Title

Redefining Risk to Reclaim Wellbeing: Examining Individual, Relational, and Collective Consequences of Racial Inequities in Policing

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Redefining Risk to Reclaim Wellbeing:
Examining Individual, Relational, and Collective Consequences of Racial Inequities in Policing

By

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Abstract

Redefining Risk to Reclaim Wellbeing: Examining Individual, Relational, and Collective Consequences of Racial Inequities in Policing

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This dissertation examines the mechanisms through which systemic inequality is understood and its relationship with personal and collective wellbeing, focusing on racial inequality and policing practices. Spierenburg (1984:16) described the tension between punishment and the value of human life as inevitable "unless we find a way to do without repression entirely." I am motivated by sociological theories that establish the individual and the collective as mutually constitutive (Cooley 2017; Mead 1934; Simmel 2011). I bring symbolic interactionism to bear on contemporary definitions of self from social psychology and definitions of love from feminist theory. I argue that wellbeing emerges from mutually reinforcing interactions in which an individual's wellbeing simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society's wellbeing. In other words, the conditions that allow for the realization of basic needs at the individual level are intrinsically linked to the collective's ability to foster an environment conducive to meeting those needs. I refer to this reciprocal process as the mutuality of wellbeing. Social hierarchies, most centrally the concept of race, have historically been used to deny this mutuality, serving as a tool to perpetuate inequality using institutionalized punishment (Du Bois 2017; Muhammad 2010). The framework of the mutuality of wellbeing challenges the notion that punishment is necessary for society, revealing it to be a misconception held in place by racism, "the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard" (Fields and Fields 2012:17).

To that end, this dissertation explores how the everyday practices of policing impede individual and societal wellbeing. Guided by the theoretical framework of the mutuality of wellbeing, this dissertation investigates these issues through three distinct but interconnected studies. The first study examines how interracial couples navigate safety and vulnerability in their intimate relationships, offering insights that inform and inspire abolitionist feminist visions of public safety. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Black-White couples, I identify two distinct perspectives on safety: unidirectional and mutual vulnerability. Unidirectional safety aligns with dominant narratives of individual responsibility and risk management, revealing the limitations of a framework that fails to account for the complex power dynamics and structural inequities shaping interracial intimacy. In contrast, mutual vulnerability perspectives emphasize

the transformative potential of shared risk, radical openness, and collective healing, resonating with abolitionist principles of interdependence, care, and transformative justice. By illuminating how interracial couples negotiate trust, power, and vulnerability, this paper challenges conventional notions of safety rooted in control and domination. Instead, it offers a vision of public safety grounded in the abolitionist feminist ethics of love, accountability, and community building. Ultimately, this paper invites readers to reimagine safety as a collaborative, ongoing process of creating more just and caring relationships - both interpersonal and societal. It contributes to interdisciplinary conversations about the meaning and practice of safety, justice, and abolition while also revealing the intimate, everyday labor required to build a world beyond prisons and policing. In centering the voices and experiences of interracial couples, this paper expands our understanding of the critical role that love, in all its complexity and contradiction, plays in the struggle for collective liberation.

The second empirical chapter turns to the myriad explanations that exist for law enforcement's disproportionate targeting and use of violence against racial minorities, a phenomenon defined here as racialized policing. This article examines how cultural models guide interracial couples in interpreting and responding to experiences of racialized policing. It positions Wright's tripartite framework for understanding causal attributions for class inequality as cultural models that guide interpretations of racial inequality. In-depth interviews with 34 members of Black-White interracial couples revealed three distinct interpersonal response patterns aligning with Wright's categories of individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination. Participants reflecting the individual attributes model emphasized personal traits and experiences that distanced them from (dis)advantages of racialized policing and did not describe policing as impacting relationship dynamics. Individuals aligned with the opportunity hoarding model emphasized Black partners' exclusion from fair policing and protection. Their responses aimed to mitigate risks for Black partners, often placing constraints on or adding responsibilities to Black partners while leaving unquestioned White partners' freedom to opt in or out of those burdens. The third category of response patterns reflects an exploitation/domination cultural model grounded in understanding the relational interdependence of racial privileges and vulnerabilities. These responses concentrated on how White partners could modify their behaviors and leverage their racial positioning in an attempt to counteract the uneven distribution of security, liberty, and police threats that their Black partners disproportionately faced. Applying Wright's causal attributions as cultural models illuminated the implicit societal narratives shaping how interracial couples interpret and respond to racialized policing at the interpersonal level.

The final study focuses on social dominance orientation (SDO), defined as one's support for group-based hierarchy that shapes prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. This chapter assessed SDO's ties to workplace attitudes, psychological health, social functioning, and openness to equitable reforms among patrol officers (N = 67) using surveys measuring these constructs paired with archival records of officers' total career use of force incidents. Controlling for demographics and occupational factors, results revealed higher SDO related to more frequent historical force usage. SDO is also associated with lower job satisfaction, weakened organizational identity, poorer peer relationships, elevated distress, and diminished support for diversity training and community partnership policing. Collectively, findings demonstrate SDO's detrimental connections with career patterns of coercion as well as cascading influences on officer integration, functioning, and willingness to embrace equality reforms – highlighting implications for culture change. While focused on policing, results broadly evidence how

implicitly tolerated inequality ideologies manifest in occupational health decrements across sectors.

1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the mechanisms through which systemic inequality is understood and its relationship with personal and collective wellbeing, focusing on racial inequality and policing practices. Spierenburg (1984:16) described the tension between punishment and the value of human life as inevitable "unless we find a way to do without repression entirely." I am motivated by sociological theories that establish the individual and the collective as mutually constitutive (Cooley 2017; Mead 1934; Simmel 2011). I bring symbolic interactionism to bear on contemporary definitions of self from social psychology and definitions of love from feminist theory. I argue that wellbeing emerges from mutually reinforcing interactions in which an individual's wellbeing simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society's wellbeing. In other words, the conditions that allow for the realization of basic needs at the individual level are intrinsically linked to the collective's ability to foster an environment conducive to meeting those needs. I refer to this reciprocal process as the mutuality of wellbeing. Social hierarchies, most centrally the concept of race, have historically been used to deny this mutuality, serving as a tool to perpetuate inequality using institutionalized punishment (Du Bois 2017; Muhammad 2010). The framework of the mutuality of wellbeing challenges the notion that punishment is necessary for society, revealing it to be a misconception held in place by racism, "the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard" (Fields and Fields 2012: 17).

To that end, this dissertation explores how the everyday practices of policing impede individual and societal wellbeing. Guided by the theoretical framework of the mutuality of wellbeing, this dissertation investigates these issues through three distinct but interconnected lenses. First, it examines how interracial couples, who often navigate the complexities of racial inequality in their daily lives, define and experience safety and risk in their relationships. By understanding how these couples construct and negotiate their sense of wellbeing, we can gain insights into the broader societal dynamics that shape perceptions of security and vulnerability. Next, the dissertation examines how those same interracial couples interpret and respond to racialized policing, revealing how their shared meaning-making processes shape the construction of wellbeing within their relationships. Last, the dissertation investigates how hierarchy-endorsing beliefs within police institutions affect officer well-being, job satisfaction, and openness to equitable reforms, exploring the interrelated consequences for both officers and the communities they serve. Together, these three lines of inquiry provide a window into how the mutuality of wellbeing operates in the context of racial inequality and policing practices, demonstrating the interconnectedness of individual experiences, cultural narratives, and institutional structures in shaping the conditions for personal and collective thriving. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to feminist abolitionist research arguing that a functional society requires dismantling repressive systems and building affirmative alternatives (Davis 2011; Haley 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism, Self-Determination, And The Mutuality of Well-Being

Theories of the mutuality of self and society are largely captured by the umbrella of symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory that regards the self/other dyad as the most fundamental unit of society. Interactionists posit that society is an empirical concept that can be studied at the micro-level of individual interactions from which emerge macro-level structures.

Once established, social structures confront individuals, shaping interactions in ways that make and remake society (Mead 1934). Cooley (2017:151), a founder of the interactionist perspective, theorizes that the self is comparable to the nucleus of a cell, "not altogether separate from the surrounding matter, out of which indeed it is formed, but more active and definitely organized." The self is reflexive, it can be both subject and object, and self-consciousness emerges from the "taking or feeling of the attitude of the other toward yourself" (Mead 1934:171).

The idea that the self and other are mutually constitutive motivates Mead's (1934) critique of the caste system as an obstacle to the development of an ideal society. Mead (1934:317) argues that "if individuals are so distinguished from each other that they cannot identify themselves with each other, if there is not a common basis, then there cannot be a whole self present on either side." In this sense, symbolic interactionism presents self-actualization, the fulfillment of one's human potential, as both produced by and producing the self-actualization of the other. This theory suggests that self-actualization is not a fixed characteristic or achieved status, rather an ongoing and dynamic process produced through collective actions. Relatedly, Simmel (2011:121) argues that human freedom is a social process determined in relation to another; it is the "possibility of making oneself count within a given relationship."

Questions of human potential and freedom are at the core of sociological inquiries, though they often center individuals' capacity to develop freely in the labor force and equality within governance (Durkheim 1893; Tucker 1978). Symbolic interactionism encourages us to think about all freedoms stemming first from the self/other dyad and as the capacity for humanity itself. If every individual meets the differences of another individual with curiosity, acceptance, and mutual adjustment, then the social order that emerges should reflect that same egalitarian dynamic. Ruptures and imbalances in these interactions would produce social disorders that exploit, exclude, and repress. Through studying interactions, I aim to identify the interactions that facilitate well-being and those that prevent it.

I ground this examination in feminist ethics of care and definitions of love, such as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." This definition underscores the importance of mutual care and support in fostering individual and collective well-being. As hooks (2001:40) reminds us, "where the will to power is paramount, love will be lacking," suggesting that the desire to control and subordinate is antithetical to love. She critiques the ways in which dominant conceptions of love are often rooted in individualism and the maintenance of power imbalances, particularly along lines of race, gender, and class. Instead, hooks (2001) advocates for a "love ethic" that prioritizes mutual growth, responsibility, and the affirmation of one another's humanity. Anzaldúa's (1999) work reminds us that the path to mutual care and support requires a willingness to confront and transform the rigid boundaries and hierarchies that divide us. That path requires a recognition of race as a powerful fiction that impedes authentic connections and solidarity (Fields and Fields 2012).

DuBois' (1903) concept of "double consciousness" illuminates the complexities of recognition and love in a racially stratified world that dehumanizes certain people. Double consciousness describes the internal conflict experienced by African Americans in a society that denies their full humanity. This dual identity, characterized by the tension between one's sense of self and the way one is perceived by the dominant white society, complicates the realization of authentic love and recognition. Similarly, Fanon (1952) argues that the dehumanization of colonized peoples through racism and oppression creates a "zone of nonbeing" that disrupts the formation of a healthy sense of self and hinders the possibility of authentic love and recognition. In creating a false sense of superiority based on race, the racial caste system also impedes White

individuals' ability to fully realize their own humanity by denying them the opportunity to see themselves in the subjugated other, as Mead's theory of the self suggests.

I bridge sociological and feminist theory with social psychology's theory of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the sociological framework of symbolic interactionism (Deci and Ryan 2008). SDT posits that well-being flourishes in environments that satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy reflects the need to feel volitional and the origin of one's actions; competence involves feeling effective and capable in one's activities; and relatedness refers to feeling connected and significant to others. These needs are considered universal and essential for psychological growth and integrity, as well as for fostering well-being.

When love as mutual growth and the principles of SDT are considered alongside the tenets of symbolic interactionism and, which emphasizes the micro-level interactions from which society's macro-structures emerge, a profound connection becomes apparent. Symbolic interactionism asserts that the self is formed and continually reshaped through social interactions, with the self/other dyad being fundamental. The individual's capacity for self-actualization, as proposed by Mead, is not only a personal endeavor but also a relational process that is inherently tied to the actualization of others. Mead's view aligns with the SDT perspective that relatedness, or meaningful connections with others, is vital for well-being.

Symbolic interactionism suggests that self-actualization and human freedom are socially co-constructed through mutual recognition and adjustment within the self/other dynamic. This resonates with SDT's emphasis on autonomy as a psychological need—freedom is not only a matter of individual autonomy but also a product of mutual respect and understanding in social relations. The convergence of these theories highlights that well-being is not a solitary pursuit but a mutual one, rooted in the fabric of social interactions and the collective negotiation of meanings and identities.

Therefore, a comprehensive theory of 'the mutuality of well-being' would posit that the fulfillment of one's potential is inextricably linked to the collective potential of society. As individuals navigate their roles within various structures, they both influence and are influenced by the macro-level societal frameworks. Thus, well-being is a dynamic, interactive process that evolves from the interplay between individual psychological needs and the collective social processes that shape human interactions and, ultimately, the social order. To promote well-being effectively, societal structures must be attentive to fostering environments that support the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of all individuals while recognizing the fluid and reciprocal nature of the self and society. Unsurprisingly, this conclusion aligns with abolitionist and transformative justice approaches that prioritize healing, accountability, and addressing the root causes of harm (Kaba 2021; Mingus 2019).

Building upon the comprehensive theory of 'the mutuality of well-being,' which emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual and collective potential, this dissertation explores policing shapes the dynamics of well-being in the context of racial inequality. The institution of policing perpetuates the racial caste system in the U.S. and has created significant barriers to the realization of mutual well-being by perpetuating dehumanization, oppression, and the denial of authentic recognition. This system has not only harmed people of color but has also impeded white individuals' ability to fully realize their own humanity by preventing them from recognizing their shared struggles and seeing themselves in the subjugated other.. By examining the complex interplay between individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, and institutional practices, the following chapters shed light on the mechanisms through which

systemic inequality is perpetuated and challenged. To begin, Chapter 1 centers the lived experiences of interracial couples, exploring how their conceptualizations of safety and risk reflect broader societal notions shaped by the racial caste system and challenge conventional understandings.

Plan of the Dissertation

Interrogating Safety and Risk Through Interracial Relationships

This first chapter examines definitions of safety in interracial relationships to inform abolitionist feminist frameworks of public safety. Drawing on 34 in-depth interviews with members of Black-White interracial couples, the study identifies two perspectives on safety: unidirectional (one person providing safety to another) and mutual vulnerability (shared risk and collective healing). Unidirectional perspectives align with dominant notions of individual responsibility and risk mitigation, reflecting a societal failure to prioritize communal care and mutual aid. This framing reflects constraints on visions of holistic forms of security. In contrast, mutual vulnerability perspectives emphasize radical vulnerability, trust, and accountability, aligning with abolitionist principles of collective healing and harm transformation. These perspectives challenge conventional notions of safety as an individual trait, framing it as a relational process requiring an ongoing commitment to shared risk and openness. By shifting from a unidirectional, individualistic model to one rooted in communal care and reciprocity, these narratives highlight the need to divest from structures of domination and control while actively building institutions and practices that foster collective healing, resilience, and growth.

While Chapter 1 examines the interpersonal dynamics within interracial relationships and their implications for redefining safety, Chapter 2 shifts the focus to a systemic issue that profoundly impacts these relationships: racialized policing. By analyzing the cultural models that shape couples' interpretations and responses to experiences of discriminatory law enforcement practices, this chapter illuminates the intricate interplay between individual perspectives and broader societal narratives surrounding racial inequality.

Causal Attributions of Racialized Policing Shape Interactions in Black-White Couples

The second chapter addresses the myriad explanations for law enforcement's disproportionate targeting and use of violence against racial minorities, a phenomenon defined here as racialized policing. This article examines how cultural models guide interracial couples in interpreting and responding to experiences of racialized policing. It positions Wright's tripartite framework for understanding causal attributions for class inequality as cultural models that guide interpretations of racial inequality. In-depth interviews with 34 members of Black-White interracial couples revealed three distinct interpersonal response patterns aligning with Wright's categories of individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination. Participants reflecting the individual attributes model emphasized personal traits and experiences that distanced them from (dis)advantages of racialized policing and did not describe policing as impacting relationship dynamics. Individuals aligned with the opportunity hoarding model emphasized Black partners' exclusion from fair policing and protection. Their responses aimed to mitigate risks for Black partners, often placing constraints on or adding responsibilities to Black partners while leaving unquestioned White partners' freedom to opt in or out of those

burdens. The third category of response patterns reflects an exploitation/domination cultural model grounded in understanding the relational interdependence of racial privileges and vulnerabilities. These responses concentrated on how White partners could modify their behaviors and leverage their racial positioning in an attempt to counteract the uneven distribution of security, liberty, and police threats that their Black partners disproportionately faced. Applying Wright's causal attributions as cultural models illuminated the implicit societal narratives shaping how interracial couples interpret and respond to racialized policing at the interpersonal level.

The first two chapters explored the personal and relational consequences of systemic racial inequities, as manifested through interracial couples' experiences and perceptions. Chapter 3 tackles these issues from an institutional perspective, investigating how ideologies of social dominance permeate the culture and practices within law enforcement agencies. The last chapter quantitatively assesses the impact of such ideologies on officer well-being, job satisfaction, and openness to equitable reforms, underscoring the far-reaching implications of inequality beyond individual encounters.

Social Dominance Orientation and Occupational Wellbeing Among Police: Implications for Equitable Policing and Officer Health

Social dominance orientation (SDO), defined as one's support for group-based hierarchy, shapes prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. However, few studies examine SDO's effects on police officer wellbeing. This chapter assessed SDO's ties to workplace attitudes, psychological health, social functioning, and openness to equitable reforms among patrol officers (N = 67) using surveys measuring these constructs paired with archival records of officers' total career use of force incidents. Controlling for demographics and occupational factors, results revealed higher SDO related to more frequent historical force usage. SDO also associated with lower job satisfaction, weakened organizational identity, poorer peer relationships, elevated distress, and diminished support for diversity training and community partnership policing. Collectively, findings demonstrate SDO's detrimental connections with career patterns of coercion as well as cascading influences on officer integration, functioning and willingness to embrace equality reforms – highlighting implications for culture change. While focused on policing, results broadly evidence how implicitly tolerated inequality ideologies manifest in occupational health decrements across sectors.

In summary, this dissertation is grounded in a robust theoretical framework that synthesizes symbolic interactionism, feminist ethics of care, and self-determination theory. This integrated perspective posits the mutuality of well-being, wherein individual fulfillment and collective societal structures are inextricably intertwined through the dynamic interplay of social interactions. By examining the lived experiences of interracial couples, the cultural narratives surrounding racialized policing, and the occupational impacts of social dominance ideologies within law enforcement, this dissertation aims to elucidate the complex mechanisms through which systemic inequality manifests and perpetuates barriers to well-being. Ultimately, this research endeavors to contribute to ongoing abolitionist and transformative justice efforts by illuminating paths toward dismantling oppressive systems and cultivating life-affirming alternatives rooted in principles of mutual care, accountability, and collective healing.

2. INTERROGATING SAFETY AND RISK THROUGH INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Abolitionist feminism critiques prevailing definitions of safety grounded in the carceral state, which rely on punishment and control and contribute to the perpetuation of racial and gender inequalities (Kaba 2021). As an alternative, abolitionist feminist praxis advocates for transformative justice approaches that prioritize healing, accountability, and addressing the root causes of harm (Kaba 2021; Mingus 2019). Central to this vision is rethinking the meanings and implications of safety, risk, and vulnerability in a society shaped by interlocking systems of oppression. Epitomizing this vision, Cornel West asserts that "Justice is what love looks like in public." In this paper, *love* is defined as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (hooks 2001:4). Given the lack of love in the current system called justice, this project turns to romantic couples to glean insights for envisioning just alternatives to institutionalized punishment. This paper examines definitions of safety in interracial relationships to inform and inspire abolitionist feminist frameworks of public safety.

The emphasis on interracial relationships in this study, specifically Black-White partnerships, is motivated by the historical and ongoing significance of the Black-White dichotomy in shaping the American criminal legal system and broader social relations. Historically, the United States has been defined by a stark racial divide between Black and White populations, with the criminal legal system playing a central role in enforcing and perpetuating this divide (Wacquant 2001). From slavery to Jim Crow segregation to the current era of mass incarceration, the subjugation and governance of Black individuals have been foundational to the operation of the carceral state (Alexander 2010; Muhammed 2010). The historical and persistent criminalization and control of Black bodies by the carceral state has created a deep-seated mistrust and power imbalance between Black communities and law enforcement, as well as a broader association of Blackness with criminality and danger in the White public imagination (Cacho 2012).

Given this context, Black-White interracial relationships represent a site of intimate grappling with the racial dynamics that underpin the criminal justice system. These relationships involve a negotiation of trust, power, and vulnerability across racial lines that define the relationship between police and marginalized communities. The nature of these negotiations differs significantly between intimate relationships and police-community interactions; this paper does not equate them. Law enforcement interactions are characterized by a power imbalance and a need for control (Alpert and Dunham 2004), which can hinder the development of trust and mutual care. As hooks (2001:40) reminds us, "where the will to power is paramount, love will be lacking," suggesting that the desire to control and subordinate is antithetical to love. In contrast, intimate relationships provide a space where partners can work towards building trust, mutual care, and accountability, even in the face of deep-seated racial divides.

By examining how Black and White partners navigate these dynamics in their intimate lives, this article invites us to consider how principles commonly navigated in intimate interracial partnerships reveal the contours and possibilities of a reimagined framework for community wellbeing. These insights can inform alternative approaches to public safety that move beyond the control and subordination that characterize many police-community interactions. Studying interracial relationships offers a unique opportunity to envision and explore the transformative power of love, trust, and mutual care in the context of racial difference. To the extent possible, I elucidate how these lessons can carry over into the context of public safety to reform and

transform responses to harm. By drawing on the experiences and perspectives of interracial couples, this article aims to contribute to imagining a more just and caring approach to public safety grounded in the principles of love and mutual understanding.

Drawing on 34 in-depth interviews with members of Black-White interracial couples, this study identifies two key distinctions in perspectives on safety and risk in relationships: those who emphasize safety as unidirectional (one person providing it to another) and those who viewed safety as entailing mutual vulnerability. Unidirectional perspectives emphasize personal agency and the role of a partner in providing a sense of safety and comfort against external uncertainties. This perspective aligns with dominant notions of safety, focusing on individual responsibility and risk mitigation. However, in an interracial relationship, the external harms and threats related to systemic racism can manifest in ways that disrupt the very notion of safety within the partnership. For instance, a White partner seeking safety from external threats may inadvertently cause harm to their Black partner by failing to recognize or address how their own actions or perspectives are shaped by racial privilege. Unidirectional perspectives on safety, which focus on one partner providing safety to the other, cannot adequately address these internal conflicts and power differentials. They may not account for situations where the pursuit of safety by one partner actually undermines the safety and wellbeing of the other, particularly when racial inequities shape those dynamics.

Perspectives centering on mutual vulnerability emphasize shared risk. These narratives highlight safety as the continual practice of radical vulnerability, trust, and accountability with others. Mutual vulnerability aligns with abolitionist principles by understanding safety as collective healing and harm transformation through relationships (Mingus 2019). These also reflect ‘care ethics,' which "envisions the moral agents as related, mutually dependent and unequal in power—as opposed to the conventional portrayal of the agent as independent, equal and self-sufficient " (Zaidi et al. 2021, 239).

Transformative justice recognizes that everyone has the capacity to cause harm and to be harmed and that supporting each other through these experiences is essential for building solid and equitable relationships and communities. When both partners are committed to love as a practice of nurturing each other's growth (hooks 2001), the suffering that arises can become an opportunity for deeper understanding, healing, and transformation. By being accountable to each other's experiences and working through the pain together, partners can cultivate a more resilient and authentic connection. This framing resonates with abolitionist feminist principles, which acknowledge the inevitability of conflict and harm in relationships and communities but emphasize the potential for accountability, healing, and growth when addressed through a lens of love and care (Kaba 2021). As the couples in this study reflect on their intimacy building, they reveal the limitations of hegemonic conceptions of safety for navigating the realities of racially mixed unions. They point to alternative understandings of risk as necessary for all human connection and the development of competence in interracial interactions, specifically. By spotlighting alternate relational ethics grounded in mutual care, responsibility, and transformation, they gesture toward the reconstruction of safety as collectively achieved through ongoing processes of trust and accountability. Ultimately, by moving beyond unidirectional perspectives on safety and embracing a more relational and contextual approach, we can cultivate the kinds of relationships and communities that can truly support the wellbeing and liberation of all people, particularly those most impacted by systemic inequities.

Abolition Feminism

Abolition feminism offers a critical lens to examine systems of oppression, such as the prison industrial complex, and their intersections with gender, racial, and sexual violence (Davis 2003). This framework posits that prisons serve the interests of racial capitalist patriarchy by enhancing control over marginalized populations rather than promoting genuine community safety and security. By connecting various forms of state and interpersonal violence, abolition feminism underscores the central roles of gender and race in these oppressive dynamics.

A key focus is analyzing the racialized and gendered constructions of vulnerability and perceived danger. Hartman (1997) demonstrates how White womanhood has been culturally positioned as inherently victimized, while Black bodies are portrayed as threats requiring control. Lamble (2021) extends this analysis to the legal system, which routinely categorizes queer and trans individuals as deviant and "unsafe," further marginalizing these groups through criminalization.

Building on these critiques, Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer (2011) deconstruct the rhetoric of "safety" itself as a form of social control. They argue that this discourse rewards compliant behavior while suppressing those deemed threats, reinforcing a dichotomy of "us" versus a dehumanized "them." Far from an objective condition, notions of public safety serve to normalize surveillance and regulation of marginalized populations.

In contrast to exclusionary security models, abolitionist feminist scholars propose frameworks centered on mutual vulnerability, interdependence, and collective access to resources. Gilmore (2007) reframes genuine safety as the provision of life-sustaining resources and support rather than fortressing through punitive measures. Kim (2018) critiques how mainstream anti-violence initiatives often uphold punitive, masculinist responses that fail to address intersectional survivors' needs.

Transformative justice has emerged as an abolitionist approach rooted in these ethics of collective care and accountability without relying on state violence. Mingus (2019) and hooks (2001) highlight practices of harm accountability through open communication, responsibility-taking, and sustaining supportive community bonds. DeValve's (2015) theories extend this notion, advocating justice rooted in an ethic of "beloved community" and transformative love that nurtures human connections while addressing root causes of harm.

In essence, abolition feminism calls for a paradigm shift in how society conceptualizes and enacts safety and justice. Rather than exclusionary control over marginalized groups, it centers on reparative, community-based models prioritizing interdependence, healing, and holistic security for all individuals, especially the most vulnerable. This literature collectively elucidates the need for such transformative approaches to dismantle systemic oppressions and their intersections.

Intimate Interracial Relationships

Interracial relationships in the United States, particularly between Black and White individuals, have a long and complex history shaped by legal regulation and societal stigma. Anti-miscegenation laws banning interracial marriage were pervasive, with the first appearing in the Virginia colony in the 1600s and spreading across many states until being ruled unconstitutional in the landmark 1967 *Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court* case (Newbeck 2004; Wallenstein 2002). This pivotal legal battle altered public perceptions and frameworks concerning interracial unions. The Black-White racial divide has been central to American social

dynamics, impacting personal relationships as well as broader social, economic, and political spheres. Such relationships have often served as litmus tests for racial tolerance and integration, simultaneously challenging racial boundaries while provoking societal backlash from various segments (Childs 2005; Foster 2009). As America transitioned from explicit racial segregation to more covert racial divisions, interracial relationships became focal points for discussions around race, identity, and social change (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Societal perceptions of race and stereotypes deeply impact the dynamics of safety and risk within interracial couples. Power dynamics rooted in broader societal racial inequalities can manifest, with racial trauma influencing how partners perceive and interact with each other (Brooks and Morrison 2022). Through their intimate cross-racial connections, interracial partnerships have the potential to foster a personal understanding that challenges existing racial narratives and contributes to broader social integration (Root 2001; Steinbugler 2012).

While previous research has explored interracial couples' dynamics related to trust, safety, and accountability, this study is a novel attempt to analyze these issues through an abolitionist feminist lens. Given the historical significance of the Black-White racial divide in shaping the U.S. criminal justice system, this paper aims to contribute insights into how transformative justice principles play out in interracial intimacy, informing visions for achieving genuine personal and community safety without relying on carceral systems and punitive control. By centering the experiences of Black-White interracial couples, it can expand abolitionist frameworks rooted in vulnerability and interdependence.

Data and Methods

This study is based on in-depth interviews with members of 16 Black/White couples and two additional individuals whose partners were not interviewed for thirty-four interviews. Study participants were treated as individual partners to permit unique perspectives rather than assume identical perspectives of the same interactions. I recruited participants by first employing convenience sampling and contacting my extended networks via emails and texts. Next, I used snowball techniques to grow the sample by asking participants for referrals. Given my longstanding embeddedness in LGBTQ activist organizations and communities, this recruitment approach ensured the inclusivity of lesbian, gay, and queer couples contributing to a more intersectional understanding of the dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality in conceptions of safety and risk. Study participants all lived in the U.S. Half of the study sample identifies as Black or Black/Mixed Race, and their corresponding intimate partners report White, non-Hispanic racial identities. The median age of respondents is 34; 32 percent identify as queer, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 25 percent attained less than a Bachelor's degree. All names used are pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted over a HIPAA-protected Zoom account between August 2022 and May 2023.

Once a couple agreed to participate, I scheduled Zoom interviews with each partner independently. I asked each respondent to only discuss the interview and their responses with their partner once both interviews were complete. Interviews last between 1-3 hours and all subjects are compensated $50 for their time. Interview questions capture the details of specific interactions that have occurred, rather than ‘typical’ dynamics, in an effort to minimize reporting of imagined or aspirational practices (Small 2017). The interview was divided into four sections that (1) explores personal upbringing and relationship background, (2) participants experiences with general conflict in their relationship, (3) participants experiences of racial differences or

racism in their relationship, and (4) how couples have engaged, or not, in issues of racism and police violence specifically. I draw only from the first section in this analysis, specifically respondents answer to the question: what is your definition of romantic love?

These data, which consist of 39 hours of interview transcripts and ethnographic notes written after each interview, were collected as part of a larger study on interracial relationships and policing. I recorded each Zoom interview and transcribed the recordings using the automated transcription software Otter.ai. I analyzed the de-identified transcripts in DeDoose in three stages. First, I used focused coding on any mention of safety or vulnerability. Following the tenets of abductive theory (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I conducted open coding to identify any emergent patterns within and between responses. The thematic analysis identified two key safety themes from these excerpts: unidirectional and mutual vulnerability.

Prevailing and Alternative Frameworks of Risk and Safety

Drawing on the principles of abolitionist feminism and the insights from interracial couples, two key themes emerged from the interview findings: unidirectional conceptions of safety and emphases on mutual vulnerability. Unidirectional safety aligns with dominant narratives that emphasize individual responsibility and risk management. Respondents who framed safety in this way stressed the importance of minimizing risk by providing protection and security for themselves or their partners. This perspective constructs the pursuit of comfort and wellbeing, often in response to the absence of structural protections. However, this framing of safety has limitations in the context of interracial relationships, as it does not fully capture the complex dynamics of race and power that can impact the provision of safety within the partnership itself.

In contrast, the theme of mutual vulnerability offers an understanding of safety that parallels abolitionist feminist principles of care, interdependence, and solidarity. Respondents who emphasized mutual vulnerability defined safety as requiring a willingness to share risks and be vulnerable with each other, even in the face of uncertainty and pain. This perspective suggests that safety is not an individual achievement but is inextricably linked to collective wellbeing. By framing safety as a continual and reciprocal process that requires ongoing communication, empathy, and accountability, the mutual vulnerability theme highlights the importance of building relationships and communities grounded in trust, care, and a shared commitment to healing and transformation. Ultimately, by bringing these two themes into dialogue with abolitionist feminist principles, this study offers insights into how we might reimagine safety and justice in ways that center the experiences and needs of those most impacted by systemic inequities.

Unidirectional Conceptions of Safety

Respondents with a unidirectional concept of safety in love largely align with dominant approaches to managing risk in broader society. These narratives emphasize the role of a partner in providing a sense of security and comfort against external uncertainties. This perspective on safety focuses on the individual responsibility of one partner to mitigate risks and provide protection to the other, where safety is sought through the actions of a single partner in a world perceived as inherently risky.

For example, Mary, a 67-year-old White woman, describes safety as a source of comfort and protection provided to her by her husband, Omar, a 73-year-old Black man. She says,

> Whatever goes wrong in my day, I know that I can rush home to him, and he's going to be the source of comfort and help me through it. That feels safe. He will protect me from any bad feelings if I if somebody hurt my feelings. He's going to be on my side.

Her description of rushing home to him as a refuge from the day's troubles encapsulates the idea of love as a safe harbor from external adversities, with Omar serving as the primary provider of safety and comfort. Nancy, a 38-year-old White woman, echoes a similar sentiment of unidirectional safety. She describes her husband, Chris, a 42-year-old Black man, as a "safety net," a metaphor suggesting a form of insurance against life's challenges:

> Knowing that I have my partner with me throughout life just makes me feel a lot more comfortable going through things like I'm never gonna go through something alone. I know that he'll always be by my side and that makes me a little more confident in what I'm doing. Because it's like, okay, if I do fail, he's that net to catch me and bring me back up.

Nancy's sees Chris as providing safety and support to help her navigate life's challenges. This framing of safety emphasizes the role of one partner in addressing the vulnerabilities and needs of the other rather than a more reciprocal or interdependent understanding of safety. Mary and Nancy reflect traditional gender expectations of the man serving as the protector. This gendered dynamic, when intersecting with racial differences in an interracial relationship, may overlook how the person tasked with providing safety, Black men, may experience vulnerabilities and needs that are shaped by systemic racism. Moreover, Nancy's description of safety as an individual action taken against an otherwise hazardous world, with her partner serving as a "safety net," Nancy’s depiction of Chris as a source of safety and support underscores a tacit notion of personal responsibility for safety in a society where communal safety nets are insufficient or altogether absent. This individualization of safety mirrors a larger cultural shift where the onus of mitigating risks has retreated from the collective sphere to the private realm, placing the burden on individuals. Within the context of their interracial relationship, this framing not only perpetuates traditional gender roles with the man as the protector but also ignores the systemic inadequacies that render such personal safety nets necessary.

Jada, a 33-year-old gender non-conforming Black woman, and Destiny, a 27-year-old Black woman, expand on this theme of unidirectional safety in their respective relationships with White women. They associate love with alleviating stress. Jada defines love in terms of someone's capacity to make her feel "nice and safe," again suggesting a desire for interpersonal relationships to compensate for a lack of safety in the wider world. Similarly, Destiny describes love as a relaxing presence that minimizes stress.

For Mary, Nancy, Jada, and Destiny, mitigating risk and discomfort are central to their visions of love. To be a woman in a patriarchal society is to face the ever-present threat of violation and to have one's safety and autonomy contingent on navigating male power and aggression. This is particularly resonant given the intersections of race, gender, and in Jada's case, gender non-conformity, which compound the types of risk they are exposed to. They

articulate a vision of love that is constrained by positionalities that render everyday life threatening.

Malik, a 29-year-old Black man and former police officer, expresses a view of safety that is informed by his particular social location and life experiences at the intersection of race and gender. As a Black man, Malik has likely faced unique challenges and expectations shaped by the ways racism has historically constrained Black masculinity, contributing pressure to project strength and fulfill a protective role. His experience as a police officer may have further reinforced a sense of responsibility for ensuring the safety of others, particularly women. When reflecting on his recently ended relationship with a White woman, Malik notes that he felt it was his duty to provide safety as the man in the relationship. He states, "I feel like it's my position to provide the safety for them. It's more important for me to hear that they feel safe around me and that they are more willing to be vulnerable around me." Malik's reflection speaks to gendered expectations and is constructed against a historical context in which Black men as threatening and Black families as matriarchal.

Across respondents with unidirectional views of safety, there was a theme of security as an individual trait that shapes actions. For Kendrick, a 26-year-old Black man, safety is understood as the competence to navigate inevitable relationship hazards. He states, "I believe if you're not secure as an individual, then you really shouldn't be entering into a relationship with someone else." When asked to explain what he meant by security, he expounded, "Just self-security, being confident in yourself. Knowing that what you're expecting from a partner, you can also give and being ready to take whatever the relationship dishes out, because at the end of the day, we're humans, people have bad days. And they may displace that onto you." Kendrick describes security as an internal state rather than an interpersonal process. His perspective emphasizes the importance of self-confidence and the ability to handle interpersonal challenges. By placing the onus of security solely on the individual, this perspective may overlook the role of mutual support, understanding, and accountability in fostering a sense of safety and wellbeing within the relationship.

Jennifer, a 41-year-old White woman, describes herself as providing her own safety in her relationship with Jabari. "I'm just a very strong person. I'm used to taking care of myself so I feel like I'm safe no matter what." Jennifer's sense of safety is rooted in the self-reliance she says she developed as a young single mother solely responsible for providing and caring for her children. Similar to the other women with unidirectional, Her perspective is both a product of and response to a society that places poor single mothers in precarious social positions.

Lawrence, a 34-year-old African-American man, also conceives of safety as an individual trait, defining it in terms of financial security. He rejects the role of safety in love based on his definition of it:

> Safety lends itself to more of what can I get from this person versus I want to exist with somebody… I don't necessarily want anything in particular from them… \[safety\] implies that if you took away that thing, then you wouldn't love that person. Right? Like, right now we're doing pretty well. But yeah, if something was to happen, and she lost her job, and I don't think that would change anything like that in our dynamic."

Lawrence's view explicitly rejects the notion of safety as a transactional element in love, which would imply assessing a partner's value based on what security they can provide. Instead, he emphasizes his desire to connect and exist with someone regardless of their ability to

contribute to his sense of safety or wellbeing. His perspective underscores the idea that the resilience of a relationship lies not in the avoidance of risk but in the shared commitment to face life's challenges together. Lawrence's perspective, however, begins to preview the next theme in respondents' narratives: mutual vulnerability. By emphasizing the importance of shared experiences and a commitment to facing challenges together, Lawrence's view shifts towards a more reciprocal understanding of safety and wellbeing within intimate relationships.

Mutual Vulnerability

Many participants emphasized the courage to be vulnerable with each other in their definition of love. Rather than a protective shield or individual trait, they view safety as produced by an ongoing process of collective openness to and sharing of risks. For example, Naomi, a 33-year-old Black woman, states,

> I think vulnerability is very important. ...I wouldn't put as much weight on safety as I would vulnerability. Because when you're dealing with someone of a different race...I don't know if he's ever going to make me feel 100% safe. Which means the vulnerability has to play a part, and me understanding that unless he was a Black woman, he would not know really how to make me feel 100% safe

Naomi suggests vulnerability is not just a component of their relationships but a critical element, especially when it intersects with issues of race and identity. Naomi recognizes that her partner, coming from a different racial background, may never fully understand or provide the kind of safety that comes from shared experiences, particularly those unique to being a Black woman. This acknowledgment does not diminish the value of their relationship; rather, it highlights the importance of vulnerability as a substitute for absolute safety.

Naomi underscores the importance of vulnerability in navigating the complex dynamics of interracial relationships. She acknowledges that her partner, coming from a different racial background, may never fully understand or provide the kind of safety that comes from shared experiences as a Black woman. However, rather than viewing this lack of complete empathy as a weakness in their relationship, Naomi recognizes it as an opportunity for both partners to engage in a more profound exploration of each other's worlds through the practice of vulnerability.

Naomi's perspective challenges the conventional notion of safety as a state of being protected from all harm or discomfort. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of vulnerability in building trust and mutual understanding, even in the face of inevitable differences and uncertainties. This idea reflects care ethics principles, which recognize that moral agents are related, mutually dependent, and unequal in power (Zaidi et al. 2021). By embracing vulnerability as a necessary part of their relationship, Naomi and her partner create space for a more authentic and transformative connection.

Dave, a 34-year-old White man, emphasizes the transformative power of love to enhance one's self-regard through the lens of another's perspective. The crux of his viewpoint is the reciprocal nature of vulnerability in love, where it is not only shared but can be drawn out more deeply by a partner than one might manage alone. He says,

> Romantic love is a feeling when you find another person who makes you feel better about yourself than you do on your own…. It's a person that you find yourself at the most

> vulnerable with because they will demand it of you more so potentially than you're willing to be with yourself. And, and in exchange for that you feel safer around them than you do anyone else.

He suggests that romantic partners have a unique ability to elicit vulnerability — possibly even more than one might be comfortable with when alone. This demand for openness, while it might seem counterintuitive to safety, actually cultivates it. By being our most vulnerable selves with our partners, we create a space where we can feel unequivocally safe. Naomi and Dave's narratives center the transformative potential of mutual openness. They conceive a commitment to openness, while uncomfortable, as cultivating a stronger sense of safety. This idea aligns with the abolitionist principles of collective healing and transformation through relationships.

Andrew, a 31-year-old White man, reflects on his previous relationship with a Black woman, Vanessa. He attributes their break-up to his failure to be vulnerable with her. His reflection on the breakdown of his relationship with Vanessa illustrates a central dilemma: the tension between the desire for safety and the necessity of emotional vulnerability. Andrew acknowledges that he was not as emotionally vulnerable as he needed to be with himself and Vanessa. He recognizes that a crucial aspect of intimacy is the willingness to engage in difficult conversations and confront uncomfortable truths with a partner. His initial reluctance to address issues in their relationship, particularly around their sexual connection after transitioning from long-distance to in-person, stemmed from a preference for maintaining a sense of safety over addressing underlying tensions.

The breakdown came when safety — avoiding confrontation and maintaining the status quo — took precedence over the risk associated with vulnerability. Andrew described his decision to suppress his concerns under the guise that "it's fine" as a defensive mechanism that prioritized his immediate avoidance of conflict over long-term relational health. He attributes the choice to prioritize safety as a significant factor in the eventual dissolution of their relationship. When Andrew finally brought up his feelings, he felt the delay had allowed his concerns to "ferment," making the issues within the relationship more daunting and difficult to address. His narrative describes the negative costs associated with avoiding vulnerability.

Andrew also mentioned that "a foundation of trust and safety" is essential for authentic self-expression. However, his story shows that trust and safety are about feeling secure and creating a space where it is possible to take risks and be vulnerable. Similarly, Elijah, a 38-year-old transman, views safety as part of the conditions needed for partners to engage in mutual vulnerability. "There is an opening of oneself to the other person or the bearing of oneself" that involves safety. For both men, safety is not an end in itself but a means to achieve the greater goal of vulnerability within a relationship. This perspective contrasts with a unidirectional understanding of safety as a static state of being protected from risks. In the mutual vulnerability view, participants convey a dynamic condition that enables one to engage with risk through vulnerability. Safety, therefore, becomes a conduit through which partners can express their authentic selves and explore the depths of their emotional connection.

Central to Allison's, a 33-year-old Black woman, experience is the concept that her partner will attempt to "understand before judging" where a willingness to engage in conversation and offer consideration and care forms the bedrock of trust that allows for such openness. She identifies this blend of understanding, conversation, and care as the "meeting point" of vulnerability and safety, indicating that they are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. Like Allison, Tim emphasizes the reciprocity of sharing risks. Tim, a 34-year-old

White man, said that the protective "façade" can come down through shared vulnerability. These narratives stress that vulnerability is not just about being open but also about how partners respond to and manage that openness in a caring and considerate manner.

Participants with mutual vulnerability frameworks acknowledge that love, safety, and vulnerability are interdependent. They suggest that the deepest connections in love come from a willingness to be seen in their most authentic forms. While this process is inherently risky, it is also where they locate safety—not in being shielded from harm but in being wholly understood and embraced.

Translating Lessons from Love to Public Safety

The narratives of interracial couples offer valuable insights into the nature of safety and vulnerability within intimate relationships. The unidirectional framing of safety reflects a broader societal failure to prioritize communal care and mutual aid as central components of public safety. When safety is understood primarily as protection from individual threats, rather than as the collective cultivation of wellbeing, it limits our capacity to envision and realize more holistic forms of security. This narrow conception of safety not only impacts marginalized communities disproportionately, but also constrains the possibilities for growth and flourishing within our most intimate relationships.

Historically, movements like the Black Panther Party recognized the shortcomings of a public safety model that relied heavily on policing and sought to implement community-based programs that addressed the material and social conditions underlying harm. The Black Panthers' initiatives, such as free breakfast programs, health clinics, and education projects, embodied a vision of safety grounded in mutual care and collective empowerment. Similarly, contemporary calls for redirecting funding from policing to social services, mental health support, and restorative justice reflect a desire to invest in community infrastructure that promotes shared wellbeing.

By centering mutual vulnerability, trust, and accountability, these perspectives challenge conventional notions of safety as an individual trait or protective shield, instead framing it as a relational process that requires an ongoing commitment to shared risk and openness. This aligns with the abolitionist feminist principles of transformative justice, which acknowledge the inevitability of conflict and harm in relationships and communities but emphasize the potential for accountability, healing, and growth when addressed through a lens of love and care (Kaba 2021). Just as these couples navigate the complexities of race and power dynamics within their intimate bonds, their experiences can inform how we approach public safety in a society shaped by racial inequities and power imbalances. By embracing vulnerability and mutual understanding, they demonstrate the limitations of pursuing safety through control and domination, echoing abolitionist critiques of the carceral state's reliance on punishment and marginalization (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007).

This perspective suggests that genuine safety cannot be achieved through exclusionary measures or the fortressing of privileged groups. Instead, it requires a collective commitment to shared risk, open communication, and accountability – principles described by couples with a mutual vulnerability framework, used to foster trust and healing within their relationships. As we move from intimate relationships to the broader context of public safety, these insights offer a guide for reimagining justice beyond the confines of the carceral state, rooted in an ethic of care, interdependence, and transformative love (DeValve et al. 2018; hooks 2001).

Mutual vulnerability challenge the prevailing notions of safety rooted in control, risk mitigation, and the perpetuation of inequalities – notions that undergird current law enforcement practices. For example, police officers prioritize their personal safety as the pivotal factor during enforcement stops, facilitating forceful responses to any perceived threats even when that threat is later disproven. Crucially, research shows that officers' threat determinations are inextricably linked to social constructions around race, gender, disability status, and housing insecurity, with Blackness itself routinely triggering suspicion absent evidence of criminality (Bell 2017). This reflects a system where risk mitigation is paramount, often at the expense of the most vulnerable individuals in society.

Underpinning the demand for police abolition lies a fundamental reconsideration of the concepts of safety and risk – a reconsideration that the narratives of interracial couples inform. One prominent proposal toward reducing the scope of police power is the proposed amendment of laws to stipulate that 'officer safety' cannot serve as a justification for the use of force in the absence of a predicate offense. This potential change reflects a shift in the prioritization of risks, suggesting that the perceived threat to an officer's safety should not automatically outweigh the rights and safety of individuals, particularly when no crime has been committed. Such a legislative change aims to recalibrate the balance of power during police-civilian interactions, emphasizing a more equitable distribution of risk and a more stringent justification for force. By limiting the situations in which police can use force and requiring a higher threshold for justifying such actions, this proposal seeks to reduce the overall scope and impact of policing. In the long term, such a redistribution of risk would aid the movement to reduce the footprint of policing altogether.

By shifting our understanding of safety from a unidirectional, individualistic model to one rooted in communal care and reciprocity, we can create the conditions for more fulfilling and equitable relationships – both interpersonally and societally. This reimagining of safety involves not only divesting from structures of domination and control but actively building institutions and practices that foster collective healing, resilience, and growth. When we expand our visions of public safety to encompass mutual aid, transformative justice, and community self-determination, we open up possibilities for more liberatory and spiritually nourishing connections across all spheres of life.

3. CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF RACIALIZED POLICING SHAPE INTERACTIONS IN BLACK-WHITE COUPLES

This chapter addresses the critical issue of racialized policing—where law enforcement disproportionately targets and uses force against racial minorities—highlighting its role in perpetuating systemic inequality between Black and White Americans. Such practices affect various societal domains, including political participation, education, and workplace behaviors (Laniyanou 2022; Legewie and Fagan 2019; Leigh and Melwani 2020). The threat and application of police force constrain minority freedoms, mobility, and security, limiting access to social and economic capital (Lerman and Weaver 2014). Harsher disciplining of minority spaces and bodies through policing serves to exclude Black Americans from engaging fully and equally across societal institutions and resource distributions, ultimately upholding segregation (Balto 2019; Gordon 2020).

This study investigates responses to racialized policing, using interracial couples as a strategic site to examine how cultural models of race shape those responses, inform couples' sensemaking processes, and structure intergroup interactions. Interracial marriages, including Black-White unions, have become increasingly common, as indicated by the rising percentages of such marriages captured by the U.S. Census Bureau and analyzed by Pew Research Center. For instance, Pew Research Center reports a more than fivefold increase in the share of newlyweds in interracial marriages since 1967 (Pew Research Center). Despite this demographic shift, scholarly understanding of how interracial couples experience and interpret racialized policing is not well-developed. Existing studies have examined how intrapersonal and intragroup dynamics, such as racial socialization in Black families, influence attitudes and responses to policing (Malone Gonzalez 2022). Additionally, high-profile incidents of police violence against unarmed Black Americans and subtle systemic bias have been shown to reduce trust and increase perceived social distance between Black and White Americans (Hetey and Eberhardt 2014; Kraus et al. 2019). Scholars have explored mixed-race families to understand how systemic racism shapes family dynamics, revealing the presence of 'intimate racism' (Yampolsky et al. 2023) and the development of racial literacy among White partners (Twine 2004; Twine and Steinbugler 2006). However, there remains a gap in understanding how perceptions of racialized policing shape intergroup interactions within intimate relationships.

Central to this investigation is the role of cultural models in guiding individuals' interpretations and responses to experiences of racial inequality. Cultural models, implicit assumptions, and beliefs about society guide individuals in interpreting and responding to experiences of racial inequality (Quinn and Holland 1987). This study draws on Wright's (2008) framework for organizing explanations for class inequality, which he described in three categories based on the causal attributions made: individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination. I show that Wright's framework for organizing explanations of inequality stems from implicit cultural assumptions and beliefs shared within society. These causal attributions represent cultural models that guide how individuals perceive and interpret experiences of inequality, applied here to questions of racial inequality.

This study asks the following research question: How do cultural models guide interracial couples in interpreting and responding to experiences of racialized policing, and what are the implications for interpersonal dynamics within these relationships? Participants' perspectives reflect three cultural models paralleling Wright's framework. Participants expressing an individual attributes cultural model emphasize personal traits and experiences that distance themselves and

their partners from collective racial (dis)advantages related to policing. From this perspective, they do not describe taking interpersonal actions to address racialized policing. Other participants' views reflect an opportunity hoarding cultural model, which understands police fairness and protections as resources systematically denied to minority groups by the exclusionary practices of dominant White groups. These participants describe protective responses aimed at mitigating the perceived disadvantages and vulnerabilities their Black partners faced regarding policing and racism. Finally, participants operating from an exploitation/domination cultural model view Black vulnerability to policing as stemming from historical White domination and the perpetuation of oppressive institutional arrangements. Their responses involve White partners directly modifying their behaviors to prevent potential police harm against Black partners.

While Wright developed the tripartite framework for understanding causal attributions of class-based inequality, I contend that the underlying causal logics also illuminate how people understand and respond to racial inequality as forms of cultural models identified. By examining the experiences of Black-White couples, this research provides unique insights into how individuals reconcile conflicting cultural norms and expectations around race and policing. The findings of this study can inform policy, practice, and future research by shedding light on the complex interplay between societal-level meanings, attributional rationales, and interpersonal conduct in the context of systemic racism and inequality. Understanding how cultural models shape responses to racialized policing within intimate relationships can contribute to the development of more effective interventions and support systems for individuals and communities affected by this pervasive issue.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins by examining the impact of policing on racial inequality and surveys the dynamics of racial hierarchies in interracial relationships. It then discusses the concept of cultural models and their relevance to decision-making. This is followed by an exploration of Wright's class analysis theories as a framework for understanding racial inequality. The methodology and data used in the study are then outlined, followed by the presentation of findings that identify patterns of response to racialized policing. The paper wraps up by discussing how personal interpretations of systemic issues can affect interactions and indicates the potential implications for a broader understanding of structural inequalities and their effects on social interactions.

Policing Structures Racial Inequality

Research has consistently shown that racially marginalized groups, particularly Black individuals, are disproportionately exposed to aggressive policing practices compared to White individuals (Baumgartner et al. 2018; Epp et al. 2014). Aggressive policing practices disproportionately affect racially marginalized groups, limiting their freedom of movement and exposing them to systemic discrimination, harassment, and violence in public spaces (Edwards et al. 2019). This restriction on freedom of movement has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including decreased political participation (Laniyonu 2018), reduced use of public services like emergency rooms (Kerrison and Sewell 2020), and adverse impacts on employment opportunities due to criminal records resulting from police actions (Anderson 2022; Pager 2003). Furthermore, racialized appraisals of suspicion and threat by law enforcement officers contribute to disparities in how individuals are perceived and treated in interactions. Stereotypes of Black criminality lead to the assessment of Black individuals as more threatening, resulting in disproportionate use of force by police (Bell 2017; Correll et al. 2002; Duncan 1976; Eberhardt

et al. 2004; Peruche and Plant 2006; Sagar and Schofield 1980). Civilians' perceptions of Black individuals as more suspicious and threatening also play a role in initiating police interactions, further diminishing Black individuals' freedom of movement and bodily safety. In interactions with law enforcement, the threat of violence and arrest encourages performances of deference, perpetuating racialized disparities in status and respect (Wacquant 2022). Accordingly, this article uses the phrase 'racialized policing' to describe the legacy of overt legal racism and implicit biases coded into norms and behaviors of law enforcement that disproportionately enable greater police surveillance and violence towards minority groups compared to Whites.

This differential exposure can lead to divergent perceptions and experiences of the police, with Black individuals more likely to view law enforcement as a threat to their safety and freedom, while White individuals may perceive the police as a source of protection (Weitzer and Tuch 2005; Peck 2015). These differing perceptions and experiences may shape individuals' coping strategies and responses to racialized policing. For example, Black individuals may engage in behaviors to minimize their risk of police encounters, such as avoiding certain areas or changing their appearance (Sewell, Jefferson, and Lee 2016;). Less is known about how these divergent experiences of racialized policing impact interracial relationships.

Racial Hierarchies in Interracial Relationships

Interracial intimacy and intergroup contact have been subjects of significant sociological interest, shedding light on the complex dynamics between individuals, social norms, and the existing racial order (Hordge-Freeman 2015; Osuji 2019; Steingbugler 2012). In the past, classical assimilation theorists viewed interracial relationships as a measure of social distance between racial groups and a sign of structural and cultural assimilation (Park 1914). Intermarriage with White individuals was seen as an indicator that minority group members had adopted the language and customs of the dominant White population and had been absorbed economically and politically into mainstream society. However, contemporary perspectives recognize that interracial relationships are not just miniature models of racial hierarchies, but they exist within a racialized world, where complex interactions between ethnoracial boundaries, love, and social hierarchies come into play.

Scholars have explored mixed-race families to understand intergroup contact in real-world settings and how systemic racism shapes family dynamics. Studies have revealed the presence of 'intimate racism' in interracial couples, involving experiences of racial fetishization, stereotyping, and explicit racism (Yampolsky et al. 2023). Others have shown that these relationships foster race consciousness, particularly among White members of the families, as they learn to think critically about racist practices (Twine 2004; Twine and Steinbugler 2006). Researchers have argued that for White individuals to understand the experiences of Black individuals, they must develop racial literacy, allowing them to perceive the symbolic and material value of Whiteness and identify racist practices (Twine 2004; Twine and Steinbugler 2006).

Chinyere Osuji's (2019) work emphasizes that interracial marriage can simultaneously challenge and reinforce ethnoracial boundaries and highlights the flexibility of these boundaries for White partners. This phenomenon is situated in a broader context where race and color can conflate, obscuring intraracial stratification and inequality. Osuji's research underscores how interracial couples negotiate, construct, and push against ethnoracial boundaries, revealing the coexistence of love and white supremacy across racial lines. The current article contributes to

this literature by examining how perceptions of racialized institutions shape the everyday practices of interracial couples and its implications for the reproduction or resistance to the existing racial order.

These interracial couples occupy critical sites for study given debate among scholars about the potential of interracial contacts to reduce racial stratification (Hordge-Freeman 2015). Interracial couples engage in ongoing negotiations of identity and difference, grappling with questions of belonging, acceptance, and cultural identity. These negotiations provide insights into the complexities of navigating racial boundaries and the strategies individuals employ to reconcile conflicting cultural norms and expectations. Studying interracial couples allows researchers to examine how perceptions of race and ethnicity intersect with experiences of policing, including racial profiling, differential treatment, and the enforcement of social norms. By examining the experiences of interracial couples, researchers can gain valuable insights into the cultural models of inequality that shape individuals' lives, including their interactions with institutions such as law enforcement.

Cultural Models and Decision-Making

While existing research has extensively documented the effects of racialized policing on individuals and communities, there is a dearth of research examining how these experiences shape interpersonal dynamics within interracial relationships. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how cultural models guide interracial couples in interpreting and responding to experiences of racialized policing. Cultural models, which are shared understandings and assumptions that shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors (Quinn and Holland 1987), may play a crucial role in how couples navigate the challenges posed by racialized policing.

As "presupposed, taken-for-granted models" (Quinn and Holland 1987:4) that organize meaning, cultural models determine what people perceive as salient and how they characterize experiences as part of broader patterns (D'Andrade 1995). These schemas function as tools enabling interpretation, inference-making, reasoning, and problem-solving in everyday situations (Cerulo 2010). A longstanding critique contends that expressed cultural beliefs often fail to predict behaviors, instead rationalizing conduct after the fact (Quinn and Holland 1987). However, newer theories argue that cultural models comprise expansive "toolkits" of symbolic resources employed in flexible strategic action rather than rigid internalized constraints (Swidler 2001). From this perspective, cultures shape individuals into "social actors" equipped with diverse skills and capacities for pursuing context-specific goals, not passive adherents to prescribed norms (Swidler 2001). Consequently, how people selectively apply cultural knowledge as action strategies represents a vital intersection between shared meanings and social outcomes.

Quinn and Holland (1987) show how individuals construct narratives about their actions that must be understandable, justifiable, and socially acceptable, involving a degree of embellishment or alteration. This process is crucial for social interaction and achieving objectives. People's socialization experiences significantly influence their perception of personal agency, with some seeing themselves as primarily in control of their fate while others feel relatively powerless (Quinn and Holland 1987). They critique ideas that individual understanding comes solely from personal experience, arguing that view overlooks the role of culturally shared knowledge, suggesting it is implausible for people to learn everything they know solely through personal experiences by adulthood. These culturally shared knowledge systems, or cultural

models, shape how individuals interpret and respond to experiences of inequality, including racial inequality. Wright's (2008) foundational work on causal attributions for class-based inequality offers a framework for understanding these cultural models of racial inequality

Wright's Causal Attributions as Cultural Models of Racial Inequality

Wright (2008) organized explanations of inequality in the sociological literature into three groups of causal mechanisms that can be understood as cultural models permeating society. One model deals with mechanisms that link the unequal conditions under which people live and their individual characteristics to effects in their lives, which rests on a logic of individual attributes (Wright 2008). A second cultural model reflects a Weberian opportunity hoarding logic, where social closure practices enable some groups to monopolize access to resources and opportunities by excluding others (Wright 2008). The third cultural model operates through an exploitation/domination logic, whereby advantaged groups benefit from their ability to control and extract value from marginalized groups (Wright 2008).

Rather than frameworks confined to academic analysis, I contend these causal attributions represent widespread cultural models that all social actors employ to make sense of inequality in their lived experiences. By connecting these implicit rationales to observed behaviors, my findings demonstrate how individuals construct their realities and relationships through these belief systems. The individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination logics function as implicit cultural schemas profoundly shaping how people perceive and respond to issues of systemic inequality like racialized policing.

The individual attributes logic concentrates on how the acquisition of personal characteristics categorizes individuals into different classes (Wright 2008; 2009). This approach understands class effects on life outcomes in terms of individual attributes and conditions - some are determined at birth, while others are influenced by one's social standing at a given time (Wright 2008; 2009). From this view, life trajectories are shaped by class-based experiences like job insecurity, workplace pressures, and the opportunities and choices available based on one's economic resources within the context of societal inequality (Wright 2008; 2009). The individual attributes logic does not ignore social determinants. Instead, "the relevance of social determinants always works through the ways they shape the characteristics of individuals" (Wright 2008:337), and "the central concern of sociologists has been to understand how people acquire the characteristics that place them in one class or another" (Wright 2009:103.) This emphasis on personal attributes as the root cause of disparate outcomes aligns with Western cultural models of individualism - values of independence, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and meritocracy (Bellah et al. 1985).

The individual attributes logic that Wright (2008) applies to class can also shed light on racial inequality. This approach links unequal conditions and characteristics to outcomes based on the rationale that race shapes attributes and experiences that impact life chances (Pattillo 2013; Wright 2008). For example, research shows that the racial wealth gap stems from factors like homeownership disparities and inherited wealth, which are patterned by race due to historical exclusions (McKernan et al. 2013). Experiencing poverty early in life also correlates with worse later-life outcomes across areas like education and health, with higher poverty rates among minority groups (Duncan et al. 1994). These examples reflect how race structures individual-level conditions and characteristics, which accumulate over time and transmit across generations to influence opportunities and well-being per the logic of individual attributes. Thus,

differential attributes tied to race result in divergent life chances between racial groups. The logic does not ignore structural factors but rather sees them as working through created differences at the individual level. In this way, the individual attributes rationale links race to patterns in individual characteristics and conditions to explain broader racial inequality.

The opportunity hoarding logic centers on social closure practices as the primary driver of class inequality (Wright 2008; 2009). Drawing from Weber's (1922/1978) theory of social closure, this perspective views power as derived from the ability of dominant groups to monopolize access to resources, opportunities, and status by excluding others. The opportunity hoarding logic suggests the economic privileges of advantaged classes are directly linked to the disadvantages faced by excluded groups (Wright 2008). This contrasts with the individual attributes view, where advantages and disadvantages stem separately from personal characteristics rather than being systematically connected (Wright 2008). Under individual attributes logic, eliminating disadvantages like poverty by improving attributes like education would not affect the affluent. However, opportunity hoarding implies the advantages of dominant groups depend on the marginalized groups' inability to access resources due to exclusionary practices (Wright 2008).

The opportunity hoarding logic aligns with the theory of system justification in social psychology (Jost et al. 2004; Jost and Hunyady 2005). This theory suggests people are motivated to legitimize existing social systems and arrangements, even when they perpetuate inequality, as a means to protect their group interests and maintain a sense of fairness. System justification enables rationalizing inequality and rejecting claims of systemic injustice.

Applied to racial inequality, the opportunity hoarding framework helps elucidate how Whiteness has been constructed as a form of property and status that perpetuates exclusion (Harris 1993; Wright 2009). Capitalism relies on a division between worker-owner, a type of opportunity hoarding enforced by private property rights that confer economic advantages. Harris (1993) shows that the status of owner is inseparable from race, where whiteness is a form of property that has allocated societal benefits, with laws and norms of colorblindness protecting the privileging of white interests and identity. For instance, research on housing policy shows how redlining and lending discrimination have historically excluded Black families from homeownership, enabling White families to hoard the benefits of inheriting and accumulating home equity across generations (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2017). Employer attitudes favoring Whites also close job opportunities to minorities, as evidenced by higher unemployment rates and discriminatory callback practices for Black versus equally qualified White job applicants (Pager et al.2009; Quillian et al. 2017).

The opportunity hoarding logic also relates to racial disparities in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2020). Affluent communities, which disproportionately self-identify as White due to intergenerational economic advantages, often concentrate more policing resources for their perceived security needs (Laniyonu 2018). In contrast, poorer racially marginalized neighborhoods face aggressive over-policing, often justified by higher crime rates in those areas (Geller et al. 2014). These dynamics reinforce historical racial hierarchies by enabling the ongoing exclusion of marginalized groups from accessing community wealth and resources, thereby allowing dominant white property owners to hoard the benefits.

The third causal logic Wright identifies is exploitation/domination, whereby certain individuals and groups benefit from their ability to control the activities of others (Wright 2008; Wright 2009). ‘Domination’ refers to commanding power over others’ actions, while ‘exploitation’ denotes the acquisition of economic gains from the labor of dominated groups

(Wright 2008; Wright, 2009). Thus, exploitation involves domination, but domination can exist without exploitation (Wright 2008; Wright 2009). In this logic, advantaged groups not only restrict access to resources and positions but directly control disadvantaged groups for their own benefit (Wright 2008; Wright 2009). For example, exploiting groups may monitor labor efforts and impose sanctions to compel compliance (Wright 2008). Accordingly, the level of inequality shaped by this logic depends significantly on the efficacy of political resistance, challenging the structural underpinnings of power and privilege (Wright 2008). This is because substantially reducing inequality requires transforming the root exclusionary, dominating, and exploiting mechanisms rather than just redistributing resources within unchanged structures (Wright 2008; Wright 2009). The exploitation/domination logic points to examining and critiquing the institutional embodiments of the societal arrangements, enabling some groups to control others to their disadvantage (Wright 2008; Wright 2009).

The exploitation/domination logic also sheds light on the dynamics of racial inequality, given the interdependent relationship it identifies between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This logic goes beyond exclusion to propose ongoing interdependencies between the conditions and activities of privileged and oppressed racial groups (Wright 2008; Wright 2009). For example, low-wage exploitative work often involves jobs with large minority overrepresentations, like farm work, domestic work, and some manual labor (Glenn 2002). Researchers tie this to deliberate employer preferences for an insecure, disempowered workforce from dominated racial groups, which enables exerting control through threatened deportation, lax regulations, or few advancement prospects to disadvantage workers (Catanzarite 2002; Glenn 2002). In a similar vein, the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately channels Black and Latino youth into incarceration systems characterized by extensive coercion and control, creating criminal records that increase their vulnerability to exploitation in the job market (Meiners 2011; Sojoyner 2016). Thus, interconnected exploitation/domination practices reinforce historical asymmetries in power and resources along racial lines (Alexander 2020; Robinson 2000). Eliminating racial exploitation/domination, therefore, necessitates disrupting these co-constitutive activities that concentrate disadvantage among marginalized racial groups to enable others' advantages.

Data and Method

This study uses in-depth interviews with members of 16 Black/White couples and two additional individuals whose partners were not interviewed for a total of thirty-four individual interviews. Study participants were treated as individual partners to permit unique perspectives rather than assume identical perspectives of the same interactions. Joint interviews would have revealed a joint, co-constructed narrative as opposed to variations in expectations. I will later discuss how that might be leveraged in future studies. I recruited participants using convenience sampling, contacting my extended networks via emails and texts. Next, I used snowball techniques to grow the sample by asking participants for referrals. Given my longstanding embeddedness in LGBTQ activist organizations and communities, this recruitment approach ensured the inclusivity of lesbian, gay, and queer couples contributing to a more intersectional understanding of the dynamics of gender, race, sexuality, and policing in intimate relationships. The study participants all lived in the US. Half of the study sample identifies as Black or Black/mixed-race, and their corresponding intimate partners report White, non-Hispanic racial identities. The median age of respondents is 34; 32 percent identify as queer, gay, lesbian, or

bisexual, and 25 percent attained less than a Bachelor's degree. All interviews were conducted over a HIPAA-protected Zoom account between August 2022 and May 2023.

Studying this population offered methodological and theoretical advantages. Given the "rigidified twofold racial schema" (Wacquant 2001:100) in the US, Black and White couples represent a strategic research site (Merton 1987) to explore the dynamics of racial meaning as constructed through the institution of policing. Akin to relational ethnography, this study incorporates two types of actors occupying different positions within the social space and bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence (Desmond 2014:554). I sampled couples who cohabitated during the years 2020-2022, a critical period of study given cohabitating couples' increased proximity to one another (Seagull 2021.) This timeframe covers the police killings and subsequent protests that Leigh and Melwani (2019) conceptualize as 'mega-threats.' These widely publicized negative diversity-related events are shown to impact intergroup relations (Legewie 2016). My analysis centers on investigating couples' cultural models, defined as shared cognitive frameworks shaping interpretations and responses to events (Quinn 2005), applied here to understand decision-making around the navigation of racialized policing. Intensive interviewing allowed the extraction of prevailing cultural logic guiding couples' meaning-making and relational coping strategies when facing racist policing systems. The salience of racist police violence in 2020 created a unique window into revealing how broader stratification manifests interpersonally through examining logics couples use to reconcile injustice during acute societal reckonings with anti-Black racism.

Once a couple agreed to participate, I independently scheduled Zoom interviews with each partner. I asked each respondent to avoid discussing the interview and their responses with their partner until both interviews were complete. Interviews lasted 1-3 hours, and all subjects were compensated $50 for their time. Interview questions capture the details of specific interactions, rather than 'typical' dynamics, to minimize reporting of imagined or aspirational practices (Small 2017). The interview was divided into four sections: (1) explores personal upbringing and relationship background, (2) participants' experience with general conflict in their relationship, (3) participants experiences of racial differences or racism in their relationship, and (4) how couples have engaged, or not, in issues of racism and police violence specifically. I draw primarily from the third and fourth sections to examine how individuals describe the problem of racialized policing and their responses to it.

My positionality as a queer Black college-educated woman influenced the make-up of my sample, which skews towards a higher social class, limiting the generalizability of these findings. Participants were also aware of my affiliations with a research organization and a university with a reputation for progressive activism. Recruiting from my social network and my positionality raise two issues of sample bias. First, self-selection bias (Heckman 1975) may mean that the interview respondents are systematically different from the actual population of Black-White interracial couples. Second, social desirability bias (Edwards 1957) suggests that respondents tend to answer questions in a manner that others will view favorably. In response to both issues, I highlight the internal variation reflected in participants' responses. Even within what might be thought of as a somewhat politically homogenous sample, there is a diversity of perspectives, particularly regarding responses to police violence, suggesting a range of experiences and viewpoints within the study population. This variation strengthens the study's validity by demonstrating that the findings are not merely a reflection of a narrow, homogeneous sample but rather capture the complex realities of how Black-White interracial couples navigate and respond to experiences of racialized policing.

Data consists of 39 hours of interview transcripts and ethnographic notes written after each interview. I recorded each Zoom interview and transcribed the recordings using the automated transcription software Otter.ai. I analyzed the de-identified transcripts in DeDoose in three stages. First, I used focused coding on the mention of police, police violence, and protests of policing. Three primary patterns emerged in how participants responded to police violence: (1) no behavioral expectations of themselves or their partner in response to police violence, (2) behavioral expectations primarily for Black partner, and (3) behavioral expectations primarily for White partner. I conducted a second stage of focused coding to compare these categories. I searched for differences identified in the literature to drive differential behaviors in response to conflict, e.g. sexuality, gender, social class, and geography. When no clear patterns emerged, following the tenets of abductive theory (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I conducted open coding to identify any emergent patterns within and between the three response categories. At this stage, I interpreted responses through Wright's (2008) implicit casual logics typologies: individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination. I returned to my initial behavior codes to organize the three responses under each typology and identify the cultural models undergirding each.

Table 1: Respondents Characteristics

Pseudonym	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Gender
Jada	Black	Ghanain	33	Woman/GN
Jessica	White	NA	33	Non-binary
Destiny	Black	NA	27	Woman
Amber	White	NA	27	Woman
Thomas	White	NA	37	Man
Nia	Black	NA	40	Woman
Zachary	White		30	Man
Shanice	Black	NA	28	Woman
Nancy	White	na	38	Woman
Chris	Black		42	Man
Jordan	Mixed Race/	British/SE As	37	Man
Elijah	White	Jewish	38	Transman
Deon	Black/Mixed		35	man
Yael	White	Jewish	34	woman
Alisson	Black	Ghanain	33	woman
Dave	White	Jewish/Cicili	34	man
Mary	White	Jewish	67	woman
Omar	Black	NA	73	man
Lawrence	Black	Ugandan	34	man
Rebecca	White	Jewish	36	woman
Kendrick	Black	na	26	man
Maggie	White	na	26	woman
Kenya	Black	na	36	woman
Mitch	White	na	35	man
Jennifer	White	White	41	woman
Jabari	Black/Mixed		43	man
Robert	White		41	man
Naomi	Black		30	woman
Tess	Black/Mixed		33	woman
Tim	White		34	man
Rosaline	Black	Af Am/Haitia	26	woman
Harrison	White	Jewish	28	man
Malik	Black/Mixed		29	man
Andrew	White		31	man

Table 2: Crosstabs Racialized Gender Pairings

	White man	White woman	White T/NB
Black man	0	7	1
Black woman	8	1	1
Black T/NB	0	0	0

*note 2 of the participants' partners were not in sample

Findings

In this section, I examine how couples describe their interpersonal responses to racialized policing and identify the cultural models embedded in response types. The analysis revealed three distinct response patterns among interracial couples navigating racialized policing, each aligning with one of Wright's (2008) causal attribution frameworks functioning as cultural models of inequality. First, some couples responded by distancing themselves through individualization, emphasizing personal attributes that inoculate them from racial advantage or disadvantage related to policing. This response reflects a cultural model of individual attributes cultural model attributes inequality to unequal individual conditions and characteristics. Second, other couples responded with protective strategies aimed at mitigating the vulnerability of Black partners to potential police mistreatment. These responses generally did not directly question or challenge the access and privileges their White partners retained regarding freedom from racial profiling or police harassment. These responses reflect an opportunity hoarding cultural model, focused on reducing interpersonal exclusion rather than questioning the necessity of institutions like the police for societal functioning. Finally, some couples mobilized White partners to change their behaviors to prevent police encounters that may harm Black partners. These responses embodied an exploitation/domination cultural model recognizing racial inequality as stemming from dominating institutional arrangements that enable the extraction of resources and control over marginalized groups. By grounding the analysis in Wright's (2008) causal attributions as cultural models, this study illuminates how participants' implicit rationales for racial stratification shaped their interpersonal responses and relationship dynamics when navigating racialized policing. The following sections explore each cultural model in greater depth.

Table 3: Cultural Models Mapped onto Interpersonal Behaviors

Cultural Model	Definition	Interpersonal Behavior
Individual Attributes	Views inequality as stemming from unequal conditions and characteristics that categorize some groups as more vulnerable than others	Use of distancing responses that cite individual traits or experiences to argue racialized policing does not impact their relationship
Opportunity Hoarding	Understands inequality as arising from dominant groups restricting access to valuable resources and advantages for minority groups through exclusionary practices	Emphasis on strategies to shield minority partners from police mistreatment that can inadvertently reinforce constraints on minority partners' freedoms
Exploitation/Domination	Sees racial advantages and disadvantages as relationally interdependent, with privileged groups benefiting from controlling and exploiting marginalized groups	Expectations and actions aimed at improving minority safety by having privileged partners relinquish certain privileges that disadvantage minority partners

Distancing Through Individual Attributes Model

The first type of response involves couples distancing themselves from racialized policing as a systemic issue that does not directly impact their relationship. These distancing responses are facilitated by emphasis on individual qualities that insulate the couple from group-based privilege or disadvantage related to policing. Participants highlight individualistic traits and experiences, such as socioeconomic status, skin color, or specific police encounters, to argue they and their partners do not personally benefit or suffer from racial privilege or oppression vis-à-vis policing. By emphasizing individual-level attributes, these respondents simultaneously acknowledge systemic racism in policing without situating their relationship dynamics and experiences within that structure of advantage and disadvantage.

The findings show that individuals with individual attributes perspectives of racism in policing use distancing (Knowles et al. 2014) to manage their and their partners' advantaged and disadvantaged identities. For example, Thomas, a 37-year-old White man, appeals to his individual experiences with cops to distance himself from experiences of White privilege in the context of policing. He recounted getting pulled over by police in Tennessee for speeding when he was 19, believing he was targeted because he had out-of-state tags. He began his account by stating, "I don't like cops, and I am scared of cops. And it's for different reasons [than race.] I just don't trust them." He recounted getting pulled over by police in Tennessee for speeding when he was 19. Thomas believes he was pulled over and had his car searched because he had out-of-state tags, and "the state trooper did not like people being from another state… I was fuming, and I was trying to be polite. And I was- I was terrified." Thomas' wife, Nia, a 40-year-old Black woman, reiterated the same story in her interview, suggesting that Thomas understood a Black perspective on policing because of how police had unfairly treated him. She said, "I didn't have to explain anything. He totally understood it…he doesn't trust police. He never has. He's even had some issues with police…where he grew up, and then like, traveling through the South. They don't like anything that's different."

Thomas and Nia made sense of policing through his individual experiences of mistreatment, disassociating his experiences from broader patterns of White privilege. When discussing high-profile police killings of unarmed Black Americans in 2020, they did not describe these events as impacting their relationship or interactions.

Lawrence, a 34-year-old Black man living in Texas, cited his Ugandan citizenship as a factor that distanced him from the problems of racialized policing faced by Black Americans in the United States. He described having the option to return to Uganda as shielding him from experiencing the same level of fear and hurt that Black Americans experience due to police violence and discrimination.

> I always feel like no matter how racist things get here [in the US] …I can just back up and go back [to Uganda.] Even though that's not realistic at this point. I just have that idea in the back of my mind…I feel like my relationship with America has been more or less transactional in that I am an upstanding citizen, I pay my taxes in return and get, you know, the American dream and all that stuff. So when all those shootings happen, I'm like, 'Oh, my God, it's terrible.' But at the same time, I don't feel as hopeless as my African-American friends.

Lawrence described his transactional orientation toward the U.S. as a coping mechanism that buffered him from fearing police violence. He conveyed this sentiment to his wife, stating, "As a Black person, I'm not particularly concerned about police shootings in my life." His individual attributes cultural model allowed him to reject the notion that his vulnerability to police violence was equal to that of Black Americans. By articulating his transactional relationship with the U.S. Lawrence mitigated his concern over potential police violence, enabling him to differentiate his susceptibility to police violence from that of Black Americans. He utilized his dual Ugandan citizenship as a means to distance himself from the issues surrounding racialized policing in the U.S. Within the dynamic of his interracial marriage, there was an absence of discussion regarding the implications of racialized policing for his White American spouse, which did not account for the potential influence of her racial positioning within these issues.

Similarly, Shanice, a 28-year-old Black woman living in DC, viewed her experiences living in other countries as a potential 'way out' of the racist police violence prevalent in the US.

Like Lawrence, Shanice distanced herself from the shared experiences of the Black community that are conditioned by racialized policing. While she recounted having conversations with her White partner about the need for structural changes, specifically regarding the role of the government in making some individuals more vulnerable to harsh policing than others, Shanice did not situate herself or her partner within the context of racialized policing. Beyond those conversations, she provided no examples of how they navigated or dealt with policing issues interpersonally within their relationship.

Jabari, a 43-year-old Black/biracial man, was the only participant who disclosed having a criminal record. He described a childhood marked by frequent stays in juvenile corrections facilities until he was incarcerated at age 18. While acknowledging the problem of racist policing, Jabari attributed his numerous interactions with police officers to his illegal drug use rather than his race. His emphasis on personal responsibility, a cornerstone of individualistic cultural models, informed his individual attributes logic regarding racialized policing. At the time of George Floyd's murder, Jabari was living in a halfway house for recovering drug addicts. He described Floyd's killing as a "raw deal" that affected him emotionally, but did not see it as connected to his own history of arrests and incarceration. Jabari stated that his and his partner's substance abuse issues overshadowed any concerns around racialized policing. Unlike previous participants, Jabari distanced himself and his partner from collective outcomes of racial privilege and oppression by defending their encounters with law enforcement as consequences of their individual choices to break the law.

Deon, a 35-year-old Black/biracial man from Chicago, attributed his light skin tone and upper-class upbringing to sheltering him from concerns about police violence. He noted that his White wife often reacted more viscerally than he did to news of police killings, and Deon questioned whether, as a biracial person, he could legitimately speak out on issues of racialized policing. Deon described the police murders in the summer of 2020 as the first time he seriously considered the threat of policing, stating, "It certainly made me think a lot about the dangers of just existing... I think it is privileged that I haven't done that much in my life. You know, there's a lot of people around the world who that's just that's how it is." While Deon mentioned that his wife wanted to discuss policing with him and that they participated in some marches, he did not describe these events as having an impact on their relationship or interactions. Deon understood his individual attributes as having shielded him from worrying about racialized policing.

These responses reflect an individual attributes model that views inequality as stemming from unequal personal conditions and characteristics that render some individuals more vulnerable than others (Wright 2008). Within this framework, reducing Black vulnerability to policing is seen as operating independently from White privilege. In this study, participants' individual attributes perspectives on racism were characterized by an emphasis on individual traits, such as nationality and skin color, and personal experiences which enabled them to distance themselves and their partners from the collective experiences of (dis)advantage caused by racialized policing. For instance, Nia used her White partner's negative encounter with the police to illustrate his capacity to understand systemic racism. She did not identify him as situated within the broader problem of racialized policing.

Similarly, other Black participants who distanced themselves from issues of racialized policing through the individual attributes model did not acknowledge their White partners as being implicated in these problems. For most participants operating from this individual attributes perspective, there was a corresponding lack of interpersonal responses within their relationships to address racism in policing. While some may have mentioned taking individual

actions like contacting Congress, they did not describe any interactions or changes in relationship dynamics between themselves and their partners, as they did not situate their experiences within the larger systemic context of the problem. The following section describes a different set of responses where participants aimed to protect Black partners often involving constraints or burdens placed on Black partners.

Protective Strategies Reflecting the Opportunity Hoarding Cultural Model

The second pattern involved couples implementing protective strategies for Black partners due to their perceived vulnerability to adverse police interactions. Such strategies included measures like encouraging Black partners to update license plates to reduce the likelihood of traffic stops, or have them attend community meetings to increase familiarity with White neighbors. The intent was to mitigate risks for Black partners, however, these responses inherently placed constraints on their freedoms of movement, sense of safety, and overall well-being. Simultaneously, these responses operated under the implicit understanding that White partners retained unencumbered access to those same resources and protections.

The opportunity hoarding cultural model understands racialized policing as stemming from dominant White groups monopolizing access to fair and protective policing through exclusionary practices that restrict racial minority groups from those same benefits (Wright 2008). Responses reflecting this model concentrated on shielding individual Black people from adverse police interactions, rather than directly challenging systemic dynamics that enable such exclusionary privileging of Whiteness. This perspective views racial disadvantage as a dependent relationship where one group's marginalization results from and facilitates the other group's exclusion and accrual of advantages. While acknowledging how policing contributes to collective Black disadvantages, the opportunity hoarding model does not explicitly account for how it concurrently preserves White privilege.

Although several Black participants did not perceive themselves as directly impacted by issues of racialized policing, their perspectives often diverged from their White partners' views. For instance, Lawrence's wife Rebecca, a 36-year-old White/Jewish woman, expressed concerns that White neighbors might perceive Lawrence as a threat while walking around the neighborhood and call authorities. After having children, Rebecca described an increasing fear of police violence against Lawrence and their biracial son. In contrast to Lawrence, who felt his Ugandan nationality distanced him from racialized policing in the U.S. Rebecca viewed him and their son as collectively marginalized by such policing practices.

Rebecca provided examples of how policing directly shaped interactions within her relationship with Lawrence. During the summer of 2020, she insisted that Lawrence attend their annual homeowners association meeting in their predominantly White neighborhood, despite his reluctance:

> [Lawrence] hates to go, but I like for him to go because I think it is important that our White neighbors see him and see our children, and know that they're part of the neighborhood. And it's sad that I feel the need to do that. But I think it's important.

At this meeting featuring a police officer as a speaker, a White woman asked what local police were doing to keep the neighborhood safe from ‘rioters.’ Rebecca then asked the officer what they were doing to protect racial minorities, though Lawrence did not want her to speak up.

Rebecca's interjection led to a point of contention between them afterward, as he told her he would have preferred if she had not drawn attention to their family being the only mixed-race family in attendance.

Reflecting, Rebecca stated, "I think this is where [Lawrence and I] approach things differently. And I often think, am I overstepping? But part of me is also thinking that I can use my privilege as somebody who passes for white." She described herself as "White passing," citing her Jewish identity and experiences among Africans as separating her from hegemonic Whiteness:

> I did Afro-Haitian dancing as a child in elementary school, I spent my summers like learning to play the steel drums. Once I got to college, I studied abroad in South Africa. I auditioned for the African music ensemble. I did Zulu drumming and dance and learned Zulu. I took like sociology courses on South African history… I think historically, when we think about being Caucasian in America, it's more the Anglo Saxon WASPY [sic] Caucasian aspect, and I don't identify with that history. You know, Jewish people have been marginalized are their own minority

Rebecca provided another example of a Black colleague inviting her to a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest, which she felt flattered by. She subsequently invited Lawrence and their son:

> And it was really important for me to go, I wanted to show my support to her. But I also wanted [my son] to be there and [Lawrence] to be there...I have a picture of him with a sign I made for him. He was in his stroller with a sign that said Black Lives Matter. And that was important to me. And I wanted to document it, too. Like, I want him to have that picture when he gets older. And maybe that's my me pushing things on him. But I hope he wants that too.

Rebecca considered if she may have been "overstepping" at the association meeting and whether she "pushed" her son by having him attend the BLM protest. Her responses centered on mitigating the exclusion her husband and son faced from privileges of safety and freedom that she could access as a white-passing person, reflecting an opportunity hoarding framework that views racial inequality as dominant groups denying resources and protections to marginalized groups.

Jabari's view of himself relative to the problem of policing also differed from that of his White partner, Jennifer. Jennifer, a 41-year-old White woman, described feeling more upset by the police killings than Jabari, attributing it partly to being a mother of a biracial son. Unlike Jabari, who attributed his police interactions to personal choices, Jennifer saw his treatment by cops as directly tied to his race. She recounted an incident where police pulled them over because she was drunk driving.

> They pushed him to the ground and shoved his face in the ground. I just stood there and yelled and probably used a lot of bad language. And then, I said, 'You're only doing that because he's Black and I'll record you.' Then they called for backup, and the guy they called was a Black cop. And I felt like that was to cover their ass.

Jennifer's actions of driving drunk initiated the police encounter, which she then escalated by yelling at the police, increasing Jabari's vulnerability to police violence. During the interaction, Jabari repeatedly asked Jennifer to remain quiet, but she refused because she perceived the officers' actions as racist.

> But that initial way they shoved him to the ground, I wasn't gonna not say anything, but he thought it would be better if I just didn't say anything. So he kept saying, 'Just be quiet. Just be quiet. Don't say nothing. It's fine. It's fine.' But it wasn't fine.

Rebecca and Jennifer's responses centered on managing the exclusion of Jabari and Lawrence from receiving fair treatment and protections that Rebecca and Jennifer could access by virtue of their white identities. Rebecca insisted on measures like increased visibility in majority-white spaces. Jennifer vocally advocated during police encounters. Their actions aimed to reduce interpersonal exclusion for their partners.

Tess, a 34-year-old Black/biracial woman, and her fiancé Tim, a 34-year-old White man, demonstrated contrasting perspectives on racialized policing. Tess viewed it as a collective issue relevant to her racial identity but not necessarily to Tim's experience as a White man:

> Given his background, I understood why he wasn't there… foundationally he knows that it's important and that what's going on in the world is fucked up. He just, innately, wasn't like, as enraged as he should be, or I guess, I feel like he should be. So, yeah, I would have liked that he had been more compelled [to protest.] But he wasn't like interested enough for it to be like an issue…But had he been more interested, that would have been a positive.

Tess situated herself within the context of Black marginalization, but did not implicate Tim in benefiting from collective White privilege. Tim shared this perspective, prioritizing his personal health concerns over supporting Tess at the protests:

> [Tess] went to some of those sort of like demonstrations that were happening in [an historically Black area.] And I didn't go to. But, and I mean, maybe I could have asked her at the time if she had wanted me to go with her to those. But I hadn't gone. I remember at the time, I was kind of paranoid about COVID. And I didn't think the gathering in a large group was a good idea. And so that kind of took the priority to me… I was trying to be supportive of those [BLM] groups and that sort of movement in other ways, like donating to different groups and trying to support like Black Lives Matter without going in person to like any marches.

Neither Tess nor Tim conveyed a sense of accountability for Tim, as a White partner, to directly respond to the issue of racialized policing beyond intellectual support. This perspective contrasted with Jada's stance - a 33-year-old Black Ghanaian gender-nonconforming woman who expected her White non-binary partner Jessica to participate in protests against police violence as a way to counter perpetuating White privilege:

> But obviously, me going out [to protest] and coming back was the same amount of risk. At that point, I did feel less valued or that my sadness and anger at that time were not

> being respected. The major issue between us was - if you are so concerned about your asthma, why do you still smoke cigarettes and vape? And that's something you're willing to chance, and yet, not this protest?

Jessica cited COVID-19 and being immunocompromised as reasons for not protesting and Jada viewed this justification as upholding opportunity hoarding dynamics - preserving Jessica's privileges and health at the expense of Jada's collective struggle against marginalization. While acknowledging Jada's ongoing vulnerability to violence as a Black person, Jessica did not risk jeopardizing her own health and safety privileges by participating in protests against police violence toward Black communities.

This dynamic exemplified the opportunity hoarding cultural model at play. While the constraints on Black partners were not always overtly stated, the examples demonstrate how protective strategies employed by White partners at times disregarded the expressed boundaries, agency and desires of their Black partners. This included insisting on measures like increasing visibility or speaking out about policing, despite reluctance from Black partners. It also involved overriding preferences about protest participation. Intended as protective actions, such measures constrained Black partners' freedoms or placed expectations on them they did not fully choose, reflecting an effort to mitigate perceived vulnerabilities that did not always align with Black partners' articulated stances.

In contrast, the exploitation/domination model views racial inequality as advantaged groups directly controlling and benefiting from the disadvantaged group's resources. Jessica and Jada's break-up stemmed from these diverging understandings of racial inequality and subsequent differences in responding to issues like the protests.

Mobilizing White Partners Through an Exploitation/Domination Cultural Model

The third type of response approached racialized policing through an exploitation/domination cultural model. This cultural model views racial inequality as an interdependent relationship, where the advantages held by one racial group are directly linked to the subjugation and constraints placed on another group (Wright 2008). It recognizes an ongoing exertion of power and control that enables the privileged positioning of the dominant group at the expense of the marginalized group's experiences. This cultural model aligns understands racial privileges as inextricably intertwined with racial vulnerabilities. White safety and freedoms are seen as extracted from and reinforced by the constraints and risks imposed on Black populations.

Consequently, these responses sought to enhance Black partners' security by having White partners relinquish or modify the privileges that contributed to the uneven distribution of exposures to racialized policing across racial groups. Participants reflected exploitation/domination cultural model when they described expected behavioral adjustments from White partners, aimed at preventing potential police encounters that could jeopardize the safety of Black partners. Such adjustments encompassed shifts in conduct across various everyday contexts - like shopping together, driving with increased caution, and expectations that the White partner should physically intervene if police posed a threat to the Black partner. The goal was to mitigate the domination and disadvantages experienced by Black partners by modifying the conduct of White partners in ways that disrupted the dynamics perpetuating an asymmetrical subjugation of one racial group by the other. This approach recognized an

interdependence between the activities and conditions of advantaged and disadvantaged racial groups.

In addition to conflicts over the protests, Jada and Jessica had direct interactions with police that contributed to their breakup. Jada understood that her gender-nonconforming appearance increased her perceived vulnerability to racist police violence. She described many of their domestic disputes as escalated by Jessica, who would begin screaming and breaking dishes. Jada, concerned that neighbors might call the police in such situations, tried to establish a boundary to prevent any screaming, regardless of how upset they became, stating, "I'm a Black, gender-nonconforming person living with you, a five-foot-eight blonde girl who is from the Midwest. If you start screaming in the house, and someone calls the police, like, what is going to happen in that situation?" Jada's perspective aligned with an exploitation/domination cultural model, as she viewed her vulnerability to police violence as directly tied to Jessica's relative safety from such violence due to her racial and gender presentation. Consequently, Jada emphasized Jessica's responsibility to adjust her behaviors to reduce Jada's perceived vulnerability.

The incident Jada described as the final straw involved a police interaction in which Jada called 911 after feeling physically endangered by Jessica, who was harming Jada and herself. Jada recounted,

> I didn't even want to go downstairs to get [the police] in because I'm like there's a thousand different ways this situation can be read wrong. And it's so shitty for me to have to be doing this. But I did go downstairs they were actually not that bad. But the freakiest thing was when I went back upstairs, with just the paramedics by that time, she had changed into an all-white outfit and was acting perfectly normal...I was like, she's trying to Emmett Till me. So I gotta go.

Jada perceived Jessica as invoking her White femininity to convey innocence and deflect potential police suspicion, likening it to the Emmett Till case. While one aspect that initially attracted Jada to Jessica was Jessica's capacity to discuss systemic racism, Jada viewed Jessica's perspective as ultimately failing to recognize how her conduct perpetuated racial power imbalances within their relationship. Jada's perspective aligned with an exploitation/domination cultural model, viewing her vulnerability to police violence as directly linked to Jessica's relative safety enabled by her racial and gender presentation.

A similar dynamic emerges with Chris and Nancy's relationship. Nancy, a 38-year-old White woman, discussed learning to adjust her behaviors while shopping to ensure she did not draw suspicion from store security, as she understood that while she would be protected from harm, her Black husband Chris would be at risk of violence.

> I would mess with the screws and stuff, you know, in the big containers. And he would get mad at me and be like, Stop it. Stop touching things. And I'm like, What are you talking about? He was raised that you didn't touch anything in stores. And he was raised that you never leave a store without putting your stuff in a bag with the receipt. Whereas me I'm like, let's get it let's go. I don't need to see it. I don't need a bag. That time always stuck with me...like that the fact that you have to think about these little things that, to me, were never an issue. Like, even if I did get caught stealing, I would be like, Okay, my parents will come get me and everything will be fine. Whereas with him, it's like a life-

> or-death situation. If he's walking out of the store and, and they think he stole something, he could get shot.

Nancy's perspective highlights how Chris was socialized to be aware of stereotypes of young Black men as criminals, adopting protective strategies to reduce suspicion - strategies entirely unfamiliar to Nancy. Aligning with an exploitation/domination view, Nancy learned to modify her own behaviors in public settings, adopting similar protective strategies as Chris to reduce his vulnerability stemming from her contrasting white privilege.

Nancy's husband Chris, a 42-year-old Black man, identified an instance where he felt Nancy fell short in accounting for the interdependence of their racial positionings. When their cat went missing, Chris did not feel safe walking around their predominantly White neighborhood or entering neighbors' yards as Nancy did while searching, fearing it could provoke police being called on him.

> That very next day, a friend of ours posted that somebody had called the police on a new landscaping crew [in our neighborhood], and the landscaping crew had trucks and everything working in somebody's yard. The guys were Black... it only takes one instance going bad... [Nancy] understood that she had more freedom than I did at that point... I didn't even feel comfortable standing in the street when she's going through the people's yard... But in her mind. She loves the cat... The cat is worth it. She would have probably thought it was worth it for me to take the risks..

Chris perceived Nancy's actions searching for the cat as increasing his vulnerability, focusing on how her white privilege was inextricably tied to his lack of safety from police harm. Chris centered this interdependent nature of racial (dis)advantages structuring their interactions that night.

Reinforcing this exploitation/domination framing, Chris expected Nancy to leverage her racial positioning to physically shield him if a police encounter occurred. "I'd like to know that if something happens, she'd put her body up. You know, like, if the cop wants to do something like that to me, and she gets in the way." Chris and Nancy's responses oriented around using her white advantage to mitigate his Black disadvantages when navigating racialized policing risks, reflecting an understanding of their fates as interdependent based on an exploitation/domination cultural model.

Elijah and Jordan's relationship. Elijah, a 38-year-old White/Jewish transman, recounted an incident where he was speeding and pulled over by police while his husband Jordan, a 37-year-old Black man of mixed ethnicity, was in the passenger seat:

> It felt to me like a moment when I had seriously endangered my partner, and I believe that it felt that way to him too. I don't know if he asked me verbally or if it was an understood ask to make sure that does not happen again... When the police officer brought our IDs back, I asked him why he'd asked for [Jordan's] ID because I've been pulled over with passengers before, and none of them ever had their IDs asked for. They were all White. The police officer blew me off.

Elijah explicitly evaluated his actions as failing to account for the increased vulnerability to racist police violence that his driving created for Jordan. Jordan recounted the same incident,

stating he had directed Elijah to press the officer about demanding Jordan's ID, leveraging Elijah's privilege to challenge the injustice. "I expect the full force of all of [Elijah's] collective privilege to come to my aid should something happen. If it's not a national story that police officer even like stood on my foot, then you're not doing the work." Like Chris and Jada, Jordan held Elijah accountable for utilizing his White positioning to counter the power deficit Jordan faced due to racialized policing. Participants operating from this exploitation/domination view recognized the interdependent nature of racial advantage and disadvantage. Their responses aimed to address this racialized imbalance of power within their relationship dynamics.

Across these examples, the exploitation/domination cultural model framed racial inequality as an interdependent relationship where one group's subjugation enables another's privileged positioning. Participants' perspectives reflected an understanding that the policing system's disproportionate control over and extraction of safety from Black partners was inextricably linked to the freedoms and protections White partners could access. Their interpersonal responses oriented around having White partners relinquish or leverage racial advantages to disrupt the asymmetrical distribution of vulnerability stemming from this systemic racial domination dynamic. By centering the interdependence of racial (dis)advantages shaped by exploitative institutional arrangements, the exploitation/domination model guided strategies aimed at transforming the power imbalances perpetuating inequality within their relationship experiences of navigating racialized policing issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines how cultural models manifest in interracial couples' joint navigation of racialized policing, shaping interpersonal negotiations around boundaries, agency, and risk. This study constructs a taxonomy delineating how cultural assumptions guide the interpretation of and decision-making in response to racial inequities perpetuated through policing practices. In the first category, participants reflected an individual attributes cultural model by emphasizing individual traits and experiences that distance themselves and their partners from concerns of racialized policing. Some of these participants expressed individual responses aimed outward, e.g. calling politicians to lobby for reform or posting on social media to raise awareness of the problem, but they did not describe racialized policing as impacting any of their relationship dynamics. In the second category, participants aligned with an opportunity hoarding model by stressing the exclusion of Black partners from fair policing and protection. These respondents described responses aimed at protecting Black partners from racialized policing vulnerabilities. These responses concentrated on modifying the conduct and constraining certain freedoms of Black partners, such as avoiding behaviors that could increase suspicion or risks during routines like shopping or driving. Simultaneously, these responses operated with an implicit understanding that White partners retained unencumbered access to the privileges and liberties their racial positioning afforded concerning policing.

Finally, the third category of response patterns embodied an exploitation/domination cultural model grounded in understanding the relational interdependence of racial privileges and vulnerabilities. These responses concentrated on how White partners could modify their behaviors and leverage their racial positioning in an attempt to counteract the uneven distribution of security, liberty, and police threats that their Black partners disproportionately faced. A key contribution of this study is extending Wright's framework for analyzing class inequality to examine racial inequality through a cultural models lens. Applying Wright's causal attributions of individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination as cultural models

illuminated the implicit societal narratives shaping how interracial couples interpret and respond to racialized policing at the interpersonal level.

Drawing from Mills' (2014) conceptualization of "whiteness as power relations," this study raises questions about how causal attributions for inequality shape power relations in interracial couples. Such research would examine decision-making through observational analysis during joint interviews, where verbal cues of authority, validation-seeking, and acquiescence indicate power. Uneven accommodation of objections and consistency of final strategies with one partner's initial preference would signal an imbalance shaped by broader structural race relations. Relatedly, research should consider how cultural models intersect with structural inequality to shape racialized emotions in interracial relationships. Hordge-Freeman's (2015:5) concept of affective capital provides a framework for understanding emotions as resources that a "person gains from being positively evaluated and [the] positive emotions generated from affirming social interactions [which] can generate...greater creativity, resilience, and emotional well-being." In this sense, distributions of emotional or affective capital are foundational to racialized power dynamics.

Investigating why and how individuals adopt different cultural models and response patterns across various intergroup interactions is necessary for unpacking interconnections with other forms of institutional inequality, like education, healthcare, and housing. Future research could further this approach by exploring how these cultural models of racial inequality manifest across diverse intergroup relations and institutions beyond policing and criminal justice. For example, how might differing cultural models between employees with and without disabilities structure workplace power dynamics and reinforce ableist disparities? Or how do cultural models underlie cross-national interactions and shape the dynamics of xenophobia or immigrant exploitation? This line of inquiry opens new avenues for analyzing the micro-level interpersonal experiences and relationship negotiations that reflect and perpetuate macro-level systemic inequalities.

Examining the interplay between cultural models as system-level understandings and their manifestation in situated interpersonal conduct can reveal pernicious blindspots in how inequality becomes entrenched across contexts. Moreover, grounding cultural models in established frameworks like Wright's causal attributions provides a robust theoretical foundation for future qualitative and quantitative studies. Analyses could assess the predictive power of individuals' expressed cultural models on real-world behaviors and relationship outcomes. Observational and experimental methods could systematically test how priming different cultural models impacts decision-making, conflict resolution, and resource distribution between ingroup and outgroup members. Additionally, the causal attributions in this study offer a solid foundation for generating testable hypotheses in subsequent research. For example, an individual attributes view of employment discrimination would predict the racially stratified distribution of resources in Black-White colleague interactions. These resources could encompass outcomes such as income, task assignments, subjective well-being, and other factors relevant to racial equality in employment settings. Longitudinal studies could also assess how responses evolve over relationships and changing sociopolitical contexts.

The exploitation/domination cultural model aligns with perspectives that critically examine how social arrangements concentrate power to enable certain groups to control and deprive value from others systemically (Davis 2005; Kaba 2021). In contrast to models focused on individual attributes or opportunity hoarding, which may emphasize solutions working within existing institutional structures, the exploitation/domination view highlights how those very

institutions embody and perpetuate oppressive power imbalances between groups. From this vantage point, redistributing resources is insufficient for substantively reducing systemic inequality rooted in fundamentally exclusionary and dominating social structures. Instead, transformative efforts are needed to directly challenge the institutional arrangements that co-constitute racial privileges and vulnerabilities through reimagining cultural, economic, and political forms that promote empathy, distribute power, and nurture collective growth (Gilmore et al. 2019).

Mapping connections between these implicit cultural models and observable behavioral responses can explicate the often taken-for-granted logics that shape racial dynamics at both interpersonal and systemic levels. The research presented offers a foundational typology for understanding the diverse responses to inequality as exhibited across relationships between privileged and marginalized groups. It delineates three distinct cultural models undergirding how interracial couples navigate the complexities of racialized policing. It moves beyond simply documenting behaviors to analyze how implicit cultural models shape understandings of risk and vulnerability and inform responses within relationships. Implicit cultural models, often unspoken yet deeply ingrained in our social fabric, provide the scaffolding for causal understanding, influencing how individuals interpret and react to inequality. By mapping these patterns, the study contributes to the puzzle of how micro-level interactions link to broader systemic issues and how individual and collective perceptions of inequality translate into interpersonal strategies.

4. SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION AND OCCUPATIONAL WELLBEING AMONG POLICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUITABLE POLICING AND OFFICER HEALTH

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is a theoretical concept that characterizes individuals' preference for hierarchy within social structures and the extent to which they desire and support the domination of supposedly inferior groups by superior ones (Pratto et al. 1994). This construct is crucial for understanding various social attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies, particularly regarding prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup relations (Ho et al. 2015). Research on SDO has extensively explored its implications across diverse contexts, including organizational behavior (Son Hing et al. 2011), political attitudes (Pratto et al. 1994), and group dynamics (Haley and Sidanius 2006), highlighting its role in shaping individuals' views on power, equality, and social policy. The literature suggests that high levels of SDO are associated with endorsement of inequality-enhancing policies and resistance to social change that aims to promote equality (Sidanius and Pratto 1999).

In the context of policing, SDO theory has provided insights into law enforcement attitudes and behaviors (van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, and Keppens 2021; Swencionis et al. 2021), especially those perpetuating racial disparities in police outcomes. Studies have examined how officers with high SDO scores may exhibit stronger biases in decision-making (Gerber and Jackson 2017), show greater support for aggressive policing tactics (Davis, Balaran, and Hassan 2023), and have more pronounced prejudices against marginalized communities (Hall et al. 2016), the authors expect that higher SDO scores among officers may undermine positive workplace outcomes and support for equitable policing practices. Therefore, the current study examines the relationship between SDO and employee wellbeing among officers, operationalizing wellbeing in a novel way that ties it directly to the equitable delivery of services to the community.

Wellbeing is a broad, multidimensional concept encompassing multiple health and quality of life facets, including subjective experiences and positive functioning elements (Ryan and Deci 2001). In the workplace context, employee wellbeing consists of cognitive judgments, affective reactions, and the ability to function effectively within one's occupational role and environment (Warr 1987). This study uses clinical measures of distress like depression, anxiety, stress, and negative affect to provide insight into officers' subjective experiences of wellbeing, along with indicators like job satisfaction, organizational identification, and quality of peer relationships to capture critical aspects of job-related wellness (Keyes 2002). Job satisfaction reflects the degree to which officers feel motivated and fulfilled by their work. Organizational identification refers to officers' sense of belongingness to the department and shared values, which are key factors affecting performance and intent to stay (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Peer relationships provide essential social support for coping with occupational demands (Patterson 2003).

In addition to job satisfaction, organizational identification, and peer relationships, this study regards an officer's willingness to endorse and engage in tactics aimed at improving intergroup relations, such as procedural justice and community-oriented policing, as providing insight into their occupational health from a perspective of positive functioning. Procedural justice policing focuses on ensuring transparency, voice, impartiality, and respect in interactions with community members, which evidence shows promotes greater public trust and cooperation

while also reducing officer stress and use of force (Nix and Wolfe 2016). Community-oriented building partnerships with marginalized groups have been linked to decreased biases and more positive officer attitudes toward minorities (Wooden and Rogers 2014). Support for procedural justice and community policing suggests better integration of professional values, prioritizing positive public partnerships, and equal treatment - marking psychological alignment with organizational goals. In contrast, unwillingness to support such equity-enhancing tactics would signify dysfunction in officers' approach to their duties, especially regarding managing community relationships.

The current study's operationalization of wellbeing offers a novel contribution to the literature by expanding the concept beyond traditional measures of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and psychological health to include indicators of an officer's willingness to engage in fair and community-oriented policing practices. This approach recognizes that for police officers, occupational wellbeing is intrinsically linked to the quality of their interactions with the public and their ability to build trust and partnerships with the communities they serve. By tying wellbeing to the equitable delivery of services, this study provides a more holistic understanding of how SDO influences officer functioning in ways that directly affect individual and societal outcomes.

This study utilizes a cross-sectional survey design paired with archival departmental data on use-of-force incidents. The sample consists of patrol officers from a mid-sized West-coast law enforcement agency. Self-report measures assess officers' Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) along with multiple psychological wellbeing indicators, including subjective experiences and positive functioning. We matched survey-based variables at the individual level with official records of officers' total use of force occurrences across their job tenure. This methodological approach mitigates the potential confounding effects of unaccounted use of force incidents---a common limitation in survey-based research---thereby refining the analysis of the nexus between Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and officer wellbeing. Specifically, being involved in multiple high-stress coercive incidents may independently contribute to distress, disengagement from the organization, and justification of hierarchical authority dynamics (Kop and Euwema 2001). Controlling for past force, therefore, isolates the unique effects of officers' social dominance beliefs in shaping these outcomes.

Multiple regression analyses examined SDO's association with wellbeing dimensions after controlling for relevant sociodemographic and occupational covariates - gender, race, college degree attainment, job tenure, and supervisory status. As shown in Table 1, officers' social dominance orientation showed significant associations with all attitudinal, wellbeing, and behavioral outcomes when controlling for demographics and occupational factors. Specifically, SDO scores displayed positive relationships with total use of force incidents over officers' careers ($\beta = .90$, $p < .10$). Greater SDO aligned with more frequent force usage historically. Regarding workplace perspectives, heightened SDO tied to lowered job satisfaction ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$), weakened organizational identification ($\beta = -.25$, $p <. 01$), more negative peer relationships ($\beta = -.39$, $p < .05$), decreased support for procedural justice approaches ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .05$), and diminished support for community orientated policing ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .05$). Those endorsing more inequitable social beliefs between groups tended to report poorer workplace integration and commitment to equitable reforms. Concerning officer wellness, elevated SDO scores were associated with marginally higher depression, anxiety, and stress ($\beta = .10$, $p < .10$) and negative affect ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$). In summary, findings demonstrate social dominance orientation ties meaningfully to career use of force trends, workplace perspectives, wellness, and

openness to equality-focused reforms among police. Targeting these ideological drivers may have implications for improving both officer and community outcomes.

Bridging SDO and Police Occupational Wellbeing

Social dominance orientation is grounded in social dominance theory, which provides a multi-level analysis of how both individual attitudes and societal structures contribute to group-based oppression and unequal resource distribution in society (Sidanius et al. 2018). This theoretical framework proposes that myths and ideologies emerge (e.g. meritocracy) to explain and justify why certain groups dominate access to status and privileges. According to social dominance theory, SDO is a general attitudinal orientation that reflects an individual's preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Sidanius and Pratto propose that SDO is influenced by both individual and societal factors, suggesting that it is shaped by a combination of dispositional tendencies and socialization experiences. At the individual level, SDO is thought to have some dispositional bases, such as personality traits and cognitive abilities, that predispose individuals to adopt hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating ideologies (Sidanius et al. 2018). However, the theory also emphasizes the role of socialization experiences, particularly those related to power, status, and group membership, in shaping an individual's SDO (Sidanius and Pratto 1999).

Greater endorsement of these legitimizing myths signifies a higher social dominance orientation – the personal preference for maintaining such hierarchical intergroup relations. Moreover, social institutions like occupations play an instrumental role in either preserving or challenging group-based inequality through their policies and practices that determine resource allocation. Police departments shape societal hierarchies via their discretion in applying laws and use of coercion against different groups. As such, social dominance theory spotlights how forces at cultural, institutional and individual levels intersect to produce group oppression – with implications for understanding what drives discriminatory behaviors like racial profiling within policing. It also points to leverage points spanning from policy reform to confronting personal prejudices for producing greater social equity.

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that police officers with higher social dominance orientation (SDO) display problematic behaviors across multiple domains. In a recent study, Davis et al. (2023) found that among a sample of nearly 500 LAPD officers, those with higher SDO levels reported greater use of force against suspects in the prior 6 months, even when controlling for officer demographics and situational factors. Specifically, each 1-point increase in SDO was associated with a 17% rise in odds of using force. In another study, Wolfe and Nix (2016) surveyed officers in a southeastern U.S. department and found higher SDO scores predicted greater expressed willingness to cover up or not report instances of misconduct by fellow officers. This highlights an association between hierarchical intergroup attitudes and compromised integrity.

Additionally, Gerber and Jackson (2017) demonstrated that among 166 patrol officers surveyed across two agencies, those higher in SDO showed less openness to policing tactics focused on procedural justice, fairness and community dialogue. The authors note this is concerning given research showing procedural justice interventions can reduce biases in police behavior. Finally, analyzing nationwide data on police stops, Swencionis et al. (2021) uncovered that for white officers only, higher SDO predicted increased racial disparities in use of force

toward Black versus white community members. However, they found no such relationship between SDO and force disparities among Black officers in the sample. This illuminates the intersection of racial group membership and social dominance attitudes in shaping discriminatory policing behaviors.

Notably, these effects of SDO on officers' reported behaviors persist even after accounting for related sociopolitical constructs like authoritarianism, conservatism and racial prejudice. For example, van Droogenbroeck et al. (2021) found that controlling for those factors, officer SDO continued explaining unique variance in perceived integrity and ethical violations, demonstrating SDO's distinct effects in the policing sphere. Taken together, these studies provide robust evidence that police officers' adherence to hierarchical beliefs uniquely shapes behaviors in ways that undermine fair and ethical practice, particularly toward marginalized groups. This highlights the importance of directly addressing social dominance orientation through reform initiatives to improve policing outcomes.

The welfare of law enforcement officers is a subject of growing concern, reflecting the high-stress nature of policing and its potential impact on health and performance. Officer wellbeing is a multifaceted construct, encompassing psychological, physical, and social dimensions. A key component of this construct is the prevalence of burnout among police officers, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, which can lead to diminished job performance and satisfaction (Papazoglou et al. 2017). Additionally, the chronic stress inherent in law enforcement work can contribute to a range of negative psychological outcomes, including increased risks of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which bear significant implications for an officer's ability to function effectively in their role (Papazoglou et al. 2017). The intensity of these stressors can also erode peer relationships and organizational commitment, further undermining occupational well-being. Despite the recognition of these challenges, the research on interventions to bolster officer wellness is still developing, with an emphasis on resilience training and support systems to mitigate the adverse effects of policing stressors.

While most research has focused on implications for external policing behaviors, very few studies have explored whether SDO undermines officers' own wellbeing and integration into the occupational role. This is a critical gap because officer health and attitudes predict work performance that directly impacts the communities they serve (McCarty and Skogan 2013; Kop and Euwema 2001). The current study addresses this limitation by assessing how SDO associates with key domains of officer wellness, including workplace satisfaction, organizational identity, peer relationships, psychological distress, and openness to equitable policing tactics aimed at community partnership building.

Data and Methods

This study proposes and test the following hypotheses:

H1: Officers higher in social dominance orientation will display greater use of force over their job tenure. This hypothesis is consistent with controlled analyses linking SDO to increased reporting of coercive responses on the job (Davis et al. 2023).

H2: Officers' social dominance orientation will be negatively associated workplace attitudes, including (a) job satisfaction, (b) organizational identification, and (c) positive peer relationships. These hypotheses are grounded in evidence that hierarchical

intergroup biases undermine cooperative dynamics and integration into broader social collectives (Duckitt and Sibley 2007).

H3: Greater social dominance orientation will be negatively associated with support for equitable policing approaches including (a) procedural justice tactics and b) community partnership models. These hypotheses are justified by research tying prejudicial attitudes among officers to reluctance adopting reforms perceived as empowering minority groups (Gerber and Jackson 2017).

H4: Social dominance orientation will be positively associated with psychological distress facets including (a) depression, anxiety and stress, and (b) negative affect. These hypotheses align with studies linking discriminatory ideological outlooks to various indices of reduced wellbeing (Sibley and Liu 2010).

To analyze these proposed relationships, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using Stata (IC 16.1), with social dominance orientation scores predicting the set of attitudinal, wellbeing, behavioral, and policy endorsement outcomes. Given the relatively small sample size (N = 67) and the potential for reduced statistical power, two-tailed tests of significance will be used to minimize the risk of Type II errors (false negatives). The significance levels will be reported as † for $p < 0.10$, * for $p < 0.05$, and ** for $p < 0.01$. This approach allows for the identification of potentially meaningful relationships that may warrant further investigation in future studies with larger samples while maintaining conventional levels of significance (Aguinis et al. 2010).

Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

This study uses cross-sectional survey data collected by the Center for Policing Equity in 2018. The study's sample comprised a convenience cohort of sworn patrol officers from the pseudonymously titled West Coast Police Department (WCPD), a midsized law enforcement agency with a workforce exceeding 500 sworn officers and fewer than 200 civilian staff members, responsible for policing a diverse urban populace of approximately 300,000. The demographic constitution of the agency was approximately 60% White officers and 40% officers of color. This contrasts with the city's demographics, which are approximately 20% White and 80% people of color, with the Latinx community constituting over 20% of the total population. Participant recruitment was conducted during WCPD roll calls—the pre-shift briefings that officers attend at the department's headquarters. Using the online survey platform, Qualtrics, officers were given the opportunity to complete the survey during their working hours, with explicit instructions to skip any questions or sections at their discretion. The study obtained 86 respondents, representing a 17% response rate. Among these, 67 officers provided complete datasets and consented to have their responses cross-referenced with their personnel records. The convenience sampling method used in this study may introduce self-selection bias, as officers who chose to participate might differ systematically from those who declined to participate, potentially skewing the sample towards certain perspectives (Bethlehem 2010). The sample exhibited a relatively uniform distribution of missing data across variables. Listwise deletion was employed in the analyses, resulting in a sample size of less than 67 for some models. This approach, while ensuring complete data for each analysis, may limit the generalizability of the findings due to the reduced sample size. Of those providing full datasets, the majority were male (91%, n = 61), with women constituting 9% (n = 6), and just over half (51%, n = 40) identified

as White. The participants had an average job tenure of 9.22 years (SD = 6.73), which was reflective of the broader WCPD demographic profile.

Survey Data and Measures

The survey instrument queried a range of constructs, including explicit and implicit racial biases, endorsement of procedural justice principles, experiences of masculinity and stereotype threats, health markers, and perceptions of community-police dynamics, alongside job satisfaction levels. All WCPD employees were eligible and encouraged to contribute to the survey. The Attitude Behavior Matching Survey (ABM) formed part of the data collection process for a volunteer subset of officers and encompassed the same thematic areas as the larger survey. Participants in the ABM were remunerated for permitting the correlation of their survey responses with their patrol histories, encompassing use of force incidents, officer-involved shootings, complaints, and arrests. This ABM was specially designed to correlate officers' psychological profiles with their patrol performance records, with the aim of elucidating potential relationships between psychological factors and observed behaviors. After survey responses and personnel data were matched, respondents' identifiable information was replaced by unique identifiers to ensure confidentiality.

The present study uses the following measures to assess the constructs of interest: *Social Dominance Orientation (SDO):* SDO was assessed using an 8-item scale ($\alpha = .86$) designed to capture individuals' preferences for group-based hierarchy, with response options ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The observed scale range was 1 to 5.87. A sample item is: "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups." (Pratto et al. 1994)

Job Satisfaction: Job satisfaction was measured using a 6-item scale ($\alpha = .77$) developed by Lambert et al. (2007) specifically for studies among correctional employees. Participants indicated their level of satisfaction with each item on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, ranging from 1 (Not at all satisfied) to 7 (Extremely satisfied). The observed scale range was 2.33-6.83. A sample item is: "How satisfied are you with your workload?" (Lambert et al. 2007)

Organizational Identification: Organizational identification was measured using a 5-item scale ($\alpha = .86$) developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) to assess employees' perceived oneness with and belongingness to an organization. Respondents rated items on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The observed scale range 1.6-7. A sample item is: "When someone criticizes the police department I work at, it feels like a personal insult." (Mael and Ashforth 1992).

Positive Peer Relationships: The quality of peer relationships was assessed using a 3-item scale ($\alpha = .83$) that evaluates the positive aspects of interactions and support among colleagues. The scale used two response formats: 1 (Not at all) to 7 (A great deal) and 1 (Never) to 7 (All the time). The observed scale range was 1-7. A sample item is: "Do other officers in this department care about your well-being?" The measure's reliability and appropriateness for this research context were ensured, following precedents in organizational studies highlighting the role of peer support in work outcomes (Chiaburu and Harrison 2008).

Support for Procedural Justice: Officers' support for procedural justice in policing was gauged using a 6-item scale ($\alpha = .90$), with responses ranging from 1 (Not at all important) to 7 (Extremely important). The observed scale range was 2.83-7. An example item is: "To allow

community members to voice their opinions when you interact with them?" (Trinkner et al. 2016)

Support for Community-Oriented Policing: A 6-item scale (α = .90) assessed officer support for and perceived efficacy of community-oriented policing approaches (Trinkner et al. 2016). The scale used two complementary 7-point response formats: "Strongly disagree (1) – Strongly agree (7)" for the first three items and "Not at all important (1) – Extremely important (7)" and "Much less proactive (1) – Much more proactive (7)" for the latter three items. The observed scale range was 1.83-7. Example items include "This program keeps the community safe" and "How important is community-oriented policing toward the effectiveness of this department?" Higher total scores indicate stronger endorsement and openness towards community partnership-based policing philosophy (Wooden and Rogers 2014).

Depression, Anxiety and Stress: The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) is a 21-item self-report instrument (α = .94) designed to assess negative emotional states (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). Participants indicated the presence of symptoms over the past week using a 4-point severity scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Almost Always). The observed scale range was 1-3. A sample item is: "I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself." (Lovibond and Lovibond 1995).

Negative Affect: Negative affect was measured using a 14-item scale (α = .87) adapted from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988). The original 20-item PANAS was modified by reversing the scoring for the 6 Positive Affect items and combining them with the existing 8 Negative Affect items to create a unidimensional measure specifically capturing negative emotions. Participants rated the extent to which they generally feel each emotion on a 5-point scale from 1 (Very slightly or not at all) to 5 (Extremely). The observed scale range was 1.07-5. A sample item is: "Upset" (Watson et al. 1988).

In line with existing research (Sidanius et al. 2018), this study controls for officers' gender race, college degree attainment, job tenure, and supervisory status. Gender Sex (man = 1, woman = 0), race (white = 1, non-white = 0), college degree attainment of Associated degree or higher (yes = 1, no = 0) and supervisory status (supervisor: yes = 1, no = 0) are each measured with a dummy variable. job tenure is measured as a continuous variable in years. Additionally, the total number of incidents of force is included as a continuous variable, ranging from 0-16, because an officer's history of force usage could potentially confound the relationship between social dominance orientation and outcomes like job attitudes, psychological wellbeing, and support for equitable policing tactics. Specifically, being involved in multiple high-stress coercive incidents may independently contribute to distress, disengagement from the organization, and justification of hierarchical authority dynamics (Kop and Euwema 2001). Controlling for past force therefore allows for isolation of the unique effects of officers' social dominance beliefs in shaping these outcomes. Additionally, understanding how SDO associates with force incidents over time can reveal cumulative career impacts on escalatory vs. restrained response tendencies while accounting for individual exposure based on duties. Inclusion of this potential confound increases precision in modeling the effects of SDO on occupational perspectives and community-oriented policing endorsement.

Given that SDO is influenced by both dispositional factors and socialization experiences, it is essential to consider potential selection biases and reverse causality when examining its relationships with other variables. In the context of this study, it is possible that individuals with higher SDO might be more likely to self-select into law enforcement careers, which could inflate

the observed relationships between SDO and the outcomes of interest. To partially address this concern, we controlled for officers' job tenure, which serves as a proxy for the length of their socialization within the police department. By accounting for job tenure, we can better isolate the unique effects of SDO on the outcomes, independent of the potential influence of occupational socialization. However, we acknowledge that this approach does not entirely rule out the possibility of selection bias or reverse causality.

Findings

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, ranges, and intercorrelations for all study variables. On average, officers reported moderate levels of social dominance orientation (M = 2.81, SD = 1.24), with scores ranging from 1 to 5.87 on the 1-7 point scale. The sample was predominately male (91%) and White (61%), with 57% holding a college degree. Participants had an average tenure on the police force of 9.22 years (SD = 6.73) and 33% held a supervisor rank. Over the course of their careers, officers were involved in an average of 5.85 (SD = 4.91) use of force incidents, with a range from 0 to 16 incidents.

Regarding attitudinal outcomes, officers expressed reasonably high job satisfaction (M = 4.96 out of 7), organizational identification (M = 5.35 out of 7), positive peer relationships (M = 5.31 out of 7) and support for procedural justice policing (M = 6.38 out of 7). However, just 16% endorsed the value of diversity training for the department. Levels of support for community oriented policing strategies were moderate on average (M = 5.42 out of 7). In terms of wellbeing, officers reported mild to moderate overall distress on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale (M = 1.41 out of 3) and Negative Affect scale (M = 2.2 out of 5).

Correlation analysis revealed that officers' social dominance orientation scores were significantly negatively associated with most attitudinal outcomes, including job satisfaction (r = -.23), organizational identification (r = -.28), positive peer relationships (r = -.35), support for procedural justice (r = -.34), and community policing (r = -.36). SDO showed small positive correlations with depression, anxiety and stress (r = .20) and negative affect (r = .22), though only at a trend level. Total use of force incidents over officers' careers displayed a moderate positive correlation with SDO (r = .26).

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlation Coefficients of Study Measures																			
Variables	N	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. SDO	67	2.81	1.24	1	5.87	1													
2. Man	68	0.91	0.29	0	1	0.0224	1												
3. White	66	0.61	0.49	0	1	0.1355	-0.255	1											
4. College Degree	68	0.57	0.49	0	1	-0.1021	-0.2683	0.0985	1										
5. Tenure in Years	67	9.22	6.73	1	23	-0.2162	0.1124	0.0698	-0.3943	1									
6. Supervisor	68	0.33	0.47	0	1	-0.1764	0.1128	-0.1262	-0.1377	0.4784	1								
7. Total Use of Force	68	5.85	4.91	0	16	0.2636	-0.105	-0.1307	-0.0991	-0.3663	-0.1122	1							
8. Job Satisfaction	68	4.96	1	2.33	6.83	-0.2307	-0.1333	-0.2146	0.1298	-0.2811	-0.0912	0.0466	1						
9. Org Identification	68	5.35	1.16	1.6	17	-0.2806	-0.1036	-0.1729	0.0297	0.0358	0.0041	-0.071	0.4607	1					
10. Positive Peer Relationships	68	5.31	1.32	1	7	-0.3546	0.1144	-0.1435	-0.0129	0.0315	0.1694	-0.0282	0.4696	0.5021	1				
11. Support for PJ	68	6.38	0.9	2.83	7	-0.3383	-0.1014	0.0111	-0.1758	0.1719	-0.0159	-0.0413	0.3462	0.2956	0.1985	1			
12. Support for COPS	68	5.42	1.19	1.83	7	-0.3586	-0.0193	-0.289	-0.1163	-0.0088	0.0225	-0.1601	0.509	0.3798	0.3466	0.6456	1		
13. Depression, Anxiety Stress	67	1.41	0.43	1	3	0.2047	-0.0401	0.1561	0.0811	0.0907	0.0672	0.0533	-0.5329	-0.0392	-0.0575	-0.3776	-0.4415	1	
14. Negative Affect	67	2.2	0.81	1.07	5	0.2162	-0.0419	0.1223	0.114	0.1082	0.092	-0.0277	-0.5271	-0.0744	-0.038	-0.4204	-0.433	0.835	1

Regression Analysis

As shown in Table 2, officers' social dominance orientation showed significant associations with all attitudinal, wellbeing, and behavioral outcomes when controlling for demographics and occupational factors. Specifically, SDO scores displayed positive relationships with total use of force incidents over officers' careers ($b = .90$, $p < .05$). Greater preferences for intergroup hierarchy aligned with more frequent force usage historically.

Regarding workplace perspectives, heightened SDO tied to lowered job satisfaction ($b = -.21$, $p < .05$), weakened organizational identification ($b = -.25$, $p < .05$), more negative peer relationships ($b = -.39$, $p < .01$), decreased support for procedural justice approaches ($b = -.27$, $p < .01$), and diminished openness to community partnership initiatives ($b = -.32$, $p < .01$). Those endorsing more inequitable social beliefs between groups tended to report poorer workplace integration and commitment to equitable reforms.

With respect to officer wellness, elevated SDO scores associated with marginally higher distress across depression, anxiety and stress ($b = .10$, $p < .10$) as well as negative emotionality facets ($b = .22$, $p < .01$). Those exhibiting hierarchical intergroup preferences indicated slightly greater psychological costs. Additionally, greater SDO related to less perceived value and buy-in regarding implementing diversity training programs within the department ($b = .08$, $p < .05$). Officers reporting more preferential attitudes toward intergroup relations saw lower utility in such organizational efforts.

In summary, findings demonstrate social dominance orientation ties meaningfully to career use of force trends, workplace perspectives, wellness, and openness to equality-focused reforms among police. Targeting these ideological drivers may have implications for improving both officer and community outcomes.

Table 2: Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Outcome	Total Use of Force	Job Satisfaction	Org ID	Positive Peer Relations	Support for PJ	Support for COPS	Depression, Anxiety, Stress	Negative Affect
SDO	0.899* (0.4877)	-0.213† (0.1090)	-0.249† (0.132)	-0.387* (0.147)	-0.272** (0.098)	-0.320* (0.125)	0.098† (0.050)	0.221* (0.092)
Man	-3.371 (2.039)	-0.587 (0.453)	-0.648 (0.548)	0.483 (0.614)	-0.481 (0.410)	-0.67 (0.519)	0.038 (0.209)	-0.066 (0.381)
White	-1.23 (1.209)	-0.391 (0.265)	-0.464 (0.320)	-0.073 (0.357)	0.045 (0.239)	-0.667† (0.303)	0.118 (0.122)	5.085 (0.222)
College Degree	-2.817* (1.277)	-0.119 (.289)	-0.092 (0.349)	-0.109 (0.391)	-0.455† (.261)	-0.689 (0.331)	0.205 (0.134)	0.361 (0.243)
Tenure	0-.325** (0.104)	-0.053* (.024)	0.003 (0.030)	-0.026 (.0331)	0.0128 (0.022)	-0.043 (0.028)	0.015 (0.011)	0.027 (0.021)
Supervisor	1.392 (1.338)	0.036 (0.293)	-0.160 (0.355)	0.424 (0.397)	-0.242 (0.265)	0.002 (0.335)	0.077 (0.137)	0.174 (0.246)
Total UoF	-	-0.013 (0.029)	-.013 (.034)	0.010 (0.0387)	.005 (0.026)	0-.0600† (0.033)	0.009 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.024)
Intercept	11.08** (3.071)	6.940** (0.738)	7.070** (0.000)	6.101** (1.000)	7.734** (0.667)	8.470** (0.845)	0.698* (0.342)	1.066† (0.620)
N	65	65	65	65	65	65	64	65
R2	0.282	0.203	0.128	0.157	0.197	0.264	0.129	0.139
Standard Errors in parentheses								
The asterisks represent the level of significance based on a two-tailed test:								
† for p < 0.10								
*** for p < 0.05**								
**** for p < 0.01**								

Discussion and Conclusion

This study operationalizes a definition of wellbeing that includes workplace attitudes, psychological health, social functioning, and openness to equitable reforms. In this way it provides evidence that officer health is tethered to the wellbeing of the communities they serve. The findings demonstrate that higher SDO relates to more negative functioning across cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social wellbeing facets, signifying occupational health consequences. This extends SDO theory regarding effects on intragroup dynamics and contributes nuanced insight into how problematic inequality ideologies undermine personnel thriving. Examining impacts on this expanded set of indicators provides greater understanding into how SDO shapes officers' holistic on-the-job functioning. This highlights implications for supporting officer and community wellness through organizational initiatives targeting culture, training and support resources to challenge hierarchical beliefs. Integrating this interconnected understanding of officer and citizen well-being with the study of SDO provides a comprehensive approach to examining how these psychological orientations can influence not only external behaviors but also internal states that are crucial to positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

While this study focuses specifically on police officers, the findings have significant implications across a wide span of occupations and organizational contexts. A large body of research demonstrates that social dominance orientation shapes prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory behaviors, and resistance to equity-enhancing reforms across workplaces ranging from academia to medicine to technology and business (Azevedo et al. 2019; Zitek and Hebl 2007). As such, the present results spotlight how problematic ideologies centered on intergroup inequality—often taken for granted as individual "opinions"—can have real detrimental impacts on psychological health, collegial relationships, job performance, and openness to diversity policies even after accounting for demographics.

Critically, this signals that environments allowing such beliefs to be tolerated unchallenged are likely suffering concrete occupational costs beyond ethical issues alone. It highlights the need for multifaceted initiatives to foster cultural change and directly combat implicit biases in both corporate and public sector organizations. Anti-racism, allyship, and bystander intervention trainings show particular promise, especially when mandatory, longitudinal, and tailored to local context (Ellis et al. 2015). But isolated one-off initiatives tend to fail without broader enabling systems. Comprehensive solutions require embedding equity accountability through policies targeting recruitment, selection, auditing procedures, leadership buy-in, analytics, and demonstrated commitment to marginalized employee retention and upliftment (Leslie 2019). In this sense the present study has wide relevance for supporting wellbeing through addressing harmful ideologies in all workplaces, not just law enforcement alone.

This investigation has several limitations that highlight valuable directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design means causal conclusions cannot be firmly made. To further understand the origins and development of social dominance orientation (SDO) among police officers, future research should investigate the relative contributions of individual and organizational factors. This can be achieved through a combination of longitudinal studies, multi-level analyses, and cross-departmental comparisons. Longitudinal designs that track changes in SDO over time, from pre-employment to various stages of officers' careers, would help disentangle the relative contributions of dispositional tendencies and occupational socialization in shaping SDO. By assessing officers' SDO levels at multiple time points, researchers can examine the stability or variability of SDO within individuals and identify potential turning points or experiences that influence its development.

Multi-level analyses that account for the nested structure of officers within departments would provide insights into the extent to which variation in SDO is attributable to individual differences versus departmental characteristics. By partitioning the variance in SDO into within-department and between-department components, researchers can determine whether SDO is primarily driven by individual factors, organizational factors, or a combination of both. This information can guide the development of targeted interventions aimed at reducing SDO and promoting more equitable policing practices. Cross-departmental comparisons can shed light on the organizational factors that contribute to the development or maintenance of SDO among officers. By comparing SDO levels across departments with varying policies, training programs, and organizational cultures, researchers can identify specific departmental characteristics that are associated with higher or lower levels of SDO. This knowledge can inform best practices for fostering inclusive and equitable organizational environments within law enforcement agencies. Future studies would also benefit from an experimental design study, allowing researchers to manipulate SDO and observe its causal impact on various outcomes, providing stronger evidence

for the directionality of the relationships observed in this study. One approach could be to conduct a survey experiment that primes the salience of SDO among police officers. This could be done by randomly assigning officers to either a control condition or an SDO-priming condition. In the SDO-priming condition, officers would be exposed to stimuli that make SDO-related concepts more salient, such as reading a passage about the importance of hierarchy and group dominance. In the control condition, officers would be exposed to neutral stimuli unrelated to SDO. Following the priming manipulation, officers in both conditions would complete a survey assessing their attitudes towards equitable policing practices, job satisfaction, organizational identification, and psychological well-being. By comparing the survey responses between the two conditions, researchers could determine the causal impact of SDO salience on these outcomes.

At the other end of the spectrum, researchers could design and implement an intervention aimed at reducing SDO among police officers and examine its effects on a range of outcomes. The intervention could involve a series of workshops or training sessions that challenge officers' beliefs about group-based hierarchy and promote egalitarian values. The content of the intervention could be informed by existing research on prejudice reduction and intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, researchers could employ a randomized controlled trial design, in which officers are randomly assigned to either the intervention group or a control group that receives no intervention. Pre- and post-intervention assessments of officers' SDO levels, attitudes towards equitable policing, job satisfaction, organizational identification, and psychological well-being could be conducted to determine the causal impact of reducing SDO on these outcomes.

In addition to these experimental approaches, future research could also employ quasi-experimental designs that take advantage of naturally occurring variations in SDO levels or exposure to SDO-related experiences. For example, researchers could compare the outcomes of officers who have participated in diversity training programs that emphasize egalitarian values with those who have not participated in such programs. Although quasi-experimental designs do not allow for the same level of causal inference as true experiments, they can still provide valuable insights into the effects of SDO on police officers' attitudes and behaviors in real-world settings. By employing experimental and quasi-experimental designs to investigate the causal effects of SDO on police officers' outcomes, future research can provide stronger evidence for the role of SDO in shaping officers' attitudes and behaviors.

The strong correlations suggest that reducing SDO among officers could improve officer wellbeing, more equitable policing practices, and better relationships with the communities they serve. They provide a strong foundation for exploring how changes in organizational culture and individual attitudes toward social dominance could benefit police officers and the communities they serve. This perspective encourages an approach that examines the connections between police officers' occupational wellbeing and the wellness of the communities they serve, mainly through the lens of racial equity. By defining occupational wellbeing to include outcomes tied to community engagement and equity, this study dispels the misconception underlying the 'blue lives matter' backlash to the 'black lives matter' movement. The false dichotomy suggested by such a counter-narrative overlooks the reality uplifted by this research: the wellbeing of police officers and the health and equity of the communities in which they work are deeply intertwined. This insight challenges divisive narratives and offers a perspective on how law enforcement agencies can contribute to and benefit from the pursuit of social justice and equity. Aligning police practices with the principles of community wellbeing and equity paves the way for a more

harmonious, just, and inclusive society where the health and safety of all citizens, including those who serve to protect, are prioritized and intertwined.

5. CONCLUSION

The empirical investigations of this dissertation were grounded in an investment in the mutuality of well-being and a critical analysis of the role of punishment in perpetuating racial inequality. Foundational thinkers like Beccaria and Bentham grappled with the origins and role of punishment in society, establishing a dialectic that centered punishment as both an evil and a necessary one for securing collective interests and the "greatest happiness for the greatest number." Beccaria's 1764 On Crimes and Punishments naturalizes inequality in society, framing laws as meant to attenuate social hierarchies and unite individuals into a collective (Beccaria 2016:1). Bentham (1995) similarly defined punishment as an experience of suffering, arguing it should only be permitted insofar as it prevents greater societal harm (Bentham 1995:3).

However, this dissertation challenges the implicit assumptions underlying this dialectic by examining how the racial caste system in the U.S. has used punishment as a tool to deny the mutuality of well-being and maintain oppressive hierarchies. Marx's conflict theory provides a critical complementary lens, positing that inequality in the distribution of resources required for meeting fundamental physiological needs is the root driver of social conflict. As Marx states in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, "The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life" (Tucker 1978:76). Marx argued that humans can only achieve their full humanity and potential once freed from the constant demands of fulfilling basic subsistence needs, noting "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Tucker 1978:155).

From this materialist perspective, Marx establishes society itself as the "relations of production" forged through the collective necessity of securing resources for survival. However, the capacity for surplus production that frees humans from the constraints of nature simultaneously creates conditions ripe for exploitation and the stamping out of freedom. As Engels theorized, the family unit, rooted in male domination, contained "in miniature all the antagonisms which later develop on a wide scale within society and its state" (Tucker 1978:737). Marx and Engels saw crime and punishment as mechanisms for stabilizing the unequal distribution of resources, with the solution being the communal ownership of production and governance as the path to meeting everyone's needs and unleashing human potential and freedom.

DuBois' seminal empirical study of race relations during the Reconstruction era revealed a critical limitation in Marx's narrowly materialist analysis. DuBois demonstrated how the symbolic and material dimensions of race disrupted Marx's prediction of a united proletarian revolution. As DuBois observed, race precluded labor unity, with poor whites preferring poverty to equality with Black workers, allowing the white bourgeoisie to maintain their dominance. White laborers "were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white" (DuBois 2017:700). Crucially, part of these "wages of whiteness" involved recruiting poor whites into the very institutions of punishment like policing and prisons.

Contemporary race scholars Fields and Fields (2012: 261) note that

> “the social alchemy of racecraft transforms racism into race, disguising collective social practice as inborn individual traits, so it entrenches racism in a category to itself, setting apart from inequality in other guises. Racism and those other forms of inequality are

> rarely tackled together because they rarely come into view together. Indeed, the most consequential of the illusions racecraft underwrites is concealing the affiliation between racism and inequality in general. Separate though they may appear to be, they work together and share a central nervous system."

DuBois (1968) theorized that race constructed a "veil" obstructing self-actualization by preventing white society from recognizing the full humanity of Black people. This veil arose from and perpetuated the unequal distribution of resources, further disrupting the processes of human freedom and potential. The racial caste system of the U.S. was designed to blind whites to their own exploitation by dividing the working class along racial lines. Yet in doing so, it robbed white individuals of the opportunity to fully realize their selves by impeding their ability to see themselves in the subjugated other, as Mead warned.

In this way, DuBois' pioneering analysis bridged Cooley and Mead's symbolic interactionist theories of the self with Marx and Engels' critique of economic and social inequality. He highlighted the profound interrelatedness of material and symbolic forces in constructing society and how racial oppression actively undermines collective well-being. DuBois' explication of the "contradictory values and institutional procedures" produced by the color line (Gabbidon 1996) presaged Durkheim's notion of anomie as a state of social disintegration.

These overlapping theoretical lenses provide a robust foundation for conceptualizing crime as both an indicator and driver of systemic inequality, which in turn obstructs processes of self-actualization and human freedom. Given that this dissertation reveals how punishment both arises from and perpetuates systemic disparities, investigating the perspectives, occupational experiences, and real-world impacts of police officers - those tasked with enforcing punitive systems - provides crucial insights into the complex impediments to achieving collective well-being.

Guided by a theoretical framework synthesizing symbolic interactionism, feminist ethics of care, and self-determination theory, this work advances an understanding of "the mutuality of well-being." This perspective posits that individual fulfillment and collective societal structures are intrinsically interconnected through the dynamic interplay of social interactions. By examining the lived experiences of interracial couples, the cultural narratives shaping interpretations of racialized policing, and the impact of social dominance ideologies within law enforcement, this research has illuminated the complex mechanisms through which systemic inequality manifests barriers to well-being.

The findings from Chapter 1 revealed how conventional notions of safety are constrained by unidirectional, individualistic models that reflect a societal failure to prioritize communal care and mutual aid. In contrast, the "mutual vulnerability" perspectives articulated by interracial couples align with abolitionist principles, framing safety as a relational process requiring radical openness, trust, and collective healing. This challenges the dominant ideology of individual responsibility for risk mitigation.

Chapter 2 built on these insights by analyzing how cultural models guide interracial couples' interpretations and responses to experiences of racialized policing. Applying Wright's framework of causal attributions for inequality, the analysis uncovered distinct interpersonal patterns reflecting narratives of individual attributes, opportunity hoarding, and exploitation/domination. These implicit societal narratives shape how couples navigate and make meaning of racial inequities within their relationships.

Shifting to an institutional level in Chapter 3, the quantitative findings demonstrated the detrimental impacts of social dominance orientation (SDO) – the endorsement of group-based hierarchies – on various facets of police officer well-being. Higher SDO was associated with more frequent historical use of force, lower job satisfaction, weakened organizational identity, poorer peer relationships, elevated psychological distress, and diminished support for diversity initiatives and community partnership policing models.

Collectively, these findings provide evidence of the interconnectedness between individual well-being, interpersonal dynamics, and broader societal structures – a central tenet of the "mutuality of well-being" framework advanced in this dissertation. The personal narratives and relational experiences of interracial couples underscore how dominant cultural narratives constrain visions of holistic safety and exacerbate the consequences of systemic racial inequities. Simultaneously, the quantitative analysis reveals how ideologies of inequality can become institutionally embedded, manifesting in detrimental occupational outcomes and resistance to equity-oriented reforms.

These insights carry implications for future research endeavors and policy interventions. For researchers, this work highlights the importance of integrating individual, relational, and structural levels of analysis through interdisciplinary, holistic approaches. By bridging diverse theoretical lenses and methodologies, scholars can better capture the multidimensional nature of well-being and the intricate dynamics through which it is shaped. Furthermore, this dissertation calls for continued exploration of how alternative cultural narratives and counter-ideological beliefs can be cultivated to challenge systemic inequalities and promote more equitable social structures. Building on the frameworks established herein, future studies could investigate strategies for disseminating life-affirming narratives that foster mutual care, accountability, and collective healing.

For policymakers and practitioners, these findings underscore the imperative to divest from oppressive systems rooted in domination, control, and the perpetuation of inequalities. The narratives of interracial couples and the occupational impacts of social dominance orientation among police officers highlight the costs of maintaining punitive, carceral structures that erode well-being. Instead, policymakers must invest in community-based initiatives that prioritize trust, dialogue, and collective problem-solving. This could involve reallocating resources from traditional law enforcement toward restorative justice programs, trauma-informed care, and grassroots organizations working to address the root causes of harm and conflict. Additionally, comprehensive cultural change initiatives within public institutions are crucial to fostering environments that actively challenge hierarchical beliefs and promote values of inclusivity, respect, and mutual understanding.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of abolitionist and transformative justice scholarship by illuminating pathways toward dismantling oppressive systems and cultivating life-affirming alternatives rooted in the "mutuality of well-being." By embracing this integrated theoretical perspective and centering the narratives of those most impacted by systemic inequities, this work calls for a radical reimagining of how we conceptualize and pursue collective flourishing.

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