesses

Before the year 2000, spas and massages were considered services for the upper middle and upper class. Once Thais entered this business niche, massage became an affordable luxury for a wide range of customers from different socioeconomic strata. As a result, these businesses can be found in Beverly Hills and in East and South Los Angeles. However, while Thai massages are well-known among people in Los Angeles, little is known about the struggle that Thai business owners and Thai massage therapists face in business operations, particularly concerning laws and regulations. This section discusses how government surveillance occurs in Thai businesses, and how Thai business owners negotiate and continue their businesses under such strict surveillance. This article describes how government surveillance leads to legal violence toward Thai massage business owners and workers. To contextualize legal violence, this article links specific laws and regulations, and their implementation, to particular outcomes in Thai massage owners' and massage therapists' working lives. This article also displays how legal violence comes about in the government's intention to curb sexual services in the massage industry, and to maintain a massage service standard. Finally, building from Crenshaw's (1991, 2017) work, this article utilizes the concept of

structural, political, and representational intersectionality to understand how and why Thai women are marginalized by their race, ethnicity, and gender.

4.1.1 Thai massage and sex

In the United States, prostitution is illegal except in 10 counties in Nevada (ProCon.org, 2018). However, the media often portrays, and the public often perceives, many legal businesses, such as nightclubs and massage businesses, as places that offer sexual services. Thai massages, in particular, may be depicted as offering sexual services. To prevent sexual solicitation within massage businesses in Los Angeles, the massage ordinance clearly states: "No storage or sale of sexually oriented material and/or sexually-oriented merchandise, as defined by LAMC 103.01, shall be permitted within the Massage Establishment." (The Los Angeles Police Department, 2015: 8).

Police raids at massage businesses are built into the system and constructed as necessary legal routine practices to keep the community safe from shady businesses. In principal, people and their belongings are shielded from arbitrary government search and seizure under both the United States and California Constitutions. Nevertheless, it is not always required to get a search warrant before conducting a search. Indeed, a majority of police searches are conducted without a warrant. This is allowed in several scenarios, for example, when an officer is clearly witnessing something illegal, when it is part of an arrest, and when an individual grants permission to a search (Los Angeles Police Department, 2022). Thai massage business owners have no choice but to comply to such enforcement as the power dynamics between the police officer and the owner are unequal. Many Thai massage owners comply while being unaware of their legal obligations as they believes noncompliance will put them under the radar of the government. This is when the weaponization of policy occurs.

The weaponization of policy happens when policies harm a specific person or group of people (Faber et al., 2023). This is seen in the case with Thai business owners and Thai massage therapists through several policies (Table 2). Due to ambiguity, weaponized policies can lead to racial discrimination. This is especially so when there are no written rules or the rules are unclear, the people in charge of enforcing them, often those with power, may use different standards which can results in discriminatory outcomes (Okun et al., 2019). The high level of human trafficking and the abuse of coethnics within the Thai community has led the government to construct Thais as legal suspects. This puts Thai massage owners in a difficult position, as officials are prejudiced, and are automatically suspicious of their businesses. The police has the power to conduct unannounced inspections and raids on Thai massage businesses because they suspect that sexual services are provided.

TABLE 2 Policy weaponization.

Ambiguity discriminatory practices
– Unannounced inspections and raids on Thai massage businesses.
– Unfair arrests and police brutality.
Barriers to entry
– CAMTC certification
1. Attend a minimum of 500 hours at a CAMTC-approved school.
2. Pass a CAMTC-approved exam.

The structural intersectionality of Thai women's race, ethnicity, and gender make them highly vulnerable to police raids. According to the interviews with Thai massage business owners, many owners and therapists face unfair arrests and police brutality. Police treat the owners and therapists like criminals with no dignity and respect. They are also subject to symbolic violence because they live in fear and believe they have no rights but to accept the abuse as normal. Indeed, the president of the Nuad Thai and Spa Association of America explains the scenario that Thai massage owners face as:

> So the policemen treat us (Thai massage owners) with no dignity, as if we are criminals. So yesterday, one (massage owner) came and told me about the police raid. Once I heard it, I cried. I felt so angry for her. They talk to you badly and disrespectfully.

Dusadee, a massage business owner in her 50s, who has been in the United States for 15 years, explains her experience of her business getting raid as:

> So I hang up the licenses (the massage therapist licenses) and for all massage therapists I paid the tax correctly…So I have seven workers. The authority listed the employees' name in a book and asked me to sign. I did not check the details. I just signed. Later, I found out there were 15 names. I was confused. My business is this big how can I hire 15 workers? I think they are just out to get money. I paid $17,500 in fine…My friends advised me not to appeal because they said I might end up paying more if I did.

Dusadee's case shows that her lack of understanding of the legal procedures led her to sign documents without knowing the consequences. As a result, she was accused of hiring workers illegally. Although Dusadee believes that she did not receive justice, she did not appeal as she is afraid that it might affect her chance of getting U.S. citizenship.

On some occasions, undercover police will pretend to be a customer seeking sexual services. While this is helpful for the police in determining which places provide real massages, and which ones are cover-ups for brothels, the result is that Thai massage business owners experience fear and anxiety in their daily business operations. Racial, ethnic, and gender biases are no longer just an interpersonal problem but an institutional one, as shown by the struggles of Thai businesses vis-á-vis the U.S. government.

In some cases, the massage therapist's inability to communicate well in English, and her body language may be misinterpreted, leading undercover police to think she agrees to sexual services. The massage therapist will then be arrested and charged with prostitution-related offenses, unlicensed massage if she lacks a certification, and/or issues relating to her immigration status (Chin et al., 2019; Solis, 2021). Some Thai massage therapists are undocumented, and some are on student visas. In these cases, even if they had not engaged in sexual services, they would drop complaints and claims of wrongful arrest against the police, as they feared being deported.

Furthermore, undercover police officers sometimes engage sexually with massage therapists during stings, but they seldom use cameras to record the interactions, which is often downplayed in police reports. After sexual engagement with the women, police officers sometimes verbally humiliate and degrade the therapists, dehumanizing and traumatizing the women who the raid is meant to help (MacMillan and Bhattarai, 2021). Thai women view such acts as

an abuse of power by the authorities, and thus become suspicious and distrustful of law enforcement. Many Thai women believe that police violence against them is specifically due to their race, ethnicity, gender, and occupation.

All the respondents are aware of the legal consequences of concealing sex services in their businesses. Therefore, they adhere to a strict code of morals and ethics, abide by the law, and permit no sexual conduct on their premises. Nevertheless, the police inspection causes anxiety for business owners, as they face two main challenges: customers who expect and demand sexual services and massage therapists who provide such services.

The fact that some male customers equate Thai massage businesses with brothels is problematic. Kittima,[2] a massage business owner in her 30s who has been in the United States for 10 years explains the situation:

> Some customers will ask it outright, like do you have a "happy ending?…" Some customers will have ways of finding out. For example, asking do you have "pretty young girls?" When I get that question, I will tell them that I recommend they call elsewhere as I do not have that here…The customer would say, "Why not? What if I pay more? I give good tips." Why is there a why not? [sounding frustrated].

Thai massage business owners screen customers to weed out those seeking sex services. They do so by observing the customers' speech and/or how they act. Suthida, a massage business owner in her 40s who has been in the United States for 7 years, explains her screening process in detail:

> I screen them in the lobby. So I meet lots of people, so I can tell the way they speak and their behavior. Sometimes they will ask do you have "young girls?" If that's the case, they are coming for sex because if you want a real massage, you would just ask if we have an opening for one customer…Some men would just stare into my face. You know, men staring at your face and asking do you have "young girls," or can I check out the massage therapists?… I will ask them where the pains are. They may respond, oh, I have a backache. If they are of large built, I will ask can massage therapist step on their backs? So they will know from the queue I give that it's real massage…Another thing is the pants. I will tell them they must keep the pants on… If they say, "I feel uncomfortable," I will say, then we cannot give you the massage.

Nevertheless, not all customers express their desires for sexual services from the beginning. This presents a challenge for the massage owner. Some customers will show their true desire only once they are in the room alone with a massage therapist. Kittima explains:

> Some customers I really cannot tell. Like this morning, it just happened. So, this guy dressed up really nicely and looked clean, but once he went in for the massage he tried to touch the massage therapist. She said, no, why are you touching me? No, do not touch me. So, he said, I came here because I wanted to have fun.

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2 Pseudonyms are used in this article to preserve participant confidentiality.

Many Thai massage business owners express the difficulty of controlling what goes on behind closed doors. If the massage therapists are honest about their profession, they will inform the owners, who will then go in and tell the customer to get dressed and leave. However, some massage therapists will secretly provide the requested services for extra money without the owners' consent.

Massage therapists who engage in sex services pose another challenge for massage business owners. According to the owners, it is difficult to prevent massage therapists from providing sex services. Most places have doors or curtains because customers want privacy during their massages. Pongsathorn, a massage business owner in his 60s who has been in the United States for 36 years, shares the unorthodox methods he has used to weed out sexual conduct from his massage business:

> I secretly put in a CCTV because I suspect something is going on. So, the lady worked here for just a month, but then the customers queued up to the end of the boulevard [indicating she had way too many regular customers] …Also, her customers would not accept anyone else even though she was busy…So I knew that must be it…I always come and check on my business. I observe those who dress sexily and are constantly changing brand name purses.

In many cases, sexual services in massage businesses may occur but without the consent of the business owners. Unfortunately, the law and regulation seldom allow the business owners to present their sides of the story. Despite knowing that some former therapists engage sexually with their customers, many massage owners do not report them to the police, as they fear their license may be revoked. Instead, they fire those therapists who then move to another massage business, and ruin that business's reputation. Thai massage business owners have every reason to be afraid. There have been many cases in which massage business owners are charged with promoting prostitution merely because they run a business (Solis, 2021). The owners are in a difficult position because they cannot report the massage therapists who offer sex services to the police. After all, if they did, the police would charge them with violating the customers' privacy by using hidden cameras. As a result, Thai massage business owners believe they lack government protection.

This legal violence is made possible by existing regulations and enforcement systems. Proponents and supporters of these punitive laws and regulations claim that they protect consumers, and the communities in which the businesses are located. Targeted Thai business owners, however, experience these laws and regulations differently. Thai massage business owners have no choice but to accept and comply with the formal legal structures that give the police the right to pay a visit without prior notice. This instills a constant sense of fear for Thai massage business owners. The police raids and inspections have become normalized as part of daily business operations. Thai massage business owners are no different from Indian motel owners in Dhingra's (2012) study, who claim to be the target of local governments and cannot control what customers do in their motel rooms, e.g., illegal activities and prostitution.

In addition, many Thai women in the study migrated to the United States to attain the American dream by opening a legal business. However, they believe that the state fails to help them adjust and integrate into society. Law enforcement frames their raids and investigations as combatting sex trafficking (Solis, 2021). Ideally, the

police raid is supposed to empower women to work in a safe environment, but Crenshaw (1991) has pointed out that political intersectionality can play out differently for women of color because they are positioned in at least two subordinated groups, and because those groups often pursue conflicting political agendas. Therefore, police raids can have the opposite effect on Thai massage therapists who may be undocumented and/or uncertified. Many Thai massage therapists choose this job as they envision a new life for themselves and their families. When authorities shut down massage businesses, it affects both the business owner and the massage therapists. Thai massage therapists may be even more vulnerable if they lose their jobs, and are forced to work in more risky environments. This is the opposite of the state's intention. The legal violence lens thus exposes the contradictions on which the formulation and implementation of local, state, and federal law rest. While these laws seek to punish women who offer sexual services, they really just push them to spaces outside the law. Government agencies are thus perceived as a tool of repression against Thai ethnic businesses. This leads to a loss of trust in government agencies, not just in terms of business transactions but also in day-to-day living.

Representational intersectionality is the cultural construct of women of color (Crenshaw, 1991). While the authority's prosecutions of prostitution claim to protect and empower Thai women, it perpetuates the image of Thailand as a country that traffics women, and of Thai women as exotic commodities that can be purchased. To truly empower Thai women, the government has to ensure that the raids and police investigations have translators that enable the women to understand the accusations and defend themselves, and that they have the right to a fair trial.

4.1.2 Professional certification

Currently, the California Massage Therapy Council (CAMTC) certification is the only credential accepted for massage professionals by the State of California. Although state law does not require CAMTC certification for massage therapists to practice, some cities and counties do require this certification (California Massage Therapy Council, 2018a). In 2015, for example, Los Angeles County replaced its city massage permit with the CAMTC certification (The Los Angeles Police Department, 2015). This new requirement has been extremely challenging for Thai massage business owners and Thai massage therapists.

To obtain this certification, the massage therapist must attend a minimum of 500 hours at a CAMTC-approved school, and pass one of the following exams: (1) Board Certification Exam in Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (BCETMB) (2) Massage and Bodywork Licensing Exam (MBLEx) (3) National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCETMB) and (4) New York State Massage Therapy Examination (California Massage Therapy Council, 2018b).

While obtaining the CAMTC certification seems relatively straightforward, many Thai massage therapists find it arduous. Many Thai massage therapists and massage business owners[3] admit that they have difficulty obtaining the certificate, as the schools they attended

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3 Some Thai massage business owners also work in their businesses as massage therapists.

are not approved by CAMTC, or they once were but are no longer. Duangdao, a massage business owner in her 40s who has been in the United States for 10 years, put the issue into perspective:

> Therapists must graduate from a school approved by the state… that mean you need to take classes with foreign teachers (non-Thai). Most massage therapists who came here and have worked here for a long time and got the city license are the pioneers and do not have much English skills. It is difficult for them to understand the classes and even harder for them to take and pass the written exam. As a result, many massage therapists have given up their hope.

While Thai massage therapists have a choice of four different CAMTC-approved exams, most take the MBLEx exam. According to many massage business owners and therapists, this exam is quite difficult as they must study anatomy and other technical subjects.

The structural intersectionality of Thai women's ethnicity, race, and class places them at a disadvantage. Despite having worked in this occupation since they arrived in the United States a decade back, many Thai women are now forced to comply with the new legal certification requirements. Thai massage therapists' educational background is varied. Some therapists have only a few years of education, while others have a college degree or post-graduate qualification. Therapists who have only a few years of education and/or do not understand English well, find it extremely difficult to understand the class materials, pass the exam, and obtain the certificate. This is especially so for older Thai women whose English is not good. As a result, many women are exploited by their coethnics, who sell them fraudulent certificates for several thousand dollars, and only later do they realize that they are useless. This requirement opens opportunities for coethnic exploitation, and can result in the development of toxic immigrant communities (Del Real, 2019; Cervantes and Menjívar, 2020).

The new legislation aims to ensure that massage therapists have the required knowledge to provide safe services to customers. Although the new legislation may not target a specific race, ethnicity, or gender, Thai women are seriously affected because they are highly concentrated in the massage business. To get the CAMTC certification, one must have the money, the time, and the skill to pass the examination in English. Thai massage therapists who are responsible for sending remittances home find it extremely difficult, as the time and money they spend enrolling in a school mean less time to work and earn money.

The current situation that Thai massage therapists in Los Angeles face are similar to what Korean nail salon workers in New York experienced three decades ago. In 1991, the New York State Legislature started to regulate nail salons. The law required six hundred hours of education and a qualification examination to earn the nail specialty license. Nonetheless, the Korean Nail Salon Association of New York successfully lobbied for a grandfather clause. The clause allowed nail salon workers who could prove work experience of one or more years in nail salons to obtain licenses without additional classes and/or examinations (Min, 1996; Kang, 2010). Unfortunately, Thai massage therapists are not as lucky. Despite having the Nuad Thai and Spa Association of America to advocate for their rights, the association has been less successful in getting a similar clause to exempt Thai therapists with prior work experience.

The CAMTC certification requirement of massage therapists shows that the weaponization of policy occurs not only when the rules are arbitrary but even so when there are clear written rules. These written rules, nevertheless, can be discriminatory. Even with fair application of the regulations, there will always be an overt discriminatory consequence. Standardized tests have proven to be the most successful technique since they seem fair on the surface. If someone is deemed to be "unqualified," it is reasonable to deny them the job opportunities (Faber et al., 2023). As the CAMTC classes and exams are conducted in English, this puts Thai massage therapists at a great disadvantage. This case is similar to the requirement for psychologists in Canada to pass a French language exam in order to work. However, the ability to be a good psychologist has nothing to do with the language ability (Olson, 2020; Faber et al., 2023). Likewise, the ability to be a good massage therapist has nothing to do with the language ability. In addition, while fining unlicensed massage therapists on the surface may seems fair yet because Thai massage places are inspected more so than other massage places, the chances of Thai massage therapists getting fine is higher.

Law enforcement has had detrimental effects not only on Thai massage therapists, but also on Thai massage business owners. While the certification scheme aims to punish uncertified massage therapists, it leads to legal violence toward the therapists and the business owners. Moreover, since the requirement was enforced, Thai massage business owners have encountered difficulties finding certified massage therapists. Duangdao elucidates:

> So those who got the permit from the city and used to be able to work now cannot because they do not have the state certification. The state certification is really difficult to get. The problem now is that we lack massage therapists, which forces many massage businesses to close and sell off because we could not find massage therapists with state certification. Massage therapists also have problems because they cannot work, so they sneak and do it. But once the police raid, they get a ticket and must pay a fine. So if they get fined a couple of times, it affects their chances of getting the state certification.

While understanding the reasons for the policy change, many Thai massage business owners believe they are not given much choice but to hire uncertified therapists. Based on my sample, only one owner got fined for hiring uncertified therapists, but many Thai massage business owners are worried that they might be the next in line to get into trouble with the state. Thai massage business owners believe that, if they get into trouble with the authorities, their sentence would be more severe than that of a white person due to their lack of understanding of the U.S. legal system and their inability to defend themselves in court. Therefore, to be on good terms with the government and give themselves a sense of security, most Thai massage business owners strategize by hiring both certified and uncertified massage therapists.

Most Thai massage business owners support their uncertified therapists in getting certified. Suphanee, who is in her 60s, and has been in the United States for 17 years, explains:

> I support uncertified massage therapists to take that three-month course because you have to do this all your lives. So, the law already came out, and if you do not have the certificate, massage business owners will not dare hire you in the future. So, I recommend that they sacrifice some working hours and take the courses two to three

days per week. Also, now we have the spa group, which helps Thai people. So there will be a Thai version of the MBLEx exam.

This massage business owner is quite optimistic about a Thai version of the MBLEx exam. However, the exam is still available only in English and Spanish (Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards, 2022).

Crenshaw (1991) points out that political and representational intersectionality can come at a cost to women of color. Women of color have trouble getting their voices heard, and their experiences incorporated into agendas. Sometimes what society claims to be best for women of color is in reality an obstacle to their progress. The authorities claim that the certification scheme will put certified massage therapists at an advantage, and uplift the massage therapists' image and status in society, but this has had a detrimental effect on Thai women. The professional certification does not only reduce competition, but eliminates the only source of income for some Thai women, as many massage business owners will hire therapists with a certificate if given a choice. As a result, many Thai women have lost their jobs, and some who still insist on working in this niche have to hide like criminals. While legal violence is rooted in the legal system that purports to protect consumers, it produces unintended economic and emotional injury to the Thai community. To save the Thai massage community, the government could exempt therapists with prior work experience from the MBLEx exam, or conduct the exam in Thai.

Using the legal violence lens, this article unearths the deleterious consequences of a system of laws and policies on the massage profession certification scheme. While the certification is enforced to protect consumers, this regulation threatens the livelihood of Thai massage therapists and Thai small business owners. Because obtaining the certificate is difficult, some therapists have decided to remain uncertified. This is especially the case for the pioneers who have worked for decades as massage therapists, and were looking forward to their retirement within the next few years. By being uncertified, many Thai women face downward mobility as Thai massage business owners prefer hiring certified massage therapists to avoid getting fined and blacklisted by the government.

Thai massage business owners also risk downward mobility as many have given up hope, and plan to sell off their businesses due to the lack of certified massage therapists. When asked what they will do once they sell off their businesses, some said they would go back and work as massage therapists because that is the only skill they have. Therefore, this new regulation of professional certification leads to legal violence, which prevents Thai massage therapists from earning a living using their existing skills, and prevents them from becoming future business owners. This regulation thus hinders the economic mobility of Thai women. The effect of legal violence is not limited to undocumented Thai immigrants, but also Thai-American citizens and Thai legal permanent residents in the massage sector. These effects are harmful to the Thai community in the short and long term.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this article, the concept of legal violence and intersectionality is utilized to understand how laws and regulations regarding the massage business affect the Thai community in Los Angeles, California. Viewing Thai massage owners' and therapists' race, ethnicity, and gender not as

distinct characteristics, but as intersecting and interrelated elements that continue to influence one another allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexity of interrelated power influencing the Thai massage community (Crenshaw, 1991, 2017; Collins and Bilge, 2020). Previous research on legal violence against minority groups in the United States is often linked to how immigration law is used as a tool by the state toward undocumented immigrants (De Genova, 2004; Miller, 2005; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012; Cervantes and Menjívar, 2020). This article shows that the concept of legal violence is much more comprehensive, and can be applied to a broader range of situations. The concept is utilized to explain how the implementation of local and federal regulations and laws constitutes legal violence. This study advances the concept of legal violence by showing that legal violence affects not only undocumented immigrants, but also legal residents—Thai U.S. citizens as well as Thai permanent residents—in the massage business sector. This opens up the platform for global scholars of all fields to utilize and develop this concept to fully understand the existing and evolving social phenomenon. Further, Crenshaw's (1991) concepts of structural, political, and representational intersectionality are utilized to understand how and why Thai women's race, ethnicity, and gender affect their experience in countering state regulations. The implementation of government surveillance on Thai massage businesses and the implementation of certification for the massage profession is intended to protect customers and society from unlawful sexual transactions, and maintain a standard of massage services. These laws and regulations are well structured, and have become normalized and publicly accepted. However, these laws and regulations severely affect Thai massage business owners and therapists. They lead to constant fear, anxiety, distrust of government authority, and constrain the economic mobility of Thai women. Thus, legal violence has damaging effects on Thai massage business owners, therapists, and their families, both in their everyday lives and in their long-term prospects.

This article has two policy recommendations that can benefit the Thai community and the U.S. government (see Table 3). First, it concerns sexual services in Thai massage places. This is one of the biggest challenges for Thai massage business owners as sometimes massage therapists provide sexual services without the owners' consent. Most Thai massage business owners claim they do their best to prevent sexual transactions by screening both customers and therapists. Nevertheless, when the police raid the business and find that sexual services are offered, both the owners and massage therapists are prosecuted. Here, the state can provide a contact channel for massage business owners to inform the state of suspected sexual conduct and give a fair investigation without immediate charge. By doing so, massage business owners will trust the legal authority and cooperate to promote sex-free massage places in the community.

TABLE 3 Policy recommendations.

System reform
– Provide a translator during a raid.
– Provide a contact channel for massage business owners to inform the state of suspected sexual conduct and give a fair investigation without immediate charge.
Reduce barriers to entry
– Reconsider the need for the CMATC-approved exams for Thai therapists with prior work experience to reduce financial and language burden.
– Encourage CAMTC-approved schools to conduct classes in Thai language.
– Introduce the MBLEx exam in Thai language.

Second, as massage and spa businesses are the Thai community's second-largest business, there should be a policy to help Thai massage therapists get certified. One of the criteria to obtain the CAMTC certification is to pass one of the CAMTC-approved exams. Most Thai massage therapists take the MBLEx exam. However, the MBLEx exam is still available only in English and Spanish (Federation of State Massage Therapy Boards, 2022), which leads to unequal opportunities for Thai, especially older Thai women who may not have English proficiency. The exam aims to test whether massage therapists have knowledge and skills regarding their occupation, not test their English proficiency. Thus, the exams should be available in Thai as massage is an occupational niche Thai specializes in. Having the exam in the Thai language will be beneficial to the Thai community in helping Thai massage therapists get certified and to the consumers who can be confident that they receive the service from a person with mandatory knowledge. Future research could examine whether other ethnic groups in the massage business sector in Los Angeles also face similar barriers. Further, comparative studies can be conducted to see whether Thai massage business owners and therapists in other states face similar obstacles.

Positionality statement

The author is a Thai sociologist who does research on Thai community in Los Angeles, California. Being Thai facilitated her rapport with the respondents. Her shared racial and ethnic status helped her respondents to feel comfortable so they openly discussed their business situations, and the problems they faced with government authorities in operating their businesses.

Data availability statement

The datasets analyzed in this study are not readily available as they contain participants' personal information. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to krittiyak@g.swu.ac.th.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by University of Southern California Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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