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EDITED BY
Myriam N. Bechtoldt,
EBS University of Business and Law, Germany

REVIEWED BY
Joy Beatty,
Eastern Michigan University, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Armand Bam
✉ armandb@sun.ac.za

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Commentary: "Medice, cura te ipsum!" a (mini) review of how white men are portrayed in diversity management research

Armand Bam *

Stellenbosch Business School, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

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A Commentary on "Medice, cura te ipsum!" a (mini) review of how white men are portrayed in diversity management research

by Gildenhuis, D., Bosch, A., and Boroş, S. (2025). *Front. Organ. Psychol.* 3:1525043. doi: 10.3389/forgp.2025.1525043

1 Introduction

Gildenhuis et al. (2025) offer a provocative call for reflexivity in how diversity management scholarship portrays dominant group members (DGMs), particularly white men. Their analysis suggests that the field's reliance on adversarial framings risks entrenching polarization and alienation, proposing instead a shift toward reflexive and paradox-oriented perspectives that emphasize interdependence and cooperation.

This commentary recognizes the intent to advance constructive dialogue within diversity scholarship. It is also possible to acknowledge that certain forms of negative framing can, at times, contribute to defensiveness and backlash, a point the authors raise with some merit. However, I argue that the authors' approach, though well-intentioned risks reinforcing the very imbalance it seeks to redress. By decoupling *framing* from *power*, and by abstracting "dominant group members" from structural and historical context, the review may inadvertently reproduce a narrative of white male disenfranchisement rather than critically interrogating the social structures that sustain inequality. The concern, therefore, is not that they identify a problem, but that their reframing risks obscuring the underlying dynamics of privilege, which make discomfort an expected, indeed necessary part of equity work.

2 Adversariality, discomfort, and the role of accountability

The review's central dichotomy, *adversarial vs. reflexive* framing, rests on the assumption that highlighting inequity and privilege constitutes an oppositional stance. Yet within critical and feminist traditions, the act of naming structural injustice is not "adversarial"; it is foundational to ethical reflexivity (Ahmed, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991).

The categorization of critical analyses as “adversarial” effectively delegitimizes scholarship that foregrounds power and oppression, treating discomfort as divisiveness rather than as epistemic accountability.

At the same time, it is fair to acknowledge that certain forms of negative framing can produce defensiveness or backlash among dominant group members. However, this effect does not invalidate critique. Rather, it underscores the need to distinguish adversariality that names injustice from adversariality that forecloses dialogue, a distinction the current review collapses.

A reflexive literature does not avoid power; it situates it. As hooks (1994) and Fanon (1963) remind us, social progress requires confrontation with discomfort, not its conceptual sanitization. By advocating a shift away from “adversarial” framings without integrating an explicit power lens, the review risks encouraging a form of *reflexivity without responsibility*, a “both-sides” narrative that conflates critique with hostility. This framing ultimately risks recasting accountability as antagonism, thereby obscuring the structural inequities that make discomfort not only expected but necessary.

3 Methodological thinness and overreach

The methodological architecture of the review is elegant in design while shallow in execution. Coding 560 abstracts for framing type provides an efficient scoping mechanism, but abstracts, by definition, truncate argumentation, often omitting theoretical nuance or methodological detail. Determining whether an article employs a “paradoxical” or “adversarial” frame from 200 words of summary risks profound misclassification.

Moreover, the extrapolation from a final subset of 26 full-text analyses to a field-wide conclusion introduces disproportionate inferential weight. The authors’ claim that “diversity management research predominantly frames white men as adversaries” is methodologically untenable without full-text triangulation, intercoder reliability data, and a transparent codebook. As a result, what might have served as a stimulating *scoping* reflection is presented instead as an empirical generalization, without the rigor to sustain it. The methodological leap reinforces the very polarization they diagnose by amplifying an unverified narrative of widespread adversariality.

4 Polarization, backlash, and the misinterpretation of accountability

The authors argue that adversarial framings “polarize” organizational actors and impede collaboration. Yet the empirical evidence does not support a causal link between naming inequity and reduced cooperation. On the contrary, research in organizational justice (Dobbin et al., 2015, 2019; Kaiser et al., 2013) shows that accountability-based interventions, pay transparency, responsibility structures, measurable goals, outperform empathy-based, or dialogue-only initiatives.

The question, therefore, is not whether adversariality exists but what its purpose is. Accountability driven critique may, at times, feel adversarial to dominant groups, but that sensation is not synonymous with polarization, it is part of the learning trajectory and process inherent in equity work.

The problem is not the critical naming of privilege; it is the design of interventions that stop there. To conflate critique with polarization risks pathologizing accountability itself. It reframes the *discomfort of dominant groups* as an analytical failure of the field, rather than as a predictable and necessary stage in organizational learning. Backlash is not evidence that naming inequity “does not work”; it is evidence that accountability is being felt during a responsible process of change.

5 Contextual narrowness and western overgeneralization

The decision to focus on South Africa and the United States offers a valuable contrast but undermines claims of generalizability. These are two societies with distinct histories of racial hierarchy, while both are exceptional in their legal and political emphasis on race-based redress. To extrapolate from them to “diversity management research globally” introduces conceptual distortion.

Furthermore, the review collapses “white men” into a single analytical category, overlooking intersectional differentiations such as class, nationality, sexuality, and disability (Collins and Bilge, 2020). The “dominant group” is not monolithic, and whiteness itself is stratified and context-dependent (Frankenberg, 1993). Without attention to this heterogeneity, the portrayal of “white men” as misunderstood victims of adversarial discourse risks echoing contemporary grievance politics rather than critically examining it. Disability particularly complicates the category of “dominant group member”; a white man with a chronic illness may hold racial and gender privilege while simultaneously experiencing exclusion. The absence of such nuance flattens the very category the authors seek to defend.

6 The paradox of paradox theory

The authors’ proposal to adopt paradox theory as a unifying framework is theoretically intriguing but incomplete. Paradox theory’s appeal lies in its capacity to hold tensions, between unity and difference, stability and change. However, when imported into diversity scholarship without a structural lens, paradox can devolve into *neutrality*. As Knights and Clarke (2017) warn, depoliticizing identity and reflexivity produces precisely the “amnesia and myopia” through which hierarchy is reproduced rather than transformed.

True paradoxical thinking requires dialectical engagement with history, identity, and power. Without these, paradox theory risks functioning as a conceptual shield for privilege, allowing organizations to celebrate “tension management” while avoiding redistribution or transformation. Adversarial naming of inequity is not antithetical to paradox; it is its precondition. Paradox without power collapses neutrality.

7 Reflexivity must include the researcher

One of the paper's stated aims is to prompt scholars to "look in the mirror." This is commendable. But reflexivity that examines *others'* biases without situating the researchers themselves within broader systems of knowledge production risks becoming performative.

Critical reflexivity requires more than empathy; it demands *positional accountability*. It asks: Who benefits from this framing? Whose discomfort is centered? Whose voices are treated as "extreme" or "adversarial"? These questions are notably absent from the current review. Given the power dynamics at stake, researcher positionality is not a peripheral consideration, it is central to understanding how framing operates as a political act.

8 Toward a constructive reframing

The authors are correct that dichotomous "oppressor/victim" framings can oversimplify complex realities. Yet a constructive alternative does not lie in abandoning power analysis; it lies in *layering* it with interdependence and empathy. Three strategies could advance their aspiration without sacrificing rigor:

1. **Integrative framing:** Recode future studies using a tripartite model, *critical (power-focused)*, *cooperative (paradox-focused)*, and *transformative (systems-focused)*, to avoid binary coding and capture nuance.
2. **Intersectional sensitivity:** Disaggregate "dominant group members" to reflect intersectional variability and the situated nature of privilege.
3. **Empirical accountability:** Connect "framing" not to tone but to *outcomes*, representation, pay equity, turnover, psychological safety. Reflexivity should be empirically linked to justice, not merely harmony.

9 A note on the political moment

The review's timing matters. Across multiple democracies, populist backlash and "reverse discrimination" narratives are ascendant. Within this climate, any scholarly move that recenters the discomfort of white men must tread carefully to avoid legitimizing grievances that distort structural reality.

White men are not disenfranchised in organizational contexts; they remain statistically overrepresented in leadership, pay, and decision-making authority (International Labour Organization, 2023). Acknowledging this is not adversarial, it is empirical. To mischaracterize such acknowledgment as polarization risks aligning academic discourse with regressive cultural narratives rather than evidence-based organizational change.

10 Conclusion

Gildenhuis et al. make a valuable contribution by highlighting the need for reflexivity and cooperation in diversity scholarship.

However, reflexivity cannot mean retreating from power, history, or justice. A genuinely reflexive field must hold paradox *and* power, dialogue *and* redistribution, empathy *and* accountability. Recognizing that certain forms of negative framing may elicit defensiveness does not require the abandonment of critique, rather, it requires clarity about how accountability functions and why discomfort is often intrinsic to structural change.

In this sense, the call to "physician, heal thyself" remains apt, but only if the diagnosis includes our own complicity in epistemic systems that comfort the powerful while naming discomfort as extremity. A reflexive community must therefore differentiate between adversariality that illuminates inequity and adversariality that forecloses dialogue, ensuring that accountability is not misread as polarization.

Rather than reframing the field around dominant group discomfort, the next frontier for diversity management research should be to examine *how power operates through the very act of framing itself*, and how scholars, practitioners, and organizations can remain reflexive without becoming revisionist. Such reflexivity is not a softening of critique but deepening of responsibility, one that can sustain collaboration without obscuring the structural conditions that make equity work necessary.

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