

# Racial Capitalism and Social Psychology: A Note for Future Research

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## Abstract

*In this research note, we describe how theories of racial capitalism offer important insights into social psychological processes of racial discrimination, stereotyping, and more. First, the racial capitalism framework sheds light on the material conditions that shape social psychological aspects of racial domination and oppression, including processes of identity formation. Second, racial capitalism thinkers have emphasized how capitalism instrumentalizes racial identity and differentiation to spur accumulation. Third, racial capitalism points to intersectionality as key to understanding how social-structural factors shape the social psychological experiences and effects of discrimination for the racially disadvantaged. Social psychologists should incorporate these insights into their examinations of race and racism.*

## Keywords

intergroup conflict, intersectionality, prejudice and discrimination, racial capitalism, racial identity, stereotypes

Social psychological perspectives are an essential part of sociologists' tool kit for understanding racism and inequality. Indeed, "the basic processes invoked by the terms race, racism and discrimination are quintessentially social psychological phenomena," though how these micro processes are embedded in and derived from structure remains less examined (Bobo and Fox 2003:319). In this research note, we elaborate how the social psychological study of racism, bias, discrimination, and the like can be improved using insights from the literature on racial capitalism. We argue that engagement and dialogue between social psychology and theories of racial capitalism can help to better specify how large-scale social

forces are enacted in identities, boundaries, feelings, beliefs, interaction, and behavior.

For our purposes, racial capitalism can be defined as a theoretical starting point. Racial capitalism prompts researchers to focus on the systemic processes through

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which value is derived from racial difference and differentiation (Leong 2013). Any analysis of race (or political economy) must examine the mutual constitution of racial and class distinctions and resulting imbalances of power to create, control, and distribute resources. It is not a wholly coherent framework with clear propositions but rather a term that encompasses a broad, interdisciplinary line of critical inquiry rooted in the Black radical tradition. However, racial capitalism contains a range of concerns of interest to social psychologists (Go 2021; Jenkins and Leroy 2021; Ralph and Singhal 2019). Instead of providing a comprehensive overview, we call attention to specific insights that can enhance our understanding of the motivations and mechanisms that undergird, reproduce, and sustain racial inequalities. In focusing on the materiality of race, racism, and anti-Blackness, theories of racial capitalism point to particular mechanisms (e.g., exploitation, accumulation, and resource hoarding) that constitute racial identities, racial groups, and other race-related social psychological phenomena.

Bringing racial capitalism to bear on questions of racism, bias, and discrimination helps to augment current social psychological perspectives that tend to focus on identifying the cognitive mechanisms that connect prevailing culture—and, occasionally, conditions in organizations and other mesolevel settings—to various racial attitudes (Patterson 2015). Racial capitalism brings systemic forces and their effects in defining material realities to the forefront of how we understand social psychological phenomena. It highlights factors that enable accumulation of material wealth through racialized processes of coercion, hoarding, dispossession, and extraction and how they are

legitimated by mesolevel institutions and provides a clear through line from macrolevel historical and political-economic conditions to mesolevel institutions to microlevel attitudes and behaviors.

The key point is that continuing legacies of material domination shape how people construct racialized identities and boundaries as well as how those meanings are enacted. This perspective complements and builds on existing social psychological approaches. It strikes a productive balance between theories that key into the making of racialized categories (e.g., Omi and Winant 1986) and those that emphasize the hierarchical nature of racial power (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2003). It illuminates how systemic factors create the conditions for mesolevel dynamics of group competition and institutional discrimination as well as microlevel phenomena like racial bias and stereotyping. Finally, theories of racial capitalism caution against understanding how racism operates as a system without attending to economic logics, class hierarchies, and capitalism's legal-political capacities. The fundamentals of both racial and economic exploitation are deeply intertwined; any analysis of either—including understanding the social psychology of racism and discrimination—must attend to their co-reconstitution in society (Fields and Fields 2012). In what follows, we highlight three insights from racial capitalism that can enhance conceptualization, operationalization, and analysis in social psychological studies of race, racism, and discrimination. While our main goal is to demonstrate the utility of the racial capitalism framework for social psychologists, we also apply social psychological research to theories of racial capitalism in order to expand their meso- and microlevel contributions.

## UNDERSTANDING RACE AND RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

### *How Material Conditions and Identity Formation Shape One Another*

Drawing on Du Bois (1935) and Robinson (1983), we argue that one way to attend to the co-constitution of racial and material domination within social psychology is to center how material conditions and identity formation shape one another. As Du Bois (1935:743) noted in *Black Reconstruction*, White laborers in the antebellum South “received a low wage” but “were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage.” The maintenance of (racial) group identity is remunerative for those who can claim membership in the dominant group. Conventional social psychological research has pursued lines of inquiry consistent with this insight. For instance, Abascal (2015) uses experimental behavioral games to show that individuals respond to a news story about the growth of the Latinx population in the United States by prioritizing their most privileged identity (for White Americans this is their racial group, and for Black Americans this is their national identity).

But in addition to elaborating how racial identity shapes material outcomes, a racial capitalism perspective emphasizes that materiality drives racial identification and differentiation in the first place. As Robinson (1983:187) notes, material conditions—slavery, dispossession, genocide, the “exploitation of land, labor, and natural resources”—supported the “social ideology and historical consciousness” that constructed American Indian and Black racialized subjects as inferior to the “ruling classes.” This perspective suggests possibilities for reconceptualizing social psychological research design and sampling since Abascal (2015:809) acknowledges that her method cannot disentangle “the relationship

between identification and behavior [which] likely runs both ways: people who identify strongly with a group are more likely to act in ways that benefit the group, and acting in ways that benefit the group reinforces identification.” A racial capitalism–informed experiment might make explicit the material assumptions associated with the treatment to better tease apart how and why Black and White people differ in racial identification. The treatment could pose different levels of impact of Latinx immigration on the economy—describing immigration as expected to increase overall productivity or increase job market competition—and could vary the impact of race by describing White or Black U.S.-born workers as being more affected. This experiment would also consider sampling strategies that better attend to race and class intersections (e.g., class gradients within the “Black” and “White” categories) since class *and* race position may shape reactions to the treatment.

Some social psychological work has pursued this line of thinking (though without direct engagement with racial capitalism). Following Ridgeway’s (1991) observation that the first requirement for status differentiation in a given society is resource inequality, Brezina and Winder (2003) show that economic disparities between White and Black people give rise to processes of racial identification and discrimination that further legitimate White economic privileges. Specifically, they show that as White people increase their estimation of the economic gap between White Americans and Black Americans, they are more likely to endorse negative stereotypes about Black people’s work effort.

Racial capitalism also shows how other economic processes—beyond simple resource inequalities—create the conditions for racial differentiation and racist attitudes. The accumulation of resources

to White communities via the incarceration of Black people (see Gilmore 2007) prompts further support for racially unequal punitive policies. Simply being told that prisons have higher proportions of Black people increases endorsement of harsher punishments and longer sentences for criminal behavior (Hetey and Eberhardt 2014). This is both an illustration of the “Whiteness wage” in action and a demonstration of how material conditions contribute to racial identification and differentiation: the material advantage that White people have produces racialized beliefs and group boundary formation.

Social psychological research can also expand racial capitalism’s contributions by theorizing and elaborating the meso- and microlevel mechanisms linking identities with material conditions within contexts of structural racial and economic exploitation. A racial capitalism approach might theorize the rise of Trumpism in the United States by calling attention to the political activation of White racial consciousness and the growing activity of movements mobilized around this identity. But social psychological accounts of network and participation structures point to another way that material conditions set the stage for such identity formation. Thye, Lawler, and Yoon (2011) find that certain network factors (including potential for inclusion and inequality of structural power) lead to more group affiliation and commitment. When understood through a racial capitalism lens—one that specifies how racial groups are differently positioned relative to those network structures and exchange dynamics (Robinson 2021)—these findings reveal the conditions under which White racial “groupness” (i.e., White group political identity) persists, even if economic incentives are lacking (see Savage and Sommer 2016). Racial group

alienation (Bobo and Hutchings 1996) can therefore be understood as emerging from the very “groups” that capitalist economic relations create and estrange. While a racial capitalism perspective stresses that groups are a potentially shifting and relational product of economic relations, social psychology notes that the strength and persistence of such group identities is likely affected by a variety of network and participation dynamics, including things like “proximate” social structures, “ecological” settings where people interact, and “contagion” effects during these interactions (Merolla et al. 2012; Smith-Lovin 2007; Zhao, Robinson, and Wu 2020).

### ***How Capitalism Makes Use of Racial Difference and Differentiation***

A second way to attend to racial capitalism’s driving insight—the co-constitution of racial and material domination—within social psychology is to center how capitalism makes use of and commodifies racial differentiation. Here the focus lies less on materiality’s social psychological effects and more on the power of social psychological processes, like discrimination, as tools in reproducing material disparities. In particular, for Robinson (1983:26), contemporary capitalism merely replicates and refreshes the “tendency of European civilization . . . not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones.” This point calls attention to the many ways that discriminatory agents use tactics of racial differentiation to unequally allocate moneymaking opportunities. Racial capitalism nuances existing social psychological theories of prejudice and discrimination, which emphasize disconnection/lack of contact or stereotypes as causes of these behaviors while paying

less attention to the material incentives that produce and exaggerate such differentiation.

Capitalism includes a variety of signals that encourage actors to instrumentalize widely perceived racial differences. This connects to social psychologists' close attention to the relationship between discriminatory racial identification and status differentiation (see Di Stasio and Larsen 2020; Harkness 2016; Pager and Shepherd 2008). Racial capitalism helps to explain how racial identities—given systemic incentives to shore up these categories—acquire economic value, get used as tools to gain within an exploitative system, and ultimately become fodder for accumulation and extraction. In American society, this identity-extraction process generally means that White individuals and institutions in particular leverage “nonwhite people to acquire social and economic value” (Leong 2013:2152). The commodification of non-White racial identity in a society seemingly preoccupied with diversity means that White institutions and people “treat nonwhiteness as a prized commodity rather than as a cherished and personal manifestation of identity” (Leong 2013: 2155). This orientation to identity is inherently extractive, signifying a “tokenistic” approach to racial diversity that exploits individuals' racial identity for the status, legitimacy, and, ultimately, monetary value it brings to the White institutions and people perpetuating it. As Mayorga-Gallo (2019:11) notes, this “commodification of diversity is intimately tied to White identity construction . . . [and facilitates] a positive construction of self” for White people.

Racialized identity extraction runs parallel to the commodification of racial differentiation in key areas of economic life, for example, housing markets that racially stratify where people live

(Korver-Glenn 2021; Krysan and Crowder 2017). Residential segregation can be understood as a form of racial differentiation that is materialized in an extreme way—baked into place (Massey and Denton 1993). Segregated places form imaginaries that in turn powerfully inform how home seekers discern and interpret the market value of particular places (Besbris 2020; Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2022; Lipsitz 2011). In this way, racial segregation's major consequence is that it links White economic privilege directly to non-White disadvantage: much of the “value” of living in a White area lies in the latter's distance—both geographically and symbolically—from the exploitation and disinvestment visited on residents of non-White (and especially Black) areas (Connolly 2014; Robinson 2020; Taylor 2019).

As both racial capitalism and social psychology theories would predict, these hierarchies that legitimate and enable racial commodification are created, sustained, and adapted through practices that infuse the housing market with racial-economic stereotyping and racialized material outcomes. Some of these processes include real estate agents' practices of steering people into discriminatory residential patterns (Korver-Glenn 2018, 2021); loan officers' and appraisers' practices of valuing (i.e., assigning economic worth to) homes vis-à-vis racialized notions of “desirability” (Howell and Korver-Glenn 2021); the real estate industry's practices of protecting neighborhood racial boundaries, fearing loss of business otherwise (Besbris 2020; Besbris and Faber 2017); and that same industry's normalization of racialized risk assessments, networking, and marketing practices (Besbris, Schachter, and Kuk 2021; Korver-Glenn 2021). These practices beget further segregation as White racial-economic dominance is maintained and concentrated. Asian,

Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people avoid places in which they suspect they will face discrimination, and non-White—particularly, Black—neighborhoods are continually stigmatized (Bell 2020; Besbris et al. 2015; Besbris, Faber, and Sharkey 2019; Krysan and Crowder 2017).

Recently, researchers have shown how racial commodification has shifted as private capital returns to previously disinvested neighborhoods and populations. Taylor (2019) describes “predatory inclusion” as the process by which individuals previously excluded from access to markets become targets of those markets and included in ways that prey upon them while enriching those doing the targeting (see also Besbris et al. 2022). Hyra (2017) describes the irony in which developers use “Black branding” to encourage White residents to gentrify low-income Black neighborhoods by highlighting the neighborhoods’ rich Black heritage and thrill of experiencing stereotypical gritty urban life. In housing, as in credit or labor markets, a legacy of racial-economic differentiation sets the table for further discrimination, resource extraction, and exploitation.

### ***The Social Psychological Tax of Racial Subjugation***

The final point we develop is that the racial capitalism framework also sheds light on the cognitive and emotional struggles of systemically disadvantaged populations. Social psychological theories powerfully explain the processes and mechanisms through which individuals with advantaged identities demarcate and marginalize others. For Ridgeway (2006:1), people “enact structural patterns [of] inequality” through cultural sentiments and beliefs transmitted in social-relational contexts that are shaped by wider material conditions. These

schemata congeal into hierarchies around racial and other differences that rank people evaluatively “in terms of how diffusely ‘better’ they are,” which in turn legitimates and further entrenches material disparities (Ridgeway 2014:3). This perspective is well suited for modeling how “vocabulary[ies] of shared meanings” and the “grammar’ of rules for combining [those] meanings” transmit to a variety of contexts, even while remaining flexible to “the specific contingencies” of any given situation (Ridgeway 2006:7). Such a perspective, however, is less well suited for understanding the social psychology of people marginalized and “othered” by these hierarchies—though there is some recent progress on this front.

Within the social psychological literature (and beyond), intersectionality to some degree addresses this gap. On the one hand, it has emerged as a catch-all language for articulating the social psychological experiences of people marginalized on the basis of race or other forms of categorical difference. For founding scholars such as Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (2000), intersectionality exposes how broader institutional and political discourses tend to erase the multidimensional identities of marginalized categories of people, especially Black women. By highlighting “interlocking systems of oppression,” intersectionality argues that marginalized people’s identities, beliefs, and feelings necessarily embody a political praxis for navigating a wider matrix of systemic harms (Collins 2015:8).

On the other hand, contemporary applications of intersectionality in social psychology are somewhat narrow, focusing on the discriminatory attitudes of people occupying positions of power toward individuals with multiple marginalized identities (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Harkness 2016; Di Stasio and Larsen 2020; Pedulla 2014). Other

studies approach intersectionality from the vantage point of marginalized people. While some pursue an “additive” approach of examining the effects of more versus fewer marginalized identities (see Misra 2021), others emphasize the mutually constitutive nature of intersectional identities and its impacts on various cognitive and material outcomes (Harnois 2015; Tuthill 2021). Taken together, these studies helpfully reveal the linkages between intersecting identities and real-world disparities. But as intersectionality’s founding scholars have bemoaned, these applications can also “flatten” intersectionality by reading it “as just multiplying identity categories rather than constituting a structural analysis or a political critique,” which obscures the “systematic effects of cumulative oppression” that create and sustain cognitive and material disparities (Berger and Guidroz 2009:70).

We argue that contemporary applications of intersectionality within social psychology are limited because they reduce the psychology of marginalized people to a set of outcome metrics, especially on perceptions of discrimination, interracial closeness, psychological well-being, and degree of racial identification (Doyle and Kao 2007; Hunt et al. 2007; Khanna and Johnson 2010; Tropp et al. 2018). What is missing are analyses of how racism and other structural oppressions give rise to particular social psychological struggles for marginalized categories of people. Luckily, this theme has figured prominently in literature on racial capitalism (see Itzigohn and Brown 2020), which offers some useful direction for making social psychological research on intersectionality more attentive to systemic forces and their wide-ranging ramifications. As historian Sweeney (2021: 64–65) argues, writers in this tradition have closely examined the many ways that “black being [is] fractured by processes of racial

capitalism,” producing an “elemental spiritual alienation” that is phenomenologically distinct. For that reason, racial capitalism emphasizes the “unification of this fractured being” as well as the preservation and “recovery of ontological wholeness” as “central to any black political project in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, even if it is not named as such.”

Racial capitalism’s conceptualization of societal oppression as a problem of ontological fracture and repair brings the impact of systemic forces into the foreground of research on the social psychology of race, racism, and discrimination—highlighting, like earlier and certain recent formulations of intersectionality (e.g., Ponton 2016), the necessarily political dimension of such phenomena. We argue that racial capitalism complements existing perspectives on the widespread adoption of cultural schemata as a key driver of societal exclusion (e.g., Ridgeway 2006, 2014). It directs attention to ongoing legacies of racial and material domination and how they shape the vocabularies and grammar of identity work—meanings that inform self-making and the adaptive logics that define how those meanings combine into contextually specific formations—for people marginalized by those systemic forces. In this way, racial capitalism moves beyond deductive metrics toward an inductive approach of examining the processes and mechanisms through which marginalized people struggle to exist and recover a sense of social psychological wholeness against the weight of relentless subjugation. Indeed, a racial capitalism–informed approach to understanding the social psychology of marginalized groups and particularly how individuals navigate multiple marginalized identities likely requires more qualitative studies of experiences and institutions.

Alongside social psychology’s focus on exploring the degree to which people

identify with ascribed racial identities or perceive wider discrimination, for example, researchers might also explore how racialized identities and beliefs come to articulate with specific practices of reparative labor and political expression. In this vein, Sweeney (2021:72), building on insights from Cedric Robinson, notes that understanding the struggle of Black women means attending to how “professions of faith by black women have functioned not only as incantations of protection and healing but also as historically informed attempts to make whole what was divided by racial capitalism.” For this reason, Black feminists such as Claudia Jones, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective have emphasized not only the intersecting oppressions that Black women face but also how they have “fashioned radical horizons of possibility from this unique embodied location,” in which “faith, ancestral connections, and millenarian divination have guided their struggles for dignity, civic recognition, and material resources” (Sweeney 2021:71).

A similarly intersectional approach has been taken up in some studies of inequality in contemporary settings. Gurusami’s (2017, 2019) research on formerly incarcerated Black women shows how they—both as workers attempting to redeem themselves as productive members of society and as mothers attempting to keep their families together—encounter a variety of oppressive practices and structures that fragment and undercut their senses of self. Gurusami’s findings lay out how these struggles reflect an ongoing legacy of state coercion and racialized and gendered violence that both shapes and transcends the particular carceral context in which Black women exist as well as how these systemic forces give rise to positionally specific dilemmas as Black women struggle to carry out their basic social

responsibilities. These social psychological dilemmas prompt them to develop reparative tactics that help them to manage but ultimately exacerbate punitive treatment at the hands of state agents.

Other examples of this approach can be found in studies of racism and housing markets. Housing markets epitomize “the triple bind or ‘super-exploitation’ of black women in a capitalist society” (Sweeney 2021:65). Desmond (2012:104) finds that female renters in Black and Latinx neighborhoods were “more than twice as likely as male renters [in these same neighborhoods] to be evicted through the court system.” He theorizes that Black women disproportionately bear the burden of eviction because of structural dynamics, including exceptionally high numbers of Black female leaseholders due to hyperunemployment and criminalization of Black men. These dynamics underwrite negative relationships between landlords and low-income Black women renters, whom landlords perceive as not conforming to masculine expectations of interaction and whose resource-deprived social networks are unlikely to be able to help with the rent.

Williams’ (2004) study of poor Black women’s mobilization to improve public housing highlights the political impact of their distinct positionality relative to systemic forces and how this position engenders unique psychological states that prompt political mobilization. Taking account of how intersectional identities converge with specific instances of reparative labor and political expression also helps to shed light on the tensions and hostilities that emerge within racially marginalized categories of people. For example, Pattillo (2007) grapples with this issue in her work on racial politics and complexities of gentrification on Chicago’s South Side. Pattillo’s study shows that the distinctive race-class positionality of middle-class versus poorer



Black residents ultimately determines how they perceive the fairness of—and whether they choose to align with—the real estate projects being pushed by White developers to gentrify historically Black areas. Poorer Black residents adopted a political agenda and tactics that were more resistive than those of their middle-class counterparts. Yet, these “internal fissures,” for Pattillo (2007:3), are also reparative within the context of systemic racism and the particular ways that it fragments Black identity: “even and especially when the disagreements get heated and sometimes vicious,” those disagreements and tensions are “what *constitutes* the black community.”

Hence, by accounting for people’s multiple identifications as well as their material interests, the racial capitalism framework can better explain varied and sometimes contradictory racial subjectivities. These analyses also demonstrate the inadequacy of conceptualizing such identity work merely as situational “impression management” (Goffman 1959), the enactment of situationally salient identity-based roles (Stryker 2008), or as “stories” that enable accomplishment of identities within mesolevel settings (Wilkins 2012). Rather, we argue that racial capitalism can help us to better understand—to paraphrase Patricia Hill Collins—the grammar through which identity-related meanings “come, under certain conditions, to cohere together . . . at specific conjunctures, [around] certain political struggles” (Collins 2015:15).

## CONCLUSION


To best understand race, racism, and discrimination, social scientists must look to the myriad historical forces that have shaped the individual realms/markets where they are taking place. To best do so, we argue, entails utilizing the tools of an existing framework (Besbris and


Khan 2017). The racial capitalism framework orients scholars to look for the material benefits of racist attitudes and behaviors that then produce psychological benefits (e.g., the wages of Whiteness *and* psychological taxes for marginalized groups). It provides a clear motivation for collective discrimination—though it is flexible enough to understand individual actions as produced by a complex set of ideological and material pressures—as well as for the creation of institutions with discrimination embedded in them. The framework does not attempt to reduce individual prejudice to material interest but instead locates collective group attitudes, alienation, and the formation of groups themselves as stemming from an imbalanced distribution of resources. Attitudes emerge in tandem with the structural allocation of resources, providing cultural and cognitive frameworks that support and justify such allocation. These interests and ideologies evolve but generally sustain existing hierarchies. A racial capitalism framework also has practical/political benefit in terms of fighting discrimination: if a great deal of prejudice is rooted in material/power imbalances, a more materially equitable world should help reduce that prejudice. If, on the other hand, prejudice is deeply ingrained psychology, it is more difficult to see what can be done or explain why inequality is so persistent.


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