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FROM CULTURALLY INDUCED SPLITTING TO CULTURAL DELUSIONS: WHITE SUPREMACISM AS A “EURO-AMERICAN PSYCHOSIS”

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Abstract

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This paper proposes a psycho-cultural pathway linking (i) ambivalent Euro-American representations of the racialised 'Other', (ii) a culturally induced form of splitting, and (iii) culturally shared delusional formations. Drawing on cultural psychiatric work that frames 'cultural delusions' as group-endorsed, ego-syntonic, highly implausible and socially incorrigible beliefs that constrain individual and collective development, we treat white supremacism as delusion-like belief. We introduce the concept of culturally induced splitting to describe how socio-cultural-institutional and media ecologies can distribute ambivalence into polarised stereotypes (for example, "good refugee" versus "bad migrant"), allowing benevolence and hostility to co-exist without integration. Digital epistemic dynamics (epistemic bubbles and echo chambers) are considered as amplifiers of splitting and of preference falsification. A brief field vignette from qualitative work in Italian mental-health services illustrates how oscillating representations operate within helping institutions. We conclude with implications for cultural psychotherapy and research: interventions may need to focus on making ambivalence thinkable, increasing institutional reflexivity, and addressing echo-chamber dynamics rather than relying solely on factual dispute.

Key words:

Cultural delusions; White supremacism; Culturally-induced splitting; Colonial ambivalence; Othering; Migration discourse; Echo chambers.

Introduction

Cultural psychiatry has long wrestled with the boundary between culturally patterned belief and psychopathology. Recent proposals have revived the notion of cultural delusions to describe beliefs convincingly held by a social group, experienced as ego-syntonic, highly implausible, socially incorrigible, and capable of narrowing individual and collective possibilities (Armando, 2016 and 2017; Bartocci, 2013; Bartocci, Zupin, 2016a and 2016b; Rovera et al., 2014; Rovera, 2015 and 2017). The key move is to ask whether some shared beliefs function as rigid formations that restrict development by closing the space of correction, doubt and ethical encounter.

This paper advances a specific hypothesis: that white supremacy can be conceptualised as a cultural delusion. We propose culturally induced splitting as a mechanism linking structural ambivalence towards the racialised Other to a delusion-like ideological resolution.

In this framework, cultural delusions can be operationalised as collectively sustained convictions held within a recognisable social group, typically experienced as ego-syntonic and therefore not perceived as problematic by those who inhabit them. These convictions may be unrealistic in relation to external evidence yet remain functionally incorrigible precisely because they are continuously reinforced by social consensus. Their clinical and socio-political salience lies in the way such shared certainties can constrain both individual and collective possibilities for development, narrowing the horizon of what can be questioned, imagined, or transformed. This usage aligns with cultural-psychiatric and psychoanthropological work that interrogates how culturally validated “truths” can become pathogenic when they stabilise rigid forms of meaning, identity, and authority (Bartocci, 2013; Bartocci & Zupin, 2016a, Zupin et al., 2020).

White supremacy as a cultural delusion (“Euro-American Psychosis”)

Within this conceptual horizon, the formulation of white supremacy as a delusion - proposed heuristically rather than diagnostically - treats racial supremacy as a culturally organised conviction system structured by grandiosity, entitlement, and moral rationalisation. Hickling describes this as a “primary grandiose delusion” through which European/Euro-American civilisation naturalises the belief that the world’s peoples and resources belong to it, while retrospectively justifying conquest, slavery, and empire as civilising benevolence (Hickling, 2009). Read as a cultural-delusional configuration, the “truth” of supremacy is maintained not by evidential adequacy but by historically sedimented authority, institutional repetition, and affective investments that render the belief self-sealing and resistant to disconfirmation. (ibid.)

Phenomenological vignette: grandiosity, appropriation, dehumanisation

“Imagine, this small group of white people arriving in a boat after 10 or 12 weeks across the Atlantic, not having enough food and enough water and starving and hungry. And they arrive in this place of paradise, wonderful paradise, and they look at it and they say, this all belongs to me. And you all in here belong to me. And your wife and your husband and your children, you all belong to me...” (Hickling, 2011)

Hickling’s illustrative vignette reframes colonial arrival as an enactment of delusional grandiosity: an exhausted group reaches “paradise” of the Caribbean islands and immediately concludes, in essence, “this all belongs to me,” extending possession from land to persons. The value of this vignette is phenomenological: it foregrounds the structure of the conviction - appropriation, omnipotent entitlement, and reduction of others to owned objects - rather than treating colonial violence as merely strategic or economic. In this reading, dehumanisation serves as a necessary cognitive-affective condition for the grandiose claim to remain coherent: by reducing the other to a thing—in a dynamic reminiscent of the ‘petrification’ described by Laing—otherness is neutralised as resistant subjectivity and transformed into an intrinsically possessable object; in this way, domination becomes not only permissible, but self-evidently ‘right’ (Hickling, 2011; Laing, 1960).

In this framework, white supremacy can be operationalized - at a minimal definitional level - as the conviction that white people are intrinsically superior to other racialised groups. From a cultural-psychiatric standpoint, the aim is not to impose a diagnostic label on a political ideology, but to use the heuristic of “cultural delusion” to interrogate how certain shared convictions can become rigid, ego-syntonic, and incorrigible when continuously reinforced by social consensus.

This shift immediately raises a clinically oriented question: what kind of psychological distress might be managed - rather than caused - by the delusional configuration of white supremacy? In other words, if delusions can be approached (at least in some cases) as adaptive formations that attempt to stabilise meaning and self-coherence under affective pressure, then the explanatory work must move upstream, towards the sources of that pressure (Moskowitz & Heim, 2011; Bradley & Western, 2005). On this basis, we propose that a key generator of distress is a specific form of splitting - not primarily

intrapsychic in origin, but externally scaffolded and culturally patterned - here provisionally termed culturally-induced splitting.

A psychopathological insight into the concept of splitting

The construct is introduced through two classical analogies that clarify its psychopathological plausibility while marking its difference from conventional psychodynamic usage. First, the historical psychopathology of schizophrenia placed *Spaltung* (splitting) at the centre of the disorder's architecture; in this tradition, delusional formations can be understood as emerging downstream of a prior disintegration of psychic functions and complexes (Moskowitz & Heim, 2011).

Second, developmental and psychodynamic accounts of borderline pathology describe splitting as a defensive and organisational maneuver linked to affect dysregulation, oscillations between idealisation and devaluation, and the precarious integration of object representations - dynamics that can, in some cases, extend into transient psychotic-like experiences under stress (Bradley & Western, 2005). The point of these parallels is not nosographic equivalence, but the shared logic: when incompatible representations cannot be integrated, polarised meaning-making becomes a route to temporary coherence - at the cost of rigidity and distress (Moskowitz & Heim, 2011; Bradley & Western, 2005).

Colonial ambivalence and European perception

From this perspective, reviewing relevant postcolonial and cultural studies contributions, the Western sense of superiority towards the culturally-diverse "Other" appears historically intertwined with simultaneous fascination and fear - an ambiguity that is often intensified when directed towards peoples from sub-Saharan Africa. This ambivalence, however, is not only a thematic oscillation ("fascination" versus "fear"), but a multi-level dispositif that operates simultaneously on at least three planes. First, at the level of desire, Hooks shows how the longing for intimacy with "dark Others" can be experienced as transgressive and even self-transformative, while remaining

structurally compatible with domination through commodification and “imperialist nostalgia” - a libidinal economy in which the Other is approached as an affective resource rather than an ethical subject (Hooks, 1992). While teaching at Yale, Hooks describes a conversation she overheard in which some white students discussed non-white partners according to racial/ethnic categories, using a vocabulary of selection and 'shopping' that translates otherness into an object of consumption. The encounter is presented as a 'convertive' and transformative experience—a transition from 'innocence' to 'worldliness'—but this very promise of self-transformation is made possible by the tacit assumption that the physical presence of the Other is available and exploitable. In this way, transgression does not disrupt the structure of domination: difference is sought as a libidinal intensifier, not as an ethical relationship between subjects (ibid.). Second, at the level of administration, colonial governance institutionalises an equivocal membership: the colonised subject is interpellated into the horizon of “civilisation” and mimicry yet is kept in a juridical-political limbo - citizen and non-citizen at once - where rights are conditional, revocable, and differentially allocated, thereby translating ambivalence into bureaucratic form (Genova, 2004). In practical terms, inclusion occurs through procedures that 'admit' the individual as a member of the workforce or as a subject of protection, but keep them permanently verifiable: a temporary permit to be renewed, a requirement of 'good conduct' or employment, an administrative check that can transform the 'admitted' person into an 'irregular' one in a matter of weeks and therefore into someone who can be deported/detained (ibid.). Third, at the level of temporality, European perception of sub-Saharan Africa is repeatedly organised through shifting historical frames - alternating archaic pasts, belated presents, and projected futures - so that Africa is persistently positioned as “out of time” with Europe even when its images change (Horáková, 2007). For example, what is offered as media 'evidence'—the rivers of bodies in Rwanda in 1994, the child soldiers in Sierra Leone, the 'apocalyptic spectacles' of Darfur—tends to be interpreted as the re-emergence of ancestral ethnic hatred (archaic past), as the persistence of 'pre-modern' violence (late present), and as a scenario that authorises a projected future of "salvation"/normalisation from outside (ibid.). Taken together, these three layers clarify how ambivalence is socially reproduced as desire, as legal status, and as historical sequencing, thereby

predisposing shared representations to split into polarised, morally legible stereotypes. In the proposed model, culturally-induced splitting designates precisely this culturally reproduced failure of integration at the level of shared representations. The ensuing distress is not conceptualised as an individual anomaly detached from context, but as the subjective burden of inhabiting a cultural field that repeatedly trains perception and affect into mutually exclusive poles—thereby rendering delusional certainty a psychologically economical, if ultimately constricting, solution (Moskowitz & Heim, 2011; Horáková, 2007).

The rhetoric of good and bad migrants and its interconnection with epistemic bubbles

Across European cultural history, a recurrent ambivalence towards the racialised Other can be described through a polarised affective economy: fascination, desire and idealisation (“good”) on the one hand, and fear and devaluation (“bad”) on the other. This oscillation is not merely a trope of popular imagination; it has also shaped early epistemic formations within cross-cultural psychiatry, where “difference” became a privileged site for projecting and stabilising Western self-understandings.

A paradigmatic example is provided by Lucas and Barrett’s analysis of “psychiatric primitivism”, which identifies two opposing and internally coherent interpretive frameworks - labelled “Barbaric” and “Arcadian” - through which non-Western societies are rendered legible in psychiatric discourse. The “Barbaric” perspective tends to bind cultural alterity to disorder, danger, and violence, whereas the “Arcadian” perspective mobilises an inverse idealisation, associating “traditional” social forms with harmony, integration, and even therapeutic promise. Importantly, Lucas and Barrett argue that these are not neutral descriptive categories but interpretive templates that organise research questions, rhetorics, and conclusions in comparative psychiatry - particularly in debates where culture is tacitly equated with developmental distance and moral valuation. Read through the lens of splitting, such *templates* can be understood as cultural-cognitive devices that permit rapid moral sorting of alterity into “desirable” and “threatening” forms, thereby protecting coherence within the in-group’s symbolic order while foreclosing epistemic complexity (Lucas & Barret, 1995; Zupin & Cerisola 2024).

In contemporary Euro-American politics and media discourse on migration, this same polarity is recapitulated in the now-familiar distinction between “good refugees” and “bad migrants” - a moralised categorisation that functions both as a public grammar of deservingness and as a vehicle for affect regulation (compassion vs hostility). Social-psychological evidence suggests that labels and implied voluntariness of movement materially shape attitudes and behavioural intentions: refugees (coded as forced, involuntary, and vulnerable) tend to elicit greater warmth and endorsement of helping, whereas “economic migrants” (coded as voluntary and interest-driven) elicit comparatively less supportive orientations. In parallel, discourse-analytic work on the “migration crisis” highlights how media narratives often articulate an implicit normative refugee archetype, whereby protection becomes attached to specific performances of innocence, vulnerability, and passivity, while other figures are constructed as suspect, opportunistic, or even predatory. The outcome is a structurally “split” representational field: the same population can be made to appear alternately as the object of humanitarian identification and as the focus of securitarian fear, with intermediate positions rendered illegible or politically unusable (Wyszynski et al., 2020; Szczepanik, 2016).

Digital media ecologies may further intensify this culturally induced splitting by stabilising polarised narratives through algorithmic curation and group-structured epistemic dynamics. Nguyen's distinction between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers is particularly useful. An epistemic bubble is, in essence, a situation in which certain relevant voices are not heard at all: not because they have been discredited, but because they are excluded 'by omission' (poorly connected networks, social selection, information filters). In a bubble, when an external voice does reach us, it is not necessarily rejected automatically: it simply had not been encountered very often. An echo chamber, on the other hand, does not just reduce exposure: it works primarily by manipulating trust, i.e. by teaching us to consider outsiders unreliable or malicious and, at the same time, to overestimate the epistemic authority of insiders. This is why the echo chamber often renders counter-evidence 'useless': even if it is encountered, it is disqualified in advance by delegitimising external sources (Nguyen, 2020). In this sense, the echo chamber is not simply a deficit of exposure; it is an active social technology

that makes counter-evidence psychologically available yet epistemically unusable, because dissenting sources are pre-classified as unreliable or malicious. Such dynamics resonate with the clinical intuition - here employed strictly as a heuristic rather than a diagnosis - that some collectively held belief-systems acquire a delusion-like incorrigibility by virtue of social consensus and authority structures, rather than by individual cognitive error alone (Levi et al., 2025).

Empirical work on migration narratives and social media polarisation supports the plausibility of this mechanism. In a *mixed-method* design combining survey evidence with a Twitter field experiment, Levi and colleagues show that social media environments can distort the public portrayal of migration preferences, amplifying the most hostile and polarising narrative over time and thereby intensifying political polarisation. (ibid.) This pattern - wherein emotionally charged out-group hostility gains disproportionate traction within platform-mediated interaction - can be read as a socio-technical accelerant of splitting: it preferentially rewards simplified, antagonistic representations, consolidates in-group moral certainty, and progressively de-authorises sources capable of reintroducing nuance.

Integrative conclusion: from cultural delusions to culturally-induced splitting

What we propose is, in substance, a bridge between (i) the notion of cultural delusions and (ii) the specific case of delusions of white supremacy as a culturally available, socially reinforced solution to an otherwise difficult affective–epistemic position.

In classical psychodynamic terms, splitting designates a defensive organisation in which mutually incompatible affective meanings (idealisation vs devaluation; “all-good” vs “all-bad”) are kept apart rather than mentalised and integrated (Bradley & Western, 2005).

The proposed construct of culturally-induced splitting, by contrast, is analogous but not identical: its primary source is not an intrapsychic conflict, but the external cultural logic in which subjects live—historical representations, institutional practices, and media ecologies that repeatedly solicit binary positioning towards the racialised Other (fascination/idealisation vs fear/devaluation). This is also observable at the meso-level

of institutional cultures: in a qualitative re-reading of three multi-agency focus groups conducted within an Italian FAMI programme, we described how services initially coalesced around two mutually stabilising *imagos*—the “dangerous migrant” versus the “needy/homeless migrant”—carrying opposed affects (hostility vs caregiving). Regular inter-institutional meetings operated as a reflective “third space”, progressively weakening this split and improving integrated responses beyond the project’s narrow perimeter (Zupin & Cerisola, 2024).

The key claim is that splitting is intrinsically distress-generating, and that—under conditions of sustained arousal, uncertainty, and social reinforcement—this distress may be resolved through delusion-like closure: an experience of regained coherence, certainty, and moral–political orientation.

A recent contribution by Kirmayer (Kirmayer, 2024) proposes addressing the contemporary crisis of truth and the proliferation of extreme beliefs primarily in terms of social epistemology, i.e., as a product of information ecologies, trust dynamics, epistemic authority, and polarisation, rather than as ‘irrationality’ or individual psychopathology. In line with this caution (and with Bortolotti’s critique of the pathological model of conspiracy beliefs (Bortolotti, 2020 and 2024)), we recognise that labelling such beliefs as *delusional* can obscure their identity and social functions and can be reductive, especially when there are ‘armour’ of real events that fuel their subjective plausibility. However, we argue that the use of the notion of *cultural delusion* can be complementary: not to medicalise dissent, but to describe shared configurations of highly implausible, socially incorrigible and ego-syntonic beliefs, and to clarify their affective coherence function (e.g. through dehumanisation and culturally induced splitting).

The argument is therefore not that “white supremacy” is a diagnosis comparable to major depressive disorder as presented in the DSM 5, but that it can be treated as a culturally shareable, socially scaffolded belief-formation that can operate as if delusional in its incorrigibility and reality-shaping power, especially when embedded in institutional and media environments (Zupin et al., 2020; Moskowitz & Heim, 2011). In contemporary settings, this closure can be stabilised by echo-chamber dynamics and

digitally mediated trust management (systematic discrediting of out-groups and inflation of in-group credibility), which makes ambivalence harder to sustain and integration less likely (Nguyen, 2020; Levi et al., 2025).

Finally, pointing to institutional and service-level observability, culturally-induced splitting is not only a macro-cultural narrative but can be tracked in how community mental health systems and inter-institutional networks position “migrants” through alternating stereotypes, even within well-intentioned professional milieus (Bartocci & Zupin, 2020). This is why the proposed mechanism is framed as general: potentially applicable beyond Euro-American migration discourse, and usable as an analytic tool for identifying where cultural environments systematically compress complexity into polarities - and where delusion-like solutions become socially available responses to that compression.

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