

RUNNING HEAD: Whose explanation of inequality?

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**Giving voice to underrepresented groups increases fit within organizations**

Cynthia S. Levine\*

Department of Psychology and Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University

Nicole M. Stephens

Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

Yulia Chentsova-Dutton

Georgetown University

\*Cynthia S. Levine; Department of Psychology and Institute for Policy Research,  
Northwestern University, Foundations of Health Research Center, 1801 Maple Avenue,

Suite 2450, Evanston, IL 60201; [cynthia.levine@northwestern.edu](mailto:cynthia.levine@northwestern.edu)

Word Count: 4,998

## **Abstract**

The underrepresentation of racial minorities is among the greatest challenges facing by organizations today. Here, we investigate the role that an organization's explanation for this underrepresentation might play in maintaining it. We focus on the distinction between individual-focused and structural-focused explanations of inequality. Individual-focused explanations, such as those that focus on personal preferences, are prevalent in mainstream settings, whereas structural-focused explanations, such as those that focus on a lack of resources and opportunities, are prevalent among underrepresented groups. In two experiments, one in a real-world organizational setting and one in a hypothetical consulting firm, the current research demonstrates that structural-focused explanations of organizations' inequality produce a greater sense of fit and acceptance among African Americans than do individual-focused explanations. This suggests that how organizations explain inequality plays a role in amplifying or reducing it.

*Keywords:* race, culture, inequality, organizations, intervention

**Whose explanation of inequality? Giving voice to underrepresented groups  
increases acceptance and fit within organizations**

The underrepresentation of racial minorities and other historically disadvantaged groups is among the greatest challenges facing organizations today (Gorman & Kay, 2010). Under the right circumstances, diverse workforces offer advantages, such as improved decision-making or team performance (Kochan et al., 2003; Mannix & Neale, 2005), which, in turn, increases sales revenue and profits (Herring, 2009; Richard, 2000). Yet, high attrition rates among these underrepresented groups can make it difficult for organizations to establish and maintain their diversity (Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2008). Here, we examine whether the ways that organizations explain their inequality help to reinforce or mitigate it. We demonstrate that when organizations include the perspectives of underrepresented racial minority groups in their explanations of inequality, minorities have better experiences there.

In many mainstream organizations, high turnover rates among underrepresented racial groups occur, in part, because racial minorities confront numerous obstacles. These include structural barriers, such as fewer mentors or role models, and discrimination (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Wilkins & Gulati, 1996). Consequently, racial minorities often experience social identity threat and reduced belonging and trust in their organizations (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008; Steele, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Together, these structural and psychological barriers can undermine racial minorities' performance and retention, fueling their underrepresentation in organizations, especially at senior levels.

Creating inclusive environments is critical to improving underrepresented groups' sense of fit within organizations (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Given that the majority group's ideas and practices are considered the cultural ideal in many mainstream organizations (Fryberg & Markus, 2007), one way to make environments inclusive is to take minority groups' perspectives into account. For example, including women in the prototype of a successful computer scientist or including working-class students' norms in the dominant college culture increases interest and improves performance (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, & Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

Focusing on the underrepresentation of African Americans in organizations, we investigate the efficacy a novel strategy for creating inclusive environments: including underrepresented groups' perspectives in how organizations talk about inequality. We examine whether organizations' typical explanations of inequality undermine underrepresented groups' sense of fit because they reflect dominant groups' perspectives and whether giving voice to underrepresented groups increases their sense of fit in that setting. We use the term fit to refer to multiple overlapping constructs, including sense of belonging, identity threat, and trust in the organization, that tap into employees' general sense of comfort and acceptance there (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

### **Organizations' Explanations of Inequality**

Many organizations seek to increase racial minorities' representation in management positions by implementing costly, and sometimes ineffective, programs, such as diversity training or new policies for hiring and promotion (Dobbin & Kalev,

2013; Kim, Kalev, & Dobbin, 2012). When organizations take such steps—or even simply discuss the problem of underrepresentation—they reveal a particular perspective on what they think are the underlying causes of inequality and how they think it should be addressed (cf., Plaut, 2010). Thus, how organizations explain inequality may impact whether their diversity-promotion efforts are productive.

Reflecting the culture of individualism that is foundational to American society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010), organizations' explanations of inequality tend to focus on individual responsibility, while overlooking structural factors, such as access to resources (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012). For example, the mainstream American media often explains behavior in terms of personal choice (Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009), and institutions such as schools or workplaces value and reward individual achievement in a meritocratic manner (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012).

Importantly, however, individual-focused accounts of inequality reflect primarily the perspectives of those with power and status (Markus & Conner, 2013). Indeed, White Americans often invoke individual-focused reasons, such as individual behaviors or dispositions, to explain inequality (Kluegel, 1990; Thompson & Bobo, 2011). Thus, for many White Americans—who have relatively high status, more material resources, and greater opportunities to influence the world according to their personal preferences (cf., Ely & Thomas, 2001)—individual-focused explanations of inequality more often reflect their life experiences.

Individual-focused accounts of inequality, however, often exclude the perspectives of underrepresented racial minorities—the very groups whose outcomes

these accounts seek to explain. Indeed, to explain racial inequalities, African Americans often rely on structure-focused reasons, such as poverty, racism, unequal opportunities, and fewer role models (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013). Thus, for many African Americans—who have relatively low status, encounter racial segregation, and have longstanding, ongoing experiences of discrimination (Massey, 2007; Thompson & Bobo, 2011)—structural-focused explanations of inequality more often reflect their life experiences.

Because individual-focused accounts of inequality correspond more to Whites' than African Americans' experiences, these explanations may deny African Americans' everyday realities. When organizations communicate these explanations, they may therefore signal to African Americans that their experiences are not valid and that they are unwelcome in the setting. Accordingly, we hypothesize that, relative to individual-focused accounts, structure-focused accounts of inequality will lead African Americans to believe that their perspectives are more represented, and thereby increase their sense of fit within their organization. In contrast, because Whites are typically not stigmatized in most organizations and may see racial inequality as less relevant to them, we do not expect Whites to be affected. We test these hypotheses in two studies: one in an actual organization (a police department) characterized by high levels of inequality and the other in a hypothetical consulting firm.

### **Study 1**

Study 1 was conducted in a large police department in the eastern U.S. Because the department sought to remedy the longstanding problem of African American police officers' underrepresentation in their organization, we focus here on increasing African

American officers' sense of fit. In an online experiment, we exposed officers to either individual- or structure-focused explanations of inequality and measured their responses. We hypothesized that (1) structure-focused compared to individual-focused explanations of inequality would increase African Americans' sense of fit in the organization and (2) African Americans' belief that the organization reflects their perspective would mediate the relationship between how organizations explain inequality and African Americans' sense of fit.

## **Methods**

**Participants.** 416 participants (301 White, 38 African American, 5 Latino, 3 Native American, 2 Asian, 17 “other,” 50 unreported) completed the survey. We compared White officers, the organization's dominant racial group, to African American officers, the primary non-White group. In addition to their theoretical relevance, these were the only two groups with numbers large enough to analyze reliably.

55 remaining participants did not provide usable data: 8 did not spend enough time to read the manipulation and questions (i.e., less than 5 minutes), 32 took too long to be influenced by the manipulation (i.e., more than 60 minutes)<sup>1</sup>, and 15 were missing relevant data. This left 284 participants (32 African American, 252 White; 81.61% male;  $M_{\text{age}}=40.84$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}}=8.26$ ).

**Developing Materials.** To learn about the department and tailor our experimental manipulation to that context, we first conducted exploratory interviews with eight officers (two high-ranked and two low-ranked African Americans, two high-ranked and two low-ranked Whites). Officers answered open-ended questions about whether and how majority and minority group members experience the department differently (e.g., “Do

you think that retaining and promoting racial/ethnic minorities is a problem? If yes, why? If no, why not?”).

From the interviews, we learned that taking (or not taking) promotion tests was a key source of racial disparities in leadership outcomes. In our experimental manipulation, we therefore focused on explanations for this behavior: Why were African Americans less likely to take promotion tests? The interview responses addressed this question. With respect to individual-focused explanations, officers referenced factors such as preferences, effort, priorities, or motivation to explain African Americans' lower likelihood of taking the promotion test. For our manipulation, we selected two commonly mentioned individual-focused explanations that reflected these ideas: choosing not to take the test and not prioritizing promotion. With respect to structure-focused explanations, officers referenced role models, mentors, connections, or negative judgments from others<sup>2</sup> to explain African Americans' lower likelihood of taking the promotion test. For our manipulation, we selected two commonly mentioned structural-focused explanations that reflected the key themes in these factors: not seeing “people like them” succeed and lack of resources.<sup>3</sup>

***Procedure.*** Department management asked officers to complete a confidential, anonymous survey to help the department learn more about officers' experiences and improve everyone's experiences there. Participation was voluntary, without monetary compensation.

Participants first answered some general open-ended questions (e.g., what were the department's best practices) that were of interest to the department and designed to help everyone feel comfortable. Next, they were reminded that we had visited the

department previously and that, during this visit, members of the department had identified not taking the promotion test as one reason why women and racial minorities less often attain leadership positions.

Next, they read, “Here are [some] reasons why racial minorities and women might be less likely to take the promotion test. These reasons may or may not be accurate. We’re interested in the extent to which you think each . . . contributes to the underrepresentation of women and racial minorities.” These reasons that participants rated served as our manipulation. In the *individual* condition, participants rated their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with: “Women and racial minorities choose not to take the promotion test.” and “Promotion is just less of a priority for women and racial minorities than it is for other groups.”<sup>4</sup> In the *structural* condition, participants rated their agreement with: “Women and racial minorities see that ‘people like them’ do not ascend the ranks of the department.” and “Women and racial minorities less often have the necessary time or resources (e.g., mentors or connections in the department) to effectively prepare for the exam.”

The manipulation mentioned both “women and racial minorities” for two reasons. First, given that both groups were underrepresented in this department, including both made the survey more broadly relevant and could increase the legitimacy of the survey’s cover story. Second, although this study focused on African Americans, it seemed more natural to explain underrepresentation in general terms to avoid singling them out and/or arousing suspicion about the study’s purpose.<sup>5</sup>

Following the manipulation, participants rated their agreement with a series of items that captured perceptions of fit within the organization from 1 (*strongly disagree*)

to 7 (*strongly agree*). These included scales measuring identity threat, belonging uncertainty, social fit, organizational trust, and identification as a police officer (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Stephens et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011). See Results for sample items and Supplementary Materials for the full list.

Finally, to mitigate any harm among African Americans in the individual condition, participants rated the two items from the opposite condition (e.g., individual condition participants rated the structural reasons). Participants then reported demographics. Gender and age were included as covariates in all subsequent analyses because they could have impacted participants' responses to the manipulation. Specifically, gender and age or cohort could relate to engagement with contemporary social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Lean In; McAdam, 1992; Schussman & Soule, 2005).

## Results

***Agreement with explanations of inequality.*** To test whether agreement with the organization's perspective differed by race and condition, we conducted a 2 (race) x 2 (condition) ANCOVA predicting agreement with the reasons for inequality in the manipulation. There was a main effect of race, with African Americans ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ) agreeing more with the reasons than Whites ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ),  $F(1, 278)=40.17$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.13$ , but no main effect of condition,  $F(1, 278)=.95$ ,  $p=.33$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.003$ . The main effect of race was qualified by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 278)=34.78$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.11$ . African Americans agreed more in the structural ( $M=4.95$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ) than the individual condition ( $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=1.62$ ),  $F(1, 278)=6.80$ ,  $p=.01$ ,

$\eta_p^2=.02$ . Whites agreed more in the individual ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ) than the structural condition ( $M=1.86$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ),  $F(1, 278)=104.71$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.27$ .<sup>6</sup>

**Primary dependent measures.** Because the scales assessing fit tapped into multiple overlapping constructs, we first conducted a factor analyses to establish whether they captured separate dimensions of participants' responses. Four factors emerged: (1) *Concerns about Unfair Judgment* (e.g., "I trust my supervisors to treat me fairly," reversed;  $\alpha=.81$ ), (2) *Belonging and Connection* (e.g. "I feel like I fit in with others in my department;"  $\alpha=.91$ ), (3) *Positive Feelings* about the department (e.g., "I like working at my police department;"  $\alpha=.87$ ), and (4) *Expectations of Success* in the department (e.g., "I am willing to go beyond what is expected to help this police department be successful;"  $\alpha=.80$ ). See Supplementary Materials for factor loadings.

To test whether the manipulation influenced responses to these four factors, we conducted a series of 2 (race) by 2 (condition) ANCOVAs. For *Concerns about Unfair Judgment*, main effects of race and condition emerged. African Americans ( $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=1.57$ ) reported more concern than Whites ( $M=2.75$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ),  $F(1, 278)=54.27$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.10$ , and participants reported more concern in the individual ( $M=3.72$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) than the structural condition ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ),  $F(1, 278)=4.94$ ,  $p=.03$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ . These main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 278)=5.23$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ . African Americans reported less concern in the structural ( $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=1.52$ ) than the individual condition ( $M=4.69$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ),  $F(1, 278)=F(1, 278)=5.73$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ , but Whites did not differ across conditions,  $F(1, 278)=.01$ ,  $p=.93$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.001$ . See Figure 1.

For *Belonging and Connection*, main effects for both race and condition emerged. African Americans ( $M=3.91$ ,  $SD=1.81$ ) reported less belonging and connection than Whites ( $M=5.71$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ),  $F(1, 278)=71.09$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.20$ , and participants reported less belonging and connection in the individual ( $M=4.54$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ) than the structural condition ( $M=5.07$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ),  $F(1, 278)=6.19$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ . These main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 278)=5.84$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ . African Americans reported more belonging and connection in the structural ( $M=4.43$ ,  $SD=1.82$ ) than the individual condition ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=1.69$ ),  $F(1, 278)=6.78$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ , but Whites did not differ across conditions,  $F(1, 278)=.01$ ,  $p=.91$ ,  $\eta_p^2<.001$ .<sup>7</sup> See Figure 2.

For *Positive Feelings*, African Americans ( $M=4.32$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ) reported less positive feelings than Whites ( $M=4.97$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ),  $F(1, 278)=7.12$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.03$ . There was no main effect of condition,  $F(1, 278)=1.31$ ,  $p=.25$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.01$ . Although the interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 278)=2.10$ ,  $p=.15$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.01$ , the means were in the predicted direction (African Americans: individual condition  $M=4.01$ ,  $SD=1.36$ , structural condition  $M=4.64$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ; Whites: individual condition  $M=5.01$ ,  $SD=1.26$ , structural condition  $M=4.93$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ).

For *Expectations of Success*, African Americans ( $M=5.94$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ) reported lower expectations of success than Whites ( $M=6.32$ ,  $SD=.79$ ),  $F(1, 278)=6.39$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $\eta_p^2=.02$ . Neither the main effect of condition nor the race by condition interaction was significant,  $ps>.31$ .

### **Mediation by Agreement with Explanation of Inequality**

Finally, we tested whether believing that the organization reflected one's perspective (i.e., the extent to which participants agreed with the explanations for

inequality in the manipulation) mediated the relationship between condition and *Concerns about Unfair Judgment* or *Belonging and Connection* for African Americans but not Whites. We conducted separate mediation analyses for each outcome using a bootstrap approach to obtain 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Hayes, 2013). Unexpectedly, for *Concerns about Unfair Judgment*, the confidence interval for moderated mediation did include zero (-.01, .40), indicating that the indirect effects of condition on *Concerns about Unfair Judgment* via agreement with the organization's reasons was the same for the two racial groups. There was no evidence of a significant indirect effect for either group [Whites: (-.03, .33), African Americans: (-.09, .13)].

For *Belonging and Connection*, the confidence interval for moderated mediation did not include zero (.12, .62), indicating that the indirect effects of condition on *Belonging and Connection* via agreement with the organization's reasons differed by group. However, unexpectedly, this was driven by the fact that the confidence interval did not include zero for Whites (.16, .50) but did for African Americans (-.15, .20). This indicates an indirect effect of condition on *Belonging and Connection* via agreement with the organization's explanations for Whites, but not African Americans.

### **Discussion**

Supporting our first hypothesis, Study 1 shows that giving voice to structural-focused explanations of inequality increases African Americans' belonging and connection and decreases their concerns about unfair judgment. However, unexpectedly, agreement did not mediate the relationship between the condition (individual- vs. structure-focused reasons) and concerns about judgment or belonging and connection for

African Americans. This might be due to the small number of African Americans. Thus, in Study 2, we sought to test our hypotheses with a larger sample of African Americans. Moreover, for Whites, there was an unexpected indirect effect of condition on belonging and connection via agreement with the organization's explanations for inequality. Thus, in Study 2, we further explore whether this finding is robust.

Another weakness was that police departments could be unrepresentative of other workplaces—that is, they have features that could make employees highly attuned to and influenced by cues signaling fit. First, the high degree of interdependence among police officers (e.g., need to rely on others in life-or-death situations) could increase their motivation to believe that others recognize their perspectives. Second, police departments are hierarchical and emphasize deference to superiors, possibly increasing how much organizations' views could impact employees' sense of fit. Finally, given that police officers may not have attended college and instead trained specifically for their current job (i.e., attended police academy), they could have fewer alternative job options and, thus, greater investment in fitting into their current job. Thus, we sought to replicate our findings in a different professional domain characterized by a lower degree of interdependence and hierarchy and greater transferability of skills.

## **Study 2**

In Study 2, we sought to replicate and extend our results to a very different professional context with a larger sample of African Americans. The design was similar to Study 1's, but participants imagined working at a hypothetical consulting firm.

### **Methods**

**Participants.** 172 African American and White participants with at least some college education were recruited via Survey Sampling International to complete an online survey. Of these, 5 were excluded because they identified both as White and African American, and as in Study 1, 37 were excluded for taking less than 5 minutes or more than an hour to complete the study<sup>1</sup>. Three more were excluded due to missing relevant data. 127 participants remained (65 African American, 62 White; 44.77% Male,  $M_{\text{age}}=40.77\%$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}}=12.87$ ).

**Procedure.** Participants were asked to imagine they worked at a fictional consulting firm, Redstone and Company. They read that though the job was competitive, they were confident in their skills and well-liked and respected by colleagues. Participants learned that Redstone had identified reasons why it was not more diverse. In the individual condition, these were, “Racial minorities choose to work elsewhere or to move to other jobs” and “Racial minorities have other priorities and thus do not pursue promotions within this company to the same extent that White employees do.” In the structural condition, these were, “Racial minorities see that ‘people like them’ do not work at Redstone or ascend up the ladder at the company” and “Racial minorities often lack the necessary resources (e.g., mentors or connections in their department) or time to succeed at the company.” Participants rated their agreement with the extent to which they felt these reasons explain why similar organizations are not more diverse. The dependent measures were similar to Study 1 (see Results and Supplementary Materials). Finally, they reported demographics. Gender and age were included as covariates for the reasons noted in Study 1. We also covaried for education (some college without degree=1,

associate's degree=2, bachelor's degree=3, graduate degree=4) because of its potential impact on knowledge about and experience with consulting firms.

## Results

***Agreement with explanations of inequality.*** To test whether agreement with the organization's perspective differed by race and condition, we conducted a 2 (race) x 2 (condition) ANCOVA. There was no effect of race,  $F(1, 120)=.02, p=.89, \eta_p^2<.001$ , but there was a main effect of condition,  $F(1, 120)=18.86, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.14$ , with higher agreement in the structural ( $M=5.05, SD=1.40$ ) than individual condition ( $M=3.84, SD=1.78$ ). This was qualified by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 120)=11.49, p=.001, \eta_p^2=.09$ . African Americans agreed more in the structural ( $M=5.55, SD=1.08$ ) than the individual condition ( $M=3.38, SD=1.68$ ),  $F(1, 120)=31.78, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.21$ , but Whites did not differ across conditions,  $F(1, 120)=.39, p=.53, \eta_p^2=.003$ .

***Primary Dependent Measures.*** Most items (15 of 20) loaded into one factor ( $\alpha=.97$ ), so we created one composite measure of fit from these items (see Supplementary Materials for details).<sup>8</sup>

To test whether the manipulation influenced fit within the organization, we conducted a 2 (race) by 2 (condition) ANCOVA. Analyses revealed a main effect of race,  $F(1, 120)=6.84, p=.01, \eta_p^2=.05$ , with African Americans reporting lower fit ( $M=4.56, SD=1.41$ ) than Whites ( $M=5.17, SD=1.22$ ), and a marginal main effect of condition, with higher fit in the structural ( $M=5.04, SD=1.23$ ) than individual condition ( $M=4.66, SD=1.44$ ),  $F(1, 120)=3.31, p=.07, \eta_p^2=.03$ . These main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 120)=4.13, p=.04, \eta_p^2=.03$ . African Americans reported greater fit in the structural ( $M=5.01, SD=1.28$ ) than the individual condition ( $M=4.12, SD=1.44$ ),

$F(1, 120)=7.90, p=.006, \eta_p^2=.06$ . Whites did not differ across conditions,  $F(1, 120)=.03, p=.87, \eta_p^2<.001$ . See Figure 3.<sup>9</sup>

### **Mediation by Agreement with Explanation of Inequality**

Finally, we tested whether agreement with the reasons presented in the manipulation mediated the relationship between condition and fit for African Americans but not Whites using the same bootstrap approach as in Study 1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Hayes, 2013). The confidence interval for moderated mediation did not include zero (.17, 1.16), indicating that the indirect effect of condition on fit via agreement with the organization's reasons was not the same for the two racial groups. As predicted, the confidence interval did include zero for whites (-.14, .36) but not for African Americans (.26, 1.11), suggesting significant mediation for African Americans but not Whites.

### **Discussion**

Study 2 replicates Study 1 in a very different professional context. Furthermore, using a larger sample of African Americans, Study 2 finds that agreement with the organization's explanations for inequality mediates the relationship between condition and fit for African Americans, but not Whites. These findings, thus, provide additional evidence that including structural-focused accounts of inequality reflects African Americans' perspectives and thereby increases their sense of fit in organizations.

### **General Discussion**

The current research demonstrated that African Americans experience greater fit in organizations that explain racial inequality with structural, rather than individual, reasons, due to their greater agreement with such reasons. Thus, an institution's representation of inequality can impact the psychological experiences of the

underrepresented groups within it. Many social psychological interventions address inequality by shifting how disadvantaged groups interpret or respond to their experiences (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005; Stephens et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011). The present research, however, builds on other work by highlighting the context's critical role in shaping who has an opportunity to feel they fit there (Cheryan et al., 2009; Plaut et al., 2009; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

We speculate that when organizations endorse individual-focused explanations of inequality, they legitimize the status quo (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) or convey that they care primarily about the majority group's perspective. In contrast, structural-focused messages may signal to African Americans that organizations recognize and value them. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995), Whites were mostly unaffected by our manipulation. As the majority group with power, Whites may see inequality as less relevant to them. They may also be accustomed to having their perspective represented and thus less affected by its presence or absence in a single instance.

While the two studies yielded mostly consistent findings, some differences emerged. First, the expected moderated mediation occurred only in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm). Second, Whites agreed more with individual-focused than structural-focused explanations for inequality only in Study 1 (police department). Third, the dependent variables loaded onto multiple factors in Study 1 (police department) but primarily one in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm). Fourth, the manipulation did not affect African Americans' *Expectations of Success* in Study 1 (police department) but affected similar items (part of the composite) in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm).

As noted previously, the larger sample size of African Americans in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm) could explain why the expected moderated mediation emerged in only that study. Furthermore, the fact that people evaluated their *actual* workplace in Study 1 (police department), but a *hypothetical* organization in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm) may have contributed to other differences in results. As for why Whites differed in their agreement with the organization's perspective in Study 1 (police department) but not Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm), Whites' may see inequality as less relevant in general and especially so when evaluating a hypothetical organization. As for the number of factors, fewer may have emerged in Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm) because people have more nuanced views about actual work environments. Finally, as for the divergent findings for *Expectations of Success*, people might more readily agree to devote more time and energy after a one-time manipulation in a hypothetical workplace (Study 2, hypothetical consulting firm) but wait for more evidence of sustained change before doing so in an actual workplace (Study 1, police department).

A key methodological difference could have also played a role. In Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm), participants read that their colleagues liked and respected them. However, Study 1 (police department) included no such description, and many African Americans likely sensed the opposite. Consequently, even if African Americans in the structural condition believed that the overall department culture had changed for their racial group, they might have retained concerns about their personal prospects, based on past negative interactions. These lingering concerns could have, in turn, limited what aspects of fit (i.e., what scale items) were influenced by the manipulation, leading

items to load on more factors in Study 1 (police department) than Study 2 (hypothetical consulting firm) and preventing *Expectations of Success* from shifting in Study 1 but not Study 2.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

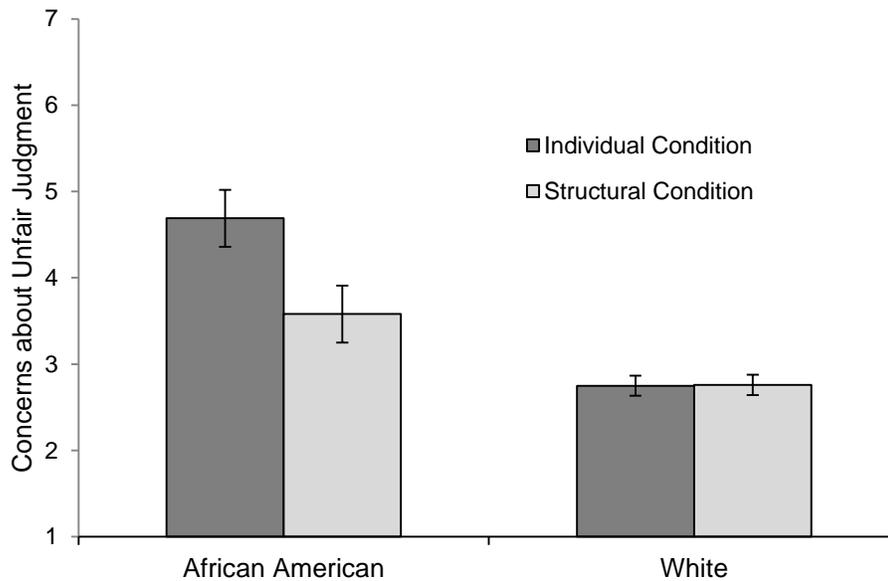
We have compared African Americans' and Whites' responses to different explanations of inequality, but do not know how other racial/ethnic groups would respond. One possibility is that structural-focused explanations of inequality could resonate with African Americans in particular, given that discussing race-related barriers is especially common in African American families (Hughes et al., 2006). Alternatively, structural-focused messages might resonate with other non-White groups, given that those with less power and status often use such explanations to understand the world (Markus & Conner, 2013). Another limitation is that our manipulations only used two examples of individual- and structural-focused explanations. Future research could test other examples.

Finally, future research could investigate how to sustain African Americans' sense of fit by changing the messages conveyed at multiple levels of the organization. For example, organizations might give employees who endorse the structural perspective outlets to express these views and actually initiate structural changes as a way of indicating that they took structural concerns seriously. Initial changes could have a self-perpetuating effect as African Americans gained a voice within organizations.

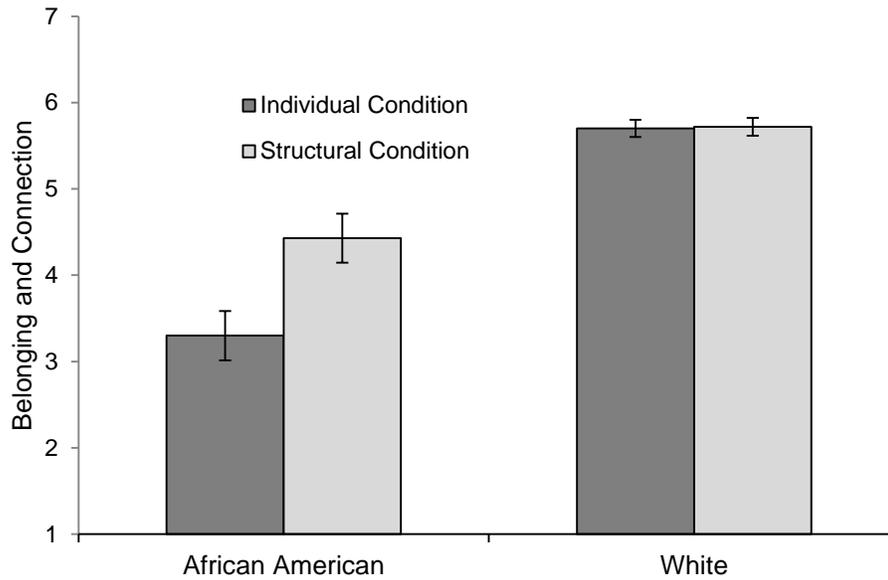
### **Conclusion**

In sum, the way organizations talk about inequality is more than a response to the problem. Representing inequality by excluding or including underrepresented groups'

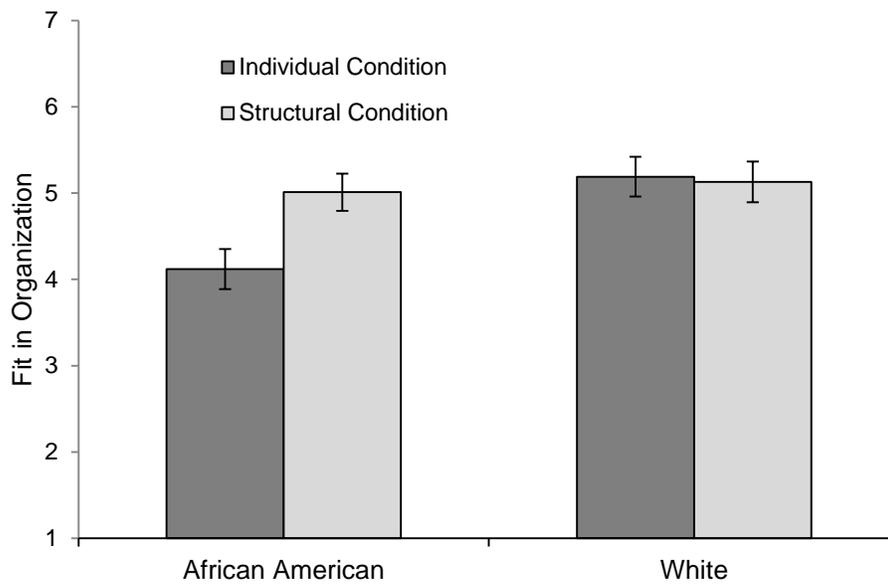
voices can accentuate or remedy that problem. Our research suggests that one important way to address inequality is to include the perspectives of underrepresented groups whose voices are typically excluded from the conversation.



*Figure 1.* African Americans' and Whites' concerns about unfair judgment in Study 1 as a function of organization explaining inequality in terms of individual versus structural factors. Error bars represent + or – 1 standard error.



*Figure 2.* African Americans' and Whites' sense of belonging and connection in Study 1 as a function of organization explaining inequality in terms of individual versus structural factors. Error bars represent + or – 1 standard error.



*Figure 3.* African Americans' and Whites' sense of fit in their organization in Study 2 as a function of organization explaining inequality in terms of individual versus structural factors. Error bars represent + or – 1 standard error.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>We excluded people who took less than 5 or more than 60 minutes. Those who took <5 minutes were excluded because they would not have had sufficient time to read the manipulation and carefully answer the questions. Participants who took >60 minutes were excluded to ensure that the manipulation was still salient and could have a chance to impact their responses. Logistic regressions showed no main effects of or interaction between condition or race in predicting exclusion,  $ps > .29$ .

<sup>2</sup>We did not incorporate negative judgments from others into the manipulation due to its similarity with dependent measures.

<sup>3</sup>Since the goal of these interviews was to familiarize ourselves with this department, the sample size was too small to conduct statistical analyses on racial differences in explanations provided. However, interviewers each anecdotally observed that White officers provided more individual explanations and African American officers more structural explanations.

<sup>4</sup>People may disengage or develop other priorities in response to stereotype threat (Major, Spencer, & Schmader, 1998). We included the word “just” to convey that priorities, not structural constraints (i.e., stereotype threat), created the inequality.

<sup>5</sup>Although women were also underrepresented, there is less evidence they endorse structural-focused explanations (see Stephens & Levine, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Throughout this article, all means are estimated marginal means.

<sup>7</sup>If participants who were excluded for time spent on the survey are included, the interaction for *Concerns about Unfair Judgment* remains significant,  $F(1, 318)=4.45$ ,  $p=.04$ , with African Americans reporting more concerns in the individual than structural

condition,  $F(1, 318)=4.88, p=.03$ . The interaction for *Belonging and Connection* is nearly significant,  $F(1, 318)=3.66, p=.06$ , with African Americans feeling more belonging and connection in the structural than individual condition,  $F(1, 318)=4.13, p=.04$ . Whites differ by condition for neither outcome,  $ps>.94$ . If covariates are not included, the interaction for *Concerns about Unfair Judgment* remains significant,  $F(1, 295)= 3.78, p=.05$ , with African Americans having more concerns in the individual than the structural condition,  $F(1, 295)=3.67, p=.06$ . The interaction for *Belonging and Connection* remains significant,  $F(1, 295)= 4.68, p=.03$ , with African Americans feeling more *Belonging and Connection* in the structural than individual condition,  $F(1, 295)=4.81, p=.03$ . Whites differ by condition for neither outcome,  $ps>.64$ .

<sup>8</sup>The remaining five items loaded onto two additional factors. Two (race) by 2 (condition) ANCOVAs with these additional factors as outcomes yielded one marginal interaction ( $p=.11$ ) in the predicted direction and one non-significant interaction ( $p=.25$ ).

<sup>9</sup>If participants who were excluded for time spent on the survey are included, the interaction becomes marginal,  $F(1, 162)= 2.93, p=.09$ , with African Americans reporting greater fit in the structural than individual condition,  $F(1, 162)=3.51, p=.06$ . If covariates are not included, the interaction is no longer significant,  $F(1, 126)=2.40, p=.12$ , although African Americans still report significantly greater fit in the structural than individual condition,  $F(1, 126)=3.78, p=.05$ . Whites differ by condition in neither case,  $ps>.54$ .

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank Phillip Atiba Goff and the Center for Policing Equity for their help running

Study 1.

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