

CRITICALLY INTERROGATING THE WHITE SUPREMACIST USES OF EQUALITY: INTERROGATING COMMUNICATIVE INVERSIONS

PROF MOHAN J DUTTA
Dean's Chair Professor
Director, CARE, Massey University



**THE CARE WHITE PAPER SERIES IS A PUBLICATION OF
THE CENTRE FOR CULTURE-CENTRED APPROACH TO
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION (CARE)**

Requests for permission to reproduce the
CARE White Paper Series should be directed to:

Mohan J Dutta - Director
Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and
Evaluation (CARE)
School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing
BSC1.06, Level 1, Business Studies Central
Massey University Manawatū Campus
Private Bag 11 222
PALMERSTON NORTH 4442
New Zealand
T: +64 06 95182 ext 86282
E: m.j.dutta@massey.ac.nz
W: www.carecca.nz

©Copyright of this paper resides with the author(s) and
further publication, in whole or in part, shall only be
made by authorisation of the author(s).

PROF MOHAN J DUTTA

DIRECTOR

CENTRE FOR CULTURE-CENTRED
APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND
AND EVALUATION (CARE)



ABOUT CARE

The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as *Neoliberal Health Organizing*, *Communicating Health*, and *Voices of Resistance*.

This white paper may include images and texts around topics such as sexual violence, physical violence, identity-based discrimination and harassment, and genocide. I encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing while reading this paper.

CRITICALLY INTERROGATING THE WHITE SUPREMACIST USES OF EQUALITY: INTERROGATING COMMUNICATIVE INVERSIONS

MOHAN J DUTTA
CARE, MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Communicative inversions, the turning of materiality on its head through rhetorical devices, form the propaganda infrastructure of the far right globally, shaping its communicative practices.¹ This communicative infrastructure, replete with disinformation that is strategically manufactured and reproduced by powerful political and economic interests, catalyses the global proliferation of the far-right, mainstreaming the far-right into political spaces and policy-making.² Communication in other words lies at the core of the political imagination that is seeded and circulated by the far-right, shaping the processes through which a disenfranchising politics attacking the marginalised is turned into public policies targeting communities at the margins.³ The attack on the margins forms the ideological infrastructure of the far right, generating market opportunities and profits. Extremely marginalising policies are designed to attack communities that are already disenfranchised, further multiplying manifold the already existing forms of marginalisation. At the heart of these attacks are the new opportunities for privatisation and resource extraction as public policies offering social security and public health, and regulating unfettered resource extraction, destruction of climate and ecosystems, unethical advertising and marketing, are targeted and attacked.⁴ The deployment of communicative inversions, networked through digital platforms, shapes a global ecosystem of the far-right, mainstreamed through policies and politics across right wing spaces globally.⁵

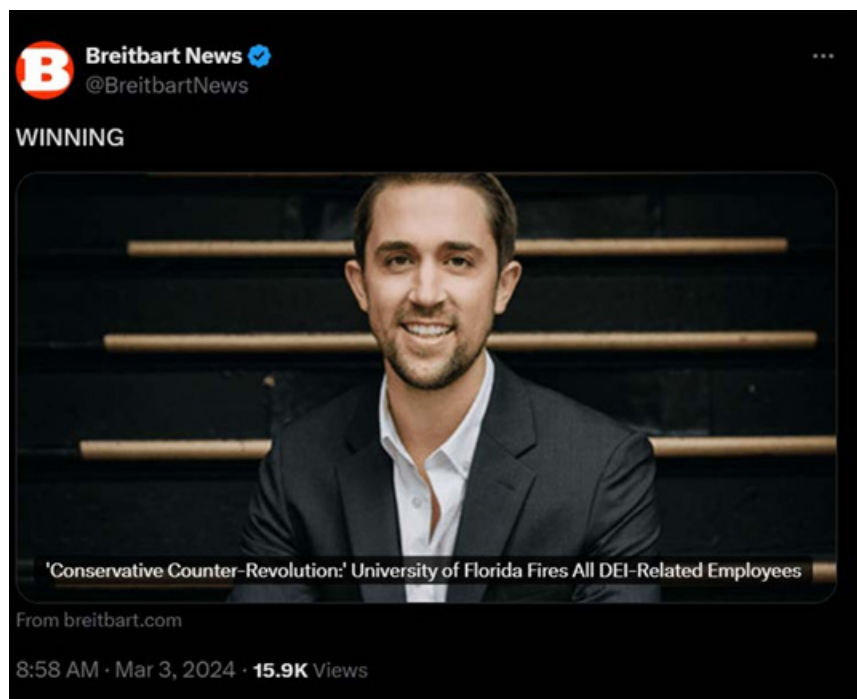


Figure 1: The Far-Right Media Platform Breitbart celebrating the anti-DEI revolution, with the image of the Far-Right activist Christopher Rufo.

Consider for instance, the constant construction of refugees as threats to Western civilization and culture by far-right campaigns, replete with images and stories around “refugees as threats to women in the West,” “Muslim mobs,” “refugees eating pets,” “refugees taking over Western culture” etc. Note here the communicative inversions, the turning of highly vulnerable refugees into threats, through images, stories, tags, and memes, that actively shape the organising of emotions (anxiety, anger, hate). Such communicative inversions are strategically disseminated through mainstream and digital platforms, flowing across platforms, in mobilizing popular anxiety, which then is monetized toward political and economic gains. This white paper critically analyses one such communicative inversion, the claim to equality that is mobilized by far-right activists, funded by far-right think tanks and corporations pursuing aggressive extractive neoliberal capitalism, and legitimized into policy by mainstream right-wing political parties.⁶

THE CLAIM TO EQUALITY: COMMUNICATIVE INVERSION

Emergent in the backdrop of the discursive registers built by the Black Lives Matter movement that foregrounded systemic anti-black institutional racism in the police, far-right activists producing the claim to equality seek to uphold racist structures that continue to produce disenfranchisement. Far-right attacks targeting equality are systematically organized to dismantle programmes around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

DEI as Anti-Western

DEI initiatives, emergent in response to struggles from communities at the margins to address the historic sources of the inequalities in outcomes, are framed as anti-Western civilization and anti-democratic. The systemic attacks on DEI emergent from far-right activist networks, funded by right wing foundations such as Koch and Heritage, were mainstreamed into politics through Trump’s executive order banning DEI training of federal contractors in his first term, and then worked into legislations across the US states subsequently.⁷

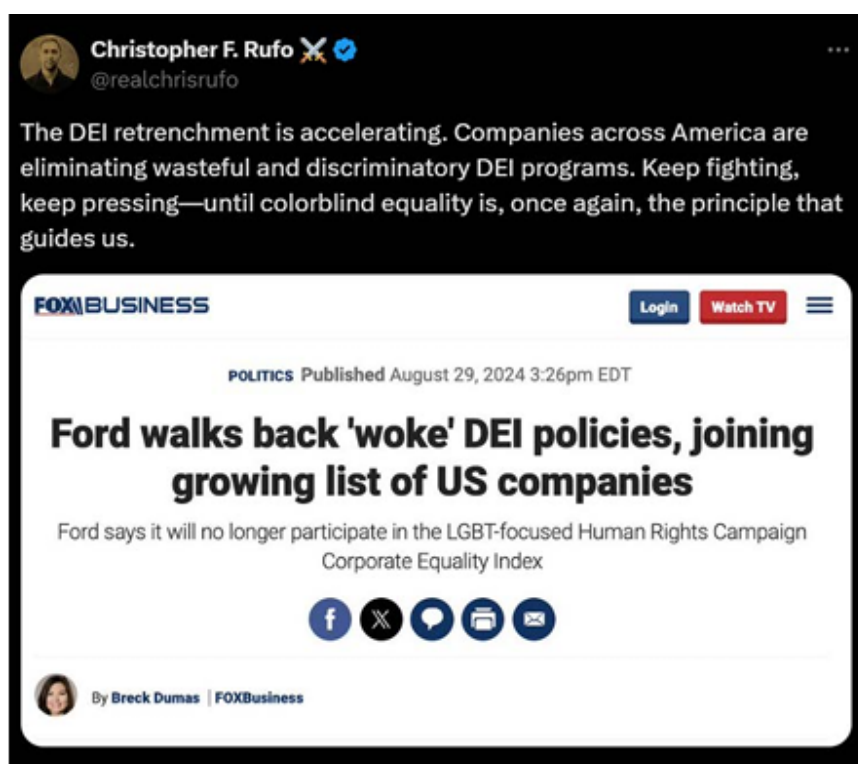


Figure 2: The Far-Right activist Christopher Rufo framing anti-DEI as colorblind equality

Colourblind Equality

The trope of colourblind equality works precisely to uphold, reproduce, and magnify the infrastructure of white supremacy, targeting DEI programmes that are designed to address the structural barriers experienced by communities at the margins.⁸ It is critical to note here the racist ideology that drives the systemic attack on DEI that works through the active and aggressive erasure of the histories of structural racism that are entrenched in settler colonialism, slavery, racial capitalism, and imperialism.⁹



Figure 3: The communicative inversion of DEI as codifying racial discrimination

The communicative inversion of DEI as racist and discriminatory shapes the far-right framing of equality that seeks to dismantle DEI-based programmes.

The central role of critical social science scholarship and pedagogy in shaping public policies around DEI that are designed to address entrenched inequities means that these bodies of scholarship and learning are the sites of attack by the far-right industrial complex. This far-right communicative infrastructure continually seeds disinformation around DEI scholarship, seeking to produce distrust in the broader public around the “woke agenda” to destroy Western democracies. Pedagogies around justice, drawing attention to structural inequalities are framed as war on Western civilization.



Figure 4: The framing of the narrative of DEI work as war

Specific narratives around ideologically driven research and teaching are produced as communicative inversions, designed to unsee the empirical evidence around disparities (in a wide array of areas from health and education to food, employment and housing).

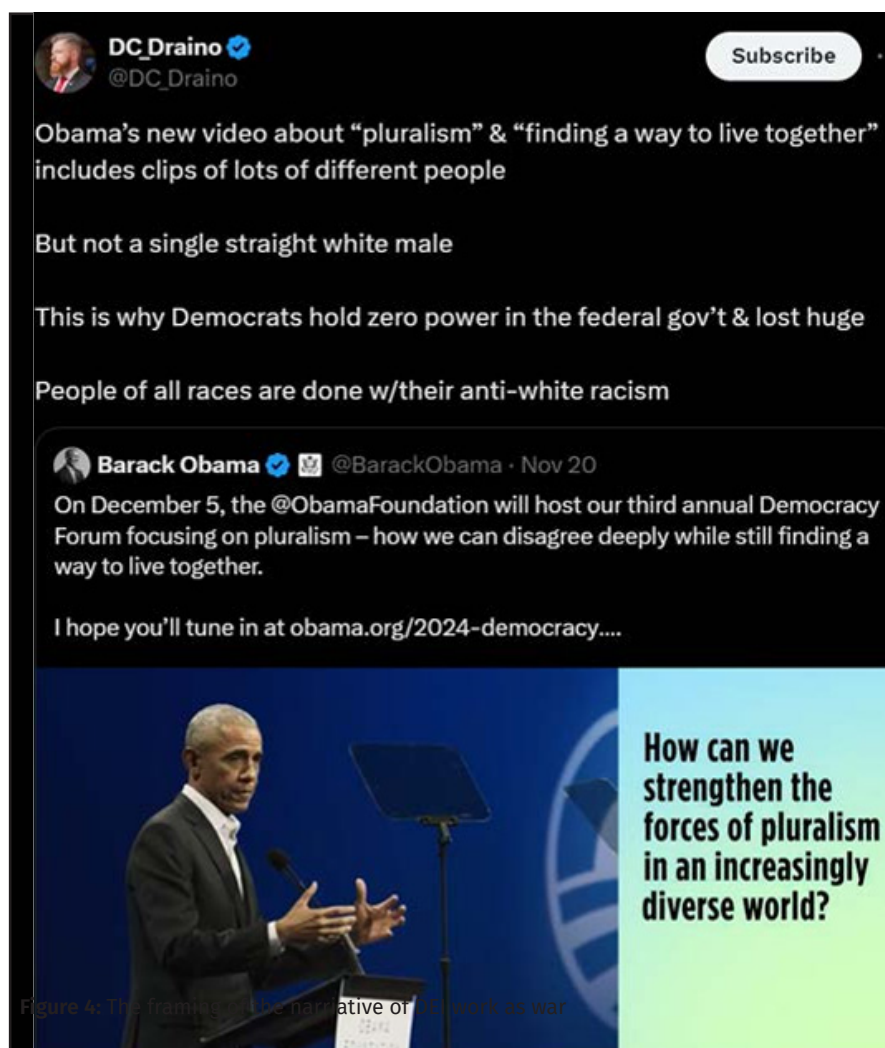


Figure 5: The framing of DEI as anti-white racism



Figure 6: A violent imagery around DEI shared in the global far-right ecosystem, and shared on the X account of William McGimpsey, who earlier worked with the Free Speech Union in Aotearoa New Zealand

COMMUNICATIVELY INVERTING EQUALITY

The claim to equality emergent from the far right then is a communicative inversion, one that turns programmes created to address historic inequalities that are produced by entrenched concentrations of power, into caricatures, depicted as “just about hurting some groups [White majority] and helping others [Indigenous, Black, migrant, gender diverse communities].”

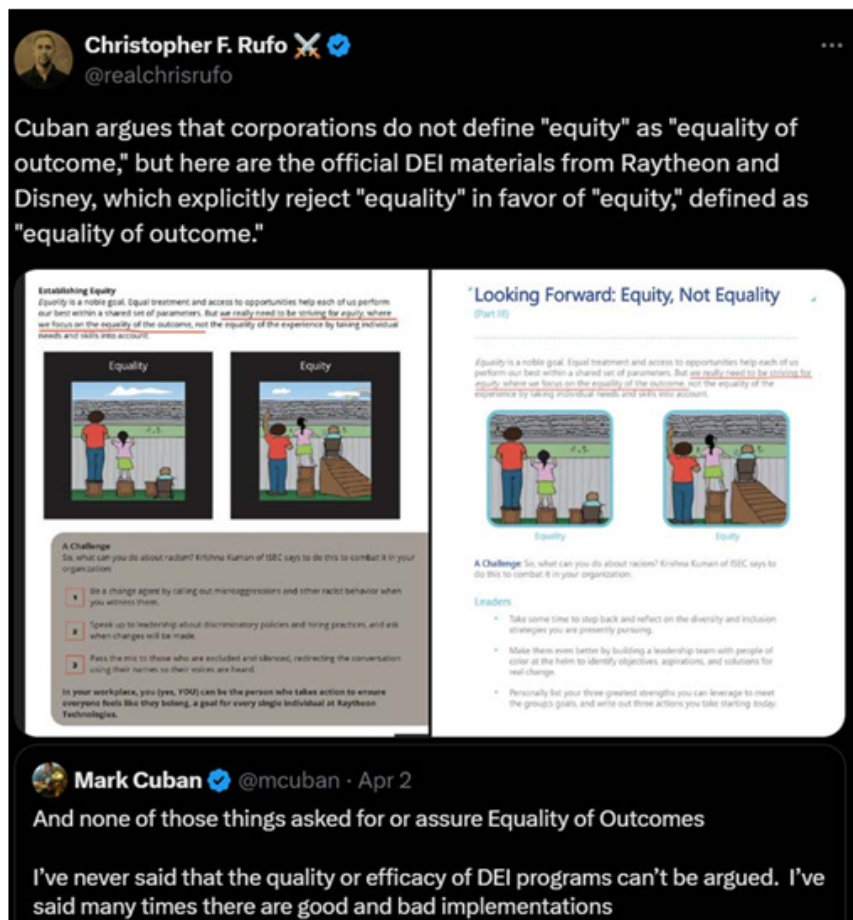


Figure 7: The framing of equity as anti-equality

Consider also the ways in which the frame of Western civilisation is drawn in here (note theme one in this paper), implying that the sanctity of Western civilisation is under threat from DEI. In other words, DEI is manufactured as a conspiracy threatening the sanctity of Western civilisation. It is critical to consider what the far-right ecosystem considers as Western civilisation, and the omitted reference here is to a civilisation of the White race, as evident in the various formulations of the Great Replacement Theory.



We also continue to haemorrhage New Zealand citizens, losing a net 53,700 in the year ended September 2024 – another new record. Most NZ citizens who leave go to Australia (54%).

Arriving migrants' country of origin is as follows:

India: 33,900
Returning Kiwis: 24,900
China: 20,500
Philippines: 19,100
Fiji: 6,500
Sri Lanka: 6,300
United Kingdom: 5,700

Post your reply



Figure 8: The narrative of great replacement and civilisational threat

Targeting social science and producing doubt

This communicative inversion is best reflected in Trump's executive order issued in 2020. Consider the following narrative that sets up the order:

"Today, however, many people are pushing a different vision of America that is grounded in hierarchies based on collective social and political identities rather than in the inherent and equal dignity of every person as an individual. This ideology is rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country; that some people, simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors; and that racial and sexual identities are more important than our common status as human beings and Americans."

Note here the framing of empirically-based, historically informed robust conceptual accounts explaining inequities in U.S. society as false belief. This communicative strategy discards the social scientific evidence around inequities and the structural drivers of these inequities (structural and institutional racism, tied to U.S. colonialism, slavery, and imperialism).¹⁰ It discards the historic evidence around the racism and sexism that form the ideological architectures of the U.S.

The disinformation around established bodies of scholarship on race, gender and ethnicity then is mobilized to seed doubt and anxiety, seeking to appeal to a white majority culture and seed fear around cultural takeover by diverse communities. These diverse communities from the margins are positioned as threats to (white) civilization and democracy. It is critical to interrogate the language of equality and universality that is drawn upon to mobilize the far-right attack on DEI. The language of equality emerges through communicative inversions as precisely a resource for organizing populist fear, anxiety, and violence.

Framing DEI as discriminatory

Ultimately, communicative inversions are arranged together to weave together a narrative around DEI initiatives as discriminatory. Let's examine further Trump's executive order. It goes on to state:

"Although presented as new and revolutionary, they resurrect the discredited notions of the nineteenth century's apologists for slavery who, like President Lincoln's rival Stephen A. Douglas, maintained that our government "was made on the white basis" "by white men, for the benefit of

white men.” Our Founding documents rejected these racialized views of America, which were soundly defeated on the blood-stained battlefields of the Civil War. Yet they are now being repackaged and sold as cutting-edge insights. They are designed to divide us and to prevent us from uniting as one people in pursuit of one common destiny for our great country.”

Consider the communicative inversion at work here, constructing DEI pedagogy as resurrecting the white supremacist ideology that justified slavery. The teaching of robust concepts (informed by scholarship across diverse humanities and social science disciplines, published in peer reviewed platforms) around the workings of racism and sexism as divisive shapes the far-right construction of unity. The construction of “common destiny” in the communicative infrastructure is built upon the othering and undermining of the robust literature on whiteness, white supremacy, US colonialism, US racism, and US participation in slavery, and US imperialism. The oneness and unity communicatively constructed by the far-right works materially through the legitimization of practices of exclusion that target communities at the margins.

After picking examples of DEI training that are designed to create conceptually informed entry points for reflexivity, which are critical to addressing the racist and sexist institutional biases that shape the ways in which organisations operate, the executive order offers the idea of equality as contrast:

“All of this is contrary to the fundamental premises underpinning our Republic: that all individuals are created equal and should be allowed an equal opportunity under the law to pursue happiness and prosper based on individual merit.”

Critical social science scholarship offers us frameworks for examining the claims of equal opportunity in the pursuit of happiness and merit, noting that a wide array of structural determinants (racism, sexism etc.) shape the ability of individuals to pursue opportunities, health and wellbeing. The very concept of merit and the rewards for merit are shaped and constrained by racist, patriarchal and cisnormative structures.¹¹ In the area of health for instance, robust bodies of evidence on social determinants of health document the ways in which societal, structural and institutional racism shape the health experiences of African Americans in the US. Moreover, these experiences are gendered, with African American women experiencing significantly greater structural barriers to health and wellbeing. The language of equality is deployed here precisely to communicatively invert the empirical evidence around deeply entrenched power structures that produce raced and gendered inequalities in outcomes in the U.S. The underlying white supremacist ideology that denies the workings of white supremacy and the lived experiences of marginalised communities struggling against structural racism communicatively inverts itself, presenting itself as an anchor to equality and equal opportunity.

The executive order wraps up with the following:

“Therefore, it shall be the policy of the United States not to promote race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating in the Federal workforce or in the Uniformed Services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes. In addition, Federal contractors will not be permitted to inculcate such views in their employees.”

In language of “race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating” is deployed to dismantle anti-racist programmes. Stereotyping and scapegoating that are concepts emergent from within the context of anti-racist scholarship are communicatively inverted, being turned on their heads to frame these anti-racist programmes as stereotyping and scapegoating.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, communicatively inverting programs, interventions, and policies designed to address the deep-seated structural inequalities as against equality forms a critical resource in the systemic attack by the far-right on diversity, equity and inclusion. These attacks must be read as invested in upholding white supremacy, based on racist concepts of hierarchy and merit, and seeking to uphold the supremacy of the white race over other races. These communicative inversions ultimately seek to uphold white supremacy, reproducing the narrative of white civilisational glory. This white paper calls for further research on the communicative strategies deployed by the far-right networks globally in deploying the language of equality to attack the rights of Indigenous, Black, people of colour, gender diverse and disabled communities negotiating various forms of marginalization. Moreover, given the linkages between powerful political and economic actors, the paper calls for further exploration of the financial trails that support these far-right discursive registers. Based on the initial analysis, the paper offers the following policy recommendations:

- Policies must closely pay attention to the discursive strategies deployed by the far-right, mapping the threats they pose to social cohesion, peace, and democracy.
- Policies must closely pay attention to the networks of commercial influence that fund the far-right messaging infrastructure, carefully mapping out the source of the threats to social cohesion, peace and democracy.
- Policies must closely examine the links between the language of equality and attacks on Indigenous rights, migrant rights, rights of women, rights of gender diverse communities etc.
- Policies must appropriately regulate digital platforms that serve as spaces for circulating and magnifying extremist discourses.
- Communities must be empowered with culture-centered critical digital literacy education.
- Policies must offer adequate protection to the scholarship and teaching of topics around DEI.

REFERENCES

1. Dutta, M. J. (2015). Decolonizing communication for social change: A culturecentered approach. *Communication Theory*, 25(2), 123-143.
2. Recuero, R., Soares, F. B., Vinhas, O., Volcan, T., Hüttner, L. R. G., & Silva, V. (2022). Bolsonaro and the far right: How disinformation about COVID-19 circulates on Facebook in Brazil. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 24.
3. Dutta, M. J. (2024). Digital platforms, Hindutva, and disinformation: Communicative strategies and the Leicester violence. *Communication Monographs*, 1-29; Dutta, M. J., & Pal, M. (2024). Experiences of Muslims in India on digital platforms with anti-Muslim hate: a culture-centered exploration. *Frontiers in Communication*, 9, 1205116; Knüpfer, C. B. (2025). Far-right Communication. In *Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Communication*; Kakavand, A. E. (2024). Far-right social media communication in the light of technology affordances: a systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(1), 37-56.
4. Hellinger, D. C. (2019). Dark money and Trumpism. *Conspiracies and conspiracy theories in the age of Trump*, 185-219; Henricksen, W. (2024). The Price of Disinformation. *UC Irvine Law Review*, forthcoming; MacLean, N. (2017). *Democracy in chains: The deep history of the radical right's stealth plan for America*. Penguin.
5. Ekman, M. (2022). The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims. *Convergence*, 28(4), 1127-1143.
6. Follmer, K. B., Sabat, I. E., Jones, K. P., & King, E. (2024). Under attack: Why and how IO psychologists should counteract threats to DEI in education and organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1-24; MacLean, N. (2017). *Democracy in chains: The deep history of the radical right's stealth plan for America*. Penguin.

7. Miller-Idriss, C. (2022). *Hate in the homeland: The new global far right*. Princeton University Press.
8. Boulware, L. E., Corbie, G., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Wilkins, C. H., Ruiz, R., Vitale, A., & Egede, L. E. (2022). Combating structural inequities—diversity, equity, and inclusion in clinical and translational research. *N Engl J Med*, 386(3), 201-203; Vora, S., Dahlen, B., Adler, M., Kessler, D. O., Jones, V. F., Kimble, S., & Calhoun, A. (2021). Recommendations and guidelines for the use of simulation to address structural racism and implicit bias. *Simulation in Healthcare*, 16(4), 275-284.
9. Bailey, Z. D., Krieger, N., Agénor, M., Graves, J., Linos, N., & Bassett, M. T. (2017). Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions. *The lancet*, 389(10077), 1453-1463; Cotton, N. K., & Shim, R. S. (2022). Social determinants of health, structural racism, and the impact on child and adolescent mental health. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 61(11), 1385-1389.
10. Bailey, Z. D., Krieger, N., Agénor, M., Graves, J., Linos, N., & Bassett, M. T. (2017). Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions. *The lancet*, 389(10077), 1453-1463; Cotton, N. K., & Shim, R. S. (2022). Social determinants of health, structural racism, and the impact on child and adolescent mental health. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 61(11), 1385-1389.
11. Rodriguez, A., Dutta, M. J., & Desnoyers-Colas, E. F. (2019). Introduction to special issue on merit, whiteness, and privilege. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 8(4), 3-9; Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard law review*, 1707-1791.