

## **Racial Diversity at work: A Psychodynamic Perspective**

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**Abstract**

This study aimed to provide new insights for diversity management by applying the psychodynamic principles of defence mechanisms and basic assumption mentality. Diversity is an important part of modern society and organizations. However, the evidence of diversity management remains inconsistent. Two opposing social theories have primarily been the focus of the scientific literature. Some scholars argue that these theories may be insufficient as they do not necessarily account for more covert forms of discrimination and experiences. We adopt a psychodynamic perspective because it has long promoted the influence of covert behaviours and subjective experiences.

10 participants were recruited using the purposeful sampling method. Participants identified as either being White, Black, Asian, or Other which was one of the three main inclusion criteria. The second being participants had no formal managerial authority and all worked in racially diverse teams in different organizations. Participants were recruited from organizations in The UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and Australia. Individual Interviews lasted 20-30 minutes and were conducted using Microsoft Teams and transcripts were coded using Nvivo 12. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to uncover themes and psychodynamic principles were applied to make sense of participants lived experiences.

The findings suggest that participants' anxieties were exacerbated by socio-environmental factors and adverse workplace experiences that negatively interfered with job performance and relationships in the workplace. Ethnic minorities reported more stressors primarily due to a conflict and discrepancy between the self and their work environment. Reducing uncertainty, leadership emotional competence, and effectively managing work boundaries were protective factors. Recommendations and limitations are discussed.

**Keywords:**

Diversity management, Racial Diversity, Psychodynamic theory, Stress and Anxiety at work, Defence mechanism, Group dynamics

**Background**

Diversity can be defined as “the variety of differences between people in an organisation including race, gender, ethnic group, age, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organisational function, background and more” (Greenberg, 2004). It is often divided into job and relational attributes. Job attributes refers to educational background and experience whilst relational attributes are more complex (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). For example, relational attributes can further be divided into surface and deep level diversity. Surface refers to observable characteristics such as gender and race whilst deep level refers to non-observable characteristics such as belief systems (Oerlemans, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2009). Historically, surface levels characteristics together with organisational factors have been the predominant focus of diversity researchers (Chitra & Chandra, 2017).

However, the evidence of the successful management of diversity in the workplace is inconsistent (Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Some scholars have suggested that these inconsistencies are related to the organisational setting such as the “unfriendly” atmosphere for women and minorities (Josh & Roh, 2009). Others argue that these inconsistencies are a result of researchers using outdated concepts of diversity such as overt discrimination and have called for investigations into more covert forms of discrimination based on qualitative studies and employees interactions (Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Jones et al, 2017; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Psychodynamic scholars have long recognised the importance of subjective experiences and interpersonal relationships in shaping workplace phenomena (Freud, 1922; Jaques, 1953; Kets de Fries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2015). The aim of this study is to apply psychodynamic concepts to understand how diverse racial employees intra and interpersonally experience their workplaces. This fills a gap in the literature by investigating how deep level characteristics such as defence mechanisms and basic assumption mentality interacts with the organisational setting to shape diversity in the workplace.

## **Literature review**

### **Social Perspective**

The goal of social theories is to have a better understanding of the social factors driving behaviour. Theories that aim to explain workplace diversity can be categorised into similarity and dissimilarity theories. Similarity theories provide evidence of the benefit of having little or no difference among group members. Leading concepts here are social identity, categorization, and the similarity-attraction paradigm. According to social identity and categorization theory, people identify with a group when the

perceived differences among members are smaller than the perceived differences between groups. Once membership with a specific group is obtained, people judge their in-group more favourably and also benefits from self-esteem and a sense of belonging from their membership in the group even when this membership is based on trivial details (Tajfel et al, 1971; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, & Oakes, 1987). Real or perceived similarities among members is used as a proxy for expecting similarity in beliefs and personality which is positively associated with frequency in communication, social integration and a desire to maintain group affiliation (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Singh, Chen, & Wegener, 2014).

However, evidence also suggest that dissimilarities among members is also associated with positive outcomes (Schaffer, 2019). Theories supporting this view are resource based theory, information decision theory and self-expansion theory. According to resource based theory, a company's unique strength depends on the diversity of their resource which makes it difficult for competitors to imitate (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Ayega & Muathe, 2018). Diversity can also improve the quality of decision making under facilitating conditions such as when the group is open to new ideas (Oerlemans, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2009; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996; Schaffer, 2019). In addition, the possibility of gaining new ideas can lead to prosocial behaviours among dissimilar individuals based on the assumption that others might have unique information that can benefit the self (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2003; Schaffer, 2019). However, individuals are prone to making decisions based on their identification with others which can negatively impact the openness of the group (Lerner et al, 2014; Stasser, 1992). Scholars have investigated moderating factors associated with the group openness towards diversity.

Prominent moderating factors identified in the literature are status differences, organisational support, and cultural values. Large status differences between groups is associated with the minority group being forced to adapt to the norms and values of the majority group which perpetuates group polarization (Kanter, 1977; Tajfel, 1978; Oerlemans, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2009). However, organisational cultures that support diversity through communication and cooperation are positively related to many team outcomes (Doolen, Hacker & Van Aken 2003; Korner et al, 2015; Oerlemans, Peeters, & Schaufeli, 2009; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Organisational cultures that do not meet this expectation usually experience high levels of absenteeism and turnover (Avery et al, 2007; Schaffer, 2019; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Nevertheless, increasing population of minorities is associated with inter-ethnic tension and prejudice as a result of perceived threats from the majority group over limited resources (Allport, 1954, Blalock,

1967; Hewstone, 2015; James, Katharina, & Miles, 2018). Tension may also arise from differences in cultural values. Differences in acculturation and collectivism/individualism are associated with tension within and between groups (Berry, 1997; Hofstede, 2011).

For example, minorities who resisted adapting to the majority group experienced harsher treatments at work (Bourhuis et al, 1997; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). Similarly, minorities prioritising collectivism experienced more conflict at work but more support at home whilst minorities that adopted more individualistic values experienced less conflict at work but more tension at home even after controlling for confounding variables such as marital status and kids (Olson et al, 2013). These binary effects are consistent with other findings (Szkudlarek, 2010; Presbitero, 2016; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 2011). Thus, the main moderating factors identified in the literature also seem insufficient to resolve the two opposing groups of theories in the diversity literature. However, following the association with inter-ethnic tension we propose another moderating factor of anxieties and defences as captured in the psychodynamic literature.

### **System psychodynamics**

The psychodynamic theory of work emphasizes the influence of anxieties in shaping work experiences. It postulates that individuals, groups and organisations are open systems that are constantly in interaction with the socio-environment (De Board, 2003). During times of excessive demands, the system may protect itself against anxieties using psychological defences that can blur the boundary between objective reality and psychic phantasy\*- referring to unconscious mental activity (Lyth, 1960; Jaques, 1953). Key triggers associated with workplace anxieties according to the theory are socio-environmental or internal organisational conflicts, interpersonal tension, ineffective boundaries, and lack of clarity associated with tasks and responsibilities (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; De Board, 2003; Mayer C. H., 2020). Managers are seen as operating on the boundaries to protect the organisational system from excessive demands through the containment of anxieties (Miller, 1993; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019; Hirschhorn, 1990). However, ineffective containment of anxieties can lead to defensive behaviours that undermines the primary task of the organisation (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; Lyth, 1960)

These defensive behaviours serve the purpose of anxiety containment mainly by transferring anxieties from one person or part of the system to the other. Anxieties are experienced through psychic phantasy when there is a need to protect the ego against threats, annihilation, and to avoid causing harm to a

good object (Klein, 1946; Klein, 1959; Freud, 1922). The main defences against anxieties are denial, splitting, projection, and projective identification. Splitting and projection refers to the separation of unwanted parts of the self and their mental transfer onto external figures who then become hated because one come to perceives them as bad. Projective identification relates to the recipient identifying with these projections and thus come to behave according to the sender unwanted projected parts (Jaques, 1953; Klein, 1959). Other common defences identified in psychodynamic studies of groups are transference, identification and idealization (Freud, 1922), depersonalization, detachment, and rigid rituals (Lyth, 1960). It is recognised that women, minorities or members lower in the social hierarchy tend to be the victims of the negative impact of these defensive processes which increases the anxieties in these groups (Mayer et al, 2018; Kets de Fries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2015; Steyn & Cilliers, 2016; Hirschhorn, 1990; Lyth, 1960). This finding highlights the interaction between intersectionality, power and wellbeing in the workplace which has also been reported in social studies (Ozbilgin et al, 2010; Rosette et al, 2018; Brown & Moloney, 2019). Consistent in these findings, women and marginalized groups tend to experience more negative experiences in the workplace.

Furthermore, these defensive processes leads to negative experiences because they shape behaviours that can negatively affect relationships and performance in a variety of ways. Bion (1961) identified within groups the functioning of two mainly opposing forces of psychic activity which he labeled the Work group and the Basic assumption group. The Work group deals with the demands of reality and actively translates psychic forces towards the completion of the objective task through voluntary skill and individual co-operation. In contrast, the Basic assumption group retreats into psychic phantasy when demands becomes intolerable. Participation in the Basic assumption group depends on the group members collective emotional valency. It is involuntary, automatic, requires no formal skill or co-operation. Basic assumptions are characterized by three distinctive but related psychic processes

1. Dependency – the group share the phantasy that the leader is a God on whom they depend on for nourishment and protection. This prevent members to confront their inner anxieties
2. Pairing – the group holds on to hopeful future expectations to avoid current feelings of despair, hatred, and destruction. The leader must remain “unborn” for hope to persist
3. Fight/Flight – the group focus is to fight or run away from something. The leader is one who provide opportunities for flight or aggression

It is important to point that the leader need not be a person and may also be in the form of an idea or even an inanimate object. Nonetheless, these assumptions prevents development because mental

activity is re-directed away from the Work group and the objective task (Bion, 1961). In addition, two more assumptions were later added by psychodynamic scholars. Me-ness refers to the individual becoming detached from the group through denial of the group existence (Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996). One-ness refers to the psychic activity when members seek to join an omnipotent force and surrender personal identity for passive participation to experience wellbeing and wholeness (Turquet, 1974).

## **METHODS**

### Study design

The present study employed a cross-sectional qualitative design during Covid-19 in which participants were encouraged to share how they intra and interpersonally experienced their workplaces.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the preferred research methodology because it has the benefits of prioritising the individual subjective experiences and seeks to uncover new meanings through the interpretation of the “lived experiences” of those individuals who have shared the same phenomenon (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009; Alase, 2017; Howitt, 2016). Its particularly effective when exploring topics that are complex, emotionally laden and ambiguous (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This is in contrast with quantitative methods that aimed to examine relationships between variables with often the primary goal to establish group norms (Elkatawneh, 2016; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). This study used a psychodynamic framework to better understand the complex but emotionally laden experiences of racially diverse employees in the workplace.

### Participants

The researcher professional network was utilised to recruit participants via the snowballing method, which is a form of purposeful sampling to identify participants with unique characteristics based on the research gap (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017; Palinkas, et al., 2015). Invitations were sent to professionals in the primary researcher network that seemed to meet the inclusion criteria based on their LinkedIn profile. A message was sent disclosing the purpose of the research and how their participation would help advanced the current knowledge of diversity in the workplace. This was followed by a brief conversation to confirm the inclusion criteria.

To be included participants had to (1) identify as either White, Black, Asian, Mix or Other and (2) held no managerial position to eliminate the influence of any formal power or status. (3) participants were employed in what can be considered a racially diverse organisation based on the direct team or department of the included participants being racial diverse. Upon confirmation, a date was set to conduct the interview.

A sample of 10 office workers were selected from multi-nationals organisations in the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, Australia and Austria. A similar sample size has been reported to produced satisfactory results in similar systems psychodynamic research (Cilliers & Smith, 2006). Participants racial representation included 3 Whites, 3 Blacks, 3 Asian, and 1 Other. The number of occupations included data analysts (1), management consultants (4), business analyst (1), Business support (2), Sales & Business consultant (2). 7 participants identified as female and 3 as male. Participants were between the ages of 25 – 40 years old and all had at least a bachelor level education in full time employment.

#### Materials and procedures

A psychodynamic framework and interview technique were used to explore participants emotional driven experiences at work. The framework of CIBART has been recommended to assess for anxieties and conflict within the organisational system (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; Mayer et al, 2018). It stands for the following:

- Conflict – as manifested intrapersonally, interpersonally and organizationally
- Identity – which is the characteristics of what makes a team or individual different from others
- Boundary – refers to the space, task, and time around or between parts of the system that keeps it together and protected
- Authority – the formal authority to perform roles and tasks as given from above, below and within teams
- Role – the description of what needs to be done and
- Task – which is the component of the work that keeps the team employed

Questions were generated to assess each element of the CIBART model based on the Free Association Narrative Interviewing (FANI) technique. Holloway and Jefferson (2008) postulated that it is the goal of this technique to elicit open ended, specific, in-depth and meaningful associative emotional memories.



For example, “How do you feel about your relationships with your work colleagues?” was one of the questions designed to explore the interpersonal conflict component of the CIBART framework by focusing on the participants emotional experience of workplace relationships. Questions were delivered via a semi-structured interview that lasted between 20-30 minutes on Microsoft Teams after gaining consent from each participant to be audio-recorded. The time frame was sufficient to identify the relevant defences and basic assumptions but due to participants time constraint did not allow for further exploration of the defences. However, data saturation was achieved when participants associations became increasingly centred and focused on specific themes. For example, when associations on work relationships became increasingly centred around job demands over the course of the interview instead of expanding into new stronger associations.

Nonetheless, a pen and paper were also on hand to make any relevant notes for follow up questions during the interviews. Recorded audios were automatically stored in the cloud and were analysed for themes using Nvivo 12 – a qualitative analysis software popular among social scientist. Lastly, psychodynamic interpretations of these themes were generated through detailed comparison between the themes and the relevant psychodynamic principles discussed in the literature review through a hermeneutic loop. This is an iterative approach that aims to understand the whole by understanding the different parts or vice versa (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). For example, the major themes were compared to key systems psychodynamic principles (1) Organisations are open systems in interactions with their socio-environments (2) Excessive socio-environment demands causes anxieties which managers must contain through boundary management (3) Ineffective containment exacerbates anxieties in the system which leads to task ineffectiveness and relationship conflicts through defences. Furthermore, different groups experience anxiety differently because of their collective emotional valency. These principles were used to understand the data which are further explored in the discussion.

### Researcher reflexivity




Reflexivity acknowledges the role of the researcher as an active participant in the knowledge construction process and It takes into consideration how individual factors such as socio-cultural biases may have affected the research process (Patnaik, 2013; Palaganas et al, 2017). The interviews were conducted by the primary researcher who had a black ethnic background. However, themes and findings generated were reviewed and commented on by the co-researcher with a white ethnic background and

any discrepancies were resolved through mutual agreement. Overall, data trustworthiness was established by applying Lincoln and Guba stringent criteria in qualitative research (Forero, et al., 2018; Morse, 2015). (1) Credibility was establishing through participants briefing and standardization of the research questions according to the FANI technique (2) Dependability/confirmability was established through discussions between the primary and secondary researcher and (3) Transferability was established using purposeful sampling by identifying participants that met the study objective. Finally, participants were provided with the interview transcripts to agree to before the data analytical process could begin.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Figure 1**

*The relevant themes for all participants*

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
	Covid-19 Role confusion Organisational context	<i>"...due to the current Covid-19 restrictions and difficulties. I've been having my switch to the next department delayed and it was delayed indefinitely"</i>
	Tight deadlines Task complexity	<i>"..because we have a target to complete. Everybody comes a little bit distress.."</i>
	Belonging Boundaries Work/life Identity	<i>"...putting that voice on, saying you listen to that music when you don't or just think yeah ill check out that show when you know its nothing you find interesting...."</i>

## RESULTS

### UNCERTAINTY

The impact of uncertainty on participants work experiences was one of the main findings of the study. Uncertainty was strongly related to Covid-19, role confusion, and the organisational context. Covid-19 was mentioned by all racial participants as a key factor underlying their role confusion. Participants reported feeling confused about their career development and feelings of stress associated with the instability. Some evidence of this findings can be seen below

*"You are supposed to go to different departments every 8 months. Um, however, due to the current Covid-19 restrictions and difficulties. I've been having my switch to the next department delayed and it was delayed indefinitely" (Male, Other)*

*"Because of great stress, It can be that its not about the job itself but like in my case for example I told you its situations of instability. You know, because you never know what's going to happen next. Its something that plays a lot with your mind" (Male, White)*

In addition, the organisational context was also reported to be an important factor in experiencing uncertainty. We found evidence to suggest that the proportion of gender diversity in the workplace may lead to difficulties and discomfort especially for participants who identified as female and Black. This was clearly captured in the following expression

*“It’s just working within that department. For me it was very difficult cause I guess there was the social aspect and then there was the I don’t know. It’s quite male heavy like a lot of guys in my team and senior managers and stuff there and they’re all quite cliquey” (Female, Black)*

## **PRESSURE**

Pressure together with uncertainty were the most consistent findings across all participants and racial ethnic group in our sample. Pressure was particularly experienced in the context of tight deadlines and task complexity. These were often reported with strong associations to experiencing anxieties, stress, dissatisfactory workplace interactions and turnover intentions. Supporting evidence are reported below

*“... stress is part of the job because we work with target...which are quite high. I mean so you always behind target. I mean there is a sense of stress always” (Male, Black)*

*“My boss came to me I need this in 20 minutes in 30 minutes to an hour...so that just kind of increase your stress levels quite significantly then creates anxiety” (Female, White)*

*“..because we have a target to complete. Everybody comes a little bit distress. Like sometimes you find someone in the stairs and just wanna say how are you but that person is very much rushing – you don’t feel like you bond with them, everyone is so busy” (Female, white)*

*“moments where you can actually interact or don’t feel uncomfortable if I stop for 5 minutes to chit chat during work- Maybe the fact for me I don’t feel people get to interact a lot between them. That’s one of the reasons sometimes make me feel like I wont stay here for long” (Female, White)*

Furthermore, pressure was also identified to shape the quality of the relationship between managers and their subordinates. A White, female participant made sense of her stressful experiences by narrating that *“It can also be that my previous boss at work, he had a lot of pressure from above”*. Nonetheless, the data suggests that the experience of pressure is also influenced by individual differences. It was reported to be a source of motivation and self-worth especially when the pressure was experienced as challenging.

*“Like the stress, actually it makes me push harder. It motivates me to do better up until a certain amount – I perceive myself pretty motivated because the environment is pretty challenging - my job is very well fulfilling...its part of my self-worth – at work if I don’t do well I get very sad. I tend to take it personal” ” (Female, White)*

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

When compared to uncertainty and pressure, there were clear inter racial differences in the experiences of work relationships. Participants who identified as Whites reported on average more positive experiences than those who identified as Black or Asian. The key differentiating factors were related to feeling a sense of belonging, boundaries, and managing work/life identities. Factors associated with feeling a sense of belonging were identified as similarities in personalities, language, and culture. For example, a white female participant reported that *“if you have this kind of personality that you just want to engage with other people then its good no matter what”* which was very much in line with the positive experience of a White male participant *“I would say everybody is really friendly and yeah I made a lot of friends here”*.

### *Belonging and work performance*

In contrast, participants who identified as Black or Asian reported experiencing difficulties, conflicts, and microaggression associated with their individual and cultural differences. Importantly, these factors were experienced as interpersonal stressors which were associated with increased intrapersonal tension and mistakes on the job. In contrast, a white female participant attributed her job related difficulties down to intrapersonal stressors. Support for these findings are reported below

*“Maybe because I already dont feel secure with my English and I get many rejections for mistakes. I do give myself a hard time like im still really bad at this” (Female, White)*

*“To adapt between Australian culture they drink a lot. I like to go to the company function in for me..I just want to just get there and then you know enjoy the meal but it seemed that after they have to go to another drink another drink” (Female, Asian)*

*“To this day my name is spelled wrong....Just little oversights like that just makes me feel like you clearly don’t care to invest even to know my name properly and You kind of find yourself taking...putting that voice on, saying you listen to that music when you don’t or just think yeah ill check out that show when you know its nothing you find interesting. Just so you feel like you belong” (Female, Black)*

*“Something was brewing inside of me and I didn't know what it was so hard to deal with but it was. It was affecting my work and concentration or something. I'd make really stupid mistakes like book tickets for wrong date or something like that” (Female, Black)*

### Belonging and work interactions

Further evidence suggest that negative experiences associated with individual and cultural differences may not only lead to adverse job tension or performance but can also lead to negative perceptions of workplace interactions. For example, an Asian female participant reported that *“You talk about my accent I wouldn't care. And then the day that I have bad mood, It wont be funny”*. Which was in line with a similar experience reported by a black female and male participants about how they experienced their interactions with their colleague, managers and the negative impact that this has on their sense of self.

*“I feel like its very, um, micro. Its not in your face, its not obvious, its not, oh, I didn't like you. I don't like your work. Its always passive..... I feel like I need to be constantly doing the right thing and not having enough time for my self-expression”. (Female, Black)*

*“..was checking on me like everyday like monitoring me every step making sure that I work and yeah I know what im supposed to do but she was monitoring every time like almost every step of the way made me feel like I was being watched all the time” (Male, Black)*

### Boundaries and work/life identities

Considering the reported differences in subjective workplace interactions between Whites and Blacks or Asian participants, it comes by no surprise that there were racial differences in the management of personal boundaries. Participants who identified as Whites reported experiencing the integration of their personal and work relationships positively. For example, a white male participant working as an expat reported the close integration of his personal and work life *“Positively, because like most of my friends that I actually made here are people from my office”*. This view of integration was also supported by another white female participant

*“I'll attribute it in a positive way, also because my boyfriend gets them as well, for instance people I know from the company I bring them to when we go out for drinks, Ok, integrate them so they go a bit both ways” (Female, White)*

In contrast, non-whites participants preferred to separate their personal and work identities. This view was supported by a black male participant who preferred to keep his *“private life and work life separate”* and only chooses to discuss any anxieties *“with my wife”*. Another black female participant reported that she actively maintains a *“strict boundary”* between her personal and work life which was associated with

*“...the work environment influences my mood. My relationship outside as well”*. The closely linked dynamic between relationships at work and outside of work was further captured by another participant who reported increased cognitive flexibility as a result of having more diverse relationships outside of the workplace

*“In my personal life, Im surrounded by more broader set of people...from all kinds of different background. In that sense its easy to look at things from a different perspective. Where I work its very easy to uhm, to fall down in a certain mindset in a certain rabbit hole. So to speak that things are supposed to be done in a certain way and coming where im coming from. Its helped me to look at things from another angle”* (Male, Other)

### Negative organisational boundaries

In addition to personal boundaries, there were reported racial differences in experiencing some aspects of the organisational boundaries. Differences in experiences was reported in the context of the social hierarchy and the feedback process. More specifically, females in general reported instances of being treated like a “PA” or a “secretary”. However, non-whites female participants reported more instances of unfair treatment as perfectly captured below

*“They seem to expect a female colleague to go down to get coffee. In my office we have three ladies. We have me and another woman who is an Aussie like Australian woman, another lady also Australian of like 70. And then by some reason, I have to always be the one”* (Female, Asian)

In addition to unfair treatments, power structure was another factor associated with the social hierarchy. This was particularly found to be unfavourable for non-whites participants. Power structures was reported to be associated with blurred organisational boundaries and conflict on the job. Both factors were closely linked to how the feedback process was experience. Evidence of these findings are reported below from two different participants

*“there is a clear power structure in place, makes you feel like you need to be on your tip toes all the time -*

*“Ultimately, so if they don’t want to do something because its beneath them, then they would resist doing it – you could tell that they’ve kind of blurred the lines a little bit and then we were called into a meeting to see if there was conflict on the job”* (Female, Black)

*“When you say feedback on your performance, it should be solely on your performance, not me. You had a fuss in the corridor on the way to work like that shouldn’t necessarily influence your come back with your review of how I performed on the job”* (Female, Black)

### Positive organisational boundaries

However, we also found evidence of some predictors of good organisational boundaries. Clarity of time, feeling supported, structure and shared expectations were factors reported to be associated with positive experiences. These were critical to contained anxieties associated with job demands and were protective factors for non-whites participants against any real or perceived negative treatments.

*“No matter how complex the case, you need to be able to take your time and let it rest. To really get to the bottom of every little complexity. Im glad that im in an environment where im allowed to take my time with certain things. Im not rushed or anything” (Male, Other)*

*“...I love structure, I have accent problem but if the structure say you need to give me information. Even when people think they're better than you, speak better or smarter than you then you still need to report to me” (Female, Asian)*

*“...this is what we discussed at the initial point. This is my review of how it went. So whats your feedback on that? So I feel like that gives me more control so I feel less anxious”. (Female, Black)*

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to understand the intra and interpersonal experiences of racially diverse employees to facilitate new insights for diversity management in the workplace. This study found strong support of the powerful influences of anxieties and defences associated with socio-environmental and organisational uncertainty, job demands, and relationships in the workplace. Each theme is presented below for discussion with the related psychodynamic interpretations.

### **Uncertainty**

Socio-environment tension is recognized as a prominent source of anxieties in the psychodynamic framework (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; Mayer C. H., 2020). In the current study, Covid-19 was the prominent source of socio-environmental tension reported by all participants. High levels of stress and anxieties were reported by participants caused by the pandemic associated with uncertainties about their career development and role confusion. The negative impact of uncertainty associated with Covid-19 and socio-environmental instability has also been documented in other studies (Hamouche, 2020; Brauns, 2015; Suarez & Oliva, 2005). Furthermore, instability is associated with identity ambiguity which is commonly associated with role confusion, anxiety, and psychological health (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Wagoner & Hogg, 2017; Schechtman et al, 2019; Verschueren et al, 2019; Smollan & Pio, 2016; Pahkin et al, 2011).



Furthermore, the data also suggest that the organisational context can also create a sense of uncertainty through unequal representation of members. According to the data of this study, unequal gender representation may particularly be a source of anxieties for minorities in the workplace. This was captured in the following sentence reported by a Black female participant who reported that “...*For me it was very difficult cause I guess there was the social aspect and then there was the I don’t know. It’s quite male heavy..*”. This finding is in line with social theories about the importance of the organizational setting in creating a facilitating context for diversity (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). It also captures the importance of identification processes in groups.

Identification is the assimilation of others attributes which makes it easier to emotionally connect with them (Freud, 1922). It seems that a lack of representation in the workplace makes it difficult to identify with others leading to weaker emotional ties as reported by the participant. This is important because identity develops through our emotional connection with others. Thus difficulties with connection is naturally associated with psychological distress and anxieties. In support of this, minorities have been reported to experience more identity conflict in the workplace (Clair et al, 2012). According to findings from social psychology, inter racial contact is initially stressful and feelings of friendship between racial groups depends on the degree of uncertainty over time (Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009; West et al, 2009). Its likely that the lack of representation contributes to a greater sense of uncertainty especially for ethnic minorities in the workplace causing them to experience their work environment as more stressful because of weaker group affiliation and integration (Capasso, Zurlo, & Smith, 2016; Singh, Chen, & Wegener, 2014; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992).

### **Pressure**

According to Sharma & Kaur (2014), in the modern world workers are faced with excessive work demands attached to deadlines that challenge workers ability to cope under stressful situations. Excessive demands on the system is considered to be the primary cause of psychological defences in the psychodynamic literature (Lyth, 1960; Jaques, 1953; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). This study found that job demands or pressures in the form of task complexity and tight deadlines were particularly related to stressful experiences. These experiences were in turn associated with a range of psychic defences.

For example, a white female participant narrated her anxieties as possibly a result of her previous boss feeling the pressure from above. This is in line with the view that during times of high demands or instability, leaders may split and project their anxieties onto their subordinates (Steyn & Cilliers, 2016; Kets de Fries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2015). This particularly captures the subtle nature of projective identification within leader-members dynamics. It highlights the importance of leadership self-awareness, regulation and their importance in effective interpersonal dynamics at work. Studies have reported that the lack of effective coping mechanisms during times of excessive stress is positively associated with abusive supervision, burn out, and counterproductive behaviours (Harms et al, 2016; Spector & Fox, 2005; Ma & Li, 2019; Burton, Hoobler, & Scheuer, 2012) and negatively interferes with work and relationships (Bacon & Charlesford, 2018; Bion, 1961, Hirschhorn, 1990, Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). However, while task conflict may improve employees sense of accomplishment upon completion, relationship conflict usually leads to a negative outcome (Hon & Chan, 2013).

Nonetheless, individual differences in self-regulation and interpersonal connection were found to moderate the effect of stressful job experiences. For example, when job demands were appraised as challenging this was reportedly associated with motivation and self-worth. Its reported that individuals with low self-esteem and limited appraisal resources are more prone to defensive behaviours (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009). While interpersonal difficulties are associated with presenteeism and turnover intentions (Kim et al, 2019; Haque, 2015; Chun & Hwang, 2018). This was perfectly captured in the following “*..Maybe the fact for me I don’t feel people get to interact a lot between them. That’s one of the reasons sometimes make me feel like I wont stay here for long*” (Female, White). Interestingly, there were little differences between participants in their experiences of job demands. What seemed most important were differences in self-regulation especially for their direct line manager and the workplace cultural norms around social interaction. This provide support to both the psychodynamic perspective for leaders to contain anxiety and the importance of cultural values as reported in the social literature.

### **Social relationships**

Compared to uncertainty and job pressure, inter racial differences were most evident in how they experienced their work relationships. The key themes of belonging and work/life identities were associated with more covert forms of discrimination or harassment. The psychodynamic literature suggest that anxiety may not affect all members the same as anxiety can be transferred across the organisational system. Moreover, Bion (1961) argued that most basic assumption defences aim to avoid

panic by eliminating differences that threatens the status quo. Social theories report that this facilitates wellbeing, self-esteem and a sense of belonging by emphasizing real or perceived similarities with others (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Dick, Ciampa, & Liang, 2018; Tajfel et al, 1971; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, & Oakes, 1987; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Indeed, participants who identified as Whites reported higher levels of similarities between their colleagues but also between their work and personal life both of which were associated with increased wellbeing and a sense of belonging. In support, Viertio et al (2021) found that conflict between ones personal and work life posed one of the largest risk factors of psychological distress for full time workers.

In contrast, non-white participants reported compartmentalizing their work and personal identity. Compartmentalization is a defensive strategy which serves the purpose of preventing conflicting feelings of coming into contact with each other through splitting (Boag, 2017; Klein, 1946). For example, non-whites tend to report polarized views by attributing positive feelings to their personal life while negative feelings were mainly attributed to the work environment. For men, there was a complete emotional denial and detachment from the work environment labelling it as *“strictly work” (Male, Black)*. For women there was an over engagement of emotional involvement with the work environment because of increased role conflict. This increased stressors and anxieties especially for ethnic minority women as they take up additional roles that are not part of their formal responsibilities such as being asked to get coffee for the team (*Female, Asian*). According to Mayer et al (2018), women leaders increased anxieties were related to the role conflict associated with acting as maternal figures for the rest of the system. While there was no evidence of the females in this study acting as maternal figures, possibly because participants with formal leadership authority were excluded. There was evidence of females in this study experiencing their roles as a “PA” or a “secretary” which are related to traditional gender stereotypes and experiencing identity conflict at work (Heilman, 2012; Clair et al, 2012). Such reports are in line with psychodynamic transference and displacement.

Transference is the process of projecting feelings for one person onto another (e.g. dependence on female supervisors to fulfil maternal needs) and is similar to displacement with the exception that displacement specifically focuses on the redirection of negative feelings to someone else who is often perceived to be weaker than you (Costa, 2017). At the heart of displacement is an imbalance of power, status, and the basic assumption of fight/flight (Bion, 1961). It is this imbalance and assumption that seems to differentiate between the experiences of members from the majority and the minority group with the latter reporting more distress. For example, minorities reported more distress as a result of the

majority group resistance “*..to do something because its beneath them..*” (Female, Black). This support social findings that have reported that minorities stress at work is mostly associated with interpersonal conflict (Ogbonna & Jerry, 2018). The data further suggest that such conflict was associated with a negative spillover effect of the job appraisal process. This is important as it implies that job appraisals and progression are also affected by defensive processes. This may particularly manifests as high levels of doubts and micro-aggression.

For example, Both males and females participants who identified as Black or Asian reported experiencing numerous instances of doubts and micro aggression associated with their individual differences, anxieties and stressful experiences. As reported in the following “*..she was monitoring every time like almost every step of the way made me feel like I was being watched all the time*” (Male, Black) and “*You talk about my accent I wouldn’t care. And then the day that I have bad mood, It wont be funny*” (Female, Asian). Such behavioural rituals are reported to reflect a compulsive repetition to minimise the anxieties of the unknown (Lyth, 1960). Blacks and Asian participants reported feeling the need to suppress their individual differences by limiting their self-expression or pretending to adopt the norms of the majority group. While depersonalization may provide a palliative defence against anxiety by fostering a false sense of collectiveness (Turquet, 1974), it limits access to ones personal identity which exacerbates intrapersonal anxieties. Excessive intrapersonal anxiety negatively affects work performance as energy is directed away from the objective task (Bion, 1961). This was evident in the following passage “*Something was brewing inside of me and I didnt know what it was so hard to deal with but it was. It was affecting my work and concentration or something. I’d make really stupid mistakes like book tickets for wrong date or something like that*” (Female, Black). In contrast, participants who identified as white and reported anxiety related to performance felt mainly uncertain about their current levels of competence.

Nonetheless, effective management of the organisational boundaries should provide protection against excessive anxieties (Cilliers & Koortzen, 2005; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). Clarity on roles and expectation may particularly be important protective factors for interpersonal conflict as they may limit the negative effect of displacement and basic assumptions as reported in the following “*..Even when people think they’re better than you, speak better or smarter than you then you still need to report to me*” (Female, Asian). Moreover, feeling supported and having sufficient time to cope with task complexity were reported to positively affect job demands. The positive influence of job autonomy and

support on job demands is well documented across the organizational psychology literature (Karasek, 1979; Clausen et al, 2020; Jolly, Kong, & Kim, 2020).

### **Implications**

The findings of this study has numerous implications for practitioners, organizations, and scholars. Our findings on uncertainty suggests that this negatively affects identification with others especially when members feel underrepresented or threatened. Therefore, interventions should not just aim to increase representation of specific members group but must also aim to reduce uncertainty (Blalock, 1967; Allport, 1954; West et al, 2009). Practical strategies can reduce uncertainty by fostering more egalitarian values through opportunities for positive interracial contact especially during stressful situations (Sawyer et al, 2012; James, Katharina, & Miles, 2018). The data suggests this does not necessarily have to happen within the context of the organizational system as positive interracial experiences were also associated with being exposed to a more diverse group of people in ones personal life. In other words, employees should also put in more effort to interact with different racial groups in their personal life as this can have a positive spillover effect to the workplace.

Moreover, effectively managing job demands also directly affects workplace relationships through its interaction with defences and counterproductive behaviours. Its crucial for managers to be effectively trained in providing the necessary support to subordinates but also to effectively manage their individual differences and intrapersonal anxieties (Parnell et al, 2000; Gardner et al, 2021). Leadership training must also include psychosocial skills such as emotional awareness and where possible counselling to cope with stressful situations. Furthermore, organisations should be mindful of power inequality in the workplace as this can contribute to conflict and tension between groups. A good starting point is to make sure that roles and expectations are clearly understood by all. Lastly, the evidence suggest that minorities experience more identity conflict associated with their intrapersonal, interpersonal, and even social role experiences.

Organisations will do well to consider the lived experiences of minorities when designing jobs and workplaces. Work cultures and jobs that are in conflict or disconnected from the lived experiences of minorities might make it difficult for minorities to emotionally connect with others and their environment. This will perpetuate status differences as minorities will struggle to integrate with the status quo leading to more polarization and interpersonal conflict. Psychoeducation and training focusing on awareness between individual and social differences may also be beneficial to promote

more interpersonal interactions. According to Jacques (1953), social change occurs at the phantasy level through increase awareness of phantasy relationships. Change at the manifest level of simply changing personnel will not suffice.

### **Limitations and future directions**

This study like all others is not without its limitations. While transferability of the findings may be strong because of purposeful sampling, generalizability is restricted considering the small sample size. Future studies can aim to replicate these findings using larger samples and statistical methods. Furthermore, its possible that participants unconscious identification with the primary researcher may have also biased the findings even though measures were taken to restrict the influence of personal factors through standardization and researcher reflexivity. The omission of participants in leadership positions meant that some Basic assumptions that are centred around the leader such as Dependency could not be detected. This mean that this study at best can only provide a limited understanding of the role of Basic assumption mentality in diverse work groups. Future studies can aim to fill this gap. Also, our world has changed considerably since the Covid-19 pandemic as more people now than ever works remotely. This study could not account for this important variable at the time it was conducted. So, how psychic phantasy is experienced during remote work remains unknown. Psychodynamic studies can forward the concept of anxieties, defences, and basic assumption mentality by applying these principles to modern technological changes.

Nonetheless, this study contributes to our understanding of the experiences of racially diverse employees at work in a number of ways. First, the importance of deep seated diversity such as intra and inter subjective experiences cannot be ignored and calls for more investigations. Second, practitioners and researchers should not just limit their practices and hypothesis within the organizational environment and should seriously explore the influence of personal factors associated with socio-environmental factors in shaping work dynamics. Third, applying new frameworks and concepts to the issue can benefit our understanding by generating new insights and directions. We hope this study inspire current and future researchers to continue exploring new avenues to promote effective diversity practices in modern society.

### **Conclusion**

Interventions aimed at diversity management in the workplace should particularly consider the interaction between members socio-environmental and workplace experiences. In particular, ethnic minorities reported more conflict with their personal identity and their workplaces which exacerbated their negative experiences. In contrast, the dominant group experienced a buffer against stressful experiences by integrating the self with their environment. However, difficulties integrating and interacting with the work environment was associated with tension in both groups. Leadership ability to contain anxiety and effectively manage work boundaries were important protective factors for all members. Failure to contain anxiety intrapersonally or interpersonally was associated with various psychic defences at the individual and the group level. This contributed to performance difficulties and more negative interpersonal experiences.

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Appendix:

Some interview questions



1. How do you feel about your relationships with your colleagues?
2. How do you experience your work responsibilities?
3. Tell me about the level of influence you feel you have at work.