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THEORETICAL ARTICLE

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Collective system-supporting inaction: A conceptual framework of privilege maintenance

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Abstract

Recent protest movements such as #MeToo exposed that institutional change initiatives targeting harassment and discrimination have so far failed to achieve equity. We propose that this is because such policy initiatives fail to account for the motivation of those privileged by inequality regimes to maintain and perpetuate these systems. Addressing gaps in collective action scholarship, we introduce a normative framework conceptualising the inaction of dominant groups as system-supporting behaviour to preserve the status quo. System-supporting inaction is a central and highly effective technique used by dominant group members to hinder processes of change and preserve their power, and it often preludes escalation to violent backlash over time. Building on sociological models of inequality and power, we develop a conceptual model that accounts for the group dynamics associated with collective system-supporting (in)action. We propose an agenda for future research that focuses on resistance to change as a means of maintaining privilege.

KEYWORDS

collective resistance to change, inequality regimes, inequality reproduction, power and privilege, system-supporting inaction

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of policy initiatives tackling between-group inequities, and institutional initiatives to improve diversity and inclusion, inequality is on the rise globally (Chancel et al., 2022; Mahase, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2021; Woolston, 2021). These widening disparities, including disparities in wealth and healthy life expectancy, affect marginalised and deprived groups the most and have their root causes in social determinants (Ahmed, 2022). Accordingly, the field of social psychology is in an ideal position to explore intergroup dynamics that contribute to the maintenance of inequalities and to become a driver of change. Yet, we find that the field has so far been silent on a central driver of the propagation of inequities, namely that those privileged within these systems silently but actively resist transformative change. We propose that to fully understand and challenge systemic inequity and injustice within institutions, we need to zoom in on system-supporting inaction, by which we mean inaction by those in power that is purposeful, normalised, and therefore often invisible because it is not viewed as action at all. While we find ample research on intergroup conflicts that are visible, explosive and sensational, including on explicit violence and backlash by dominant groups, we suggest that such outright conflict is an endpoint of incremental and escalating dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed that starts with system-supporting inaction. We also propose that inaction presents a formidable obstacle to transformative change by hindering efforts of oppressed groups to mobilise and act, while also producing a dominant narrative of willingness to change.

With this conceptual article, we argue that system-supporting inaction and the intergroup dynamic it produces is a central and highly effective technique used by dominant group members to hinder

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processes of change and preserve their power under neoliberal institutions (e.g., universities; Phipps, 2020). We also argue that both covert and overt action by dominant group members to resist equity-oriented social change stem from the same system-supporting motivations. We aim to make three main contributions to collective action scholarship. First, we offer a normative framework to identify and systematically analyse the inaction of those privileged by the status quo at the level of democratic institutions. Second, we propose a conceptual model of collective system-supporting inaction that captures the relational dynamics that lead to escalation from passive to active forms of resistance. Besides building on relevant social psychological scholarship, we complement our insights with sociological models of three-dimensional power (Lukes, 2005) and inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Third, by explicating these dynamics, we derive directions for a future research agenda. We hope to stimulate innovative approaches to thinking about system-supporting behaviours that advance our theorising about collective action and inspire research that contributes to the agency and efficacy of advocates for system change. To achieve these aims, we consult diverse literature from organisational and social psychology, health sciences and sociology. Importantly, we seek to advance theorising on resistance to change in purportedly egalitarian settings, where, unlike in authoritarian settings, overt violence and discrimination is frowned upon, which, we argue, creates a context that makes it difficult for oppressed groups to detect, verbalise and resist oppression.

This article is structured as follows. We first introduce the normative framework necessary to meaningfully interpret inaction as system-supporting. We then elaborate the conceptual model that is guiding our analysis. The conceptual model provides the basis for identifying lacunae in current approaches to collective action and for addressing them with different perspectives on power. In the second part of this article, we review three perspectives on power. We then provide an example illustrating the usefulness of the proposed model and the advantages of explicitly conceptualising system-supporting inaction as a form of power exertion. Finally, in deriving a research agenda to address and overcome the identified lacunae, we point to promising routes for future theorising and research concerning system-supporting inaction that can advance current collective action scholarship.

2 | A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK OF SYSTEM-SUPPORTING INACTION

An important development of the past years concerns the increasing naming and challenging of existing inequality systems, as illustrated most prominently by #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, which challenge patriarchy and racism, as well as their intersections (Leung & Williams, 2019). In light of this, it is surprising that social psychologists are not more outspoken about the power motives of privileged groups. This might be due to social psychologists mistakenly assuming that, like their own group, all privileged groups are striving for social justice. This leads to motives of power remaining a blind spot for the discipline. Questions such as whether moral convictions can motivate the advantaged to challenge social inequality (Van Zomeren et al., 2010) seem to neglect the fact that those with privilege typically have the power to reframe and redefine morality, privilege and inequality. Such questions are also at odds with the notoriously confirmed finding in social psychology that dominant group members will never willingly give up their power and privilege (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Craig et al., 2018; Leach et al., 2002). In fact, studies have shown that supposedly progressive social change tools can backfire. For example, intergroup contact does not decrease high-status group members' likelihood of collective action to preserve their resources (Saab et al., 2017), or decrease ingroup favouritism in resource allocation (Saguy et al., 2009), particularly if a policy directly challenges ingroup privilege (Dixon et al., 2010). Given that the prospect of fundamental change affects those with high as opposed to low power positions more negatively both within (Blader & Chen, 2011; Dover et al., 2016; Marr & Thau, 2014) and between groups (Scheepers et al., 2009), then resistance to change becomes an expected and predictable response of powerful groups. This is also confirmed at the individual level, where fear of losing power sways leaders to engage in self-serving behaviour, an effect accentuated in environments characterised by competition and rivalry (Wisse et al., 2019).

Research has shown that dominant group members can resist equity-oriented change depending on how the inequality and their own advantage is framed (Lowery et al., 2012; Rosette & Koval, 2018), and can also have social change motives that are regressive, meaning motives that seek to maintain or increase inequality (Sweetman et al., 2013). Regressive change motives are usually framed under backlash politics (Alter & Zürn, 2020), referring to the aim of powerful groups to regain power that has been lost or is threatened (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Taking this argument a step further, we propose that regressive social change can also occur when the dominant group is purposefully inactive for the sake of preserving the status quo. Considerations of power, then, have to go beyond how it is exercised, because inaction renders power exertion invisible. Rather, what is visible is that the powerless remain oppressed.

Consequently, an analysis of system-supporting inaction warrants a two- or three-dimensional approach to power, such as those offered by theorists such as Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Gaventa (2005) or Lukes (2005). We elaborate later how hidden power, through a process of internalised control, makes inequality seem legitimate and thereby invisible. Visibility refers to awareness about inequality (Acker, 2006; Tatli et al., 2017), and varies with perceivers' social position within an organisation, with those belonging to dominant groups tending to "see inequality as existing somewhere else, not where they are" (Acker, 2006, p. 452). In addition, while dominant group members might see the inequities with which disadvantaged groups are faced, they do not see how this is tied to their own advantage, and will aim to protect their privilege in response to 'threatening' information or equity-oriented policies (Craig et al., 2018; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). As such, those occupying privileged positions tend to think that their privilege is a deserved outcome of merit and choice. Research has shown that myths of efficiency, meritocracy, and positive globalisation make privilege seem normal, thereby perpetuating and reproducing inequality (e.g., Amis et al., 2020; Foley & Williamson, 2019).

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Influential theories such as Social Dominance Theory (SDT, Sidanius & Pratto, 2004) and System Justification Theory (SJT, Jost et al., 2004) aim to explain why the oppressed agree with their oppression or endorse a system that puts them at a disadvantage. However, sociologists (e.g., Scott, 1990) and social psychologists (e.g., Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Täuber, 2017; Turner & Reynolds, 2003) have rejected the central tenet of some of these theories, arguing that lack of observable resistance against oppression and inequality is interpreted at face value to indicate endorsement of the system. There is evidence that inaction by the disadvantaged is purposefully driven by identity-motives (e.g., Täuber & Van Zomeren, 2012, 2013), and can even imply resistance (e.g., Scott, 1990). However, these insights about inaction have not yet stimulated wider and systematic research efforts in collective action research, and they remain limited to those in powerless or disadvantaged positions. Similarly, Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that groups at the bottom of stratified social systems will only openly challenge the hierarchy when they see group boundaries as impermeable and have no hope of ever joining the higher status group. Implicitly, SIT delineates with this analysis how high-status groups who want to maintain their power and privilege, and want to avoid social competition and unrest that openly challenges their position, can achieve their objectives. The easiest way is by making the social system appear permeable, for instance by propagating that getting to the higher echelons of a system is a question of hard work and persistence, rather than one of intersectional privilege (e.g., Amis et al., 2020; Crenshaw, 1990). Research on tokenism (Wright et al., 1990) has shown that even when as few as 2% of the disadvantaged group can join the privileged group, people resort to individual over collective action. Essentially, therefore, diversity and inclusion policies that provide opportunities to minoritised and racialised groups effectively stifle collective action, without requiring visible organising on the part of advantaged groups. Importantly, we do not argue that these initiatives are not needed, but, when designed by those in power, could be, and evidently are, ineffective. This is precisely why those calling for transformative change seek to dismantle hierarchical systems from their roots, and call for the collective organising of the disadvantaged. However, the strategies and dynamic response of those in power remain underexplored in research, which we hope our proposed framework will inspire.

3 | A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF PRIVILEGE MAINTENANCE

Our arguments start from the tenet that changing unfair systems will necessarily come at a cost to those with privilege, which others have termed the "incentive problem for dismantling privilege" (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). As such, privileged group members will engage in behaviours that maintain power relations and hinder social change while also maintaining their sense of morality. This is because by simply going along with existing systems and hierarchies rather than challenging them, or in trying to maximise their outcomes within these systems, they end up exacerbating existing inequities (Nixon, 2019). Consequently, inaction by the powerful can be interpreted meaningfully only against the background of them striving to uphold their power and privilege through upholding the unequal system that benefits them.

System-supporting inaction by the powerful in existing unequal systems therefore can only be understood through the lens of power. In our analysis, we account for power in two ways. First, we apply the three-dimensional view on power using insights from Lukes (2005) and others (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Gaventa, 2005). The three-dimensional view on power allows for a more in-depth understanding of power in comparison to one-dimensional and two-dimensional views on power, which focus on visible and hidden forms of exercising power. Lukes (2005) incorporated these different views on power in the form of phases, where the responding phase refers to visible power (e.g., overt decision-making), the prevention phase refers to hidden power (e.g., setting the political agenda), and the shaping phase refers to invisible power (e.g., shaping meaning and beliefs). Second, Acker's (2006) seminal work on how organisations maintain and reproduce regimes of inequality guided our analysis. Inequality regimes are defined as "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Acker (2006) proposes control and compliance mechanisms that the powerful use to safeguard the perpetuation and reproduction of inequality regimes that benefit them. These match the three forms of power proposed by Lukes (2005), with direct, indirect and internalised controls being most relevant for visible, hidden and invisible power, respectively. Both the three-dimensional view on power and the operation of inequality regimes allude to the fact that power exertion is most effective when it is invisible—that is, they point us towards ways to interpret meaningfully what appears to be inaction through a lens of system-supporting resistance to change.

Figure 1 provides the conceptual model guiding our analysis. The model depicts the relational dynamics between the powerful and the powerless in an institutional setting. While the model also clearly shows temporal aspects, we will elaborate on these only in the research agenda, in order not to overcomplicate the analysis. The model's starting point (A) is an existing inequality regime (Acker, 2006) in which one group is powerful and privileged, and another group is relatively powerless and underprivileged. Building on extensive research reviewed above, we propose that this phase forms the essential framework to interpret inaction of the powerful normatively, by pointing to their desire to maintain and reproduce a status quo that benefits them. The phases of shaping (B), complaints and preventing (C) and visible resistance and responding (D) refer to the three-dimensional model of power exertion (e.g., Gaventa, 2005; Lukes, 2005). Phase B refers to inaction by the powerful with the purpose of maintaining the unequal system that affords them their privilege and power. Complaints (C) refer to actions by the powerless with the purpose of challenging the unequal system and one's own disadvantaged position in it. Such challenges will probably be met with forms of hidden power exertion (preventing) by the powerful. Visible resistance to the unequal system by the powerless (D) will be met with visible actions (responding) by the powerful aiming to defend the unequal system. The arrows that link the phases together indicate a chronological order of the phases. They further show that the inequality regime is maintained if the powerful

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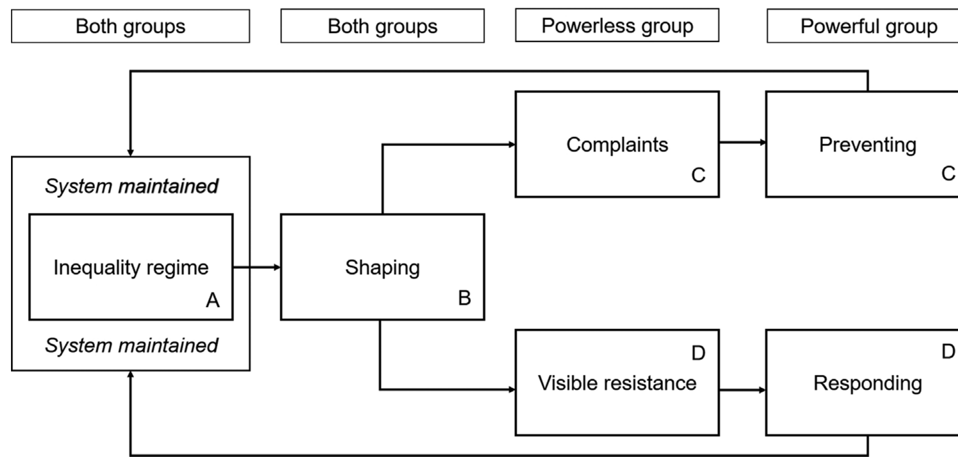

FIGURE 1 A model of privilege maintenance showing the dynamics between powerless and powerful groups. Compliance with an unequal system (a) is achieved through shaping (b). When the powerless engage in complaints or visible resistance (c), the powerful engage in preventing or responding (d), which, if successful, maintains and reproduces the unequal system (a)

successfully prevent and respond to challenges to their position. Note that, in reality, phases A and B would typically be indistinguishable. We present these phases separately to increase the comprehensibility of the analysis presented below and to highlight gaps in contemporary collective action research more comprehensively. In what follows, we consider existing collective action scholarship with regard to this model, in order to highlight contributions and lacunae.

3.1 | Shaping

The shaping phase (B) occurs within an inequality regime (A) that is perceived to be legitimate (e.g., Acker, 2006). This is the result of invisible power, which refers to exercising power over others by determining and shaping their beliefs, wishes and values (Lukes, 2005). The efficiency of shaping lies in the fact that non-coercive forms of power impose internal constraints on those who are dominated that lead to their compliance with their domination. With invisible power, rather than enforcing their own wishes and desires on the powerless, the powerful manipulate what the powerless want and value, thereby instilling their compliance with authority. The shaping phase is therefore characterised by unobservable or latent manipulation. In line with Lukes' (2005, p. 1) assertion that "power is at its most effective when least observable", Gaventa (2005) considers invisible power "the most insidious of the three dimensions of power" (p. 15). This is the phase in which the powerful can pledge commitment to change and simultaneously prevent that change by not acting on it. Because inaction in this phase is "doing as we always did", such system-supporting inaction is very difficult to uncover, except, for instance, by noting that nothing ever changes.

Theoretically, conditions of high visibility and low legitimacy of inequities should increase the likelihood for social change (Acker, 2006; Sweetman et al., 2013; Turner, 2005). Social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo are making inequality regimes visible and as such challenging the legitimacy of these systems. Yet, despite massive resistance by oppressed groups, inequalities are actually on the rise (e.g., Amis et al., 2018). We argue that once inequality has been exposed and delegitimised, the dominant behaviour among the oppressive group will be system-supporting inaction, tactics of implementing change without implementing change, that aim to maintain the status quo, and as such their own privilege. Oftentimes, unfortunately, it takes years or decades to realize that change is not, in fact, achieved. Equity-oriented policies, for instance, remain non-performative (Ahmed, 2006), and what is worse, will serve as evidence of equity, thus making it more difficult for oppressed groups to challenge inequity, unless tactics in this shaping phase are uncovered and explicitly challenged. Illustrating the operation of shaping by keeping change from happening, Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020, p. 403) conclude in a recent systematic review on sexual harassment in higher education, that anti-harassment policy has not had a discernible effect for thirty years: "despite the top-ranked articles spanning a period of almost 30 years, they argue in the same words about gaps in knowledge and implementation needs".

The implications regarding how powerful groups will exert power as derived from SIT map onto sociological views of when power exertion is most efficient: namely, when it is invisible (Acker, 2006; Gaventa, 2005; Jackman, 1994; Lukes, 2005). Thus, as long as powerful groups can uphold an impression of the unequal system as permeable and legitimate, they can maintain and reproduce the system without actually acting. In fact, the main reason for the oppressed not to object to a hierarchy that puts them at a pervasive disadvantage is that the privileged have shaped the impression that the unequal system is natural and/or legitimate, hence rendering inequality invisible (Acker, 2006). This leaves those in powerless positions endlessly fending for themselves individually (Wright et al., 1990). SIT does not explicitly discuss how the powerful benefit from leaving an unequal system that affords them with privilege untouched and intact, but this is a possibility that one needs to imagine to understand system-supporting inaction. Similarly, SJT tries to answer the question why existing social arrangements are legitimised, even when they harm personal and group interest

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(Osborne et al., 2019). However, in light of the workings of invisible power (Lukes, 2005), one can question whether system justification really points to a motivation to justify and defend an unequal system. While people might be socialised in unequal systems and hence perceive differential treatment and outcomes as normal and natural, this has little to do with justifying or defending the system. It could simply mean that they are not seeing the system or fending for themselves within it. This is not because they endorse or defend the unequal system, but because they cannot imagine a different system. In anthropological terms, they cannot imagine an "otherwise" (Rose, 2022).

3.2 | Complaints and preventing

When powerless groups begin imagining such an alternative reality, the "otherwise", this marks their transition from phase B to phase C. Phase C in the model refers to responses of the powerful to complaints, typically by means of exerting hidden power. Hidden power means that the powerful prevent grievances and concerns of the powerless from getting on the agenda.

When the powerless engage in less visible resistance, for instance by filing complaints about discrimination and unfair treatment within an institution, the powerful are likely to engage in the exertion of hidden power (e.g., Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). This form of power concerns the power to influence who is involved in decision-making and which issues make it on the agenda. By keeping them away from decision-making spaces and keeping their grievances off the agenda, the powerful can manipulate the powerless in ways that maintain their own privilege. In this phase, referred to as preventing by Lukes (2005), the powerful try to stay in power by manipulating discourse and interpretations. Indeed, the ability to influence discourse and determine what is considered on the agenda, is closely tied to existing inequality in social systems (Acker, 2006; Gramsci, 1971). Their ability to influence discourse enables the powerful to maintain and reproduce their hegemony (Fairclough, 1989; Scott, 1990). Accordingly, discursive hegemony refers to discourses that are so culturally dominant that they are seen as common sense, such as the women as caregiver discourse (Fernando & Prasad, 2018). Interestingly, although it differs from coercive power, hidden power exertion is considered violent. But in order to indicate its lower visibility, it is referred to as normative violence, indicating "the violence inherent to the operation of discursive categories, relating both to the formation of subjectivity and also to the facilitation of more overt 'typical' forms of violence" (Kenny et al., 2019, p. 802). In being a precursor for more overt forms of power exertion, normative violence reflects powerful groups' attempts to forestall power loss through "preemptive backlash" (Townsend-Bell, 2020). In line with this, the labelling of this phase as preventing (Lukes, 2005) reflects the attempt by the powerful to prevent open challenges to their power and privilege.

Besides being able to reframe discursive categories, the powerful can also effectively silence discourse altogether. This can be achieved for instance by co-opting and hijacking terms that suggest participation and equality (e.g., "shared ownership", "level playing field", Gaventa, 2005), thus making it difficult for oppressed groups to identify the problem. It can also be achieved by outright silencing of dissenting actors within the oppressed group. In academia, for instance, HR professionals and other organisational actors have been found to silence employees reporting harassment (Fernando & Prasad, 2018), thereby effectively censoring speech about violence experienced because of the power differential (Kenny, 2018). For instance, fear of retaliation is a main reason for underreporting of harassment and discrimination in workplaces (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Svensson and van Genugten (2013) found that, of all employees who had submitted a complaint to the Dutch Equal Treatment Commission, two-thirds reported retaliation. Retaliatory practices involved managers impeding employees' promotion and work conditions, for instance through unjustified negative performance appraisals, denial of promotion or other advancement opportunities, gossiping about the employee, mobbing, and exclusion from social activities (Svensson & van Genugten, 2013). Submitting a complaint can be seen as openly challenging the powerful, and retaliation as the countermeasure aiming to subdue the powerless party. Indeed, fear of retaliation is sufficient to prevent employees from sharing grievances (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018) and actual retaliation intimidates reporters of unequal treatment into retracting their complaints, or even leaving the organisation—effectively erasing them and their experiences (Phipps, 2020). These practices have been reported for all types of organisations, from universities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018) to banks (Kenny et al., 2019).

While hidden power has been studied in social psychology from the perspective of leaders influencing ingroups and outgroups (Subašić et al., 2011), we find less insight about its operation as an intergroup process between the oppressor and the oppressed serving to entrench structural inequality (Hodgins et al., 2020). Similarly, insights into the micro-dynamics of hidden power exertion and resistance to it are under-researched in collective action research. A notable exception is research into political rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) and analysis of crowd action to uncover identity negotiations between powerful and powerless groups during riots (Reicher, 1984). For collective action research to be impactful, studying these dynamics is important because institutions and organisations are key sites of inequality maintenance and reproduction (e.g., Amis et al., 2020). The powerful can use hidden forms of power, such as discourse, in ways that hold the disadvantaged responsible for their circumstances and for coping with structural inequality, which ultimately remains unaddressed. For instance, hegemonic discourse is frequently used to frame experiences of harassment reported by members of disadvantaged groups to present a lack of humour, hysteria or heightened sensitivity by those in power (Romani et al., 2019). However, the powerless can resist such framing, for instance by creating spaces in which they can identify and validate manipulation by the powerless, solidarise, and heal. Such spaces are referred to as "hush harbours" (Pyke, 2018) or "homeplaces" (hooks, 1991; Rose, 2022). The interaction and social affirmation taking place in such spaces can lead the powerless to reject attempts by the powerful to keep their grievances unaddressed and might prompt them to demand a place at the decision-making table. In other words, rejecting the normative violence that is inherent to the prevention phase can lead to visible challenges to the unequal system. When

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that happens, the powerful will respond with visible forms of power exertion.

3.3 | Visible resistance and responding

Phase D in the model refers to responses of the powerful to visible resistance, which is typically done through exerting visible power. In contrast to the shaping phase, power exertion in the responding phase can be easily recognised and therefore, resisted. Visible power exertion is traditionally studied much more extensively than the exertion of hidden power, simply because it is observable and thus easier to study. It is associated with a one-dimensional view on power, which considers observable decision-making as the primary form of how power is exerted (e.g., Dahl, 1957; French et al., 1959). This type of power is defined as influence, "power over", and is about attempting control, even if against the will of the target, through formal or institutionalised authorities and rules, that is, by appealing to legitimised authority (Gaventa, 2005; Hodgins et al., 2020). Pointing to the intergroup dynamics inherent in visible power, experimental research suggests that coercive forms of power, such as the use of surveillance, to achieve compliance are more efficient if the leader is part of the outgroup (Subašić et al., 2011). Accordingly, in his three-process theory of power, Turner (2005) identifies such coercive power as the least effective means of power exertion and the one most likely to be challenged. Indeed, the visibility of coercive power makes it relatively easy to identify and organise against to resist discriminatory outcomes. One contemporary example is voter suppression, a term referring to state laws that make it disproportionately difficult for voters of colour to vote (Brennan Center for Justice, 2022). Another example is the suppression of women's reproductive rights through stricter abortion legislation in Poland (Amnesty International, 2022). Lobby groups, activists and politicians can organise resistance and advocate for changing the rules.

In Lukes' (2005) model, this form of power exertion is labelled the responding phase, reflecting that those in power are responding to challenges of their power. In line with Lukes, Turner (2005) states that coercion is most likely to be exercised when leaders no longer have influence, or when their power is threatened. Thus, it makes sense that visible resistance by the powerless (phase C) would instigate visible power exertion by the powerful (phase D). Researchers have suggested that when the disadvantaged openly share their discontent and grievances, the powerful have no other choice than to engage in (violent) backlash. Such backlash is considered a special form of contentious politics with separate causes, mediators and outcomes (Alter & Zürn, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2018). It is evident, for example, in the rise of populist sentiments, such as anti-feminism, and push-back against reproductive rights and immigrant groups, which have received ample media and research attention (e.g., Clarke, 2021). Sociologist Scott (1990) contends that social hierarchies are stable only as long as both the powerful and powerless groups follow a precise transcript, which prescribes how dominant and subordinate groups openly ought to interact. Since the preservation of power relations depends to a great extent on both groups' willingness to play their respective roles, openly challenging rules and decisions made by the powerful has a deep symbolic meaning: "The first … declaration that breaches the etiquette of power relations, that breaks the apparently calm surface of silence and consent, carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war" (Scott, 1990, p. 8). Responding to such challenges therefore is essential for the powerful in order to maintain the social hierarchy that endows them with power and privilege. If this response to being challenged is successful, the inequality regime is maintained.

4 | GAPS IN CURRENT APPROACHES TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

The above framework allows us to identify important lacunae in collective action research. Based on the observation that system-supporting behaviour by the powerful group is almost entirely missing from the agenda, we have aimed to complement existing knowledge with the perspective of this group in particular. However, the model depicted in Figure 1 also highlights areas of inquiry that are currently missing or underdeveloped regarding the powerless group. We will summarise our observations hereafter.

While there is some theorising and empirical work in the literature on collective action from the perspective of dominant group members, this work largely examines solidarity-based action or allyship, that is, the conditions under which they would support disadvantaged groups in their collective action efforts (Saab et al., 2015; Chayinska et al., 2016; Mallet et al., 2008; Radke et al., 2020; Selvanathan et al., 2020). Regardless of one's intentions for such solidarity-based activism, a prerequisite of such action is the acknowledgement of one's privilege and one's own role in dismantling these structures. Those who benefit from systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism and ableism, rarely occupy spaces and positions purely based on merit or worth, even if they did not ask for the unearned advantage from which they benefit (Nixon, 2019). However, this advantage remains invisible to those in dominant groups (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). As stated by Acker (2006, p. 452), "One privilege of the privileged is not to see their privilege." As such, dominant group members conveniently presume that they occupy their professional or social positions because of their individual merit, rather than because of systems that elevate them at the expense of those who are disadvantaged. In fact, research has shown that dominant groups' support for policies that seek to establish equity depends on the perceived legitimacy and security of their privilege (Chow et al., 2013; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Jun et al., 2017; Subašić et al., 2011).

Because dominant groups are motivated to preserve the status quo, they are more likely to resist systemic change, and to take action to preserve systems that privilege them. While studies from this perspective are rare, they have shown that indeed dominant groups tend to undermine system-challenging collective action and encourage system-supporting collective action (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2018). For instance, system-justification motivation among high-status groups increases likelihood of system-supporting collective action both directly and indirectly via increased

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identification with the group, which itself leads to increased perceptions of group-based injustice (Osborne et al., 2019).

Consequently, we argue that the traditional approaches cannot account for motives and actions of the dominant group satisfactorily. In particular, in modern neoliberal systems, it is not always possible or ideal to hinder social change through explicit social movement-based organising, which is traditionally assumed to constitute collective action in social psychology. This is because, on the one hand, those privileged within these systems hold so much relative power that it is unnecessary for them to resort to collective action to maintain their power position. On the other hand, in this normative context of alleged commitment to equality and free speech, resistance to change is most effective by doing nothing, while publicly agreeing with the discourse of disadvantaged groups or feigning help at little cost to oneself. Dominant group members can have enough power as individuals to have no need to resort to collective power, and can hinder social change by simply not supporting, not implementing, or co-opting processes put forth by marginalised groups to create change (e.g., Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018, 2020; Cortina & Areguin, 2021). In other words, the powerful enjoy the privilege of not having to be confrontational while preventing or reversing the consequences of changes brought about by disadvantaged groups for the sake of preserving their power. At the macro-level, this is perhaps best illustrated by the case of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), where racialised staff reported a two-tiered staff system, over-representation of the "Global North" in management, as well as discrimination and abuse, despite the organisation committing to equal opportunity 16 years ago. Advocacy by members to "decolonize MSF" and massive reporting of abuse led nowhere, perpetrators faced no consequences, and reporters were left feeling "disappointment, distrust, and disdain for MSF itself" and its "perceived inaction", which reporters classified as institutional resistance (Majumdar & Mukerjee, 2022). Similarly, research on institutions has also shown, for instance, that universities' pervasive inaction regarding sexual harassment and violence serves to protect "both the institution and those (usually privileged men) whose welfare is bound up with its success" (Phipps, 2020, p. 227).

Regarding resistance from the powerless group, we note that this phase has received more attention in collective action research. However, the focus is predominantly on visible resistance. Complaints and the associated intergroup dynamics when these are met with hidden power exertion are not yet well understood. Specifically, two traditional approaches to collective action research are predominant that leave dominant group members' purposeful inaction invisible. The first refers to social psychological research on collective action being largely focused on reformist change from the perspective of disadvantaged group members (Sweetman et al., 2013), with most research examining the predictors and mechanisms of collective action within existing systems (e.g., Stürmer & Simon, 2004; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). This focus on why the oppressed do not object to their unfair conditions implicitly implies that if those oppressed try hard enough to resist oppression, their situation will inevitably change—while ignoring the actions of the dominant to resist change. Second, literature into social movements within social psychology typically frames resistance as collective, perhaps because resistance actors have needed to build collective movements to increase their power (Drury & Reicher, 2009). More recently, perspectives on collective action by disadvantaged group members have become more complex, with researchers arguing that there is a range of action disadvantaged group members undertake, including revolutionary tendencies, individual action and inaction, beyond the typically studied forms of reformist change (Becker et al., 2015; Sweetman et al., 2013; Täuber, 2017). These researchers argue that studying the complex forms of action and resistance in response to collective disadvantage is central to fully understanding intergroup relations. We propose that this also applies to the actions of dominant group members, particularly when thinking about resistance to social change, or system-supporting collective action, as others have also suggested (Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2019). Further, one effect of hidden power exertion is that members of the powerless group become isolated, a consequence of normative violence such as gaslighting and creating fear cultures (Ahern, 2018). Undermining powerless group members' understanding of belonging to a collective can prevent their transition into visible resistance for long periods of time.

Another type of social change goal that is endorsed by group members is their belief in their ability to enhance the group's social value within the current social system (Sweetman et al., 2013). Given that social systems often work for the benefit of advantaged group members, it becomes immediately clear that they will not have goals to change this system (Chow et al., 2013; Phillips & Lowery, 2018), and will engage in cost-benefit calculations when deciding to make group-level concessions towards equity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2000; Jun et al., 2017). It could also be that their imagination of alternative futures, which is considered a determinant of revolutionary tendencies among disadvantaged groups (Passini & Morselli, 2013; Sweetman et al., 2013), could actually hinder solidarity-based action or even enhance backlash among dominant group members (Townsend-Bell, 2020), since this alternative system will probably decrease their own group's (undeserved) social value. Successfully implemented change initiatives show that these fears among the dominant group are well founded. For example, a study found that contrary to common belief, establishing gender quotas for political seats displaced underqualified or mediocre men, rather than increasing opportunities for 'mediocre' women (Besley et al., 2017).

Taken together, these gaps leave the perspective of dominant groups underexplored, redirect attention from strategies they use to hinder change, and indirectly put the responsibility and burden for creating social change on disadvantaged group members. Moreover, by simply focusing on what motivates the disadvantaged to resist oppression, we leave unanswered the question of what enabled oppression in the first place (Stewart et al., 2014). As such, systematic structures that enable oppression, such as hierarchical institutions that provide unwavering power to a select few positions—often occupied by White men (Phipps, 2020)—remain unexplored. As argued by Nixon (2019), social structures produce both unearned disadvantage for some groups, and unearned advantage for others, and change efforts have largely ignored the complicity of those who receive unfair advantage from social, political and economic structures. Before presenting

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a research agenda based on these insights, we share an example that illustrates the usefulness of power-based analyses for understanding system-supporting inaction below.

5 | EXEMPLIFYING THE MODEL WITH INEQUALITY REPRODUCTION IN ACADEMIA

In this section, we illustrate the dynamics explicated above with recent research in the academic context (Hilton & Täuber, 2022; Täuber et al., 2021). This research used Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes as an analytical framework to investigate the reproduction of inequality in academia. Basing their study on semi-structured interviews with 27 employees of a Dutch university who experienced discrimination and harassment, the authors describe the micro-dynamics of inequality reproduction in academia. In this study, the perpetrators of discrimination and harassment, as well as their enablers and allies, were exclusively members of the powerful and dominant social group, namely Dutch and White. While perpetrators were further predominantly male, their organisational enablers were often female. Targets were predominantly non-Dutch, female and in early career stages. Despite the university being committed to diversity and inclusion, and having a zero-tolerance policy regarding harassment, the interviewed employees experienced pervasive inequalities over prolonged periods of time. The intersectional character of the described experiences made it difficult to recognise and address them, thereby contributing to feelings of insecurity among targets of such behaviours about what actually happened to them.

Demonstrating the power of shaping, the university's public commitment to facilitate women academics delayed young non-Dutch women scholars' recognition that they were being discriminated against and harassed based on intersections of gender, foreignness and age. Bringing up conversations about gender inequality and discrimination was hardly possible because, on paper, the university was fully committed to making the academic working environment more diverse and inclusive. The shaping phase was the most pervasive, with victims having a sense of injustice, but struggling to define and verbalise it. Because the behaviour they encountered could not possibly be discriminatory and harassing, given that the university was against this, targets were considering how their own behaviour might contribute to the situation. Their insecurity contributed to isolation, because the extensive self-doubt prevented them from speaking to others—they did not seek out the hush harbours and homeplaces (Pyke, 2018; Rose, 2022). On the other hand, discussing issues of harassment and discrimination with the harasser often led to denial and gaslighting, attempting to prevent these experiences from getting on the agenda and from targets recognising that their disadvantages in the system are collectively shared. However, once targets recognised the university's underlying inequality regime and the many ways in which it structurally disadvantaged them, participants in the research started voicing their experiences.

This was often through formal institutional mechanisms such as by reporting to the manager or confidential advisor ("complaints" in Figure 1). Upon reporting, targets were typically met with normative violence, where those in power reframed the narrative, that is, the prevention phase. They encountered many of the processes that Fernando and Prasad (2018) identified as leading to "reluctant acquiescence": they were encouraged to "unsee" and reframe their experiences. Various actors from the powerful group would suggest that their inequality experiences were due to misunderstandings, a lack of understanding of Dutch culture, or—often in the context of racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes—a lack of humour and an overly sensitive personality. Rather than addressing the structural inequality operating within the university to the advantage of Dutch, White, middle-aged men (and women), the response was to put the responsibility and blame on the individuals experiencing them. Employees were encouraged to self-silence, and some were warned explicitly to "not make a fuss", as it would hurt their career. HR and higher management were engaging in conflict avoidance and, where this was not possible, used quick fixes to cover up structural problems. For instance, rather than removing a long-known bully from an institute, those he bullied over the years were placed in other institutes and departments, or left the university. Phipps (2020) refers to these tactics as institutional airbrushing, aiming to protect universities' polished and marketable reputation.

The stories shared indicate that the prevention phase was usually initiated when participants were not willing or able (any longer) to accept the discursive categories forced upon them. When that happened, for instance through reporting to formal sources of support, such as the confidential advisor or higher management, they were confronted with at times physically violent backlash, they were silenced, gaslighted, blamed and isolated, and their narratives were delegitimised and changed in ways that held them responsible for the discrimination and harassment they had reported. Punishments included threats of being fired; lectures, PhD students and other professional opportunities being taken away; covert smear campaigns against reporters' reputation and downright attempts to destroy reporters' academic careers. Most of these punitive and retaliatory actions were actively supported by third parties, mostly HR professionals, but sometimes also higher management, such as faculty boards or deans. In line with the extant literature, this retaliation instilled a culture of fear and hopelessness not only among those affected, but also among witnesses and bystanders. Consequently, challenging the structural inequality that characterises the university was seen as useless and harmful for one's career and mental health.

Ultimately, these dynamics lead to disadvantaged group members being made invisible, either by silencing their voice and suppressing their stories, or by physically removing them from the university because their existence threatens the careers of academic superstars and the institutional narrative of equity. Because the people and their stories disappear, the inequality regime is preserved: the powerful have successfully defended, maintained and reproduced the unequal system that puts them at a structural advantage and others at a structural disadvantage. Importantly, none of these tactics necessitated overt collective action by the dominant group. Only towards the escalating end of the relational dynamics between the powerless and the powerful could responses be construed as collective. Before that, the

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tactics associated with shaping and preventing were sufficient to subdue victims or make their stories vanish. This research demonstrates the usefulness of sociological views on power for investigating system-supporting inaction by the powerful and its escalation. Overt backlash and organising by those in power, therefore, is only the tip of the iceberg of resistance to change and maintenance of privilege.

6 | A RESEARCH AGENDA

Because "a powerful actor can prevent political action without taking action itself" (Hodgins et al., 2020, p. 272), unpacking power and privilege is fundamental to fully understanding social inequities and processes of social change. Ignoring the impact of power inequalities, and focusing exclusively on the behaviours of disadvantaged groups, will lead to misdirected policy focus (McCartney et al., 2021). We hence call for more research focusing on the conditions under which dominant groups support or hinder equity-oriented change in order to facilitate transformative change. The framework depicted in Figure 1 can support the endeavour of unpacking the diverse range of strategies utilised by dominant group members to resist social change and maintain their power. This also heeds calls by other scholars to better systematise these forms of resistance dynamics (e.g., Krook, 2015). Our conceptualisation of resistance to change not only delineates a range of actions dominant group members might take, but also frames such resistance as an inevitable outcome of intergroup change processes—and thus as a normative issue. Accounting for the associated intergroup-dynamics, we propose that system-supporting inaction is only the beginning of an escalating trajectory of conflict and violent backlash whereby those privileged attempt to protect their power. Under this framework, conflict only becomes visible when minoritised groups start outrightly resisting oppressive institutional structures.

From the above analysis and research example, we see three main topics that should guide a future research agenda: (1) the forms of system-supporting resistance the privileged will prefer and why, as well as the contexts that facilitate the perpetuation and reproduction of unequal systems; (2) individual factors that predict dominant group members' resistance to change in terms of who is most likely to resist and why; (3) factors concerning how the disadvantaged navigate their lived inequality under attempts of the dominant to resist change. Ultimately, for social psychological research to facilitate equity-oriented change, research efforts should go into ways of decreasing (or eliminating) the impact of the shaping phase, while in parallel facilitating "complaints" and "visible resistance" by oppressed groups (see columns B and C in Figure 1).

6.1 | Strategies and contextual enablers of system-supporting inaction

Our model points to different forms of resistance strategies adopted by the privileged, such as feigning interest in diversity or displaying hostile behaviour, which aligns with the different modes of power exertion to which we have alluded. Future research could investigate the range of strategies advantaged group members employ to hinder change, as well as predictors of preference for specific forms of resistance. Flood et al. (2021), for example, offer a comprehensive model of resistance to gender equality which elaborates on passive, intermediate and active forms of resistance to gender equality, each of which uses specific strategies to resist meaningful change. This continuum fits well with our conceptualisation of resistance to change that ranges from *not doing* (system-supporting inaction) to *undoing* (active resistance or backlash). Future work could explore whether this continuum holds across different social change contexts and goals, and which strategies are more effective under different settings. For instance, research highlights that the most effective solutions to sexual harassment lie in reshaping the contexts and organisational cultures that support it (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). It seems plausible to assume that resistance to reformative change, too, is facilitated by permissive cultures that turn a blind eye on discriminatory behaviour by members of the dominant group, particularly when backlash is concerned. Organisations might have permissive cultures that allow for evading change and for dodging norms of equitability. Thus, questions that may guide research in this regard concern the procedures, enablers and dynamics that facilitate system-supporting resistance by the privileged, and the design and implementation of interventions to disrupt these. One possibility would be to incentivise actual change, rather than incentivising non-performative commitment to change. Similarly, the absence of effective change can be punished. An example for this is the current policy of the NIH, the largest funder of research in the United States, which has removed more than 70 lab heads from grants after (sexual) harassment findings (Kaiser, 2021).

Our conceptualisation points to a need to take an ecological approach to intergroup dynamics and examine how different combinations of individual characteristics and ecological conditions, as well as their interactions, give rise to different types of action by dominant group members. As our analysis has shown, resistance to change can only be fully understood within the respective institutional context, whether at the local, national or international level. Structural and contextual factors that could be related to the propensity and manifestation of backlash include legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms, cultural norms, expected support from interpersonal others (e.g., bystanders or those in leadership positions), and the extent of organisation of the disadvantaged group (e.g., through unions). For example, accountability mechanisms could differentiate between covert resistance and outright backlash, such that the same individual could resort to either method depending on whether and to whom they are held accountable. Under today's diversity and inclusion schemes in academia, for example, resisting gender equality is arguably non-normative and academic institutions are held accountable to donors and policy documents, so resistance to change cannot be explicitly against gender equality. In contrast, stormers of Capitol Hill were accountable to no one, and rather had the backing of Trump, and as such felt immune from any repercussions (New York Times, 2021). In parallel, exploring contextual factors would also help elaborate

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how institutional factors, including roles, priorities and expectations from individual group members, shape the behaviour of dominant group members as well, such that they would engage in inaction and comply with the unequal hierarchical order regardless of their own beliefs and desires. Rather than viewing responses to social change as fixed attitudinal tendencies, therefore, we propose to map the contextual conditions that give rise to a range of actions to capture fully the multiplicity of opinions and responses of dominant group members. Understanding these mechanisms would allow social scientists to develop context-specific interventions for social change and contribute to "reshaping the context and cultures" rather than individuals propagating oppression (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

Finally, our framework also suggests that power exertion is a dynamic and non-linear process, where responses of those in power depend on the extent to which oppressed groups are resisting oppression. While the sociological models we allude to consider power a process rather than a state (Acker, 2006), they are rather quiet on why the privileged would change their strategies from shaping, to preventing, to responding, or why they would stop relying on internalised control and move on to indirect and direct control. We propose that escalation is only comprehensible if we take into account the relational dynamics between the privileged and the disadvantaged. Analysing this interaction might inform our understanding of how resistance to reformist change moves from passive forms such as denying there is a problem, to active forms such as violent backlash. Testing non-linear models or using qualitative methods of contextual analysis could also shed light on the multiplicity of strategies that are used by dominant groups and how these shift depending on what the oppressed are doing, such that a pervasive state of shaping is maintained, and escalation is only necessary where hierarchies are under threat.

6.2 | Individual-level factors as moderators of system-supporting inaction

Future research could study whether specific characteristics of dominant group members increase the likelihood of and preference for specific forms of resistance to change. Inequality, as enforced and perpetuated through harassment for instance, has long been argued to benefit a certain populace of the powerful, namely those who would not have achieved their privileged positions through meritocratic principles, such as mediocre-performing men (Besley et al., 2017; Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2019). It seems plausible that the more undeserving or fragilely entitled people an unequal system holds—where "undeserving" might be fully based on self-perception—the more persistent resistance to system change will be, and the more likely violent and coercive backlash will be. Narcissism could be another trait that predicts resistance against system-change and willingness to engage in (violent) backlash (Górska et al., 2020) given that it is typically associated with fragile entitlement (Bosson et al., 2008). Social dominance orientation and the associated endorsement of hierarchy-enhancing myths (such as neoliberal ideology and sexism) could promote support for and predict specific types of resistance to system change (Girerd & Bonnot, 2020; Pratto & Cathey, 2002; Pratto et al., 2013). Additionally, implicit and explicit biases, such as benevolent versus hostile sexism, might differentiate between passive and active (backlash) resistance strategies. Accordingly, research could investigate how institutional and individual factors interact to lead to motives to maintain group-based hierarchies and as such the policies group members would support (Lowery et al., 2006; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). We would like to stress here the intersectional nature of power dynamics. Given that white, middle-class women are privileged in comparison with women of colour (e.g., Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Crenshaw, 1990; Moughalian & Täuber, 2020), similar processes could hold for white women, or, in fact, for any dominant social group privileged by the inequality system in question.

6.3 | Responses of the disadvantaged to different phases of power exertion

While we advocate a stronger focus of collective action research on those with power and privilege, our framework also points to necessary research avenues concerning the disadvantaged. For instance, research could investigate how each of the phases and their associated resistance strategies affect disadvantaged group members differently, and the pathways through which the phases and their associated resistance tactics hinder social change by posing as a barrier to solidarity and organising. In order to achieve this, the temporal aspects implied in the model need to be explicated. There is a temporal aspect inherent to individuals' moving from shaping to the preventing and responding phases. Importantly, we do not contend that all members of the powerless group move through the phases simultaneously. Depending on how much insight individuals have into the systemic and illegitimate nature of the inequality regime, they will transition from the shaping to the other phases. Shaping, preventing and responding can happen at the same time within the same institution, but to different people. Therefore, the shaping phase should be the primary point of intervention: once powerless groups realise the systemic and illegitimate nature of inequality, individuals within this group can move on from this phase to the next phases. Although one could argue that this is ill advised due to the increasingly violent backlash from the powerful group, we believe that inequality can be resisted more effectively when power exertion is visible, which is where our analysis connects with contemporary approaches to collective action again.

For example, normative and discursive violence in the prevention phase (column D in Figure 1) lead to shame, doubt, self-silencing, isolation and increased distrust. Coupled with organisational discourses such as the illusion of personal mobility, as well as contextual factors such as precarious labour and migration, this might lead to the self-preserving motive among the disadvantaged to try to succeed within the organisation rather than organise for change. Resistance strategies in the responding phase, however, shatter the illusion of personal mobility, and with it the perception that the organisation is amenable to change. This might lead to perceptions that it is better to leave the institution rather than trying to change it from within; in other words, to not

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be the master's tool (Phipps & McDonnell, 2021). By exploring these dynamics and decisions in future research, we can explain the range of actions and choices of disadvantaged group members (Sweetman et al., 2013) while accounting for countermovements and backlash. Relatedly, research could also investigate the conditions under which high-status group members who declare themselves allies become outcasts and subject to punishment by the same institutional structures that oppress the disadvantaged, such as the German boat captain Pia Klemp facing 20 years in prison for saving drowning refugees (Akehurst, 2021). We suggest that similar mechanisms could be at play, where outright backlash is a response to real or perceived threat that the status quo could shift (in this case, the imagined dissolution of fortress Europe).

This line of research can tie in with extant research on collective action and mobilisation. We argue that it is imperative not only to examine the circumstances under which the disadvantaged will mobilise rather than aim for individual mobility or withdrawal, but also to examine the conditions that permit resistance to endure (Sanson & Courpasson, 2022). Because inequality is on the rise globally, possibilities for conducting meaningful research into these questions are abundant. We would encourage scholars to use qualitative research to complement the impressive insights generated by experimental research into collective action. Qualitative methods such as observational studies, discourse analysis, and interviews—as successfully used, for instance, by Reicher and colleagues (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Reicher, 1984)—allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the disadvantaged, and in particular experiences of intersectional inequality (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Such methods would allow us to inquire under-researched organisational and individual aspects that might contribute to reluctant acquiescence (Fernando & Prasad, 2018). Dependency on the institution for visa and residency, for example, makes international women academics particularly vulnerable to attempts to silence them. These methods would also allow us to dissect the reasoning and motivations of those in power better. A focus on people other than the disadvantaged—such as those with power and privilege, their enablers and allies, higher management and HR professionals, but also bystanders—would do more justice to the many actors involved in resisting change and reproducing inequality that we introduce in our framework.

Finally, we encourage more interdisciplinary efforts into the substantial detrimental effects that unequal systems, as well as the actions of those benefiting from them, have on the disadvantaged. Trauma research, for instance, shows that resistance tactics such as normative violence, gaslighting and silencing contribute to complex trauma, increased distrust and cynicism (Ahern, 2018; Harsey & Freyd, 2020). A relevant question concerns whether and how the profound distrust of organisations that is associated with experiences of institutional betrayal pervades other areas, possibly instilling a deep-rooted distrust in society as a whole. Mental health problems, including PTSD, that result from being exposed to unequal treatment and (normative) violence negatively affect the livelihoods of people from disadvantaged groups. Here, too, those at the intersections of disadvantaged identities are particularly vulnerable (Gómez, 2015).

7 | CONCLUSION

Dominant groups benefit from perpetuating and reproducing unequal systems under the guise of neutrality, in large part through system-supporting (in)action. The key strength of our conceptualisation is our focus on the social and relational aspects of power, which helps show that societal inequalities are due to entrenched and structural power asymmetries between groups. We hope that the framework we developed here serves as a guide for collective action research to investigate more systematically qualities (e.g., fragile entitlement versus allyship) and tactics (e.g., denial, making invisible, retaliation) of the powerful, as well as support for the disadvantaged (e.g., shared recognition of inequality regimes, resilience concerning backlash, solidarity). Policies that intervene at the individual level will not lead to equity, and might even harm those who are supposedly benefitting from these policies, as has been argued for gender and development initiatives backfiring on women (e.g., Täuber, 2019; Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). This necessarily comes with exposing current as well as historical injustices (e.g., colonialism) that have led to these power asymmetries in resources and social and economic positions (Abimbola et al., 2021). A key area of future research, therefore, is to examine what enabled these power asymmetries, and what enables their maintenance. It appears obvious, then, that focusing on the powerful, the privileged, the dominant social group is inevitable if we are to understand the lack of meaningful reformist change and the increase of regressive change and violent backlash. The key take-home message from our analysis is that, if those who are privileged by the status quo are mandated to bring about reformist change, change will not happen. If it happens, it does so significantly more slowly than necessary, and the toll it takes on those who are disadvantaged by the unequal system in place is huge.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This manuscript is theoretical/conceptual and does not contain data.

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