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Research Statement

Inequality is a powerful force shaping social dynamics, conflict, and organizations around the globe. In the last year, the wealth gap in the United States has continued to widen as low-income workers bear the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic through high-risk essential jobs and inequitable vaccine distribution. Moreover, the murder of George Floyd has catapulted racial discrimination to the forefront of America's collective attention. Despite this, employees at organizations like LinkedIn and Cisco have pushed back on corporate policies meant to redress these inequalities, and polling indicates that support for Black Lives Matter has nearly returned to its pre-2020 baseline.

My research seeks to understand the belief systems that inhibit action aimed at reducing socioeconomic inequalities. Why do some organizations maintain large wage, gender, and racial disparities even though these disparities harm both the organizations and their employees? My work generates and leverages psychological theories to address these, and other, pressing social problems head on. I achieve this by adopting a **multi-method** (e.g., archival data, organizational field data, dyadic network experiments, traditional experiments, and longitudinal studies), **analytically diverse** (e.g., natural language processing, multilevel modeling, item response theory), and **open** (e.g., publicly shared materials, methods, data, and code) approach to conducting rigorous, theoretically grounded science.

In my work, I **(i)** have advanced psychological and organization theory surrounding biased belief systems (e.g., beliefs about income mobility and poverty) that legitimize damaging inequalities, **(ii)** used these insights to develop and test interventions (e.g., perspective taking, cross-social class contact) to correct these biases, and **(iii)** am developing a new comprehensive theoretical framework uncovering how people handle intergroup tensions at the societal, organizational, and individual level.

I. Biased belief systems that legitimize inequality

Income mobility. The cultural script of "The American Dream" proclaims that anyone can experience income mobility and rise from rags to riches if they work hard enough. At the core of this dream is the belief that disparities are tolerable, fair, and just precisely because people can move between economic stations. However, research shows that upward income mobility is less prevalent than many believe; is the dream of upward income mobility partially responsible for legitimizing economic inequality?

On one hand, my research reveals that perceived upward mobility can legitimize inequality at both a national and global scale (Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*). Utilizing multilevel modeling to examine data from 40,000 respondents across 34 countries, I found that in countries with higher income mobility people were more tolerant of economic inequality. However, beliefs about income mobility are often overly optimistic and do not necessarily mirror *actual* income mobility. Thus, to explore the more proximal psychological perceptions of upward mobility, I recruited a nationally representative sample of American adults and experimentally manipulated their perceptions of income mobility in the United States. Consistent with my theorizing, participants who were led to believe that income mobility was

high (versus low) expressed greater tolerance for inequality, and this relationship could be explained by a strengthened belief that unequal outcomes are fair and just. These findings demonstrate that optimistic belief in the American Dream, to some degree, legitimizes inequality.

On the other hand, my research has also revealed that perceived upward mobility can have mixed consequences within organizations. In this work, I advance our theoretical understanding of one reason why, despite a general discomfort with high CEO-to-median worker pay ratios, there has been a relative lack of broad employee unrest (Wiwad, Jachimowicz, & Davidai, *Under Review*, *Organization Science*). In a unique dataset of over 2,000 employees obtained from a large financial services company, I found that employees who saw themselves as more likely to move up the organizational ladder (i.e., more upwardly mobile) were less likely to want to leave the organization and find another job. In this dataset, and in six additional experiments (n = 5,634), I found consistent evidence that this is in part due to a diminished belief that success in one's organization is zero-sum (i.e., that one person's success is another's failure) as well as higher quality relationships with one's managers. Despite this, I find that employees who view themselves as more upwardly mobile in their organization are more tolerant of high CEO-to-median worker pay ratios. This research demonstrates that while upward mobility has positive consequences for employees in the short term (e.g., better relationships, reduced selfish and competitive implications of zero-sum thinking), it serves to exacerbate organizational inequalities and their downstream consequences in the long run.

Poverty. The above work demonstrates that beliefs about *organizational and societal* processes—one's ability to move up the social ladder—can legitimize inequality. But what about beliefs regarding the *psychological* processes—beliefs about people who inhabit the lowest rungs of this social ladder? To answer this question, I explored how attributions for poverty—beliefs about why the poor are poor—serve as a pernicious belief that legitimizes damaging levels of inequality (Piff[*] & Wiwad[*] et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*; Wiwad et al., 2021, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Wiwad & Stephens, *In Prep*).

I explored these beliefs using a mixture of cross-national archival data, laboratory experiments, and large nationally representative samples (Piff[*] & Wiwad[*] et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*). First, analyzing 34,000 respondents across 19 countries, I found that people in countries with a stronger recognition of the societal barriers to escaping poverty (versus a stronger belief in individual barriers such as laziness) demonstrated lower tolerance for inequality. These findings held in a pre-registered replication in a nationally representative sample of American adults. Next, to rule out alternative explanations I conducted a series of experiments. In one such experiment, I found that when I prompted people to briefly write about the situational causes of poverty, people were more egalitarian, donating 31% more of a windfall endowment to a charity whose mission is to reduce inequality by fighting poverty. These findings offer initial evidence that beliefs about poverty—specifically, the recognition of situational barriers to escaping poverty—drive intolerance for inequality and egalitarianism both globally and within the United States.

Critically, the coronavirus pandemic has served as a highly visible situational cause of poverty and inequality; the media has extensively covered the impact of the pandemic on both poverty

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[*] Indicates co-first authorship

and inequality. I leveraged this tragic but rare opportunity to test my theory that increased awareness of the situational causes of poverty decreases tolerance for inequality in a naturally occurring context. I conducted a longitudinal study spanning one year from pre- to peri-pandemic to test this prediction (Wiwad et al., 2021, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*). Using a series of latent change score models, I found that people who were more aware that the Coronavirus pandemic unduly impacted the poor increased their situational attributions for poverty and opposition to inequality between April 2019 and May 2020. This attitude change predicted a higher willingness to help the poor. While the Coronavirus pandemic will likely continue to exacerbate already record-setting inequalities, it may also mobilize organizations and individuals to help society's most economically vulnerable.

My research thus far finds that two belief systems—about the ability to climb the social and organizational ladder and the causes of poverty—can legitimize economic inequality both within organizations and globally. Critically, my work also suggests that these beliefs are malleable and thus offer promising routes to interventions that can increase concern about economic inequality and create more equitable economic outcomes.

II. Interventions to increase concern about inequality and foster egalitarianism

Perspective taking. Expanding upon the idea that people are less tolerant of economic inequality when they recognize the systemic causes (e.g., educational and labor market barriers) of poverty, I explored whether a "low-touch" intervention that simulates the daily struggles of poverty could result in meaningful and long-lasting attitude change (Piff* & Wiwad* et al., 2020, *Nature Human Behavior*). In one such experiment, I randomly assigned participants to either engage in a short but impactful poverty simulation called SPENT (available [HERE](#)[1]) where people made a series of financial decisions as if they were living in poverty. Compared to a no-simulation control condition, I found that playing SPENT not only increased awareness of the systemic barriers that sustain poverty but also, as a result, increased concern for economic inequality and support for redistribution. Crucially, this difference persisted outside of the lab both one day post-intervention as well as *five months later*. These findings are consistent with evidence that macro-level institutional factors (e.g., attending multi-year college programs that facilitate living in poverty-stricken areas) can shape concerns about the poor and economic inequality. However, these interventions typically entail wide-scale and costly institutional coordination. My work demonstrates that low-touch interventions highlighting the salience of situational causes of poverty can promote action aimed at attenuating high levels of inequality.

Cross-social class contact. Intergroup Contact Theory demonstrates that, under the right circumstances, cross-group contact can reduce prejudice. I applied this theory to a previously unexplored context—social class. In two intensive dyadic laboratory experiments, I found that participants who engaged in a cross-social class (versus same-social class) interaction were more egalitarian in a one-shot dictator game. I have continued this line of work to explore the linguistic elements underlying attitude and behavior change (Wiwad & Stephens, *In Prep*). I am recruiting pairs of middle- and working-class individuals to converse online and, through this design, am generating a rich source of data not typically analyzed in cross-group contact research—the conversations themselves. Using natural language processing analyses and economic games, I have found initial evidence that syntactic matching (i.e., similarity in how

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[1] playspent.org

people speak) is related to reduced prejudice towards the poor, stronger recognition of social barriers that cause various inequalities (e.g., education), as well as increased cooperation. Moreover, I find initial evidence that working class participants change their syntax to align with their cross-class conversation partner, more than middle class participants do, over the course of a conversation. This research lays the groundwork for my future work designing cross-social class contact interventions that can amplify the effective and downplay the ineffective linguistic features of productive attitude and behavior change.

III. Ongoing and future work.

When designing social and organizational policy, experts and lay-people alike debate whether poverty or inequality is the more pressing concern. In my recent work I have developed a novel theoretical typology to test how, independently and jointly, concerns about inequality, economic efficiency, and poverty influence policy support across ideological lines (Wiwad, Shariff, & Kteily, *Under Review*, *PNAS*). Counter to existing narratives, my findings reveal a large degree of partisan overlap; Republicans and Democrats alike prioritize helping the poor and deprioritize helping the rich. Once the bipartisan goal of helping the poor is met, Democrats prioritize inequality reduction while Republicans prioritize avoiding harm to the rich. Additionally, Democrats are more willing than Republicans to forego help to the poor if it comes along with rising inequality. Testing the emotional underpinnings of these preferences, I find that hostility towards the rich predicts the willingness to harm the rich and reduce inequality among both Republicans and Democrats, but Democrats are additionally motivated by compassion towards the poor. By developing this comprehensive theoretical typology, I am excited to continue generating valuable insights regarding how people handle intergroup tension at the societal, organizational, and individual level.

Additionally, I am continuing to expand my work beyond economic inequalities. Specifically, past research identifies a disconnect between (high) support for racially egalitarian policies and (relatively low) concern for racial disparity. I am beginning to explore one potential reason for this disconnect: shifting definitions of racial discrimination. Drawing from previous work on concept creep, I theorize that exposure to extreme instances of racial discrimination will extremify lay definitions of racial discrimination. Specifically, I have found initial evidence that exposure to explicit and extreme examples of racial discrimination (e.g., the murder of George Floyd) results in lower recognition of more subtle, but pervasive, everyday racial discrimination (e.g., praising a Black person for speaking well; (Wiwad, Jachimowicz, & Davidai, *in prep*)). I look forward to continuing this critical line of work aimed at understanding and combatting racial inequality.

IV. Conclusion

Socioeconomic inequalities are a powerful global force impacting both organizations and society more broadly. My cumulative research agenda seeks to advance psychological and organizational theory around how to address such inequalities. My research uses diverse and cutting-edge methodological and statistical techniques to achieve this goal. I aim to benefit organizations, and society more broadly, by (i) building a comprehensive theoretical understanding of when and why we come to believe that high degrees of socioeconomic inequality are acceptable and (ii) informing and creating interventions that legitimize and foster equitable—as opposed to unequal—economic and social outcomes.