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Understanding advantaged groups' opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies: The role of perceived threat

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Abstract

To combat social inequality, organizations develop and
implement initiatives that seek to improve the status of
disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, racial/ethnic minority
groups). Such diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies
are controversial, because people disagree about whether
they are necessary and what their (positive and negative)
consequences may be. Opposition can be particularly fierce
from people who belong to advantaged groups that bene-
fit from the status quo (e.g., men, racial/ethnic majority
groups). Given the power wielded by advantaged groups,
their opposition can undermine the successful implementa-
tion of DEI policies, thus resulting in continued inequality,
wasted resources, and potential for tension in the organiza-
tion. In this paper, I draw on theory and research to consider
three types of threat that can explain advantaged groups'
opposition to DEI policies: (1) *resource threat*, or concern
about losing access to outcomes and opportunities; (2)
symbolic threat, or concern about the introduction of new
values, culture, and expectations; and (3) *ingroup morality
threat*, or concern about their group's role in perpetuating
inequality. I review strategies identified by the literature to

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mitigate these threats, and discuss their potential negative consequences. The final section takes stock of the literature and considers directions for future research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social inequality exists around the world, along various group dimensions such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Organizations have developed policies and programs to combat inequality in two ways (Bartels et al., 2013; Iyer, 2009; Onyeador et al., 2021). First, they monitor existing policies and procedures to identify and eliminate any bias or discrimination that undermines equal opportunities for all groups. Second, they employ proactive strategies to increase the representation, status, and power of historically disadvantaged groups, and ensure that all employees feel supported and welcomed by the organization in being their authentic selves. Such diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies can include various initiatives, including (a) *targeted recruitment programs* to increase the number of disadvantaged group members who apply for jobs and promotions; (b) *targeted training and mentoring programs* to improve opportunities for disadvantaged groups; (c) *preferential treatment in selection decisions* (e.g., hiring and promotion), for example, by using group membership as a "tie-breaker" to choose between equally qualified candidates; and (d) *diversity training* to raise awareness about bias, inequality, and strategies for change.[1]

The efficacy of DEI policies to achieve their goals is often limited by the quality of implementation (Iyer, 2009): the necessary time and attention is not always invested to fully articulate and communicate the goals of the program, or effectively design and carry out the relevant policies and procedures. Failed DEI policies are problematic for at least three reasons: (1) the underlying social inequality is left unaddressed; (2) time and resources have been wasted on ineffective work; and (3) the failure may lead to tensions and even conflict between groups. These costs underscore the importance of determining how to properly implement such programs.

One reason for the improper or incomplete implementation of DEI policies is opposition from employees, who then are not motivated to invest the necessary time and resources into the program. DEI policies are controversial and subject to public debates regarding whether they are needed and whether they are successful (Crosby et al., 2003). Opposition can be especially fierce from members of advantaged groups who will not directly benefit from the policies (e.g., men or White people). As advantaged group members typically occupy positions of power and privilege in organizations—as in society—they play an influential role in implementing DEI policies. Thus it is important to understand the source of their opposition.

A great deal of empirical work has identified different predictors of advantaged group members' opposition to DEI policies (see Dover et al., 2016; Harper & Reskin, 2005; Harrison et al., 2006), including characteristics of the strategy (e.g., the degree of emphasis placed on group membership), characteristics of the individual (e.g., prejudice, political ideology, education), and characteristics of the social context (e.g., leadership in the organization). Integrative reviews have paid less attention to the role of threat in shaping attitudes toward DEI policies, which is the focus of the present paper.

2 | THREAT AND OPPOSITION TO DEI POLICIES

Broadly defined, a threat is an event, thing, person, or group that is likely to cause harm or damage. The mere perception of a threat can elicit negative psychological responses designed to protect the target, whether this is the individual or one's ingroup (Rios et al., 2018). Threat is relevant to individuals' interpretation of various political issues from immigration reform (Brader et al., 2008; Fryberg et al., 2012) to terrorism (Sander, 2010; van de Vyver et al., 2016).

DEI policies are no exception; the changes to policy, practice, and culture introduced by DEI initiatives can elicit perceptions of (potential or actual) harm.

In this paper, I consider how advantaged group members' opposition to DEI policies is shaped by three types of threat to their group interests: *resource threat* (concern about losing access to outcomes and opportunities), *symbolic threat* (concern about the introduction of new values and expectations in a changing organization), and *ingroup morality threat* (concern about their group's immoral role in creating or perpetuating inequality). While social psychologists have identified other forms of intergroup threat—including distinctiveness threat (Jetten et al., 1998) and existential threat (Bai & Federico, 2020)—I selected these three threats to group interest because they are most directly relevant to the context of organizations' efforts to tackle intergroup inequality.

These correspond to concepts set out in established theoretical frameworks from three different literature. First, Intergroup Threat Theory (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 2000) proposes that people can experience two types of group threats: realistic threat to concrete resources (equivalent to what I term resource threat[2]) and symbolic threat. Similarly, theories of justice (Hegtvedt, 2005) distinguish between distributive justice focusing on outcomes, which aligns with the concept of resource threat, and procedural justice focusing on process and respect, which is similar to the emphasis on values and principles associated with symbolic threat. Lastly, frameworks of group evaluations (Leach et al., 2007) identify morality as a central dimension of group self-definition.

In the sections below, I consider how the experience of each threat can increase advantaged group members' opposition to DEI policies, and discuss the strategies that may be used to assuage such threats. I also review the potential drawbacks of these strategies in achieving the goals of diversity, equity and inclusion more broadly.

2.1 | Resource threat

Resource threat is perceived when a group stands to lose concrete outcomes, opportunities, or positions of power that had previously been available to them (Rios et al., 2018). The concept is based in Blumer's (1958) theory of prejudice as group position, which posits that advantaged groups feel entitled to resources and privilege, and perceive any increase in status or opportunities for outgroups as a threat to their ingroup's interests. Resource threat is also linked to perceived collective relative deprivation, the feeling that one's group has been disadvantaged in comparison to an outgroup (Veilleux & Tougas, 1989). For instance, citizens of a country may perceive that they have less access to public services or resources after a rapid growth in population due to increased immigration.

2.1.1 | Resource threat and opposition to DEI policies

A central aim of DEI policies is to increase the representation of historically disadvantaged groups in an organization. If these efforts are successful, an increasing percentage of positions and resources will be distributed to members of disadvantaged group. Such situations typically activate zero-sum beliefs (Wilkins et al., 2015), the perception of a limited pool of resources so that gains for an outgroup necessarily involve losses for one's ingroup. The disadvantaged outgroup is thus perceived as a competitive threat for a limited number of valued social resources, status, and privileges (Bobo, 1998).

The prospect of such competition is likely to heighten the advantaged group's concern with its own status position (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Shah & Higgins, 1997), and in particular with the possibility of losses to current resources and power. For instance, White Americans who read about a company that emphasized the importance of diversity (vs. a company that did not mention diversity) were more concerned that their racial/ethnic group would be discriminated against (Dover et al., 2016).

When potential losses via DEI policies are made salient, advantaged group members adopt a prevention focus with the aim of protecting their group's interests (Ellemers et al., 2010). This focus on protecting the group's interests

(Dover et al., 2016) and enhancing benefits for the ingroup (Lowery et al., 2006) can then drive opposition to the DEI policies that are perceived to be the source of the resource threat.

Examination of policy debates in American society provides support for the role of resource threat in motivating opposition to DEI policies. Gonzalez and Sweeney (2010) analyzed 1909 public statements posted on an online comment board by residents of the US state of Michigan in response to Proposal 2, a vote to ban race-based affirmative action in state institutions. Statements communicating opposition to affirmative action tended to frame their arguments in terms of White Americans' loss of opportunities in a zero-sum context and reverse discrimination against White Americans. Most recently, Carter et al. (2019) examined 184 *amicus briefs* submitted to U.S. Supreme Court cases on affirmative action. Opponents of affirmative action framed the policy as a source of competition that threatened resources that are highly valued by White Americans, such as jobs and admission to higher education institutions.

In the organizational context, research investigating advantaged group members' attitudes toward DEI policies has also documented perceived resource threat as an important predictor. Perceptions that DEI policies pose a threat to the economic or political power of the advantaged group predicts White people's opposition to race-based DEI policies (Lowery et al., 2006; Mangum & DeHaan, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2010; Renfro et al., 2006; Shteynberg et al., 2011, Study 2; van Londen et al., 2010; Wetts & Willer, 2018, Study 3; Wilkins et al., 2015) and men's opposition to gender-based DEI policies (Konings, 2020; Konrad & Hartmann, 2001; Summers, 1995; Veilleux & Tougas, 1989).

2.1.2 | Strategies to address resource threat objections to DEI policies

Emphasize principles of justice and merit

To reduce the focus on group interests and outcomes that is associated with perceived resource threat, organizations could emphasize the goal of creating a fair system, where all individuals regardless of group background get the outcomes they have earned (Shteynberg et al., 2011). Linking DEI policies to justice principles would make clear that the goal is to reduce barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, in order to create a better merit-based system. In such a system, advantaged group members would get a fair chance to obtain opportunities and positive outcomes, rather than losing out to the disadvantaged group irrespective of merit.

Empirical research provides limited support for the success of this approach. In one study, endorsement of zero-sum beliefs among high-status groups was strengthened only when they contemplated increasing bias against their own group, rather than decreasing bias against a potentially competitive outgroup (Wilkins et al., 2015); presumably this is because the goal of decreasing bias was consistent with principles of justice and merit. Another study demonstrated that reducing the focus on group outcomes can reduce opposition to DEI policies (Ritov & Zamir, 2014): men were more opposed to DEI policies when the advantaged group members who stood to lose from the policy were identifiable (and thus loss was made salient), compared to when the people who stood to lose from the policy were not clearly identified (Ritov & Zamir, 2014). Given the limited direct evidence for this strategy, however, more research is needed before it can be implemented with confidence.

Link to broader group interests

Another potential strategy to reduce the focus on ingroup losses and zero-sum beliefs interests is to identify the broader group interests that are served by DEI policies. For example, one might make the "business case" for DEI initiatives by emphasizing their concrete benefits for individuals from all groups and the organization, such as improved productivity, performance, and learning opportunities associated with diversity (Crosby et al., 2003; Herring, 2009; Iyer, 2009). The aim would be to demonstrate that everyone benefits from DEI policies, thus reducing the salience of zero-sum beliefs.

There is some preliminary evidence for this strategy. White American university students reported the most positive affect about race-based affirmative action when they read a utilitarian justification (which emphasized the

benefits of the program for all university students), compared to a compensation justification (which emphasized the benefits provided to the beneficiary group) or no justification at all (Knight & Hebl, 2005). Another study found that perceived threat by affirmative action to company performance was a strong predictor of opposition to the policy (Kravitz et al., 2000), suggesting that appealing to this broader interest might increase support.

Yet this approach is not always effective. Recent work shows that advantaged group members perceive diversity policies as harmful to their group even when they are framed as benefitting all groups (Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). Furthermore, exposure to the business case for DEI policies does not necessarily reduce bias and discrimination. Research shows that exposure to messages that extol the instrumental benefits of race-based DEI policies leads White individuals to reduce expectations of Black students (Starck et al., 2021) and deprioritize Black applicants (Trawalter et al., 2016). As such, this strategy is likely to undermine broader efforts to combat social inequality.

2.2 | Symbolic threat

Symbolic threat involves perceived attacks on one's "way of life"—which can include values, beliefs, practices, and norms (Rios et al., 2018). Such threats emerge when familiar customs, views, or expectations are either diminished or replaced by external influences (Renfro et al., 2006). For instance, the arrival of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds can threaten the majority group's values and traditions that had previously occupied a central place in the host country. Similarly, the traditional view of (heterosexual nuclear) family can be threatened by the growing societal acceptance of same-sex marriage and alternative family arrangements.

2.2.1 | Symbolic threat and opposition to DEI policies

Theory and research suggest two ways that the presence of DEI policies can elicit perceived symbolic threat for the advantaged group: threat to meritocracy and threat to organizational culture.

Threat to meritocracy

DEI policies typically involve close scrutiny of organizational policies and procedures to identify bias and discrimination. Such initiatives can also change policies and procedures to proactively improve the representation, status, and power of disadvantaged groups. DEI policies can thus appear to "change the rules" of career progression and advancement by shifting away from traditional frameworks of meritocracy (i.e., the criteria, standards, and procedures that have always been used) and introducing new rules in their place. Examples include taking the group membership of applicants into account when making promotion decisions when this had not been a factor in previous rounds, or using a formal recruitment process to hire new employees rather than relying on informal recommendations from managers within the organization (Bartels et al., 2013; Iyer, 2009).

Research has found evidence of such "principled opposition" to DEI policies, where the focus is on the violation of core values and ideals (see Harrison et al., 2006). An analysis of 184 *amicus briefs* submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013 and 2016 showed that opponents of affirmative action framed the policy as threatening American ideals and values, such as the Protestant work ethic and meritocracy (Carter et al., 2019). White Americans' opposition to race-based affirmative action, and men's opposition to gender-based affirmative action, increases when they perceive such programs to violate principles of justice and merit (Aberson & Haag, 2003; Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000; Son Hing et al., 2002).

Threat to organizational culture

Successful DEI policies increase the representation and power of historically disadvantaged groups (Iyer, 2009), and this shift in employees' profiles will change the culture of the organization. The resulting diversity in views and

practices can threaten members of the advantaged group who have been accustomed to a more homogeneous environment. Thus a DEI policy can serve as a contextual cue pointing to a social environment that is more welcoming of the disadvantaged beneficiary group than it is of the advantaged group (Jansen et al., 2015).

Almost no empirical studies have investigated the role of perceived threat to an organization's culture in shaping the experiences and views of employees to belong to an advantaged group. Rather, preliminary evidence for this idea can be found in related lines of inquiry. Studies of advantaged racial groups in the United States (Gallagher, 2003; Nadeau et al., 1993) and Germany (Semyonov et al., 2004) show that the smaller the group members perceived their ingroup to be as a percentage of the national population, the more cultural threat they perceived from outgroups. Among White Americans, perceived declining relative group size increases opposition to diversity and support for policies promoting cultural assimilation for minority groups (Danbold & Huo, 2015). In the organizational context, Renfro et al. (2006) found that perceptions of symbolic threat (to White Americans' values, beliefs, and norms) increased White men's opposition to race-based DEI policies and negative attitudes toward beneficiaries of such programs.

2.2.2 | Strategies to address symbolic threat objections to DEI policies

Emphasize adherence to principles of justice and merit

To address the perceived threat to meritocracy and justice principles posed by DEI policies, organizations could persuade opponents that such programs do actually adhere to these principles. For example, one might explain that active interventions such as DEI policies are needed to create a fair system that provides equal opportunities for disadvantaged groups who have experienced historical and ongoing systemic discrimination. Such information would illustrate that the goals of DEI policies are in fact aligned with principles of justice and merit (Harrison et al., 2006).

Results from empirical studies provide some support for this approach. Drawing people's attention to racial inequalities in medical outcomes increased support for bias-reduction interventions such as the use of algorithm decision-making during the triage process in hospitals (Bigman et al., 2021). Other studies show that people do not perceive affirmative action to violate principles of fairness when they were presented with persuasive evidence of discrimination against the beneficiary group (Son Hing et al., 2002). Presenting DEI policies as upholding (rather than violating) merit-based standards increased support for them (Veilleux & Tougas, 1989), even among those who were initially opposed (Reyna et al., 2005). More broadly, a meta-analysis showed that presenting a persuasive justification for a DEI policy increases support for it (Harrison et al., 2006).

However, more recent research has demonstrated that this approach is limited. Meritocratic criteria and standards are open to interpretation, and can be easily presented to benefit advantaged groups (Castilla, 2017) and perpetuate systems of inequality as part of the status quo (e.g., Amis et al., 2020). Thus, members of advantaged groups may well engage in debates about whether a justice-based rationale for a DEI policy is indeed appropriate, and may not be open to considering arguments about justice and merit (Kaiser et al., 2021). Future work should examine the conditions in which such potentially defensive responses are likely to occur.

Emphasize inclusion of all groups

To tackle the perceived threat to an organization's culture, DEI policies can be framed as incorporating all groups. Such all-inclusive multiculturalism policies (Stevens et al., 2008) include the majority group as well as minority groups in the effort to create change, thus showing that the advantaged group's values and interests are not being neglected. This approach should reduce the threat to mainstream culture and identity (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014) and increase support for the policy.

There is preliminary evidence for the success of this approach. Presenting gender-based diversity initiatives as all-inclusive (e.g., supporting the contributions and perspectives of all employees) compared to targeting only women reduces men's concern that their gender group would be treated negatively and unfairly (Cundiff et al., 2018). Framing

diversity policies as targeting all racial/ethnic groups reduces White Americans' expectations of exclusion (Plaut et al., 2011) and bias (Ballinger & Crocker, 2021) against their group, and increases their feelings of belonging in the organization (Ballinger & Crocker, 2021). Indeed, the presentation of an all-inclusive multiculturalism approach—that targets both the advantaged group and the disadvantaged groups in its organizational diversity efforts—increases perceptions of inclusion among majority group members which in turn predicts support for organizational diversity efforts (Jansen et al., 2015).

Emphasizing inclusion is a promising strategy that appears to elicit positive responses among members of disadvantaged groups as well (Cundiff et al., 2018). Yet it can backfire if not implemented carefully. If an organizations message and/or actions seem to favor one group or only superficially engage with the concept of inclusion, employees take notice and become disengaged (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Onyeador et al., 2021), which ultimately can hinder the broader effort to combat social inequality. Thus, more research is needed to map out the conditions in which all-inclusive multiculturalism approaches are most effective.

2.3 | Ingroup morality threat

The final type of threat focuses on advantaged group members' efforts to maintain the positive image of their group. Evaluation of groups is based on three characteristics (Leach et al., 2007): competence (i.e., intelligence, skill), sociability (i.e., warmth, friendliness), and morality (i.e., honesty, trustworthiness). Individuals perceive threat when their group violates societal standards in any of these domains, but a group's morality is especially susceptible to threat because this dimension represents core societal values and principles (Ellemers et al., 2013). Group-level identity threats in the domain of morality are especially relevant in contexts of social inequality, because legitimacy is a central dimension on which group-based hierarchies are interpreted and evaluated (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Members of advantaged groups perceive ingroup morality threat when their group's image as moral and good is undermined (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015) because they benefit from an illegitimate social structure in two possible ways. First, their group may be responsible for perpetuating illegitimate discrimination against a disadvantaged group (Branscombe et al., 1999). Second, their group may benefit from privileges in society that it has not earned, thus undermining principles of meritocracy (Knowles et al., 2014). In both cases, perceived threat can increase opposition to DEI policies.

2.3.1 | Ingroup morality threat and opposition to DEI policies

The goal of DEI policies is to rectify an illegitimate system of social inequality by increasing the representation, status, and power of disadvantaged groups. Thus the presence of such programs can elicit ingroup morality threat among members of the advantaged group, by making salient their illegitimate high status and power in the organization (and society more generally). The violation of meritocratic principles in this case is due to the advantaged group's perceived illegitimate power and status. This is in contrast to the violation of meritocratic principles implicit in symbolic threat, which focuses on the perceived illegitimate changes to the organizations standard operating procedure.

Whether advantaged group members think about their group's unearned privileges or its role as perpetrator of discrimination, the resulting ingroup morality threat is uncomfortable: people do not like to think that their group is immoral (Leach et al., 2007). Threats to a group's moral status may thus elicit a defensive response (Knowles et al., 2014), based on motivated reasoning to interpret and evaluate information and phenomena to protect a positive sense of identity (Cole, 2018; Onyeador et al., 2021). For example, advantaged group members can maintain a positive moral identity by denying the existence of illegitimate inequality or injustice (i.e., there is no moral problem) or denying the group's responsibility for the inequality (i.e., there is a moral problem, but it is not our fault).

Such defensive responses tend to have a narrow self-focus on protecting the threatened identity, rather than a broader focus on creating social change (Iyer & Leach, 2010). Täuber and vanZomeren (2013) showed that framing the Netherlands' failures in immigration policy in moral terms (vs. nonmoral terms) resulted in Dutch citizens reporting more perceived threat, more anger directed at the immigrant groups that was harmed by the ingroups actions, and less support for the country to improve its immigration policies. Similarly, a study of American (Trinkner et al., 2019) and Australian (McCarthy et al., 2021) police officers found that their awareness of the negative "racist cop" stereotype was associated with reduced perceptions of self-legitimacy and increased support for coercive policing that perpetuates inequality.

In the organizational context, defensive responses elicited by ingroup morality threat can increase opposition to DEI policies that draw attention to the advantaged group's moral failings (Iyer et al., 2004). When the rationale for a race-based DEI policy was framed in terms of rectifying past discrimination (compared to highlighting the importance of diversity to the organization), for instance, White Americans reported higher levels of group-image threat and more opposition to the DEI policy (Jones et al., 2019). Even the acknowledgement of ingroup responsibility for group-based inequality does not necessarily lead to substantial social change, but rather is associated with limited efforts at restitution (Greenwood, 2015; Iyer & Leach, 2010).

2.3.2 | Strategies to address ingroup morality threat objections to DEI policies

Encourage positive focus on disadvantaged group

As noted above, ingroup morality threat can produce self-focused responses associated with protecting the group's moral image. Encouraging a broader focus on the disadvantaged outgroup can draw attention to the inequality that requires intervention, with less emphasis on the advantaged group's own position or the associated negative responses (Liebow & Glazer, 2019).

This other-focus should then promote support for social change efforts such as DEI policies. There is preliminary evidence for this idea. A discursive analysis of White Americans' efforts to mobilize majority support for reparations to Black Americans for a historical injustice (the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot) demonstrated a strategic focus on empathy for the victims of the atrocity and encouraging perspective-taking to understand the principled and concrete arguments for reparations (Greenwood, 2015). In a study conducted in Indonesia (Mashuri et al., 2017), members of the majority religious group (Muslims) who took the perspective of the minority outgroup (Christians) reported more support for government policies to help this outgroup. And in two studies of White American university students (Iyer et al., 2003), the other-focused emotion of sympathy for victims of racial discrimination was a more general predictor of support for different affirmative action policies than was the self-focused emotion of guilt about the ingroup's privilege and responsibility for perpetuating racial discrimination.

Yet there is an important drawback to this approach: Encouraging a positive focus on disadvantaged groups can help reduce advantaged group members' ingroup morality threat, but it may also shift attention away from the central role of group-based privilege in perpetuating social inequalities. Research shows that focusing on a disadvantaged outgroup can elicit defensive responses among the advantaged group in order to avoid the perception of benefitting from privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2015). Such defensiveness in turn can hinder broader efforts to combat social inequality. Further work is needed to understand the conditions that elicit defensive (rather than supportive) responses to focusing on the disadvantaged group, and the implications for decreasing opposition to DEI policies.

Emphasize positive aspects of advantaged group identity

A second strategy to reduce ingroup morality threat is to emphasize support for social change in line with positive aspects of the advantaged group's identity, such as more general endorsement of justice principles, responsibility for creating positive change, or opportunities for self-improvement (Liebow & Glazer, 2019). By drawing attention away

from the moral failings of the group, this approach seeks to promote advantaged group members' engagement with the inequality in a non-threatening way (Iyer & Blatz, 2012).

There is some evidence that this approach can increase support for social change efforts. A discursive analysis of White Americans' efforts to mobilize majority support for reparations to Black Americans for a historical injustice (the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot) demonstrated a strategic focus on positive aspects of group identity, including responsibility for fighting injustice, and action-oriented emotions as such hope and optimism (Greenwood, 2015). In another study, liberal (left-leaning) White Americans presented with evidence of their racial group's support for anti-egalitarianism overcame this threat to ingroup morality by disidentifying from their racial group; this distancing strategy in turn predicted support for policies that benefited racial/ethnic minority groups (Dai et al., 2021).

The afore-mentioned research provides support for this strategy, but it is limited in only sampling advantaged group members who are already predisposed to support social justice efforts such as DEI policies. Less is known about how advantaged group members who are initially opposed to DEI policies would respond to efforts to emphasize support for social change as a positive aspect of their group identity. It is possible that they will distance themselves from the message, or perhaps even emphasize other positive aspects of their identity; in either case, they may not reduce their opposition to DEI policies, and thus may serve to undermine the broader effort to combat social inequality.

3 | IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We must expand our moral imaginations to understand and empathize with all people who are struggling, not just black folks who are struggling – the refugee, the immigrant, the rural poor, the transgender person, and yes, the middle-aged white guy who you may think has all the advantages, but over the last several decades has seen his world upended by economic and cultural and technological change, and feels powerless to stop it. You got to get in his head too.

—U.S. President Barack Obama (2016) commencement address at Howard University

Advantaged groups by definition occupy positions of privilege and power in society, but this does not mean that they necessarily perceive their positions as high-status or stable (Leach et al., 2002). The above excerpt from President Obama's speech illustrates this point: Even a White man in the United States—with all the associated privileges of race and gender—can perceive his status to be precarious, "his world upended by economic and cultural and technological change."

Such changes are exemplified in social change efforts such as DEI policies, which seek to combat social inequality by improving the representation and status of historically disadvantaged groups in education and employment. In this paper, I considered three ways in which DEI policies can be perceived to harm advantaged groups, and how these three types of threat—resource, symbolic, and identity—can underpin advantaged group members' opposition to the policies.

Drawing on various literature, I identified specific strategies that might be employed to address the objections to the policy that are motivated by these threats. Research demonstrates that these strategies can help mitigate advantaged group members' threats and reduce their opposition to DEI policies. Yet other studies indicate that these strategies can impede efforts to achieve social equality, for instance by failing to reduce bias and discrimination or by eliciting negative responses that may even harden opposition to DEI policies. These results underscore just how challenging it is to change attitudes and behavior regarding controversial issues such as DEI policies in order to create social change. Additional conceptual and empirical work is needed to determine how to modify or replace these strategies in order to increase their effectiveness in combating social inequality.

Research to date has tended to examine the independent role of each type of threat in predicting attitudes toward DEI policies. Yet correlations between different forms of perceived threat can be high (Rios et al., 2018).

Future work should consider the potential additive and/or interactive effects of these threats on attitudes toward DEI policies. Is opposition stronger, for instance, if a DEI policy elicits perceptions of multiple threats rather than a single one? Furthermore, it is possible that a strategy used to reduce one threat might inadvertently elicit a different threat. For example, taking the perspective of the disadvantaged outgroup has been proposed as a strategy to manage ingroup morality threat, but there is evidence that drawing attention to the different values and goals of the outgroup can actually pose a symbolic threat (Mooijman & Stern, 2016). More comprehensive studies are needed to investigate these complex processes and outcomes.

Future work should also consider the role of each threat in predicting opposition to specific DEI policies. Most of the studies in the literature either assess opposition to DEI policies in general (i.e., without noting specific strategies) or across an aggregated set of strategies bundled together as "DEI policies." Thus little is known about whether opposition to different DEI policies—training and mentoring, recruitment, weak preferential treatment, strong preferential treatment—might be predicted by different types of threat (resource, symbolic, or identity). Although some studies have documented attitudes toward various specific strategies, they did not include all three threats as predictors. It is important to understand the extent to which the choice to employ one DEI strategy (rather than another) might shape the reasons underpinning advantaged group's responses.

This paper focused on three threats—resource, symbolic, and ingroup morality—that mapped onto distinctions set out by established theoretical frameworks across multiple social psychological literature. This was a select list of threats considered most central to predicting opposition to DEI policies, and was by no means fully exhaustive. Additional threats may also be relevant; for instance, one set of studies shows that opposition to DEI policies is predicted by prototypicality threat, or their group no longer best represents what it means to be a member of an occupation such as STEM (Danbold & Huo, 2017). Future work should explore these different threats and the processes that may underpin their relationship to DEI attitudes.

Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of taking an individual-level approach to design interventions to reduce opposition to DEI policies (Onyeador et al., 2021). Advantaged group members' support for social justice efforts may be superficial and ephemeral, and there is even evidence that advantaged groups will proclaim support for DEI policies as a strategy to appease disadvantaged groups (Chow et al., 2013). As such, broader and deeper structural change must be embedded within organizations to ensure that members of advantaged groups engage in a meaningful way with the goals of DEI policies and consistently work to implement these initiatives in order to combat social inequality.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This paper uses a single term to describe organizations' initiatives to combat social inequality ("diversity, equity, and inclusion policies") while acknowledging the evolving terminology in this area. Historically, such efforts in the United States have been known as "affirmative action," which tended to focus on selection and promotion procedures. More recently, academic scholarship and public debates in various countries have focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion to describe a broader range of organizational policies to combat inequalities (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). These terms have been used in different combinations, including "ED&I" in the United Kingdom (e.g., Local Government Association, 2022), "DEI" in the United States (e.g., Dong, 2021), and "diversity and inclusion" in Australia (e.g., Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2022). Some frameworks have added additional considerations such as "accessibility" for people with disabilities (to create the "DEIA" acronym; White House, 2021) or "justice" (to create the "JEDI" acronym; Martinez & Truong, 2021).

2 This paper does not use the term "realistic threat" to describe threats to concrete resources, because this term is misleading for two reasons: (1) it suggests that the threat must be present in objective reality in order to be perceived as a threat (i.e., it must be "realistic"); and (2) it implies that other types of threat (e.g., symbolic or ingroup morality) are not objectively "real." To offer a more precise characterization of this threat, both in its own right and in relation to other types of threat, I thus use the term "resource threat" in this paper.

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