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COMMENTARY

Antiwork or antimaster? Reframing the antiwork movement through a racial lens

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Alliger and McEachern (2024) impress upon the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology that researchers and practitioners alike should not ignore the antiwork movement, but rather study it, try to understand it, and use our science to provide evidence-based solutions to support employees. The authors note the antiwork movement is not new and indeed has grown from critical perspectives on work, gaining traction in the digital age with social media platforms. However, in reading the focal article, we could not help but think that what is underlying much of the tenets, research directions, and practical suggestions posed by the authors is that, perhaps, the antiwork movement is also representative of the systemic racialization of organizations. Along this vein, we seek to modify and expand the underlying current of the antiwork movement posed by Alliger and McEachern by reframing it through a racial lens. We first provide a review of the racialized theory of organizations (Ray, 2019), we then reframe the central tenets of the antiwork movement through a racialized lens, providing examples; and we conclude with additional research avenues and practical recommendations that considers race explicitly in understanding and improving antiwork sentiments.

A brief review of the racialized theory of organizations

The racialized theory of organizations challenges traditional organizational theory that conceptualizes the organization as "race neutral," (Ray, 2019). Ray (2019) describes in his theory of racialized organizations how systemic frameworks that have worked to grant White individuals' privileges have not worked to provide those same privileges to employees of color in the workplace. These racialized organizations are emblematic of the history of mistreatment of racial subgroups and are defined by discriminatory laws, including the diminishment of agency, unequal distribution of resources, and disregard of policies aimed at benefiting employees of color. All of these factors work together to establish a class above those who submit to discrimination. Additionally, the racialization of workplaces is not just observable on an institutional level, such as laws actively disallowing rights to groups of people, but also within organizations (e.g., unequal pay among employees) and between individuals (e.g., harassment based on race). These attributes of workplaces have produced negative reactions from millions of workers in America and are represented in the core tenets of the antiwork movement.

Antiwork through a racialized lens

The antiwork movement submits that work is exploitative and perpetuates inequality among employees and society at large. Alliger and McEachern describe 18 tenets of antiwork, many of

which hint at, but fail to recognize, the role that organizations as racial systems (Ray, 2019) play in the foundation of antiwork sentiments. Indeed, we can reframe 12 of the 18 tenets of antiwork through the lens of organizations as racialized and upholding racial structures. We provide a few examples of racial reframing of antiwork tenets in text; however, please see Table 1 for a full list.

In the first tenet of antiwork, it is suggested that work demands submission. This tenet insinuates that the organization may be viewed as the master, and workers must obey. In conjunction, Ray (2019) suggests the extent to which an employee is active in a racialized organization depends on their position; and that participation in the collective requires submission. However, workers may retaliate against the organization. Alliger and McEachern suggest that worker's reactions to current workplace conditions may manifest as counterproductive workplace behaviors in an effort to leverage control by employees back from employers (tenet 12). Reframing through a racial lens would indicate that social movements impacting employees of color, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter movement, can alter the distribution of organizational resources along racial lines, contributing to organizational change efforts (Ray, 2019).

In another example, Alliger and McEachern devote considerable time to the discussion of managerialism's role and influence in the antiwork movement, suggesting that antiwork proposes that managerialism is an effort by the organization to suppress and manipulate employees feelings and attitudes (tenet 13). This constrictive relationship between workers and managers in the workplace leads employees to assimilate to "acceptable" norms at work in their efforts to retain their jobs. Considering that acceptable workplace behaviors and norms have been framed from a nonminority lens (Santiago et al., 2021), the way that many persons of color do so is through the use of codeswitching. Codeswitching is defined as a strategy that people of color use to adjust their self-presentation through mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group in order to receive desirable outcomes (McLuney et al., 2021). Research suggests that employees of color who engage in codeswitching would not have successful workplace relationships unless they conform to those accepted norms (Santiago et al., 2021). However, when employees of color engage in codeswitching, this can have a negative effect on their health and well-being (Santiago et al., 2021).

What's more, tenet 17 supposes work is servitude, regardless if employees enjoy it. Indeed, the most direct control a manager has over a worker is whether or not that person stays employed. The economic climate of the United States today holds many concerns over a majority of its citizens: unemployment, rising cost of living, and lowering accessibility to healthcare to name a few. With the direness of providing for oneself becoming more and more common, maintaining a stable relationship with a paying job becomes vital. This creates a more modern form of indentured servitude, where workers depend on what managers allow them to earn. Reframing this tenet, Ray (2019) suggests that organizations provide resources to White employees, thus lending credence to racialized internal structure and supporting White agency. This ensures that employees of color are underresourced and kept at the lowest tier within the organizational hierarchy and are therefore dependent on what managers allow them to earn.

Recommendations for research on antiwork through a racial lens

Throughout this commentary, we have sought to establish the antiwork movement through a lens that considers race in the workplace. In reading Alliger and McEachern, we specifically note that the research directions suggested by the authors may hint at understanding and examining racial identities at work (e.g., focus on inclusive leadership; workplace identification) but do not do so explicitly. Therefore, we make the following research recommendations:

- Examine antiwork sentiments among employees of color compared to White employees using an intersectional lens that considers ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity.

Table 1. Racial reframing of the tenets of antiwork

Antiwork tenets	Examples of racial reframing
1. Work demands submission and is damaging the human body and psyche.	The extent to which an employee is active in their organization depends on their position; and participation requires submission (Ray, 2019).
4. Work is subjectively "alienating" and meaningless due to workers' lack of honest connection to the organization and its goals and outcomes.	Organizations as racialized uphold Whiteness, disadvantaging employees of color. "Segregated organizations maintain racial boundaries, channel resources, and help direct collective action," so employees of color are not devoted to the organization (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Ray, 2019).
6. Work is exploitative; workers are necessarily taken advantage of, whether they claim or appear to enjoy their work or not. Fundamentally, organizations/owners extract "surplus value," paying the workers less than the value of their work.	Wage disparity exists for employees of color compared with their White counterparts in equally qualified positions; employees of color disproportionately occupy the lower tier of the organization reducing the amount of influence the employee can have on organizational procedures and policies (Dickerson von Lockette & Spriggs, 2016; Ray, 2019).
9. Organizations act as "private governments," requiring a relinquishment of rights and freedoms that should be proffered only to actual government.	Individuals do not have to work, in so doing they can exert their agency. However, the ramifications of opting out of work include greater likelihood of poverty, reduced financial earnings, and less social support. This "reinforces the point that inclusion (or exclusion) in racialized organizations shapes agency," (Ray, 2019).
10. Work is conducted in an environment of low trust and suspicion among workers and bosses.	Employees of color experience microaggressions and other forms of modern discrimination, more so than their White counterparts, leading to perceptions that work is not psychologically safe, as well as reduced employee engagement (Jones Carney, 2021; Kim et al., 2019)
11. Work "colonizes" workers lives to include off-the-job life.	"Individuals' locations within racialized organizations influence the amount of control they exercise over their time, their ability to plan non-work time, and their ability to plot the future," (Ray, 2019).
12. Workers struggle and resist, sometimes spontaneously, in order to minimize the malevolent effects of work on their persons and lives in a wide variety of ways and with varying levels of success.	Social movements, such as the incorporation of Black Lives Matter, can alter the distribution of organizational resources along racial lines, and in so doing, contribute to organizational change efforts (Ray, 2019).
13. Where work is experienced as interesting and engaging, this can be explained by "managerialism," which is the intentional psychological manipulation of workers' feelings and attitudes through orientation, perks, and accommodations.	Employees of color engage in "codeswitching" as a means of assimilating to "acceptable" norms at work, which have been framed from a White lens (Santiago et al., 2021). Employees of color who engage in codeswitching are encouraged and rewarded (Santiago et al., 2021).
14. The belief that individuals can be selected or promoted on the basis of "merit" is misguided, and job aptitude testing and performance measurement are not valid or fair and simply propagate inequalities.	Wage discrepancy exists for equally-qualified Black and White employees; and employees of color disproportionately comprise the lowest tier of organizational hierarchies (Dickerson von Lockette & Spriggs, 2016; Ray, 2019). Organizations concentrated in predominately White locations and hiring discrimination propagate inequality for employees of color (Quillian et al., 2017).
15. Society, through its economy, education, entertainment systems, norms, and general tenor, primes its members to accept work as the only way to live.	"Within organizations, segregation or incorporation in the lower tiers of organizational hierarchies diminishes one's ability to influence organizational procedures and the larger institutional environment," such that organizational procedures determine how racialized subordinates use their time (Ray, 2019).

(Continued)

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Antiwork tenets	Examples of racial reframing
16. The economic system termed "capitalism" has historically been able to adapt to any and all changes in policies, technologies, or public and private preferences so that the employer/dominator–employee/dominated relationship continues or intensifies; at the same time modern capitalism makes solidarity difficult by "atomizing" society.	Social groups are defined by the unequal distribution of resources in capitalist societies, creating hierarchies that advance capitalism via disparity, creating disadvantages and divides among and within racial groups (Fortner, 2023; Robinson, 2000).
17. Just because people want work does not mean work is good, because work is still servitude.	"Whiteness is a credential providing access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies, and expanding White agency"; this serves to ensure employees of color "are firmly positioned at the base of the racial pyramid" within organizations (Ray, 2019).

- Determine if there is a relationship between antiwork sentiments and the use of codeswitching at work for employees of color; this may be best accomplished through a mixed-methods approach that considers employees lived experiences while also establishing a quantitative relationship.
- Examine the relationship among antiwork sentiments and organizational distrust concerning diversity programs and initiatives.

Exploring these research directions has the potential to reveal additional insights into the overlap of the antiwork movement and organizations as racial structures, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of workplace dynamics.

Practical recommendations

We note that the practical recommendations offered by Alliger and McEachern do not address issues pertaining to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In establishing our position that the antiwork movement reflects and is related to organizations as racialized structures, we offer the following practical recommendations with a focus on organizational supports for employees and "walking the talk" on DEI:

- Organizations should regularly review and adjust compensation structures to address pay disparity as well as implement transparent promotion criteria and monitor promotion rates for employees of color. This will ensure that efforts and talents of workers are not for the sole benefit of the employer, which may support the resolution of thoughts around the exploitative nature of management (tenet 6; tenet 16).
- Leadership should set clear and supportive diversity goals and integrate them into the strategic plan of the organization. The organization should publish regular DEI reports to hold the organization accountable. This may help reform trust between leadership and workers, and prevent companies from choosing when they grant certain rights and privileges (tenet 4; tenet 9; tenet 10).
- Organizations should provide regular training for managers and HR personnel aimed at effectively addressing DEI issues. Organizations should also provide regular training on microaggressions and cultural competence for all employees. This can help improve interactions among management and employees (tenet 13).
- Organizations should engage in regular auditing of existing policies and procedures to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices (tenet 9; tenet 10).

- Organizations should create mentorship programs that pair junior employees with senior leaders from diverse backgrounds. This can help address the perspective that managers are only serving to exploit workers by engaging them with opportunities to develop directly (tenet 4; tenet 14).

These practical recommendations could be used to upend the foundations of racialized organizations in an effort to enhance equity among employees.

Conclusion

Alliger and McEachern impress that the antiwork perspective is that I-O psychology's values, in their current form, serve managers and organizational leaders. We have argued in this commentary that understanding antiwork perspectives may be improved upon by taking a racialized lens to organizations. We have provided a reframing of a number of the central tenets of antiwork as well as suggested additional research avenues and practical recommendations that explicitly consider race. In so doing, we expand the underlying current of the antiwork movement to implore researchers and practitioners to understand whether the perspective is indeed antiwork, or antimaster?

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