

Weaponization of Diversity Rhetoric: An Insidious Route to Justifying Inequity

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Abstract

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Do White egalitarians (i.e., those low in social dominance orientation) weaponize diversity rhetoric to justify racial inequities? Two preregistered studies examine the weaponization of diversity rhetoric – the appropriation of diversity messaging for the benefit of privileged people. Study 1 ($N=356$) presents White Americans with arguments opposing a school affirmative action policy, while Study 2 ($N=121$) focuses on White egalitarians justifying an inequitable workplace hiring policy. In both studies, participants encounter two types of arguments: one that weaponizes diversity rhetoric (e.g., claims of affirmative action harms Asian Americans) and another that employs traditional opposition rhetoric (e.g., claims of reverse discrimination toward White Americans). White egalitarians favored the arguments that weaponize diversity rhetoric in both school and workplace contexts. This effect was mediated by weaponization

rhetoric reducing concerns about being perceived as racist. Our research demonstrates that diversity rhetoric may be a route exploited by White egalitarians to maintain racial inequities.

Keywords: diversity rhetoric, White egalitarians, social dominance orientation

White Egalitarians and the Weaponization of Diversity Rhetoric

In 2014, Harvard University was accused of discriminating against Asian American applicants in college admissions. The case was spearheaded by Edward Blum, a conservative legal strategist seeking to overturn race-conscious admissions policies, more commonly known as affirmative action. Affirmative action policies seek to create equal opportunities for marginalized groups (e.g., people of color, women) in academic and professional settings (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022; Leonard, 1984). In contrast to Blum's long history of failed attempts citing how affirmative action disadvantages White students (most notably *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2013), in the case against Harvard, he switched to weaponizing concerns about a community of color with the underlying intent to benefit White students.

At the high school level, White American parents have argued against the implementation of affirmative action policies in highly coveted schools. Some East coast high schools require standardized tests, in which students must score above a certain threshold for admission. However, standardized testing has historically hindered the educational opportunities of Black and Latinx students often due to inequitable access to economic and school resources that their White peers use to get ahead (Brunn-Bevel & Byrd, 2015; Ruecker, 2013; Williams, 1983). Deemphasizing the weight of standardized tests in admission has led to fears in perceived reduction in school quality by White parents as it moves away from merit-based systems that White Americans unfairly benefit from (Alon & Tienda, 2007). White parents have argued that implementing affirmative action policies at the high school level may be "forcing some children into an academic environment that is too advanced for them" (Meckler & Natanson, 2020). Instead of implementing these policies, these parents have suggested "fixing the pipeline" so Black and Latinx students can gain admissions under the current system (Natanson, 2021). This

racially coded language conveys concerns for students of color, with the goal of maintaining existing inequitable educational systems that advantage White students.

Contemporary American society motivates White Americans to avoid overt expressions of racial prejudice and instead present themselves as non-prejudiced through principles of equality (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Pearson et al., 2009; Rosenblum et al., 2022). Despite their egalitarian ideals (i.e., attitudes favoring group-based quality), White Americans continue engaging with prejudiced attitudes and behaviors in subtle ways (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Goff et al., 2008; Mann & Kawakami, 2012). This creates a conflict for White Americans in which they must reconcile their egalitarian values with their racist behaviors.

The Weaponization of Diversity Rhetoric

We propose that White egalitarians may reconcile the conflict between egalitarian values and racist behaviors through the *weaponization of diversity rhetoric*, which we define as: the appropriation of diversity language, values, beliefs, and behaviors by privileged people to maintain or increase social inequities. This weaponization is an umbrella term that captures some of the traditional arguments against diversity efforts but uses equity language to mask how it is benefitting privileged groups. Instead of opposing affirmative action through arguments of White students being hurt in college admissions, White Americans may instead use concerns about Asian Americans being discriminated against. This allows White Americans to oppose equity efforts in ways that seem consistent with egalitarian ideals, such as expressing concerns for students of color. Use of weaponization rhetoric led to the dismantling of college affirmative action policies in the United States, as evidenced by a recent Supreme Court decision (*Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2022*). The weaponization of diversity rhetoric may be another route to opposing diversity initiatives that has yet to be

investigated, and this new route may be more acceptable to some Americans compared to traditional routes of opposition.

While social psychology has investigated traditional forms of opposition to diversity efforts, generally done through concerns for the White racial in-group (e.g., Danbold et al., 2022; Lowery et al., 2006; Phillips & Lowery, 2015), other forms of maintaining inequities warrant investigation as they may allow White Americans to appear non-prejudiced and be more subtle in nature. Additionally, while the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may be most evident in educational contexts, there is reason to believe it extends to other contexts. Companies such as REI and Starbucks have been found to co-opt diversity trainings to include union-busting messaging. During workplace trainings, companies will implement messages about how the parent company cares for employee issues of diversity, belonging, and wages. These issues are sometimes handled by unions bargaining with the larger corporation. But by establishing a supposed direct line of communication between employees and leadership, large companies reduce challenges and bargaining power against large corporations by dissuading unionizing (Fang, 2022). As such, it is possible for organizational inequities to be maintained and furthered under the guise of diversity (Ponce de Leon & Kay, 2021).

Social Dominance Orientation and White Supremacy

Attitudes reflecting the desire for one's in-group to dominate and be superior to outgroups is known as social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994). In the United States, White Americans have historically been placed at the top of the perceived racial hierarchy (Fiske et al., 2002; Zou & Cheryan, 2017). This is due in part to American society and structures being deeply rooted in White supremacy (Harris, 1993). Accordingly, White Americans high in SDO seek to maintain currently inequitable systems as they benefit from them. White Americans

high in SDO oppose policies that redistribute opportunities and resources from privileged groups to marginalized groups (e.g., affirmative action; Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2013; Lowery et al., 2006).

The desire to maintain a racially inequitable American society stems from White Americans' perceived threat from racial demographic shifts in the U.S. population (Craig & Richeson, 2014), which creates concerns of losing educational and professional opportunities to people of color (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Zárate et al., 2004; Zou & Cheryan, 2022). Perceived racial progress and organizational diversity initiatives have led White Americans to, at times, claim to be the victims of reverse discrimination, but these claims are often deemed ineffective arguments and illegitimate forms of discrimination (Danbold et al., 2022; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Consequently, social dominance orientation research has primarily focused on how White Americans *high* in SDO fight to maintain inequitable systems. But paradoxically, could White Americans *low* in SDO, referred to as egalitarians, also be maintaining inequitable systems in potentially more subtle ways?

White Egalitarians and Stereotype Threat

Why might White egalitarians need to use a subtle approach to maintain inequitable systems? White egalitarians (typically indicated through low scores on the Social Dominance Orientation scale; Ho et al., 2015) are more likely to be politically liberal, report lower symbolic racism, and support affirmative action compared to White Americans high in SDO (Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Ho et al., 2015). However, binary perceptions of White Americans are restricting as they can hold both racist and anti-racist attitudes (Hughey, 2022). In other words, White egalitarians may hold racist views that conflict with their stated egalitarian values (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Ponce de Leon & Kay, 2021). Explicit and implicit racial attitudes have become

less pro-White in recent years, with explicit racial attitudes changing more rapidly than implicit racial attitudes (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019, 2022). This may be a consequence of social justice movements that have received national attention, such as Black Lives Matter (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). White egalitarians may more readily want to signal allyship to communities of color, and as such, may use appeasement strategies that increase solidarity with people of color (Feldman & Huddy, 2005), while also decreasing preferences for their White in-group (Lowery et al., 2012). While White egalitarians may endorse equitable policies in the abstract, their support is retracted when they have a personal stake (Glasford, 2022). The weaponization of diversity rhetoric may provide a strategy for White egalitarians to protect their racial in-group interests and maintain favorable self-concepts.

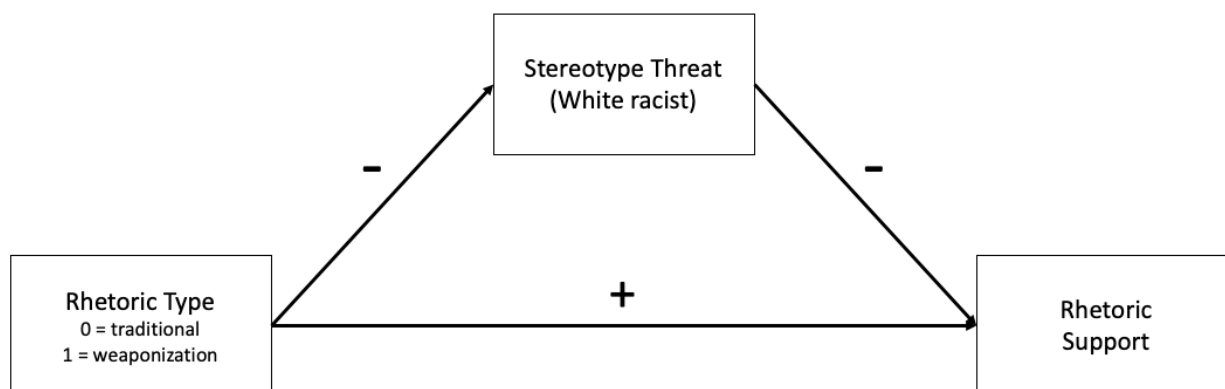
Stereotype threat has been typically studied in the context of marginalized individuals (e.g., Black students, women) not wanting to confirm negative stereotypes associated with their social groups (e.g., poor math performance; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). That said, individuals from privileged social groups (e.g., White Americans) may also experience stereotype threat. Motivated to present themselves as non-prejudiced (Rosenblum et al., 2022), White Americans seek to avoid confirming the White racist stereotype (O'Brien et al., 2010), but may continue doing so in subtle ways (Frantz et al., 2004; Goff et al., 2008). This form of stereotype threat may be particularly salient for White egalitarians, who hold values of equality in high regard (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Pearson et al., 2009). Which begs the question, how does the weaponization of diversity rhetoric influence stereotype threat experienced by White egalitarians when opposing diversity efforts?

We posit that compared to traditional opposition rhetoric, White egalitarians will report greater support for the weaponization of diversity rhetoric. The weaponization of diversity

rhetoric may reduce stereotype threat concerns for White egalitarians because it may signal allyship with communities of color using diversity language. A reduction in stereotype threat would increase support for policies that use the weaponization of diversity rhetoric compared to the policies that use traditional opposition rhetoric. We use rhetoric support as our dependent variable in the model because diversity rhetoric may manifest in various ways, including but not limited to policy and programming. Overall, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may protect the self-interests of White egalitarians by maintaining inequities that benefit their racial in-group.

Figure 1.

Proposed mediation model where weaponization rhetoric receives increased support compared to traditional rhetoric by reducing stereotype threat among White egalitarians.



Overview

The paper seeks to investigate which White Americans support the weaponization of diversity rhetoric (Study 1) and why they do so (Study 2) compared to traditional opposition rhetoric. In Study 1, we investigate whether egalitarian values predict support for the weaponization of diversity rhetoric and traditional opposition rhetoric in an educational context. In Study 2, we examined why White Americans who support the weaponization of diversity rhetoric are more likely to support the weaponization of diversity rhetoric (versus traditional

opposition rhetoric) in a workplace context. Taken together, these two studies investigate a potentially insidious form of resistance to racial equity as the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may allow White Americans to maintain inequitable organizations and systems while appearing egalitarian.

Study 1: Do Egalitarian Values Predict Support of the Weaponization of Diversity Rhetoric for White Americans?

Study 1 explores the weaponization of diversity rhetoric compared to traditional opposition rhetoric in an education context. We explore endorsement, perceived effectiveness, and likelihood of support as dependent variables for they can be indicative of support for programming and policies that maintain racial inequities in schools. Such programming and policies may protect the self-interests of White Americans and shut down potential criticisms (Danbold et al., 2022). In line with our preregistration, we hypothesized that egalitarian values would predict the relative endorsement (Hypothesis 1a), perceived effectiveness (Hypothesis 2a), and likelihood of supporting (Hypothesis 3a) of an op-ed opposing affirmative action using the weaponization of diversity rhetoric versus an op-ed using traditional opposition rhetoric. Furthermore, we hypothesized that these relationships would hold (Hypotheses 1b, 2b, 3b, respectively) when controlling for covariates (political conservatism, symbolic racism, support for affirmative action).

Method

Participants

Sample size, procedures, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered (https://osf.io/sr52h/?view_only=1ceb297320fe45979041c533180965f1). White parents were recruited from an online U.S. Prolific sample. Study 1 targets U.S. White parents because

beyond school staff and administrators, White parents have historically held the most power and influence over American schooling practices (Kimaro & Machumu, 2015). An a priori power analysis based on a pilot study suggested having at least 353 participants to detect a small local effect size (Selya et al., 2012), with 80% power. In accordance with our preregistration, we requested 375 participants to account for potential exclusions but received 376 survey responses through Prolific. Twenty participants were removed for not identifying as White, leaving 356 participants (188 women, 163 men, 4 non-binary, and 1 non-binary, genderqueer person) with an average age of 47.90 years ($SD = 13.40$ years).

Procedure

Participants were presented with two op-eds (see Figure 2), in a randomized order, both of which argued against the same affirmative action policy – but one used traditional affirmative action rhetoric (i.e., concerns about White students) whereas the other used weaponization of diversity rhetoric (i.e., concerns about students of color).

Figure 2

Op-ed using the weaponization of the diversity rhetoric (left) and traditional rhetoric (right) to oppose an affirmative action policy.

MARCH 21, 2022



Changes to advanced learning opportunities in Metro City hurt students of color

BY MONICA BENNETT AND JEANNIE TROST



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In recent years, Metro City School District has begun placing a lower emphasis on test scores and grades to identify students for advanced learning opportunities, a decision that education activists claim negatively impact students of color. Asian American students may now be less likely to be selected for these classes. Furthermore, teachers may feel inadequately equipped to support Black students, who have long been disadvantaged in the U.S. education system. Without substantial changes to the structure and curriculum of advanced learning opportunities, Black students may feel as if they don't belong in these spaces. Education reform is critical for Metro City, but these changes should not be made at the expense of experiences of students of color.

MARCH 21, 2022



Changes to advanced learning opportunities in Metro City hurt White students

BY MONICA BENNETT AND JEANNIE TROST



(iStock by Getty Images)

In recent years, Metro City School District has begun placing a lower emphasis on test scores and grades to identify students for advanced learning opportunities, a decision that education activists claim negatively impact White students. White students may now be less likely to be selected for these classes. Furthermore, teachers may need to offer additional opportunities to provide academically beneficial experiences to White students. These additional opportunities may lead to White students feeling as if they're not receiving the academically rigorous experience they were initially promised. Education reform is critical for Metro City, but these changes should not be made at the expense of experiences of White students.

The traditional affirmative action rhetoric op-ed highlighted how White students are harmed by the policy and would not receive the academic experiences promised to them. The weaponization of diversity rhetoric op-ed highlighted how Asian students are harmed by the policy and Black students would not feel supported in these classrooms. After reading each op-ed, participants indicated how much they endorsed and how effective they perceived each op-ed to be. Then, participants were forced to pick one of the two op-eds to support. Finally, participants answered additional measures, including covariates and demographics.

Measures

Egalitarian Values

Egalitarian values were assessed by reverse-scoring the short Social Dominance Orientation scale¹ ($\alpha = .90$; Ho et al., 2015). Participants were asked to indicate to what degree they oppose or favor eight statements on intergroup relations on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly oppose) to 7 (Strongly favor). Sample items include “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups,” and “We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.” Items were scored such that higher scores reflect higher egalitarian values.

Op-ed Support

Participants indicated how much they endorsed ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .92$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .90$) and how effective they perceived ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .87$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .86$) the arguments made in each op-ed. Items were assessed using a Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), , adapted from Danbold et al. (2022). Sample items for endorsement include, “I agree with the argument this op-ed makes, ” and “I think this is an honorable stance to take.” Sample items for perceived effectiveness include, “I think the argument made in this op-ed could be used in a debate and win,” and “I think it would be easy for anyone to prove this argument wrong” (reverse-scored). Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater op-ed endorsement and perceived effectiveness. Lastly, participants were given a forced choice item asking them which of the two op-eds they would support.

¹ To reduce participant fatigue due to the within-subject experimental design, the shorter form of the SDO₇ scale was used. The shorter form of the scale, also known as SDO_{7(s)}, shares similar properties to that of the full version of the scale.

Political Conservatism

Political conservatism was assessed using three items ($\alpha = .95$; Sidanius et al., 2008). First, participants described their political party preference, from 1 (Strong Democrat) to 7 (Strong Republican). Then participants described their political attitudes and beliefs in terms of economic and social issues, from 1 (Very liberal) to 7 (Very conservative). Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater political conservatism.

Symbolic Racism

Symbolic racism was assessed using four items ($\alpha = .91$; Henry & Sears, 2002). Items were assessed using a Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Sample items include, "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Black people would only try harder they could be just as well off as White people," and "Generations of discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Black people to work their way out of the lower class" (reverse-scored). Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater symbolic racism.

Support for Affirmative Action

Support for affirmative action was assessed using four items ($\alpha = .87$; Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Participants indicated how much they oppose or favor different kinds of affirmative action, from 1 (Strongly oppose the policy) to 7 (Strongly favor the policy). Sample items include, "Using membership in certain racial groups as a tie-breaker when applicants are equally qualified," and "Making a special effort to find and train ethnic minorities for good jobs." Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater support for affirmative action policies.

Results

Endorsement

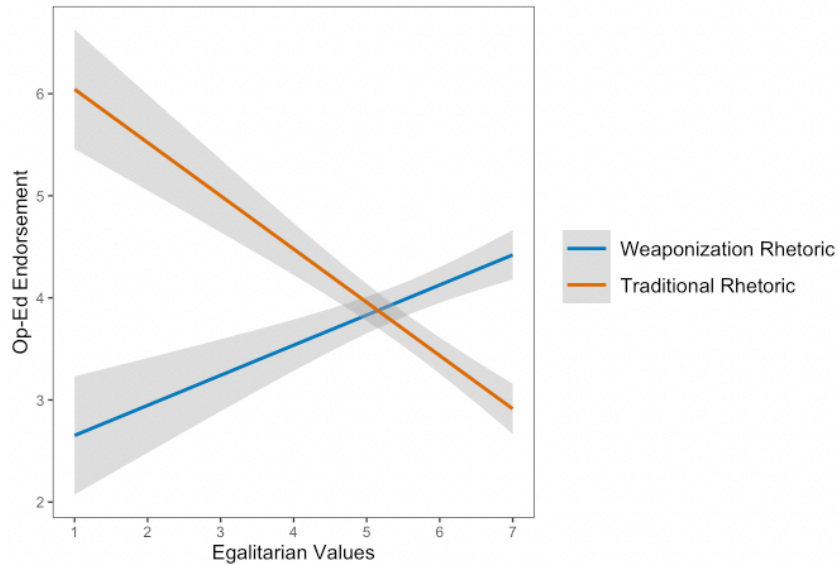
Consistent with the preregistration² (Hypothesis 1a), we found a main effect of egalitarian values, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(663) = 4.73$, $p < .001$, a main effect of rhetoric type, $b = 4.21$, $SE = 0.43$, $t(354) = 9.70$, $p < .001$, and an interaction between egalitarian values and rhetoric type on op-ed endorsement, $b = -0.82$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(354) = -10.76$, $p < .001$. Simple effects revealed that higher egalitarian values, attitudes favoring group-based equality, predicted White parents' greater endorsement of the weaponization rhetoric op-ed, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.42], but lower endorsement of the traditional rhetoric op-ed, $b = -0.52$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [-0.64, -0.40] (see Figure 3a). These simple effects were significantly different from each other, $t(354) = 10.76$, $p < .001$, and remained significant when controlling for covariates (Hypothesis 1b)³.

² The preregistered analyses were to analyze the difference score between the weaponization of diversity rhetoric and traditional opposition op-eds. We deviate from those analyses here by using the absolute scores for the endorsement and perceived effectiveness of the op-eds. This was done to better showcase the effect of egalitarian values on endorsement and perceived effectiveness for each type of rhetoric.

³ Analyses on the using difference scores in endorsement between the two op-eds revealed similar results. White parents' egalitarian values positively predicted their endorsement ($b = 0.82$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$) of the weaponization rhetoric op-ed *relative* to the traditional rhetoric op-ed, $F(1,354) = 115.75$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.25$. This relationship remained significant ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.048$) even when controlling for covariates – political conservatism, symbolic racism, and support for affirmative action, $F(4,351) = 54.59$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.38$.

Figure 3a

Egalitarian values on op-ed endorsement by rhetoric type.

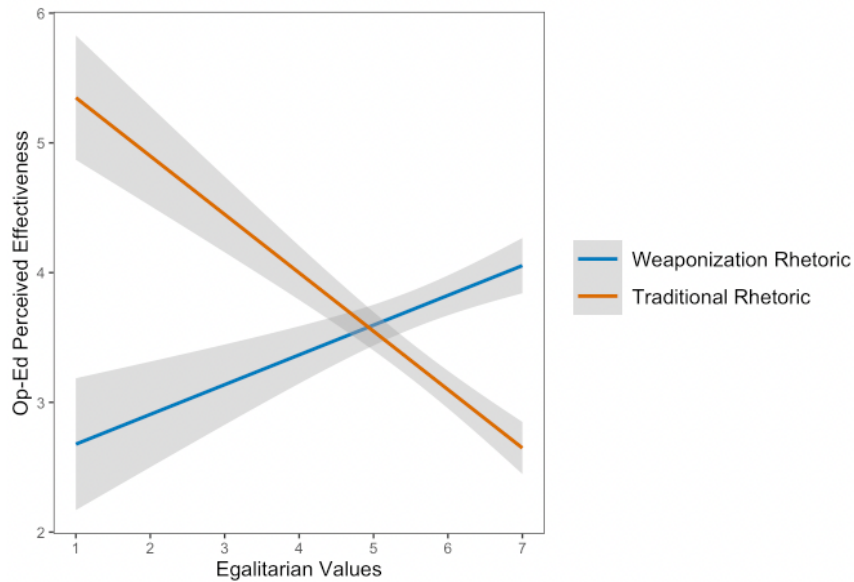
**Perceived Effectiveness**

Consistent with the preregistration (Hypothesis 2a), we found a main effect of egalitarian values, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(691) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, a main effect of rhetoric type, $b = 3.35$, $SE = 0.39$, $t(354) = 8.53$, $p < .001$, and an interaction between egalitarian values and rhetoric type on op-ed endorsement, $b = -0.70$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(691) = -9.88$, $p < .001$. Simple effects revealed that higher egalitarian values predicted White parents' greater perceived effectiveness of the weaponization rhetoric op-ed, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.33], but lower perceived effectiveness of the traditional rhetoric op-ed, $b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.55, -0.35] (see Figure 4b). These simple effects were significantly different from each other, $t(354) = 9.88$, $p < .001$, and remained significant when controlling for covariates (Hypothesis 3b)⁴.

⁴ White parents' egalitarian values positively predicted the perceived effectiveness ($b = 0.68$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$) of the weaponization rhetoric op-ed relative to the traditional rhetoric op-ed, $F(1,354) = 97.70$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.22$. This relationship remained significant ($b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .003$) even when controlling for covariates (Hypothesis 2b) – political conservatism, symbolic racism, and support for affirmative action, $F(4,351) = 35.56$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.29$.

Figure 3b

Egalitarian values on op-ed perceived effectiveness by rhetoric type.

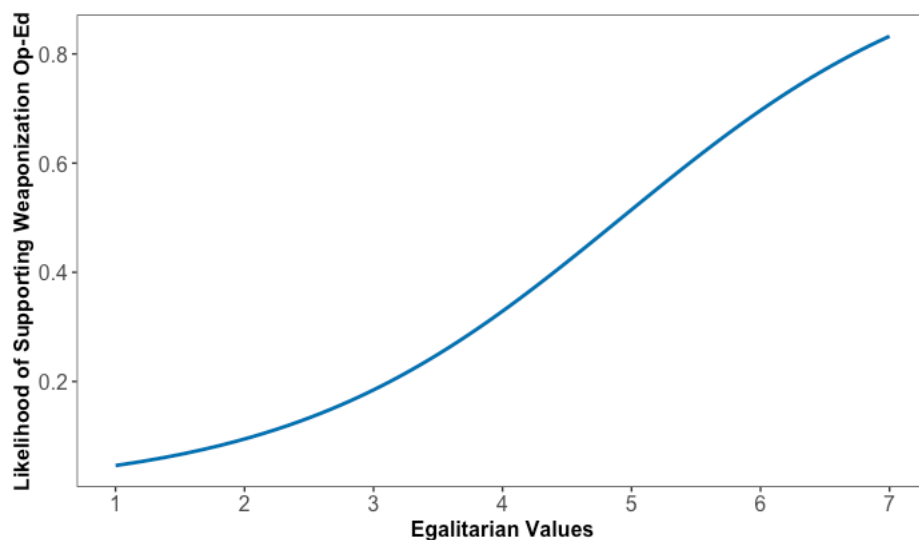


Choice for Support

As predicted in the preregistration (Hypothesis 3a), as White parents' egalitarian values increased, they were more likely to choose to support (OR = 1.68, 95% CI [1.23, 2.29]; see Figure 3c) the weaponization rhetoric op-ed (coded as 1) compared to the traditional rhetoric op-ed (coded as 0), $X^2(1) = 12.37$, $p < .001$, Pseudo- R^2 (Cragg-Uhler) = 0.26. However, contrary to our preregistered prediction, this relationship did not hold true (OR = 1.19, 95% CI [0.89, 1.60]) once we controlled for covariates (Hypothesis 3b) – political conservatism, symbolic racism, and support for affirmative action, $X^2(4) = 137.94$, $p < .001$, Pseudo- R^2 (Cragg-Uhler) = 0.44.

Figure 3c

Egalitarian values on likelihood of choosing weaponization op-ed to support.



Discussion

Study 1 investigates which White Americans support the weaponization of diversity rhetoric compared to traditional opposition rhetoric. As egalitarian values increase among White parents, their endorsement and perceived effectiveness increased for an op-ed using the weaponization of diversity rhetoric but decreased for an op-ed using traditional opposition rhetoric. This preference toward using weaponization rhetoric to oppose affirmative action policies is worrying. Although both types of rhetoric would create educational inequities, White egalitarians more readily refrained from expressing support (i.e., endorsement, perceived effectiveness, and choice for support) toward traditional opposition rhetoric, as indicated through the negative slope of egalitarian values on endorsement and perceived effectiveness. For weaponization rhetoric, not only did White egalitarians report greater support for the op-ed that used this rhetoric, but levels of support increased with egalitarian values. Should educational stakeholders be persuaded by weaponization rhetoric, they may reduce resources for diversity initiatives which ultimately harm students of color and privilege White students.

With the increasing social unacceptability for White Americans to outwardly express a preference for their White in-group, typically seen with traditional opposition rhetoric, the weaponization rhetoric op-ed maintains the status quo while appearing egalitarian. By using stereotypes of White Americans and Asian Americans as superior in perceived status and competence (Fiske et al., 2002; Zou & Cheryan, 2017), White egalitarians blur differences in racialized educational experiences and co-opt the alleged disadvantages faced by another racial group (i.e., Asian Americans). On the other end, White egalitarians may weaponize stereotypes of Black students perceived as inferior to justify concerns of Black students' feelings of inadequacy in academic spaces (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Even when controlling for political conservatism, symbolic racism, and support for affirmative action, we found the effects of egalitarian values on op-ed endorsement and perceived effectiveness remain significant. However, this effect did not hold up for the likelihood of choosing to support the weaponization rhetoric op-ed. No single predictor emerged as significant in the model, which may suggest that White Americans draw from multiple attitudes and values (e.g., egalitarian values, political conservatism, and symbolic racism), instead of just one (i.e., egalitarian values), when choosing policies to support. In sum, even well-meaning White Americans (i.e., egalitarians) can perpetuate racial inequities but may do so in more subtle ways.

Study 2: Why Do White Egalitarians Weaponize Diversity Rhetoric

While the link between SDO and diversity initiatives have been primarily investigated in the context of affirmative action in schools, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may extend into other contexts. In the United States, workplaces are concerned with discrimination as evidenced by the existence of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (www.eeoc.gov/overview), which seeks to remedy racial discrimination in the workplace.

Accordingly, Study 2 investigates whether the preference for the weaponization of diversity rhetoric compared to traditional rhetoric extends to a workplace context. Furthermore, the experimental design of Study 1 made it so White Americans had to justify an existing inequitable outcome (i.e., a school without affirmative action policies). Study 2 contrasts this by presenting White Americans with an experimental design where they must justify an inequitable outcome that is yet to happen. This distinction allows us to explore if the weaponization of diversity rhetoric occurs before and/or after an inequitable decision, which better illustrates when this phenomenon may take place. Given the parallel findings between endorsement and perceived effectiveness in Study 1, Study 2 only uses endorsement as the primary continuous dependent variable of interest.

Having established that White egalitarians are those who report a preference for weaponization rhetoric, compared to traditional rhetoric, we sought to investigate what factors may mediate this relationship. Informed by previous racism research (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Rosenblum et al., 2022), we investigate stereotype threat as the primary mediator in the relationship between rhetoric type and rhetoric support. Compared to traditional rhetoric, weaponization rhetoric may reduce threats to White egalitarians' self-concept of being seen as racist, as they are expressing concerns and allyship to people of color. At the same time, this diversity rhetoric is weaponized to maintain a status quo that benefits White Americans. We also explore alternative mediators such as association with conservative values and political correctness. Prototypes of White racists have been informed by news coverage (e.g., January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol) as White Americans with politically conservative values and as White Americans who may not care about the politically correct things to do or say. White egalitarians may seek to distance themselves from these unfavorable self-concepts, which are more closely

associated with traditional rhetoric. By comparison, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may be perceived as less associated with conservative values and more politically correct, thus increasing support for this type of rhetoric.

In line with our preregistration, we hypothesized that White egalitarians would report greater endorsement (Hypothesis 1), greater probability of choosing to support (Hypothesis 2), and lower⁵ stereotype threat (Hypothesis 3) from the weaponization of diversity rhetoric than traditional opposition rhetoric. We also hypothesized that stereotype threat would mediate the relationship between rhetoric type and rhetoric support, such that compared to traditional rhetoric, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric elicits lower stereotype threat among White egalitarians, which in turn predicts greater rhetoric support (Hypothesis 4a). Furthermore, we hypothesized that stereotype threat would remain a significant mediator even when accounting for alternative mediators (i.e., association with conservative values, political correctness; Hypothesis 4b).

Method

Participants

Sample size, procedures, hypotheses, and analyses were preregistered (https://osf.io/p9g6t/?view_only=9fd093788a124672bbc15e5a9ae60edf) White egalitarian employees were recruited from an online U.S. Prolific sample. Participants were considered employees if they currently held a part- or full-time job. Participants were considered egalitarians if their mean score for egalitarian values was above the midpoint of the scale (5 or above). An a priori power analysis based on a pilot study suggested a sample of 11 participants to detect a

⁵ A copy and paste error was made in the preregistration that flipped the directionality of Hypothesis 3. Consistent with the phrasing in Hypothesis 4, it was hypothesized that weaponization rhetoric would elicit lower stereotype threat compared to traditional rhetoric.

large effect, with 80% power. However, Fritz & MacKinnon (2007) recommend a sample size of at least 115 for a bias-corrected 10,000 sample bootstrap mediation with 80% power.

Per our preregistration, we initially recruited 180 participants to account for potential exclusions. After removing exclusions, our sample size of White egalitarian employees was 108. To reach the minimum 115 participant sample size, we recruited an additional 20 participants assuming some participants would be filtered out due to the selection criteria. In sum, of the total 200 participants recruited, 16 participants were removed for not identifying as White and 55 were removed for not qualifying as egalitarian. Although not preregistered, an additional 8 participants were removed from the analysis sample for failing either one or both manipulation checks. In the end, our analysis sample consisted of 121 participants (65 women, 54 women, and 2 people with more than one gender) with an average age of 40.44 years ($SD = 12.45$ years).

Procedure

Similar to Study 1, participants were presented with two opinions (see Figure 4), both of which argued for the implementation of an inequitable workplace hiring policy – but one used traditional affirmative action rhetoric (i.e., concerns about White employees) whereas the other used weaponization of diversity rhetoric (i.e., concerns about employees of color). The use of social networks in hiring has historically benefited White applicants more than applicants of color (McDonald & Day, 2010; Trimble & Clearing-Sky, 2009), thus fueling racial inequities at the hiring stage in the labor market. Participants were told that this workplace change could create racial inequities (“Execudel, a technology company in Metro City, announced that it is changing the way it hires new employees. The company will now use professional social networks to find job candidates. Labor experts are worried that this will create inequities that unfairly advantage White applicants.”), receiving the same set of instructions before being

presented with each of the opinions. The names associated with each of the quotes were counterbalanced.

Figure 4

Opinion using the weaponization of the diversity rhetoric (left) and traditional rhetoric (right) to implement an inequitable hiring policy.

Weaponization Rhetoric	Traditional Rhetoric
<p>“This change might not benefit applicants of color right now, but this will motivate them to build their professional social networks. In the long run, Asian and Latino applicants will end up with larger social networks because of their cultural values emphasizing family and community. By making this change to their recruitment processes, Execudel can hire future employees of color due to their skills.” - Monica Bennett</p>	<p>“This change benefits White applicants and reverses workplace discrimination against White applicants. Our past White coworkers were held back because they were unable to showcase their skills through their professional networks. By making this change to their hiring process, Execudel can hire future White employees that worked hard to build their social networks.” - Jeannie Trost</p>

The traditional affirmative action rhetoric opinion highlighted how White employees have been disadvantaged by not being to use their professional networks. The weaponization of diversity rhetoric opinion argues that Asian and Latino employees would eventually benefit from a hiring policy using professional networks due to their communal cultural values.

After reading each opinion, participants completed a manipulation check where they were asked to report what the main point of the quote they just read. The answer choices were:

“Changing the hiring process will benefit White applicants” (the correct answer for the traditional rhetoric condition), and “Changing the hiring process will later benefit applicants of color” (the correct answer for the weaponization rhetoric condition). Participants then indicated how much they endorsed each opinion and were forced to pick one of the two opinions to

support. Finally, participants answered additional measures, including mediators and demographics.

Measures

Egalitarian Values

Participants' egalitarian values were assessed by the reverse-scored short Social Dominance Orientation scale ($\alpha = .93$; Ho et al., 2015), similar to Study 1. Participants indicated how much they endorsed ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .93$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .94$) the arguments made by each opinion, receiving modified items from Study 1 that replaced "op-ed" with "opinion". Again, items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater opinion endorsement. Lastly, participants were forced to choose one of the two opinions to would support.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat was assessed using four items (adapted from Goff et al., 2008). Items were assessed using a Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Sample items include, "If I were to support this opinion, I worry that people might stereotype me as racist," and "I would not worry about someone suspecting me as prejudiced if I support this opinion" (reverse-scored). Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater stereotype threat racism ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .88$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .90$).

Association with Conservative Values

Association with conservative values was assessed using three items. Items were assessed using a Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Items included, "This opinion was likely written by authors with conservative views," "The content of this opinion is associated with right-wing politics," and "Those who support this opinion likely have

Republican attitudes and beliefs”. Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater stereotype threat racism ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .97$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .97$).

Political Correctness

Political correctness was assessed using three items. Items were assessed using a Likert scale, from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Items included, “People who care about being progressive think this opinion represents the politically correct to do,” “People who care about being progressive would support this opinion because it is what they are told to do,” and “People who care about being progressive believe that supporting this opinion is the right thing to do”. Items were scored such that higher scores reflect greater stereotype threat racism ($\alpha_{\text{traditional}} = .94$; $\alpha_{\text{weaponization}} = .93$).

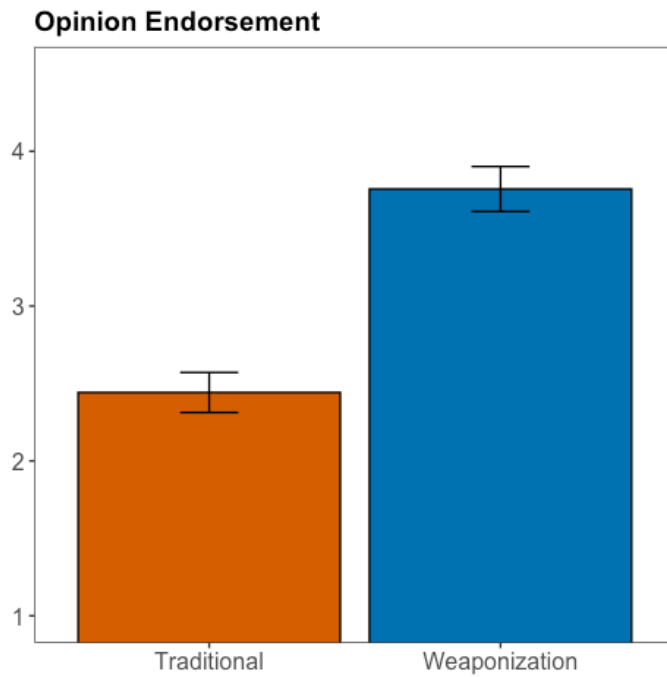
Results

Endorsement

Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis, White egalitarian employees reported greater endorsement for the opinion using the weaponization of diversity rhetoric ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.59$) than the opinion using traditional opposition rhetoric ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(120) = -6.75$, $p < .001$, $d_{\text{av}} = 0.87$ (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

White egalitarian employees' endorsement of opinions by rhetoric type.

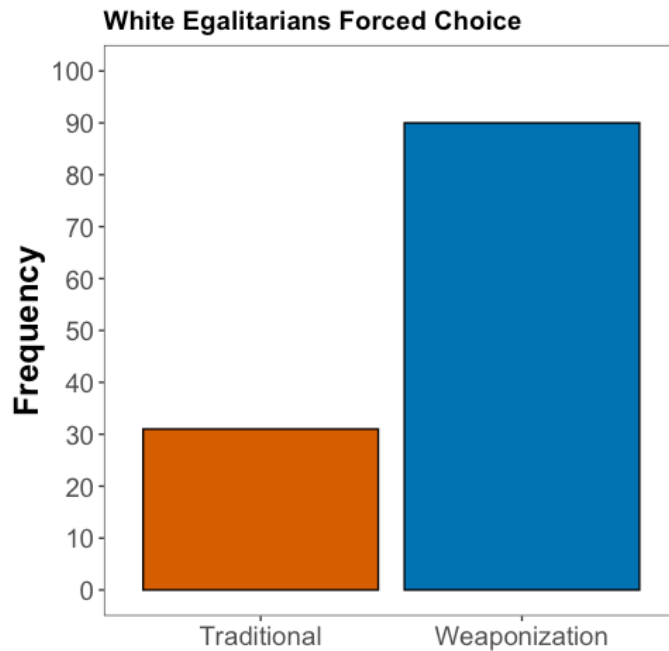


Choice for Support

Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis, a binomial distribution test showed that White egalitarian employees were more likely to choose to support the weaponization rhetoric opinion compared to traditional rhetoric opinion, $p < .001$, Cohen's $h = 1.49$ (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

White egalitarian employees' opinion forced choice by rhetoric type.

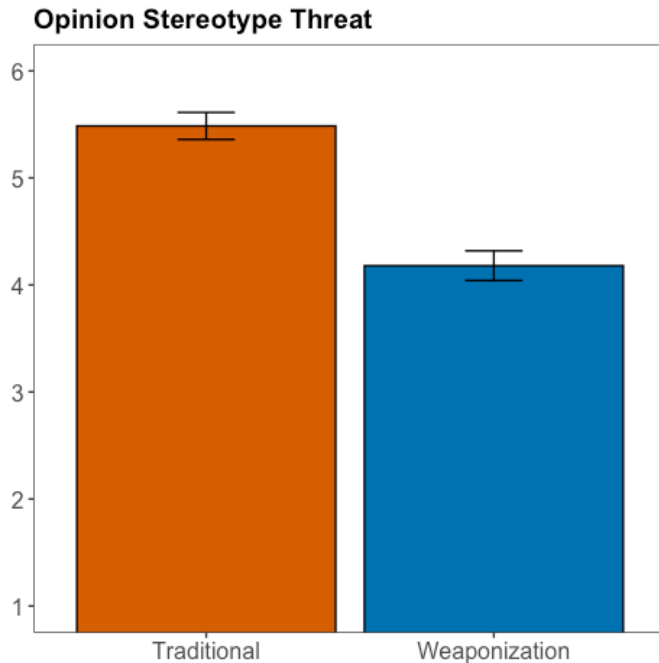


Stereotype Threat

Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis, White egalitarian employees reported lower stereotype threat from the opinion using the weaponization of diversity rhetoric ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.52$) than the opinion using traditional opposition rhetoric ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(120) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $d_{av} = 0.90$ (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

White egalitarian employees stereotype threat from opinions by rhetoric type.

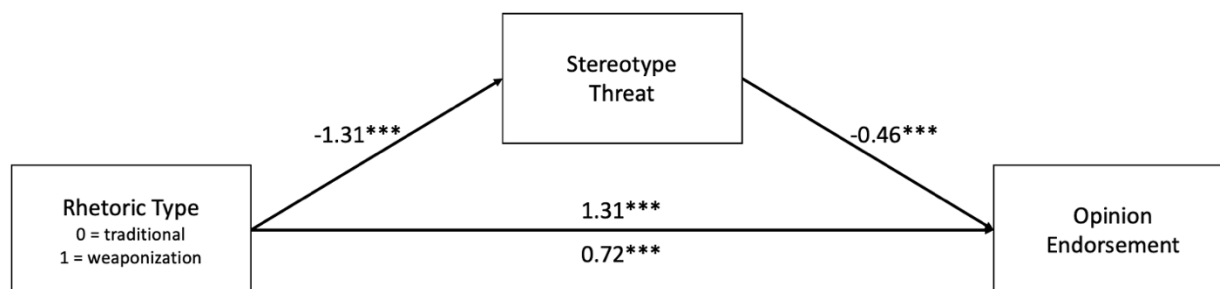


Within-Subjects Mediation

Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis (Hypothesis 4a), a within-subjects mediation analysis using bootstrapping was used to investigate whether stereotype threat mediates the relationship between rhetoric type and opinion endorsement. Participants perceived lower stereotype threat in the weaponization rhetoric opinion than the traditional opposition opinion, $b = -1.31$, $SE = .15$, $t(120) = -8.98$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.59, -1.02], and lower stereotype threat from the opinion was subsequently related to greater opinion endorsement, $b = -0.46$, $SE = .84$, $t(118) = -5.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.61, -0.30] (see Figure 8a). The indirect effect of rhetoric type on opinion endorsement through stereotype threat was significant, $b = 0.59$, bootstrap $SE = 0.16$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.35, 0.87]. Approximately 25% of the variance in opinion endorsement was accounted for by this model ($R^2 = .248$).

Figure 8a

White egalitarians report greater endorsement for weaponization rhetoric compared to traditional rhetoric via reduced stereotype threat.

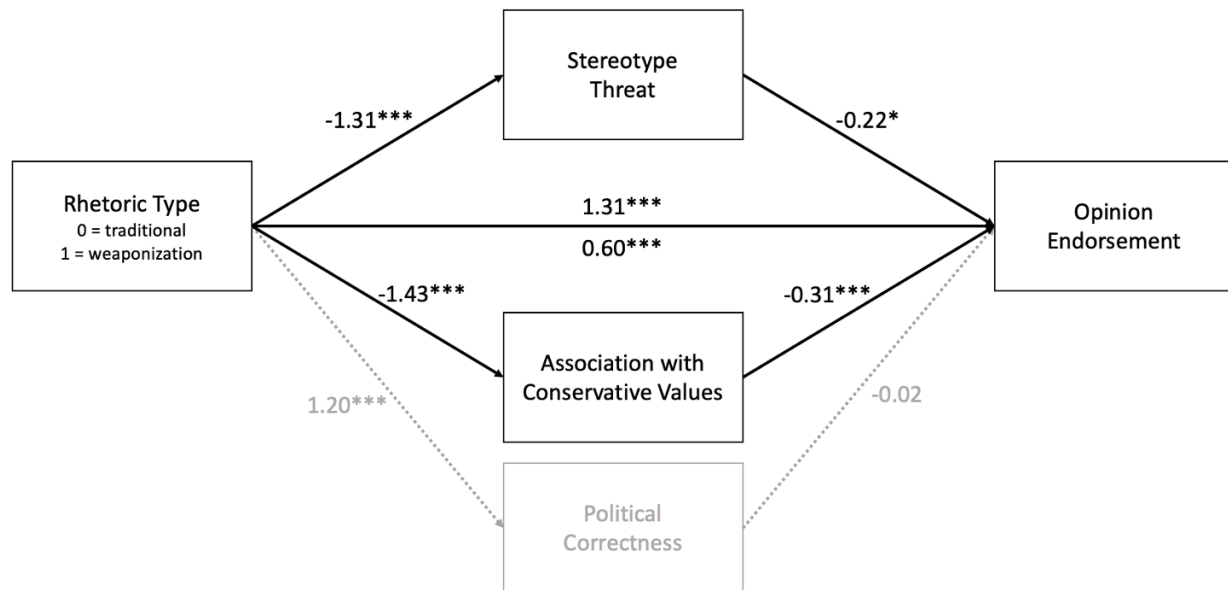


Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis (Hypothesis 4b), we examined additional potential mediators in the model, including the respective association with conservative values and political correctness for each of the opinions. The indirect effect of rhetoric type on opinion endorsement via stereotype threat remained significant over and above all other mediators in the model, $b = 0.29$, bootstrap $SE = 0.14$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.01, 0.57] (see Figure 8b).

Additionally, there was a significant indirect effect of rhetoric type on opinion endorsement via association with conservative values over and above all other mediators in the model was found, $b = 0.45$, bootstrap $SE = 0.13$, 95% bootstrap CI [0.21, 0.71]. The indirect effect of rhetoric type on opinion endorsement via political correctness over and above all mediators was not significant, $b = -0.02$, bootstrap $SE = 0.10$, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.19, 0.19]. A non-preregistered posthoc pairwise contrast between the indirect effects of stereotype threat and association with political conservatism revealed no significant differences, $b = 0.31$, bootstrap $SE = 0.19$, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.08, 0.68]. Approximately 37% of the variance in opinion endorsement was accounted for by this model ($R^2 = .375$).

Figure 8b

White egalitarians report greater endorsement for weaponization rhetoric compared to traditional rhetoric via reduced stereotype threat, even when accounting for other potential mediators.



Discussion

Study 2 investigates why White egalitarians prefer the weaponization of diversity rhetoric compared to traditional rhetoric and whether it extends to a work context. Consistent with findings from Study 1, White egalitarians reported greater endorsement and choice for support of the weaponization rhetoric opinion compared to the traditional rhetoric opinion. Compared to traditional rhetoric, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may provide a palatable avenue for White egalitarians to protect their self-interests. This time, the preference was found to extend to a workplace context, where White egalitarians maintained an outward appearance of being considerate of the experiences of people of color. Supplementing previous racism research, we find that White egalitarians are also concerned with maintaining non-prejudiced self-concepts when dealing with non-Black communities of color, in this case Latinx and Asian Americans.

Although Study 1 also included mentions of Asian Americans, those mentions were in combination with concerns about Black Americans. Thus Study 2 shows that even when not discussing non-Black people of color, White Americans still want to maintain a non-prejudiced self-concept. White egalitarians may understand the perceived racial hierarchy in the U.S. where White Americans are not only perceived as superior to Black Americans, but also Latinx and Asian Americans (Fiske et al., 2002; Zou & Cheryan, 2017).

Furthermore, Study 2 also sheds light on why White egalitarians express greater endorsement for weaponization rhetoric compared to traditional rhetoric. Weaponization rhetoric elicits lower levels of stereotype threat compared to traditional rhetoric, which maintains favorable self-concepts for White egalitarians in that they do not see themselves as confirming the White racist stereotype. Despite their egalitarian and non-prejudiced self-concepts, White egalitarians justified an inequitable hiring policy. In contrast to Study 1, participants in Study 2 were explicitly told in the study instructions that were concerns about the hiring change creating racial inequities that favored White applicants. Additionally, the inequity in Study 2 had not yet taken place, suggesting that weaponization rhetoric may also be used to justify theoretical delayed benefits for communities of color. White egalitarians preferred the opinion that stated Latinx and Asian employees would *eventually* benefit from this hiring policy due to their communal cultural values. By communicating the idea that White egalitarians have the best interests of people of color in mind, they can push forth policies perceived as beneficial to people of color; but these benefits do not come to fruition in practice (McDonald & Day, 2010; Trimble & Clearing-Sky, 2009).

Stereotype threat remained a significant mediator even when accounting for alternative explanations, lending support to the notion that White egalitarians weaponize diversity rhetoric

to maintain inequities while keeping their non-prejudiced self-concept. However, the association of rhetoric type with conservative values was also a significant parallel mediator. Preference toward weaponization rhetoric and away from traditional rhetoric may allow White egalitarians to distance their self-concepts from tactics associated with political conservatives (e.g., claims of reverse discrimination). In recent years, politically liberal groups have been shifting their implicit and explicit racial attitudes to be less pro-White faster than political conservatives (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2021), which is more in line with egalitarian values.

General Discussion

The weaponization of diversity rhetoric may be new and insidious route for White egalitarians to maintain racial inequities in schools and workplaces. We supplement previous work focused on how White Americans high in SDO contribute to and maintain racial inequities in organizational contexts (Chow et al., 2013; Knowles et al., 2009; Lowery et al., 2006, 2012) by highlighting how White egalitarians (i.e., low SDO) may also do the same (Ponce de Leon & Kay, 2021). While White egalitarians may present themselves as allies in the fight toward racial justice, the consequences of their proposed arguments must be analyzed with a critical lens to prevent furthering existing inequities.

Prior work on routes to achieving educational racial equity has found mixed evidence on whether White Americans focus on their in-group or on out-groups for who the policies should impact. In other words, should White students lose resources or should students of color gain resources? Lowery et al. (2012) found that White Americans will support affirmative action programs that hurt White students, but not programs that help racial minorities. Conversely, Feldman & Huddy (2005) found that White progressives will support a scholarship program aimed to help Black students, but not a program aimed to help White students. Instead of using

binary approaches of uplifting or hurting one group and leaving the other group untouched, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric showcases how White egalitarians may believe they are working towards equity by using concerns about people of color to further the benefits of White people. Embracing egalitarian ideals does not necessarily mean that White Americans will eliminate their racial biases (Mann & Kawakami, 2012), as American history and systems motivate them to preserve their privileges (Harris, 1993).

Implications of this work suggest that White egalitarians may weaponize different racial groups and related diversity language in various ways, depending on the context, but ultimately lead to fostering racial inequities. Mirroring the Supreme Court case that overturned affirmative action in college admissions, the weaponization rhetoric condition in Study 1 used the perceived high status and achievement of Asian Americans as evidence of the supposed negative impacts of affirmative action. The weaponization rhetoric condition in Study 2 used cultural stereotypes about Asian (and Latinx) Americans as communal to justify hiring through social networks. Taking Asian Americans as an example, various forms of diversity rhetoric specific to this racial group (i.e., high academic achievement of Asian Americans, communal cultural values) can be strategically used to push forth inequitable outcomes. As such, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric can strategically use other racial groups (e.g., Latinx Americans communal cultural values and perceived low status) to achieve similar outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of the present studies warrant future work to gain a deeper understanding of the extent and generalizability of the weaponization of diversity rhetoric. First, the malicious intent behind maintaining and furthering racial inequities must be examined. In both studies, participants were bound by framings focused on malicious use of diversity rhetoric. Investigating

when White egalitarians may support the weaponization of diversity rhetoric, even when other truly equitable solutions are presented, will better direct time and resources for stakeholders (e.g., school districts) who receive community input (e.g., parents) before implementing policies.

Second, future work must disentangle when the weaponization of diversity rhetoric is an outcome versus method to maintaining racial inequities. When the conflict between egalitarian values and racist behaviors from White Americans is made salient, will White egalitarians more readily engage in the weaponization of diversity rhetoric? If so, future research must also investigate whether White egalitarians intentionally weaponize diversity rhetoric for their self-interests or whether White egalitarians may simply not be critically analyzing arguments that contain diversity rhetoric, even when those arguments would lead to inequitable outcomes.

Third, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may also be strategically used by other privileged social groups (e.g., men) who benefit from other forms of inequity. The gender wage gap continues to be a pervasive form of gender inequity in the American workforce (Gould & deCourcy, 2023). Some men may traditionally argue that wages reflect quality of work, and as such, women simply need to produce higher quality work. However, similar to Black students' sense of belonging in academic spaces, egalitarian men may weaponize concerns about women's sense of belonging in particular work contexts to justify why they should not be placed in certain roles. The weaponization of diversity rhetoric may generalize to other groups with societal privilege and power, who may not want to be seen as prejudiced towards marginalized groups within the same axis of identity.

Conclusion

This paper highlights how White egalitarians may weaponize diversity rhetoric to maintain and further racial inequities. While political and research efforts have focused on how

to address the opposition of traditionally conservative White Americans, their counterparts are not free from culpability. As American society moves to be increasingly diverse and less accepting of bigoted attitudes and behaviors (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Devine et al., 2002), racial injustice and White supremacy may manifest itself in new ways (Carroll, 2011; Moon & Holling, 2020). Policymakers and other key stakeholders within organizational structures must remain critical of the use of diversity rhetoric, as not all use of it may bring about social justice. Additionally, the weaponization of diversity rhetoric may be particularly insidious when coming from well-meaning White Americans. Maintaining a critical lens will allow us to move forward without having to address the same inequities in a different package.

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