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The Psychology of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Creative Maladjustment” at Societal Injustice and Oppression

Aerielle M. Allen* and Colin Wayne Leach

University of Connecticut

Many theoretical frameworks in psychology are premised on the notion that people are hedonistic in nature—drawn to pleasure and avoidant of discomfort. In this essay, we argue that psychology’s hedonism contrasts with Martin Luther King Jr.’s conception of creative maladjustment, wherein a feeling of “cosmic discontent” is focused on the ugly truth of societal injustice. After reviewing hedonistic assumptions in the psychology of coping, well-being, and views of societal inequality, we discuss MLK’s conception of creative maladjustment and tie it to critical consciousness and the present-day idea of being “woke.” We then use MLK’s ideas as a lens on contemporary psychological research of views of societal injustice “from above” and “from below.” We suggest that MLK’s analysis continues to challenge psychology to develop an approach to cognition, emotion, and motivation at societal injustice that identifies the ethical value of a sustained discontent that illuminates truth and animates opposition.

The psychology of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “creative maladjustment” at societal injustice

... I am sure that we all recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we *must always be maladjusted* if we are to be people of good will. ... racial discrimination and racial segregation ... religious bigotry ... economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few ... the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence (emphasis added).

M.L. King, Jr. 1968, p. 185

In SPSSI’s programming at the 1967 APA convention, Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that “people of good will” should never psychologically adjust to—ignore, forget, accept, rationalize, legitimize – the terrible realities of societal injustice.

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to A.M. Allen, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06521-1020 [e-mail: arielle.allen@uconn.edu or colin.leach@uconn.edu].

King was being clever. He took the “technical nomenclature” of psychological (mal)adjustment and repurposed it to make an ethical point. Although he may have assumed that his argument about (mal)adjustment would have a particular resonance with psychologists, King did not invent his argument for us alone. He had used the notion of (mal)adjustment for some time, with other audiences, including in a 1963 speech to Western Michigan University. This offers some indication that King’s call for creative maladjustment at injustice was central to his ethical purpose, and to his platform for change. What King may not have realized when he appealed to psychologists in 1967 is that his conceptualization of maladjustment at societal injustice as an ethically necessary psychological position contradicted psychology’s deep-seated assumption that human beings are inherently hedonistic (for reviews, see Bastian, Jetten, Hornsey, & Leknes, 2014; Gray, 1990; Higgins, 1997) and thus prefer to avoid being maladjusted to anything for too long (for reviews, see Cheng Lau, Bobo, & Man-Pui, 2014; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). Managing or buffering stress, resilience, hardiness, grit, optimism, positive reframing, are some of the many disciplinary labels we have for the positive thinking and feeling thought to aid psychological adjustment to adversity of all sorts, including societal injustice.

In this essay, we argue that King’s valorization of maladjustment to injustice is difficult to theorize or study from the point of view of (Anglophone) academic psychology. Indeed, King’s argument that psychological maladjustment is the (factually and ethically) correct response to societal injustice is anathema to psychology’s hedonistic assumption that people prefer to avoid pain and to approach pleasure. Given psychology’s emphasis of psychological adjustment—and the well-being thought to follow from it—the field was in a poor position to understand or encourage the maladjustment to injustice that King highlighted to us fifty years ago. As we will illustrate in a discussion of recent theory and research on psychological responses to societal injustice, psychology today still has difficulty making sense of King’s call to theorize and study what he argued was the psychological experience necessary for collective effort at reversing systemic injustice.

Adjustment to Societal Injustice

In contrast to King’s argument about the necessity and value of maladjustment to injustice, psychology expects individuals to manage, cope, grow, or otherwise *adjust* their psychology such that the mind mitigates against the psychological pain of adversity (for reviews, see Cheng et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2000). The hedonistic assumption that people wish to avoid pain and approach pleasure (for reviews, see Bastian et al., 2014; Gray, 1990; Higgins, 1997) underlies the prevailing view that positive and optimistic interpretations of reality are a *sine qua non* of psychological

health and well-being, even if such interpretations are unrealistic (for discussions, see Colvin & Block, 1994; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993; Taylor et al., 2000).

Hedonism also informs the social psychological idea that individuals have an inherent motivation to minimize, rationalize, or legitimize societal injustice so as to avoid the psychological discomfort of trying to succeed in a world where talent, skill, and effort are not sacrosanct (for discussions, see Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Several prominent theories, most notably system justification (see Jost & Hunyady, 2003) theory, go further in arguing that members of societally disadvantaged groups have particular reason to psychologically adjust to unjust inequality, even if it is against their material interests. This “just world” view remains prominent despite its weak empirical support (e.g., Brandt, 2013; Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011; for discussions, see Leach & Livingstone, 2015; Leach et al., 2002). This is likely due to the ways in which psychology’s inherent hedonism fits with the more specific idea that the (dis)advantaged must be motivated to find ways to avoid the otherwise terrible reality of deeply entrenched systems that maintain societal injustice.

Given the deep hedonism of the field, it is hard to imagine the dysphoria of King’s creative maladjustment at societal injustice being interpreted as psychologically healthy. Indeed, it is easier to imagine King’s creative maladjustment being interpreted as the cognitive distortions, negative thinking, and ruminative depression Cognitive-Behavioral and other therapies are designed to undue. As the American Psychological Association states on its website, “Psychologists use scientific research to better understand how people learn, interpret events and make decisions. They then translate that knowledge into techniques *to help people make smarter choices in their daily lives*” (emphasis added). And if psychological techniques of adjustment fail, then there is medication (American Psychological Association, 2012). In the United States, and increasingly elsewhere, tranquilizers, serotonin reuptake inhibitors, and the like are used to adjust the “chemical imbalances” and “changes in circuitry” in the brain thought to cause maladjustment to the world (see National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Psychology’s emphasis of adaptation to social realities to promote well-being (for discussions, see Cheng et al., 2014; Colvin & Block, 1994; Taylor et al., 2000) suggests the need for smarter choices rather than the deep discontent that King called creative maladjustment.

One need not suffer from the “cynical hostility” sometimes attributed to the disadvantaged to imagine that we are not far off from mindful and medicinal treatments for the deep discontent that King encouraged. In fact, there is considered effort to alter the definition of posttraumatic stress disorder to include reactions to the “trauma” of systemic prejudice and discrimination (see Carter, 2007). This is despite the fact that a very small minority of those exposed to trauma ever develop PTSD and that African Americans tend to have better psychological health than White Americans despite African Americans greater exposure to several forms of

societal injustice (National Center for Health Statistics, 2016). To be sure, sadness, anxiety, and other distress that disrupts normal life should be of serious concern to psychologists, and to everyone else. In psychology, we call this disorder, and wish to reduce it to aid adjustment. But, this sort of discontent is exactly the kind of psychological maladjustment that King wished to see in response to injustice. Thus, King might question how we can use the notion of psychological disorder to conceptualize and treat discontent at a disordered society.

Maladjustment to Societal Injustice

Unlike psychology's focus on the identification and alteration (i.e., "diagnosis" and "treatment") of negative thinking and feeling about the world, King's ethically-based analysis argues that people of good will should experience psychologically painful maladjustment for as long as injustice persists. Indeed, King (1968, p. 184) was explicit in his wish for "... a kind of cosmic discontent enlarging in the bosoms of people of good will all over this nation." To treat the symptoms of creative maladjustment would be to dull a necessary and noble pain that is an authentic moral response to injustice. For King, maladjustment to injustice is an illness with only one cure—justice. Of course, King's thinking owes a good deal to beliefs about righteous and redemptive suffering in the Abrahamic religions. From a psychological point of view, however, what is striking about King's analysis is that it argues that people of good will *could* and *should* suffer psychologically for as long as injustice prevails if they "lose illusions ... to gain truth."

There are only two things which pierce the human heart.
Beauty and affliction.
Simone Weil

Thinkers have long questioned the assumption that hedonism is central to human nature (see Higgins, 1997). And, despite the many and varied ways in which hedonism is central to much psychological thinking, there are alternative views. For instance, some psychologists in the clinical and personality traditions have opposed the view that psychological health and well-being is necessarily served by pleasantly optimistic interpretations of social reality (e.g., Colvin & Block, 1994; Shedler et al., 1993). Much of this work argues that there are ethical and practical benefits to seeing the world realistically, even it hurts. And, recently, a group of philosophers and behavioral scientists came together to interrogate the "value of suffering" in psychological, behavioral, and moral terms (Value of suffering project, 2016). This work highlights the idea that psychological pain, and perhaps even physical pain, can be instructive; it can highlight what is wrong and thus signal the need to be better or do better (for discussions, see Bastian et al., 2014; Leach, 2017).

Free of assumed hedonism, dysphoric emotional experiences—such as shame, anger, and fear—can be viewed as serving to orient people to what is amiss in their environment and thereby facilitate an understanding of it (see Leach, 2016, 2017). This understanding can be an important first step in assessing the potential for action to avoid or to alter the undesired circumstance. In a recent review of research and theory on self-control, Inzlicht and Legault (2014) argue that emotional distress works as an alarm. When the alarm is heeded it orients people to expend effort at the regulation of their cognition, affect, and behavior to more efficiently and effectively exercise the self-control needed to address the alarming circumstance. Thus, emotions are indicative of one's relationship to the world, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre (see Leach & Tiedens, 2004). Unpleasant emotions indicate an unwanted relationship to an unacceptable world and thus motivate efforts at altering the world or one's relationship to it (Leach, 2016). As such, shame about a moral failure, in oneself or in one's society, may be seen as a profound state of self-reproach that pushes one to improve oneself or one's society (for an empirical review, see Leach & Cidam, 2015). A less profound feeling would promote a less profound change (Leach, 2017). Only in a psychology in which hedonism is not assumed to outweigh ethics and accuracy can King's creative maladjustment be seen in the terms he preferred—as a necessary and noble need to see injustice as it is and to feel appropriately (bad) about it.

Woke

In today's parlance, King's notion of creative maladjustment might be referred to as being "woke" or critically conscious (see Adams, Salter, Kurtiş, Naemi, & Estrada-Villalta, 2018). Although it is often assumed to be new, the use of the political term "woke" may date back to 1962 (Maxwell, 2016). And, the metaphor of awakening has a long tradition in African American vernacular. In fact, Rev. Dr. M.L. King Jr. used the metaphor in his 1967 address to argue that Black people were becoming more aware of the deeper causes of their longstanding oppression. As he put it, the "slashing blows of backlash and frontlash have hurt the Negro, but have also *awakened* him [and her] and revealed the nature of the oppressor."

I have longed to stay awake
 A beautiful world I'm tryin' to find . . .
 [. . .] *I stay woke*
 "Master Teacher," Erykah Badu

The current usage of woke within the Black community is often dated to 2008, when Eyrkah Badu's chorus in the song Master Teacher repeated over and over again "I stay woke" (Foley, 2016). The term seemed to gain special currency inside and outside of the Black community with its linkage to the #BlackLives-Matter meme and movement (see Leach & Allen, 2017). Created by three queer

women of color, #BlackLivesMatter sprang out of their political organizing after neighborhood watch officer George Zimmerman was acquitted for the killing of Black teenager Trayvon Martin. Woke has since been taken up by many who are concerned with issues of (racial) injustice and inequality.

Black Lives Matter, and related movements like Say Her Name, is believed to have “woke” people—Black, White, and beyond – from sleep by leading them to view contemporary patterns of inequality as systemic oppression rooted in historical and institutional practice. Thus, issues such as mass incarceration, disproportionate force by police, shrinking welfare state, and restrictive voting laws, are interpreted as forms of institutional racism that are the product of past forms of oppression such as residential redlining, Jim Crow, segregation, and slavery. Some argue that the unprecedented opportunities given to African Americans following the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and the promise of a postracial society after the election of the first Black U.S. president, coaxed African Americans into a political slumber (Ware, 2016). In fact, Smith’s (2014) analysis of national surveys shows that younger cohorts of African Americans view individual motivation as almost as strong an explanation of Black disadvantage as discrimination and education. In contrast, those born before the Civil Rights era, view individual motivation as a relatively minor explanation of Black disadvantage.

With its increasing usage and popularity, scholars, journalists and activists alike have sought to define what it means to be “woke”, who can in fact be “woke”, and the ethical and political implications for being “woke”. Definitions of woke diverge most dramatically in their inclusion or exclusion of political activity as a central element. Some define being “woke” as mainly an awareness of systemic racism, others argue that engagement in action against injustice is a necessary piece of being woke (Collins, 2017). For instance, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as a “political term of African American origin which refers to a perceived awareness of issues concerning social and racial injustice.” This excludes a politically active element. In contrast, commentator David Brooks (2017) asserts that “being a social activist is required for being woke”. Although definitions may vary slightly, woke can be best understood as a critical political awareness of racial injustice and its related economic, social, and political injustices. In addition to an understanding and critique of historical, systemic, and institutional racism, being woke includes concern for prominent issues such as racial bias in policing and police use of force, mass incarceration and the “prison-industrial complex” said to feed it, and unfair equitable representation in media and culture more generally. To be woke implies that one is fighting against racial inequality and White supremacy in some way, shape, or form, by “seeing” it for what it is and by opposing it by the means necessary and available. It is in this way that being woke aligns itself with King’s (1967) analysis of Black peoples’ understanding of the systemic nature of their oppression in the U.S. and the need to work for their full civil rights.

Including action in the definition of woke makes it very similar to the more well-established concept of (Black) critical consciousness (for a review, see Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). In fact, one could argue that the concept of woke is the colloquial version of Black consciousness. Woke departs from Black consciousness, however, by allowing anyone to be woke. In contemporary usage, White people can be “woke” if they come to better understand themselves as also racialized by White supremacist ideology and practice and thereby recognize their role in unjust inequality. In this way, woke is also tied to the more recent development of critical whiteness studies (see Leonardo, 2002) and the notions of institutionalized advantage/privilege. White people who are woke can even turn a White Supremacist insult on its head and call themselves “race traitors” (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996). It is unclear, however, if the historical victims and perpetrators of racism can be “woke” in the same ways. Journalist Amanda Hess (2016) wrote recently in the *New York Times* magazine that “the conundrum is built in. When White people aspire to get points for consciousness, they walk right into cross hairs between allyship and appropriation”. As we will discuss in more detail below, it seems important to consider the ways in which King’s creative maladjustment may need to operate differently for those “above” and “below” in institutionalized systems of racial, and other, stratification.

Because King’s valorization of maladjustment to injustice contrasts so dramatically from the hedonistic meta-theory of the field he addressed in 1967, it may be useful to reflect on whether King’s ideas suggest a psychology of creative maladjustment at injustice that is worth considering for psychology’s theory, research, and practice today. Although members of both structurally advantaged and disadvantaged groups can recognize societal injustice, there are differences in the degree to which individuals in these structural positions view racism and inequality as prevalent and severe (see Adams et al., 2018). The advantaged and the disadvantaged also diverge in the degree to which they explain inequality by blaming the disadvantaged or by blaming history and systemic factors such as economic and political institutions. Therefore, it is important to consider creative maladjustment from above and from below.

Creative Maladjustment “From Below”

King did not argue that witnesses to injustice should suffer interminable maladjustment, without aid. According to King, the cure for maladjustment to injustice is the self-guided, self-provided, labor that he called the “struggle for freedom and human dignity.” To make this point in his 1967 speech to psychologists, King, perhaps somewhat facetiously, identified institutional support for maladjustment as the most obvious aid:

“... it may well be that our world is in dire need of a new organization, the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment [...] And through such creative maladjustment, we may be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.” (p.185)

In his reference to a continuing freedom struggle, King relied again on a particularly African American usage of the Abrahamic tropes of faith, struggle, and the escape from bondage (whether in ancient Egypt, Mississippi, or Boston). These themes echo still today. After all, what is “Black Lives Matter” but a creative claim of equal humanity, tinged with an indignant frustration at having to make the claim (yet again)? (Movement for Black Lives, 2016).

Views of injustice. A tradition of psychological research on what is called racial socialization shows that there are substantial differences in the way that Black families teach their children the history and politics of the United States, especially as it relates to race and racism (for a review, see Hughes et al., 2006). Racial socialization is thought to protect against negative psychological effects of discrimination by providing children with the knowledge that their mistreatment is due to structural and institutional factors rather than personal deficits (for a review, see Lee & Ahn, 2013). Although racial socialization has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as decreased distress and anxiety and better anger management (Bannon, McKay, Chacko, Rodriguez, & Cavaleri, 2009), it has also been linked to greater psychological distress (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). A meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Ahn (2013) suggested that this inconsistency is due to racial socialization being tied to greater perceived discrimination and racism, which is linked to distress. Indeed, other work shows that greater identification as Black increases perceived discrimination (Leach, Rodriguez Mosquera, Vliek, & Hirt, 2010) and that the more identified actually face more discrimination (Kaiser & Wilkins, 2010). Although some research discusses how White youth come to learn about race in schools and from their peers, little research explores racial socialization in White families in ways parallel to that examined in Black families (Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002).

More generally, Black people in the U.S. are more exposed, formally and informally, to historical examples of racism in the U.S. than are Whites. In a study where both White and Black individuals completed a “Black history quiz” consisting of statements about past racism against Blacks, Whites demonstrated much less knowledge of historical racism than Blacks (Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013). Additionally, Salter and Adams (2016) explored the displays for Black History Month among predominately Black high schools and predominately White high schools in the United States. Predominately White schools tended to display abstract concepts of diversity and minimized, or ignored, racial barriers to Black success. In

comparison, Black high schools acknowledged racism and made more explicit references to slavery, Jim Crow, and specific events in the Civil Rights Movement.

This greater exposure is partly due to the ways in which Black people in the United States have supplemented mainstream sources for information with information from Black cultural, educational, and other institutions which foreground race and racism to a greater degree (Nelson, 2010). Additionally, information regarding racism and discrimination is more prevalent in Black media and social discourse (see Leach & Allen, 2017; Maxwell, 2016; Reinka & Leach, 2017). For example, today “Black twitter” is a popular platform for the dissemination and uptake of information related to issues of (racial) injustice (Maxwell, 2016). It is possible that social and other media like “Black twitter” now operate as a new kind of racial socialization as individuals are vicariously exposed to a wide variety of racial injustices. Of course, there is also personal experience (for a review, see Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). National Public Radio’s (2017) recent national survey of representative samples in the U.S. found more than half of African Americans to report experiencing racial discrimination at work or by the police. About one-third of Latinos and Native Americans reported experiencing such discrimination. Although only about one-seventh of White Americans reported personal discrimination more than half believe that racial discrimination against Whites exists.

The pattern of differential interest, information, and experience is consistent with evidence that members of disadvantaged groups tend to oppose inequality more strongly and to view it as less inevitable and legitimate. For example, Brandt (2013) analyzed representative survey data from around the world to examine the status-legitimacy hypothesis, which posits that low-status groups are more likely than high status groups to perceive their social system as legitimate and thus deserving of trust and confidence. In this analysis of over 150,000 respondents, members of low-status groups (by income, education, gender, race/ethnicity, and social class) tended to express less trust and confidence in their society than did members of high-status groups. Lee et al. (2011) analyzed endorsement of inter-group inequality with the “social dominance orientation” measure in a meta-analysis of over 50,000 respondents in over 200 samples collected over a 20-year period in 22 countries. They found women to endorse inter-group inequality moderately less than men and for ethnic/racial minorities to endorse inequality somewhat less than majorities.

There is also a wide range of empirical evidence that Black Americans are more likely than White Americans and other ethnic groups to attribute the economic gap and incidents of racism to systemic causes, such as history and discrimination, rather than to causes that blame the victim (Adams, Tormala, & O’Brein, 2006; Carter & Murphy, 2015; Hunt, 2007). For instance, in a 2012 survey, 51% of Blacks reported that discrimination against minority groups is an important problem in America compared to only 17% of Whites (Public Religion

Research Institute, 2012). A 2014 survey found that Blacks were twice as likely as Whites to evaluate police officer Daren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson and subsequent acquittal as an important issue related to racism, race, and race-relations (Pew Research Center, 2014b). Additionally, 63% of Whites believe that their local police are just as likely to use unnecessary force on racial minorities as they are Whites, compared to 61% of Blacks who believe local police will use unnecessary force on a Black person more than a White person in the same situation (NPR, 2017). Whether racism is blatant or subtle, the typical targets have a greater tendency to perceive it as racism rather than as ambiguous or as unproblematic (for a review, see Carter & Murphy, 2015). Indeed, there is a long-standing tradition in social theory, from German dialectic philosopher Hegel to liberation psychologist Fanon, which argues that the disadvantaged have a more accurate view of power, status, inequality, and injustice (for discussions, see Bulhan, 1985; Martín-Baró, 1994).

Anger, coping through protest. In the shadow of legal racial segregation, James Baldwin wrote "to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time" (as quoted in Maxwell, 2016). A song from Solange's memetic 2016 album *A Seat at the Table* expressed a similar sentiment when she sang, "Why you always gotta be so mad? [. . .] I got a lot to be mad about." To be conscious in the way Martin Luther King Jr. called for in his notion of creative maladjustment is to risk being in a regular state of rage. For decades, the concept of relative deprivation theorized that awareness of injustice against one's group fed an emotional state of discontent which fueled opposition to the injustice with the aim of reducing the group's deprivation. More recently, psychological approaches to protest have focused on anger at societal disadvantage as a motivating force (for a review, see van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012).

van Zomeren et al. (2012) conceptualize the motivation to protest as an active form of approach coping with societal injustice that can proceed through at least two social psychological routes. One route is that of emotion-focused coping designed to maintain the appropriate and productive level of shared anger or other discontent. Another route is that of problem-focused coping designed to alter injustice itself via a shared judgment of the group's efficacy to pursue its most preferred and most practical strategies. King's creative maladjustment appears to include both of these routes to protest. The maladjustment seems to map onto the idea of a shared anger or discontent animating action, whereas the creative nature of this maladjustment seems to imply that anger alone is insufficient as people of good will must creatively strategize about where, when, and how to mobilize their maladjustment to good effect. As a committed activist engaged in a mass political movement, King had to know that anger without efficacy risks turning into misdirected rage (see also Fanon, 1967). In fact, in his speech to psychologists, King theorized the uprisings and insurrections of his time by

clarifying that African Americans “could contain their rage when they found the means to force relatively radical changes in their environments.” His analysis dovetails with contemporary work. And, it deepens it by laying bare the struggle for humanity which underlies abstracted concepts such as anger and efficacy and protest.

Psychological Resistance

Importantly, a growing body of work in psychology focuses on more prosaic forms of psychological resistance that can be missed by a narrow focus on overt political action like protest. This work builds on, and borrows from, long traditions of work in the more socially-oriented disciplines of human science and the humanities (for a discussion, see Leach & Livingstone, 2015). It also builds on traditions of work long marginal within psychology, including liberation, feminist, and critical branches of the field (see Bulhan, 1985; Martín-Baró, 1994; for a recent review, see Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). A central theme is that psychological states—such as King’s creative maladjustment—cannot be expected to necessarily lead to the overt opposition of mass protest. This places too high a social and psychological burden on the oppressed. Instead, psychology should understand that it is well placed to examine the everyday forms of resistance that the disadvantaged practice to maintain self-integrity and to (sometimes quietly) affirm their understanding of societal injustice and their resultant discontent (Leach & Livingstone, 2015). For example, Travaglino (2017) recently showed that individuals who were angry at societal injustice, but low in perceived efficacy to alter it, were especially supportive of the hacker group Anonymous and their online efforts at disrupting business and politics as usual. Travaglino argued that support for “social bandits” of this sort gives the disempowered “vicarious voice” for their anger at societal injustice when more direct action seems unwise or unlikely to succeed. This strikes us as one *creative* expression of maladjustment that King would extoll unless, or until, more direct opposition made sense.

Creative Maladjustment “From Above”

Creative maladjustment is not the sole purview of the disenfranchised. The societally advantaged can also suffer psychologically about injustice, even if injustice benefits them individually or benefits their group structurally (Leach et al., 2002). As mentioned previously, what distinguishes being woke from more traditional perspectives of critical consciousness, is that everyone can be woke in principle. In practice, however, creative maladjustment at injustice is likely to operate differently from above (Leach et al., 2002; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). King (1968, p. 180) seemed to recognize this as he called upon psychologists

to “tell it like is” so that the ugly reality of racism could be laid bare to White Americans:

If the Negro needs social science for direction and for self-understanding, the white society is in even more urgent need. White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism and the understanding needs to be carefully documented and consequently more difficult to reject.

Views of injustice. Individuals must first “see” societal injustice to be creatively maladjusted. As Leach et al. (2002) explained, there are several reasons to expect that it is especially difficult for members of societally advantaged groups to see unjust inequality from above. One prominent reason is that White Americans, and members of other societally advantaged groups, are less likely to see themselves as belonging to a group than are members of societally disadvantaged groups. Viewing oneself as an individual who operates independent of society and its stratification of groups precludes viewing oneself as benefitting from unjust inequality or as perpetrating or perpetuating it. Recently, Kraus, Rucker, and Richeson (2017) provided an example of this in a study of Black and White individuals’ estimates of current and past economic equality. High-income Whites underestimated past and present economic inequality between Blacks and Whites the most. This was partly due to them having less diverse social networks and endorsing the belief that the world is, by and large, fair and thus people tend to get what they deserve. Moreover, when Whites were prompted to think about Black Americans of a similar economic status to themselves, they tended to underestimate the economic inequality between Whites and Blacks.

It is also the case that members of advantaged groups have a higher perceptual threshold for noticing unjust inequality (Leach et al., 2002) and thus they require greater evidence to be convinced (e.g., Miron, Warner, & Brascombe, 2011). Indeed, the pervasive norms against blatant prejudice and discrimination may make it harder for advantaged individuals to recognize (or easier for them to ignore) racism that is believed to be a thing of the past (Carter & Murphy, 2015). As discussed above, White Americans are also much less knowledgeable of historical racism and are less likely to consider structural manifestations of racism (Nelson et al., 2013; see also Salter & Adams, 2016). White Americans are also more likely than Blacks to perceive inequality as irrelevant, deny acts of racism, and minimize the severity of its effects (Hunt, 2007). This may be why White and Black people in the United States diverge so dramatically in their judgment of the country’s historical progress on racism and racial inequality. Whereas White Americans typically think about how far we have come, African Americans tend to think about how far we still have to go (Eibach & Purdie-Vaughns, 2011; see also Norton & Sommers, 2011).

Emotion and motivation. The societally advantaged can feel a great variety of ways about the structural inequality that benefits them and deprives others, if they notice it and believe that it is wrong (for a review, see Leach et al., 2002). King's notion of creative maladjustment suggests that the advantaged should go a step further and embrace the discomfort that should follow from participating in a system that advantages and disadvantages unfairly on the basis of arbitrary group membership. In his 1967 speech to psychologists, King offered an early and insightful critique of whiteness and the ways in which it can work to blind White Americans to their individual, cultural, and institutional investment in racism and racial inequality. For example, King argued (p.181): "The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison."

In education, and across the social sciences and humanities, scholars have answered King's early call to examine whiteness critically as a societal position that facilitates social and psychological investment in the protection of inequality (e.g., Ignatiev & Garvey 1996). However, little work in psychology has taken such a direct approach to whiteness (see Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003), or to the ways in which the social construct of race (or gender, class, sexuality) affects those advantaged by it (see Leach et al., 2002). When applied to the psychology of the societally advantaged, King's creative maladjustment becomes a radical suggestion that those who are most able to benefit from societal injustice (psychologically and materially) should feel the worst about it. This is radical in its challenge to psychology's deep hedonism and it is radical in its reversal of the common presumption that the disadvantaged are most (psychologically and ethically) obliged to be discontented with societal injustice.

Recent theory and research on emotion about societal inequality and injustice suggests that discontent among the advantaged can take two general directions (for reviews, see Iyer & Leach, 2009; Leach et al, 2002). It can be self-critical and thus operate through feelings of self-blame and moral inadequacy such as (group-based) guilt and shame. Or, it can be society-critical and thus operate through a morally outraged or indignant anger at the institutions and practices that established and perpetuate societal injustice. This anger is somewhat similar to the "righteous anger" of the disadvantaged except that it does not rely on seeing oneself and one's group as a relatively deprived victim of injustice (Leach et al., 2002). Of course, members of societally advantaged groups may also feel sympathy and compassion at societal injustice, or the closely related emotion of sadness. However, as these dysphoric emotions tend to follow from a focus on those most harmed by injustice (for reviews, see Iyer & Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2002), rather than on the injustice itself, they appear to be quite distant from King's notion of creative maladjustment or cosmic discontent. This is made clearer when we consider that sympathetic feelings tend to promote helping of the harmed (for reviews, see Iyer & Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2002), rather than the committed

opposition to the cause of the harm for which King advocated. King left no doubt that he wanted more than sadness or sympathy from psychologists, from white America, and from the world.

Although group-based guilt about societal injustice has received the most attention in recent research among the advantaged, such self-blame is rare (Iyer & Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2002). As a result of its focus on the self, as morally wrong, guilt is not a particularly active state and thus the available evidence is that it is moderately tied to wanting to compensate for injustice without necessarily wanting to do much to make it happen (for reviews, see Iyer & Leach, 2009; Leach et al., 2002). As a more profound state of self-reproach, shame about societal injustice is typically experienced as more intensely unpleasant than guilt. This is because shame is more often tied to the view of one's group and one's society as suffering a serious moral flaw (Leach, 2017). Given that shame is more about an inadequate identity than is guilt, shame can suggest the need for more fundamental change (of self and of society). As such, shame about societal injustice seems to come closer to the cosmic discontent that King encouraged. In fact, Leach and Cidam's (2015) recent empirical review of research on individual and group-based shame showed the emotion to be moderately tied to constructive approach motivation and behavior when circumstances suggested that improvement was likely. In other words, shame was a good predictor of effort at improving oneself and one's society when the nature of the moral failure made such effort seem likely to result in improvement. This fits with the above discussed work on pain and distress as a spur to self-regulation effort designed to address the cause of the discontent most efficiently and effectively (e.g., Bastian et al., 2014; Inzlicht & Legault, 2014).

Too Woke?

For those advantaged in a system of injustice, feeling bad about a recognized wrong is a necessary part of creative maladjustment and its cosmic discontent. However, we should attend to the warning that psychology's inherent hedonism offers us about the dangers of feeling discontent. Strong feelings of self-reproach for societal injustice have the potential to overwhelm those who focus narrowly on their discontent, perhaps because they see no likely way to improve the moral inadequacy that caused it (for a review, see Iyer & Leach, 2009). Self-critical dysphoria is debilitating if one has little sense that improvement is possible (Leach, 2017). In fact, Leach and Cidam's (2015) empirical review showed that shame was moderately linked to *less* constructive approach of failure when circumstances suggested that improvement of the self or society was unlikely. Thus, to have the effects he wished, King's creative maladjustment among the advantaged must strike a delicate balance between self-doubt and hope, criticism and encouragement, unwanted past and desired future.

One can assume that for the disenfranchised, greater knowledge of societal injustice is always good. But, this may not always be the case. To fully understand the extent to which racism is structurally embedded and historically rooted is to risk being too woke for one's own good. Being too woke may harm psychological well-being by undermining a sense of control over one's life and one's environment (see Peterson, Hamme, & Speer, 2002; more generally, see Cheng et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2000). Viewing racism as deeply entrenched may also, in this way, undermine a sense of shared efficacy to challenge it (see van Zomeren et al., 2012). It may be extremely difficult to feel efficacious in the shadow of such longstanding and far-reaching injustice, especially when one is in the minority and relatively disenfranchised materially and politically. We can see some signs of this in the relationship between political engagement and confidence in the societal system. Using data from representative surveys, Cichocka, Górska, Jost, Sutton, and Bilewica (2017) found a curvilinear relationship between confidence that the societal system is fair and willingness to engage in political action. Thus, the highest degree of political engagement was seen amongst people with moderate confidence in the fairness of the system. However, those low in confidence and high in confidence expressed equally low desire of political engagement. At a general level, this fits with Atkinson's (1957) classic expectancy-value-theory which posits that individuals' decisions to act are a product of the value and costs associated with acting and whether or not the individuals believe that their actions will yield the desired outcome.

Thus, one may be too woke if the depths of one's understanding of the historical, institutionalized, and systemic nature of societal injustice leads one to infer that one has little (individual or group) efficacy to oppose the injustice. However, limited one's efficacy may be, it seems necessary and important to be in a position to identify what can be done if one is to maintain any sense of agency in the world (see Fanon, 1967; Leach & Livingstone, 2015). Abject powerlessness is a difficult psychological state to imagine for anyone (see Martín-Baró, 1994).

Conclusion

Martin Luther King Jr.'s view of a necessary and noble psychological maladjustment offers several potentially potent psychological routes to justice work among the disadvantaged and advantaged. Of course, by challenging the hedonism central to so much psychological thinking, King also challenges psychology to rethink its views of health and well-being and the ways in which these views may distort our understanding of what it means to be good and what it means to be well.

Contrary to traditional perspectives on emotions such as shame and sadness, dysphoric experiences have the potential to motivate the pursuit of truth and justice. King's notion of creative maladjustment combines this dysphoria

with a self-awareness and societal-awareness critical of oppression. The two work in concert—discomfort reinforces awareness and awareness reinforces discomfort. Unlike hedonistic approaches to dysphoria in psychology, King’s creative maladjustment is not a ruminative process that undermines critical energy and effort. Neither does it seek to escape discomfort by the wish to blind oneself to injustice through legitimizing and rationalizing it. A deeper psychological understanding of maladjustment from King’s perspective is necessary to identify the emotional and cognitive bases for engagement in sustained political cultural, and psychological opposition to disenfranchisement. Some of this is being explored in recent research on the psychology behind movements such as Black Lives Matter (e.g., Leach & Allen, 2017; Reinka & Leach, 2017). However, much more theoretical, methodological, and empirical work is needed to better understand the ways in which psychological and even physical discomfort can be psychologically and politically healthy. For instance, we may need to better understand the ill health that may follow from adjustment to injustice if we are to properly assess the implications of creative maladjustment. Rather than solely focusing on the potential costs of discontent, we must understand the costs of blissful ignorance, for selves and for society. In this way, psychological work can take seriously the idea that “the truth can set you free.” This was King’s challenge to us 50 years ago, and his ethical invocations are no less relevant today as psychology seeks to clarify its role in the promotion of human well-being in this particularly fraught historical moment.

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AERIELLE M. ALLEN (B.A. 2013, UCLA; M.A. 2015, California State, Northridge) is a social psychology doctoral student at the University of Connecticut in the department of Psychological Sciences. She is a California Doctoral Incentive Program scholar and Social Processes of AIDS fellow. Most of her research examines the relationships between social and racial injustice and minority health. This work was supported by a National Institute of Mental Health Research Training Fellowship (T32MH074387).

COLIN WAYNE LEACH (B.A. 1989, M.A. 1991, Boston University; Ph.D. 1995, University of Michigan) is professor of psychological sciences at the University of Connecticut. He is a 2017 recipient of the Kurt Lewin medal for scientific contribution from the European Association of Social Psychology and elected fellow of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology. Most of his research examines status and morality in self-evaluation, emotion, and motivation. In addition to publishing nearly 100 articles and chapters, he has co-edited the books *The Social Life of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2004) and *Immigrant Life in the U.S.: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2003). Prof. Leach is Co-Editor of the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Request PDF | On Jun 1, 2018, Aerielle M. Allen and others published The Psychology of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Creative Maladjustment" at Societal Injustice and Oppression | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. No less an authority than Martin Luther King, Jr. implored behavioral scientists to eschew motivational hedonism to help the world understand how the ethically-minded might avoid turning a blind eye to the sorry state of the most vulnerable in our societies (for a discussion, see Allen & Leach, 2018). King called for more, and more widespread, states of "creative maladjustment" throughout the world. After motivational hedonism. Chapter. In September 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. took the podium at the American Psychological Association's Annual Convention in Washington D.C. to deliver a speech challenging social scientists to actively work to end racism. In his speech (in full below), "The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement," King argues social scientists possess a unique ability to help America progress beyond the racial divides that leave us "psychologically and socially imprisoned." Social scientists are able to investigate societal inequalities, its causes and manifestations, as others cannot. Through "creative maladjustment," social science can continue to lay bare our society's pestilent prejudices. The day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Robert F. Kennedy was campaigning for the presidency in Indianapolis, Indiana. Kennedy made this speech in remembrance of Dr. King's tireless efforts. I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. Today psychology is still very focused on the maladjusted individual. But King's vision went beyond neurosis or what we think of as "mental illness." What, he wondered aloud, does psychology have to say to the average person who supports the status quo, who remains blind, or who chooses to ignore the ills that plague our society? "I am sure that we will recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted," King said. Martin Luther King Jr. (born Michael King Jr.; January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was an African American, Baptist minister, and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the American civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968. King advanced civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience, inspired by his Christian beliefs and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi. He was the son of early civil rights activist Martin Luther King Sr.