“WHY AM I FEELING LIKE I’M HITTING MY HEAD UP AGAINST A BRICK WALL?”: DOING DEI WORK IN A PRIVATE, PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

ERIN CHRISTINE CARPENTER

(Under the Direction of Diana Graizbord)

ABSTRACT

After the decline of diversity rhetoric, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies and practices have subsequently embedded themselves into higher education, becoming the focus of academic scholarship and socio-political debates. Through interviews with DEI workers in a private, predominately white university (PWI), I build upon literature on diversity, DEI, bureaucratic reform, and racialized organizations to examine how and why workers engage in the work despite disempowerment, constraints, and on-the-ground experiences. I examine how they navigate implementing reform in tension with constraints. I argue that for Black women engaged in DEI work, DEI is an embodied practice that cannot be easily undone. I find that DEI workers experience top-down DEI efforts as decentralized and siloed and navigate these tensions through small world-making and pockets of effectiveness. This research maps out the tensions between DEI workers’ motivations and experiences and constraining bureaucratic forces, offering insight into how they strategically navigate such tensions.

INDEX WORDS: bureaucracy, DEI, diversity, higher education, race, racialized organizations, reform work

“WHY AM I FEELING LIKE I’M HITTING MY HEAD UP AGAINST A BRICK WALL?”: DOING DEI WORK IN A PRIVATE, PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSITUTION

by

ERIN CHRISTINE CARPENTER

BA, Texas Christian University, 2019

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2023

© 2023

Erin Christine Carpenter

All Rights Reserved

“WHY AM I FEELING LIKE I’M HITTING MY HEAD UP AGAINST A BRICK WALL?”: DOING DEI WORK IN A PRIVATE, PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

ERIN CHRISTINE CARPENTER

Major Professor:	Diana Graizbord
Committee:	Vanessa Gonlin
	Justine Tinkler

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2023

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the DEI workers who took the time to help me create this project through speaking with me about their life, experiences, emotions, and incredibly important work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to thank my thesis committee, Diana Graizbord, Vanessa Gonlin, and Justine Tinkler, who have helped me immensely throughout my time here in the Department of Sociology at the University of Georgia. All of their thoughtful comments, lectures, and insights have made the completion of this thesis possible. I especially want to thank my Major Advisor, Diana Graizbord, for encouraging me to pursue the research interests I am passionate about and for continuing to provide me with the tools to achieve my academic goals. I also want to thank my partner, friends, and family who have supported me throughout the process of researching and writing. Their words of encouragement and continued belief in me have been essential to my ability to complete this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

LIST OF TABLES viii

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 1

Introduction 1

Case and Site 6

Methods and Data 10

Overview 19

2 LITERATURE REVIEW 21

Introduction 21

Diversity Discourses within Higher Education 22

The Politics of Bureaucratic Reform 31

Racialized Organizations 35

Conclusion: Doing DEI 36

3 DEI AS EMBODIED WORK 38

Introduction 38

Embodiment 40

Tensions between “Head and Heart Work” of DEI 48

Conclusion 57

4 DECENTRALIZATION AND POCKETS OF WORLD-MAKING..........................60
    Introduction..60
    Decentralized DEI Work..63
    Pockets of Effectiveness and DEI World-Making...69
    Conclusion 78
5 CONCLUSION..80
    Sociological Significance...83
    Broader Implications..85
    Future Directions 86
REFERENCES 89

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1: Student Ethnicity Fall 2022 7-8

Table 2: Faculty Ethnicity Fall 2022 8

Table 3: Participant Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Role in University 13

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a phrase used to refer to policies, efforts, and initiatives designed to promote the representation, involvement, and support of individuals from various, underrepresented and marginalized identities including but limited to race, gender, sexuality, religion, and socio-economic status. Institutional (DEI) efforts have become a popular avenue through which universities address issues of race, socio-economic, gender and racial exclusion, responding to the failures of diversity discourses and practices that entered a decline after widespread acclaim through the early 1990's (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1626). However, despite its prevalence in organizations spanning from corporate America to higher education, DEI as of late has become the centerpiece in intense political debates and heated socio-political conversations, particularly amongst conservative voices within the United States. Conservative politicians such as Texas' and Florida's Governors Greg Abbott and Ron DeSantis, respectively, are vocally and explicitly attacking the existence of DEI, with Abbott's office informing "state agency and public university leaders" that DEI "is illegal in hiring," while DeSantis has gone so far to sign off on "legislation to defund diversity, equity and inclusion programs at all state universities" (Alfonseca 2023; Maher 2023: para. 1; McGee 2023). Given the highly politicized and threatened state of DEI within institutions in the United States, insights into the realities and experiences of those charged with doing the work of DEI are especially relevant and valuable, both within scholarly and socio-political contexts.

DEI language, policies, and practices and the work associated can be understood as both a break and continuation of a previous era. Hitting its peak in popularity in the early 1990's, we have diversity (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1626). Diversity arose after sustained pushback and undermining efforts against affirmative action, leading to a rhetorical shift to the concept of diversity: a neoliberal reframing of addressing matters of inclusion (Herring and Henderson 2012, Portocarrero and Carter 2022). Specifically within higher education, diversity became utilized by universities as a way to give the appearance of investing in racial inclusion and diversification efforts while often failing to substantively address systemic inequalities. As elite, predominately white institutions (PWI) began to implement DEI offices, policies, and commitments, isomorphic pressure led to increasing numbers of universities following suit and creating their own diversity efforts (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Diversity became an important piece of symbolic capital and legitimizing tool for universities in order to compete with each other and improve their image, especially for prospective students (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Holland and Ford 2021). As I elaborate upon in Chapter 2, diversity within higher education evolved into a tool for universities attempting to create the appearance of inclusion and diversity, using it as "a happy sign of the overcoming of exclusion" and as a way to change *perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations*," frequently failing to address head-on the systemic inequalities at work within the universities themselves (Ahmed 2012:153; 34).

Diversity ultimately expanded to include characteristics such as diversity in terms of culture and lifestyle, ultimately watering the concept down, a point expanded more in Chapter 2 under "Diversity Discourses Within Higher Education" (Herring and Henderson 2011, Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001, Portocarrero and Carter 2022). Despite diversity's widespread popularity throughout the early 1990's, a reaction to its failings led to its decline and gives rise to DEI, which, as this present study and Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma's (2023) study indicate, had become integrated into spaces of higher education by roughly the mid-2010's (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1626). Thus, DEI arose as an intended corrective to the watering down and broadening of diversity. As the most recent iteration of inclusion efforts in organizations, there is less literature on DEI than diversity. However, much of the critiques leveled against diversity are applicable to DEI, in particular the findings that diversity efforts are often used as a form of symbolic capital for universities while systemic inequities remain unaddressed and that diversity work is an exhausting, draining, disempowering form of labor (Ahmed 2009; Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015 Herring and Henderson 2012; Holland and Ford 2021; Swan and Fox 2010). Existing scholarship and my own research highlight how racialized organizations continue to center whiteness while diversity efforts often fail to address the inequities embedded into these institutions, not helping the marginalized groups inclusion efforts originally were created to help (Portocarrero and Carter 2022:8; Ray 2019).

This scholarship offer extensive insights into the rise and operation of diversity and the critiques that led to its decline, especially that of Sara Ahmed's (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life,* much of which can be extended into understandings of DEI. However, these works do not offer intimate insights of DEI workers' experiences that explicitly maps out the tensions inherent between the worldmaking realities of enacting DEI on the ground and the bureaucratic mechanisms and networks that workers must navigate in practicing DEI, and most importantly, how DEI workers navigate and continue to enact change despite such tensions. Portocarrero and Carter (2022:7-8) note the important role of DEI workers in undertaking efforts "to include members of historically disadvantaged groups in universities across the United States," and called for scholars to conduct "research on diversity officials" as there is a lack of understanding as to "what conditions enable or constrain diversity workers." This project is a case study of a particular University that followed suit in its adoption of DEI as a means to signal inclusion and equality after the rise and subsequent watering-down of diversity rhetoric that had so thoroughly infiltrated spaces of higher education. It fills the gap highlighted by Portocarrero and Carter (2022) by offering insights into the experiences, perspectives and understandings of DEI workers and how and why they do this labor in the face of constraints.

I conducted a case study of a mid-sized, private university within the United States to explore the experiences and perspectives of DEI workers (staff, faculty, and students engaged in formal DEI work in any capacity), as well as how they navigate the tensions between their personal experiences, orientations, and realities of implementing DEI and the bureaucratic forces and constraints placed upon them by the University. In order to do so, my study is guided by the following questions: How and why do diversity workers within the University do the work of diversity in the face of cultural and organizational tension and constraints? How are the broader socio-political culture and racialized structure of the institution, as well as bureaucratic forces and mechanisms, experienced by diversity workers in practice, and how do these factors shape and influence their work as well as the possibilities and meanings of DEI? I explore how those charged with implementing DEI within the University understand, perceive, and experience DEI, focusing on how these DEI workers navigate implementing DEI within a bureaucratic space, an environment known to be challenging, resistant, and disempowering to reform work (Ahmed 2012; Meyerson and Scully 1995; Sims 2017; Swan and Fox 2010; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017).

The tensions that arise as DEI workers attempt to implement reform within a bureaucratic space is at the heart of this thesis. My thesis shows why DEI workers remain motivated to continue their efforts in the face of bureaucratic obstacles, such as tensions between affective and embodied ties to DEI and the formalized job expectations and decentralization of DEI work occurring within the institution, and the various strategies they use to navigate and circumvent such bureaucratic tensions, ensuring that DEI work endures and cannot be undone even within the face of "brick walls" (Ahmed 2012). First, I argue that Black women DEI workers experience the practice of DEI work as embodied. By embodied I mean that Black women DEI is inseparable and intimately tied to their personal identities *as* Black women. To simply exist is to be and do DEI. Due to this personal connection to DEI, Black women DEI workers find these affective and personal ties to the work to be motivating in their efforts to do DEI work within the University. I describe how this exists in tension with rationalized, bureaucratized DEI work, and how DEI workers navigate and reconcile this tension. Second, I examine the tensions that occur when DEI work is decentralized and siloed, showing how DEI workers navigate this reality. I find they do so by creating pockets of effectiveness and collaborative worlds of DEI work within the institution. This project highlights the "why's" and "how's" of DEI work beyond acknowledging its disempowering nature, thus highlighting the agency and practices of resistance used by DEI workers navigating enactment of reform within the University. What it means to "do good" and accomplish this good work may look different for each DEI worker, and the strategies used to achieve this ideal of "good" may also vary.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a brief overview of the rise of diversity and DEI, namely within spaces of higher education, and what scholarship presently says on the topic. I then discuss my particular choice in case study and project site as well as my methods and data. I conclude this chapter by offering a concise description of the thesis therein.

Case and Site

This project is a case study of DEI and DEI work at a particular university within the United States. The University examined in this study is a private, mid-sized university with an R2 Carnegie Classification and a total enrollment of around 12,700 students as of Fall 2023. A smaller institution than many R1, public universities, the institution emphasizes its small class sizes, 13:1 student-to-faculty ratio, and the faculty's direct relationships with students. A relatively small campus, the University's physical space is aesthetically appealing and easy to navigate. If one were to take a walk through the University's relatively small and picturesque campus, one would come across a myriad of statues and memorials dedicated to the school's mascot, important alumni, coaches, donors, and the founders of the institution. Similar to many other universities founded in the 19th century, the founders of the institution are white men who designated the University as being affiliated with a particular Christian denomination. To the present day, the institution remains a predominantly white institution (PWI) despite relatively recent efforts to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body.

While walking the University's campus, one would likely also notice particular demographic features. The institution's student body is predominantly female, with 7,902 female students and 4,883 male students as of Fall 2023. More visually striking is the visual racial homogeneity of the University's population. As you explore the campus, it is likely that you would notice a relative absence of people of color passing by on the institution's grounds. Indeed, the University is historically and presently predominately white, with almost 63% of the student body in Fall 2023 identifying as white. Excluding graduate students, the University is still around 64% white, very similar to the 62% white undergraduate student body (as of 2021) of a fellow similarly sized, private PWI in the same general region of the United States. This majority white student body is a decline from previous years, with 72.8% of the students identifying as white back in Fall 2011. Strikingly, the Black/African American student population has declined from 5.5% of the student population in Fall 2019 to 4.7% in Fall 2023 despite the University's DEI efforts beginning around 2016 and continuing to the present day (data as reported in the universities' public online sources). The racial/ethnic demographics are fairly reflective of the state demographics at large, in which white people have historically comprised the majority of the population, with the Hispanic/Latino population being the largest minority demographic. However, whereas the University remains majority white, Hispanics as of 2022 have become the largest share of the state's population, a pattern not reflected in the changes in the University's racial/ethnic makeup over time (Ura 2023).

For a full breakdown of the student population by ethnicity, see Table 1. [1] The whiteness of the organization only becomes all the more apparent when looking at full-time faculty, of which 84.5% of Professors, 72.7% Associate Professors, and 58.8% of Assistant Professors are white as of Fall 2022 (see Table 2).[2] Despite desegregating in the mid-1960's, the University has remained a heavily white institution, both in terms of the student body and faculty population.

Student Ethnicity Fall 2023

Ethnicity Demographics of Student Body	N	By Percentage
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	14	.1
American Indian/Alaska Native	31	.2

---

[1] Data and categories from the University's public webpage on student demographics.

[2] Data and categories from the University's public webpage on full-time faculty demographics.

Unknown Ethnicity	307	2.4
Asian	380	3.0
Multi-Ethnic	528	4.1
Black/African American	603	4.7
U.S. Nonresident	611	4.8
Hispanic/Latino	2,277	17.8
White	8,034	62.8
University Total	12,785	100.0

Table 1

Full-Time Faculty Ethnicity Fall 2022

Ethnicity Demographics of Faculty	Professor	Associate Professor	Assistant Professor	Instructor	Lecturer	Total Full-Time Faculty
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	3	0	5	0	9
Unknown Ethnicity	1	2	4	0	2	9
Asian	18	27	15	3	1	64
Multi-Ethnic	1	0	0	1	2	4
Black/African American	6	13	16	9	0	44
International	0	3	11	5	1	20
Hispanic/Latino	5	12	17	4	2	40
White	175	160	90	75	19	519
University Total	207	220	153	102	27	709

Table 2

In addition to being a PWI, the University is located in a politically conservative state, and given the current attacks on DEI from conservative voices, this case offers a valuable insight into how individuals implement DEI within a larger socio-political context that is in many ways actively threatening and dismantling DEI and other associated entities, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Alfonseca 2023; Maher 2023; McGee 2023). Similar to the state as a whole, this particular University has been experiencing recent demographic shifts and contending with increasingly non-conservative, racially diverse students and faculty pushing for change. In response to these demographic shifts, larger socio-political tensions, as well as pressures from student grievances, the University instituted its university-wide DEI committee in 2016. Aligning with the general trajectory found within DEI literature, broader socio-political context, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and isomorphic pressures contributed to the University's initial implementation of DEI efforts.

However, the institution's formal commitments to DEI also emerged in part due to students applying bottom-up pressure to the University through grievances and advocating for more radical change within the realm of race and diversity. In the words of a DEI expert in the University's human resources area, "Student unrest is what led to the university taking a more direct approach, institutionalized approach to addressing a number of concerns from our students, and the formalizing of departments, of committees, of teams of research." Thus, the University's implementation of DEI cannot be entirely attributed to isomorphic pressures popularizing DEI as a legitimating form of diversity capital (Banks 2022). Rather, it is also a direct response to bottom-up activism and pushback from students attending this particular PWI. Much of this student activism occurred within the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement that led to protests all over the country in response to police brutality and racial inequality more generally, with students protesting on campus, expressing disappointment with the university's response to the Black Lives Matter Movement. These student-led efforts had a tangible impact on the way DEI efforts were implemented at the University, even resulting in the establishment of a new academic department and adoption of some of the students' demands.

In 2020, within the larger socio-political context of George Floyd and a resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests and activism, the institution held its Inaugural Diversity Day Conference and launched a DEI initiative intended to examine and record the University's connections to slavery, the Confederacy, and racism. The following year, the institution created an Intercultural Center, of which an administrator informed me that “the students were really heavily involved in the development of that space.” While the University’s DEI implementation began in part as top-down efforts in response to the broader socio-political context and isomorphic pressures throughout the field of higher education, much of the pushes and significant changes stemmed from bottom-up pressures from students organizing and protesting for transformation within the University and beyond. In the words of a Black woman staff member recalling the timeline of DEI at the University, notes the power of student organizing, calling it a “real turning point, because there had to be a response. The movement was large enough that the Chancellor and his cabinet at the time had to respond.” Through both top-down, isomorphic pressures as well as the power of bottom-up student pressure, DEI initiatives and efforts have remained and grown since their initial formalization in 2016. Presently, the University has three offices that oversee DEI: an Office of Diversity & Inclusion, Office of Institutional Equity, and Student Identity & Engagement, as well as three primary DEI-related initiatives. The timeline and trajectory of DEI within this particular University is a result of both top-down and bottom-up pressures occurring to create an organizational context in which the University had to make a formalized response via DEI institutionalization.

Methods and Data

Since my research is focused on the lived experiences of and meanings attached to the work of DEI, I utilized qualitative methodologies for this project. As Mario Small (2008:8) states, the benefits and “strengths of qualitative work come from understanding *how and why*, not understanding *how many*," making it the ideal methodology for understanding why and how DEI work continues to be enacted in the face of bureaucratic obstacles. Specifically, I utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews supplemented by observations and content analysis, garnering data via the University's formal webpages, particularly those for DEI. I used the information found on these sites to contextualize the case, map out the organizational structure of DEI within the University, garner basic historical and demographic information, as well as locate the names, formal titles, and email information for participant recruitment. Using web pages and other online sources of data is methodologically helpful in supplementing and painting a more accurate picture of the social world of DEI within the institution. Hewson (2017:21) points out how "IMR [internet-mediated research] methods" allows "data to be gathered which are not easily obtainable using offline methods." Given the geographic distance and limitations between myself and my site and participants, utilizing web pages as a means to gather information about the institution and its world of DEI allowed me to access data and information that otherwise would have been inaccessible for me throughout the course of this research.

For this project, I was interested in the everyday meaning-making and enactment of DEI work within the University, making reflexive, qualitative methods suitable as they are better attuned to studying everyday social interaction (Burawoy 1998:5). This study delves deep into the perspectives, understandings, and experiences of those doing the work of DEI, in turn revealing via in-depth interviews how these workers attach meaning to and go about putting into practice the work of DEI in the face of institutional and socio-political resistance. Thick, descriptive data that emerges out of the in-depth interviews works to get at the "how's" and "why's" behind doing DEI within the University. This project is a case study of a mid-sized, private university within the United States. Data generated from this case study will allow me to "use data to tell a compelling story" that provides thick, descriptive insights into the social world of these DEI workers (Small 2008:6).

The purpose of a case study is not to be generalizable or replicable. Rather, to use such terms for qualitative, case studies such as this one is to apply the vocabulary of quantitative, statistical research to qualitative research, “to adopt terms while ignoring their meanings” (Small 2008:8). Thus, the strength of my study lies in its ability to generate rich qualitative data that tells a story of the motivations, experiences, and strategies of DEI workers within a particular university. This close study of a particular institution and particular set of DEI workers offers an avenue through which to utilize descriptive, narrative data to help answer the “how’s” and “why’s” behind DEI work. The insights into DEI workers’ motivations and experiences provide generative insights that contribute to scholarly understandings of how DEI operates within bureaucratic contexts and the ways in which reformers within institutions navigate bureaucratic tensions.

Interviews

The empirical data for this project stems from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with DEI workers (students, faculty, and staff), those who work in implementing DEI initiatives within the University. In-depth interviewing, amongst other qualitative approaches to data collection, “privilege the subjective meaning of those who live the experience being studied and conceptualize social life as a process that is the production of the simultaneous shaping of different aspects of social life and human agency,” and “entail the collection of extensive and rich data” from interviewees (Cuádraz and Uttal 1999:161). As such, in-depth and semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture insights into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making of my participants in light of their everyday acts of doing DEI.

My sample consists of 13 individuals involved in formal DEI work in any capacity within the University. I refer to these individuals as DEI workers throughout my project. I wanted to ensure that the DEI workers I interviewed were from various locations throughout the University to ensure that I gathered insights and perspectives from individuals engaged in DEI work in various ways and from various locations and positions of power within the institution. As such, my sample consists of staff, faculty, and students (graduate and undergraduate). Non-faculty staff members make up the largest single category in my sample, with the category comprising 6 out of 13 participants. The different positions of my participants within the institution meant that they engage in DEI work in a wide variety of ways and provided me with valuable and diverse insights and chronologies of the University's DEI practices, their personal experiences and perspectives, and generally a richer portrait and organizational mapping of DEI within the institution. Below, Table 3 displays the racial/ethnic and gender identities as well as job roles of participants within the University.

Participant Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Role in University

Participants	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Role (staff, faculty, student)
1	Black	Female	Faculty
2	Hispanic	Female	Graduate Student
3	Middle Eastern	Female	Faculty
4	Black	Female	Graduate Student
5	Black	Male	Staff
6	Black	Female	Staff
7	White	Female	Staff
8	Black	Female	Staff
9	Black	Female	Undergraduate Student
10	Black	Female	Undergraduate Student
11	White	Female	Faculty
12	White	Female	Staff
13	White/Jewish	Male	Staff

Table 3

As seen in Table 3, the largest demographic category within my sample is Black women. Although this does not reflect the demographics of the University or the city the institution is located within (around 55% white, 35% Hispanic, and about 18% Black), the fact that women of color make up the demographic largest group in my sample is reflective of patterns found in other scholarship on diversity work within higher education (city demographics as reported in United States Census Bureau's webpage for this city). Namely, Ahmed (2012:4) in her book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, notes the frequency with which people of color are targeted and tasked for diversity-related work within higher education, explaining that the "responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed." When a person of color becomes "a diversity person," they are viewed as already embodying the "diversity by providing an institution of whiteness with color" (Ahmed 2012:4). Thus, the fact that so many of the DEI workers I spoke to are women of color is not surprising given the way that people of color are presumed and asked to embody diversity within white spaces.

Interviews: Sampling and Considerations

I primarily utilized purposive sampling in order to recruit participants for this study. My intention was to garner descriptive insights into the experiences and stories of DEI work by those enacting it, and thus did not necessitate a representative sample. Rather, the sampling needed to target categories of actors within the institution that are directly involved in doing the work of diversity, ideally within various positions and locations within the institution to best offer diverse insights and understandings of DEI workers and a richer and clearer understanding of the University's DEI practices. I recruited participants through contacting them via email addresses garnered from the University's formal webpages. More specifically, I spent time going through the University's web pages pertaining to their DEI efforts and reached out to individuals whose information was linked to DEI on these websites. The University's list of members of their university wide DEI Committee and the Diversity & Inclusion Office ultimately provided me with the majority of my participants. I also recruited two undergraduate students through snowball sampling when a staff member I had already interviewed sent me a list of names and emails of undergraduate students involved in DEI work. Accessing the undergraduate student population was a little bit harder than that of staff and faculty, and I was not able to successfully do so until I expanded my network through my already-recruited participants. I would occasionally send follow-up emails to potential participants if I did not hear back from them upon initial contact, but in my experience, most individuals who did not respond to my initial recruitment email did not end up expressing a desire to participate. Despite at times difficulty obtaining participants, I ended up with a sample of participants with a wide range of roles, jobs, and positions within the University.

However, although I wanted to garner a diverse sample in terms of racial and gender identities of participants, I was not able to obtain a sample as diverse as I had hoped. Due to the nature of purposive sampling, I often would send emails to potential participants and never receive responses. My sample is mostly women, with the largest demographic category being Black women. This sample is not demographically representative of the larger University nor the city the institution is located in, but it does align with the reality that people of color are often tasked with doing the work of diversity within higher education (Ahmed 2012). Since the city the University is in is over half white with the largest minority racial group being Hispanic or Latino and the student population is similarly predominately white with the largest minority being Hispanic/Latino, I had originally anticipated more of my sample being Hispanic/Latino. In addition to the uncontrollable nature of who responded to my recruitment emails, I also suspect that I recruited less Hispanic/Latino participants precisely because the University itself and the larger community is comprised of fairly sizable Hispanic/Latino populations. As such, it may be possible that individuals from these communities do not feel as called to do diversity-related work if they do not feel marginalized or “othered” as much as other racial minority groups may feel. Conversely, while people of color are often presumed to embody diversity, existing in spaces that are more heavily Hispanic/Latino may mean that people in the University are less likely to view Hispanic/Latino individuals as “being the diversity” in the institution.

All of the interviews were conducted via Zoom due to geographic limitations. I generated both audio and video recordings of all of the interviews after acquiring verbal consent from my participants. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasted around 60 minutes, with some falling a few minutes under or over. I followed a standardized interview protocol for all of my interviews that I would alter and adapt slightly depending upon the role and position of the participant, the natural flow of conversation, and later on in the data collection process, based upon patterns I was seeing emerge in my data. During the interviews, I jotted down notes of important information from the conversation. After each interview, I wrote down additional notes on the interview along with my personal perception and feelings on the interview to serve as a way to jog my memory and document my own positionality and experiences during the interviewing process. Since my research is funded by the Center for Research and Engagement in Diversity (RED) Seed Grant provided by the University of Georgia’s Franklin College, I was able to provide compensation of $20 to my participants. With the exception of the participants who declined compensation, the form to obtain the payment was emailed to participants after completion of the interview.

Once the interviews were completed, I uploaded them to both a USB drive and Otter.ai, an online transcription service. As a first step, I began the preliminary process of familiarizing myself with the data (Lochmiller 2021:2034). Utilizing an inductive approach to the analysis, I went through and listened to my interviews, adjusting and correcting the automated transcriptions where it was needed. I often annotated and made notes as I listened to the audio transcriptions of anything I found important and relevant to my research questions as well as cross-interview patterns I saw emerging from the data. From the data analysis two primary themes emerged. Adopting an approach grounded in thematic analysis, I initially coded the data "to identify meaningful and potentially relevant passages of text" (Lochmiller 2021:2035). Thematic analysis is well-suited to identifying "patterns within and *across* data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices," making it an appropriate form of analysis to base my analysis of interviews off of (Clarke and Braun 2017:297). As I listened to the 13 audio recordings and read the transcriptions, I would highlight and make note of recurring patterns in what participants were saying. I initially collected the relevant bodies of text containing shared patterns and then combined this text into separate documents for further analysis.

I then began the process of what Lochmiller (2021:2036) calls the interpretative phase of the analysis and moved on to "review, define, and name themes." I began to notice emergent themes in regards to how these DEI workers conceptualized DEI work, motivated themselves to continue this work, and most strikingly, the structural and organizational obstacles they faced and the strategies used to navigate them. As I engaged in conceptualizing the themes found within these collected quotes, two primary themes emerged. It became evident that the Black women in my sample experienced DEI as deeply embodied, which both motivated and created tensions in enacting their DEI work. Secondly, I found that DEI workers experienced university-wide DEI efforts as decentralized and siloed, which brought forth feelings of frustration. However, I also found that DEI workers found ways to navigate this decentralization through the creation of active pockets of collective DEI implementation. Still engaging in production and further fleshing out of the themes, I then wrote memos using the empirical data from my interviews that I had coded as falling under these two emergent themes: *DEI as Embodied Work* and *Decentralization and Pockets of World-Making*. These memos ultimately were expanded into the two empirical chapters (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4) of this thesis.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

According to Reich (2021:576), “qualitative research is qualitative because of the explicit ways that it considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched as core aspects of inquiry.” My findings and understandings have been co-constructed as I chose my research topic, my case, sampled and interviewed participants, and interpreted and framed the findings of this research, thus necessitating a discussion of my own positionality and subjectivity (Reich 2021:576). I chose this particular case and site due to personal networks and connections I have to the institution. As such, my own personal history and social network is what set this project into motion. In many ways this connection was beneficial as I began this project as it allowed me to gain access to the site and some participants easier than if I had no personal ties to this institution. My personal ties also provided me with foundational insider understandings and knowledge of the University, its history, and timeline regarding DEI implementation.

However, having a personal and professional connection to the site necessitated I be conscientious of personal biases and perspectives coloring my approach and interpretation of my findings. Aside from personal ties and networks, my gendered and racialized identities also impacted my interviews and interpretations of my findings. As a white woman studying DEI, I was aware entering this project that the role of race would be significant in terms of not only the theories and literature I utilize, but also in terms of my participants' experiences and my own positionality with them as I conduct interviews. 9 of 13 of my participants identify as people of color, with 6 out of 13 participants identifying as Black women. The work of DEI is largely racialized, with women of color often chosen for roles in DEI work due to the intersection of their identities (Ahmed 2018). Additionally, the work of DEI is deeply embodied for Black women DEI workers, as I explore in this project. As such, my interviews dealt heavily and explicitly with topics of race and racism and my participants often shared deeply personal and often painful personal experiences with me. My positionality as a white woman undoubtedly impacted how participants spoke of race and racism with me, and I found myself extremely aware of my own embodiment as I conducted interviews with those with different racial identities from my own. Approaching my case and site with the understanding that the University is a racialized organization was helpful to me in ensuring that I center the role of race and racism in my analysis of my interviews (Ray 2019). As will be seen in Chapter 3, much of my findings focus upon the deeply racialized and embodied ways that Black women DEI workers experience and orient themselves towards the work of DEI.

Overview

The general overview of my thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 provides context and a review of the literature on bureaucratic reform work, the theory of racialized organizations, and the nature of diversity discourses, and subsequently DEI, within the context of higher education. I situate my own work within the context of this scholarship, synthesizing and building off of them in order to depict the tensions inherent in doing the work of DEI, showing how DEI workers manage to enact reform while navigating bureaucratic obstacles and disempowering forces. In Chapter 3 I use interview data to explain how DEI work is a deeply embodied practice for Black women that cannot be undone, thus offering a partial explanation as to why individuals continue to engage in such oft-disempowering work. I paint a picture of the tension between the bureaucratized work of DEI with this embodied nature of the work, highlighting the ways in which DEI workers navigate, and sometimes reconcile, these tensions often through non-intuitive strategies. In Chapter 4, I present findings related to bureaucratic decentralization and disaggregation and the siloed pockets of DEI work that occurs throughout the institution. I argue that despite decentralization and siloed work, DEI workers still manage to create pockets of effectiveness, building “small worlds” of active and collaborative DEI work that reforms and challenges the institution from within. The conclusion offers a final synthesizing discussion of the nature of DEI as a practice and how various strategies employed by DEI workers allow them to continue to remain motivated and “do good,” despite top-down, bureaucratic forces attempting to disempower and derail substantive reform. The conclusion also addresses the significance and implications of the research and discusses potential future research directions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

"We have to work with each other to navigate institutions whose hostility is masked by diversity: who want our smiling faces rather than our beings, who want us only insofar as we are accommodating." -Sara Ahmed (2018), "Rocking the Boat: Women of Colour as Diversity Workers"

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a synthetic overview of the literature and theoretical contributions of scholars that my project builds upon and utilizes in understanding and framing my own case and empirical findings. The literatures on diversity, DEI, reform work, and racialized organizations offer conceptual contributions useful to understanding my own case study of DEI work within the context of higher education. First, I provide a brief history of the rise of diversity and its entrance into the space of higher education. Next, I review the scholarship on reform work within bureaucratic settings, which offers a useful framework for answering my research questions: What happens when radical ideas and movements enter into bureaucracies and organizations? How do individuals remain motivated to do reform work and maintain optimism? How do reformers do the work within bureaucracies and organizations? Then, this chapter discusses Victor Ray's (2019) concept of racialized organizations in order to conceptualize the University in this study as inherently and systemically racist. Lastly, I synthesize how these frameworks, concepts, and theories provide valuable analytical tools for a more holistic understanding and lens on DEI work occurring within this particular University.

Diversity Discourses within Higher Education

The rise of DEI in institutional spaces arises directly out of the historical legacies of previous inclusion-based efforts, namely that of Civil Rights legislation, affirmative action, and diversity. The road that leads to the present-day focus on DEI began with Civil Rights legislation in the 1960's, namely President Kennedy's signing of Executive Order 10925 that affirmed "the government's commitment to equal opportunity for all persons qualified to work" (Portocarrero and Carter 2022:3). However, this era of Civil Rights legislation left the definition and understanding of affirmative action vague and unclear, allowing for "equal opportunity experts" to fill this gap. Affirmative action throughout the 1960's and 1970's became widespread in corporate spaces until the Reagan administration "reduced government involvement in the private sector, including in affirmative action initiatives" (Portocarrero and Carter 2022:3). Affirmative action under Reagan's administration sustained attempts to undermine it, with opponents of affirmative action perceiving it as consisting of "preferential treatment, quotas, and reverse discrimination" (Herring and Henderson 2012:630; Portocarrero and Carter 2022). Thus, out of a period of "legal ambiguity and controversy over affirmative action" arose a rearticulation of inclusion initiatives that operated as a neoliberal attempt at addressing matters of inclusion in a way that did not evoke the intense controversies and pushback as affirmative action (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1611; Herring and Henderson 2012; Portocarrero and Carter 2022).

During the Reagan administration, equal opportunity experienced a rhetorical shift or "rhetoric of justification," centered on the idea that a diverse workforce is more beneficial to a company than a non-diverse one, encouraging a view of diversity as a resource (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Portocarrero and Carter 2022:4). Due to diversity's function in expanding issues of inclusion beyond a focus on racially minoritized groups to a broader focus on accommodating groups not traditionally perceived as disadvantaged, the term quickly became a widely used yet ambiguously defined concept embraced by institutions seeking to give off the appearance of investment in racial inclusion and diversification efforts (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Herring and Henderson 2011:630). Additionally, Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita (2001:1612, 1631) also point to *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century* (1987), as serving "as a catalyst for the institutionalization of diversity rhetoric due to its prediction of changes to the American workforce. Diversity initiatives within organizations are frequently decoupled from affirmative action's original purpose: to end discrimination (Portocarrero and Carter 2022:4). Due to its palatability for privileged groups and versatility that accompanies its ambiguous meanings, diversity has become integrated into the normative practices of organizations, especially institutions of higher education. Although affirmative action within spaces of higher education initially increased the presence of students of color, higher education followed the same route as corporate organizations throughout the 1980's, with challenges to "affirmative action limiting the presence of students of color in top universities," and resulting ultimately in an embrace of diversity rhetoric (Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2020:287-8). The appearance of diversity, not numerical reality, became of the utmost importance for universities, with it operating as a crucial piece of symbolic capital and a legitimizing tool for universities in order to compete with each other and improve their image, especially for prospective students (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Holland and Ford 2021; Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen 2020:287-8).

"Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk'" by Bell and Hartmann (2007:910) notes how diversity discourse "conflates, confuses, and obscures the deeper structural roots and consequences of diversity," drawing a parallel from this phenomenon to that of colorblind rhetoric in which people can engage shallowly with race, but ignore deeper structural origins and consequences. They found that diversity discourse tends to be rooted within a white normative perspective, appealing to ideals of cultural assimilation (Bell and Hartmann 2007:908-9). Both Bell and Hartmann (2007) Herring and Henderson (2012) point to the ways in which diversity creates the acknowledgement of an "other," but fails to acknowledge the impact, turning a colorblind cheek to issues of racism and inequality. This, the rise of diversity aligns with the rise of colorblind racism adopted in the post-Civil Rights era that allows individuals and institutions to fit neo-liberal ideals while overlooking substantive issues of racism and structural inequalities (Bell and Hartmann 2007:905). In their discussion of colorblind racism, Bonilla–Silva and Dietrich (2011:196) note how "color-blind racism permeates" the educational system due to higher education's power in maintaining racial hierarchies, promoting ideologies of meritocracy, and allowing colorblind ideologies to permeate attitudes and services within universities. Diversity's rise in popularity in a post-Civil Rights, neoliberal, colorblind social world makes it a useful tool for assisting in the spread of colorblind ideologies throughout higher education.

This embrace of an often-colorblind ideal of diversity became institutionalized in spaces of higher education as it integrated into everyday discourses. Holland and Ford (2021) highlight how diversity has come to operate as a form of symbolic capital within the field of higher education. They found that the marketing and recruiting efforts to maintain and increase symbolic capital through diversity are driven by the institutional habitus of colleges and universities" (Holland and Ford 2021:6). Notably, they found that the ways universities market diversity and wield it as symbolic capital varies across social positions within the field of higher education. Elite universities are more likely to represent the ethno-racial composition of their student bodies on their websites, despite tending to have smaller proportions of minority populations, "add in international students to representations of diversity, and omit white students" from such representations. Meanwhile, less elite universities utilize this capital differently: "they are less likely to represent their diversity through their websites," though they tend to be more diverse in composition, "they do not tend to add in international students or omit white students in their representations of diversity" (Holland and Ford 2021:22). Overall, displays of diversity for elite institutions increase the universities' symbolic capital. However, for less elite universities, their different position in the field means that diversity does not serve as an increase in capital. Rather, such institutions may be concerned with Social Blackening that indicates less academic excellence (Holland and Ford 2021). Regardless, according to Holland and Ford (2021:23), universities of varying selectivity all operate from a White Habitus that assumes a white audience and articulates diversity as "white versus nonwhite."

Berrey (2015) offers a case study of one of these elite universities, the University of Michigan, that uses diversity as a form of symbolic capital and legitimizing tool. Berrey (2015) explains that universities such as the University of Michigan view students of color important to establishing legitimacy, a finding also present in the work of Holland and Ford (2021), mentioned above. Aligning with the historical timeline laid out by Herring and Henderson (2012), the University of Michigan embraced diversity in the period that began to restrict affirmative action within higher education. Throughout the 1980's, the University of Michigan became more selective and heterogeneous: this was the period that the shift from affirmative action to diversity occurred. According to Berrey (2015), the school began framing race in terms of diversity to signal compliance with *Bakke*, a 1978 Supreme Court ruling in which Allan

Bakke, a white man who was twice rejected from the University of California-Davis "legally challenged the university's program that set aside sixteen seats for racial minority students" (Berrey 2015:30). Notably, Justice Lewis Powell objected to the university's policy, but agreed that affirmative action is acceptable on certain occasions, framing his defense using diversity rhetoric. Thus, universities could consider race in admissions if race/ethnicity was treated "as a "plus" factor and did so with the objective of diversity" (Berrey 2015:31). This was the United States "government's first major endorsement of diversity in terms of a legal concept and race consideration based upon diversity's utilitarian benefits (Berrey 2015:31). During this shift, diversity was discussed as "an attribute of the student body, a shared value, and a purposeful organizational objective" (Berrey 2015:71). Diversity became more than just formal jargon: through statistics, imagery, and narratives, it became inherent to campus culture. By invoking diversity, the University of Michigan made it a core feature of the institution necessary for a successful college. Berrey (2015) states that this shift led to a discourse of pluralism on campus and emphasized cultural difference while also valorizing a shared common student archetype as bright, motivated, and studious. As such, the diversity discourse at the University of Michigan ignored structural inequalities and problematic differences between white students and students of color: "They were ambiguous, if not deceitful, regarding what the university was actually doing to facilitate the incorporation of students of color" (Berrey 2015:77). Although administrators made a more heterogeneous campus population, the issues faced by minority students once they arrived went under-addressed (Berrey 2015:76-77).

Berrey (2015) concludes from her case study that the political and legal contention surrounding affirmative action and race-conscious policies "excluded the voices of those who wanted to assert radical claims to equality and integration," thus denigrating more radical goals

(2015:122). She asserts that Michigan's diversity push was and remains selectively inclusive by recruiting minorities to meet market demands and gain legitimacy. While their policies did facilitate some changes in the makeup of the student body and defend elements of diversity in the courts, it fundamentally did not change the system: their "drive for diversity reinforced the hegemony of elite status competition and credentialing" (Berrey 2015:122). The school's framing of diversity as beneficial to all students, even white ones, "reinforced white students' sense of entitlement and absolved them of any complicity in racial inequality." Thus, diversity discourses embraced by universities often serve to legitimize the institution, making it appear inclusive and diverse while realities of structural racism and inequality remain under addressed (Berrey 2015; Holland and Ford 2021).

Scholarship on diversity practices have pointed to how universities utilize diversity as "a happy sign of the overcoming of exclusion" and as a way to change *perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations*" (Ahmed 2012:153; 34). In agreement with Berrey (2015) and Holland and Ford (2021) that diversity serves as a form of symbolic capital for universities, Ahmed (2012) additionally provides insights into the realities of doing diversity for diversity practitioners themselves. Namely, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* by Ahmed (2012) offers understanding into the obstacles and challenges of doing diversity, experiences described as hitting "brick walls." This ethnographic account of the on-the-ground realities of diversity within higher education provides a look inside universities themselves, providing insights into what universities seek to get out of diversity, what it does in these spaces, and importantly, how institutional whiteness and racism blocks diversity practitioners' abilities to do the work of diversity (Ahmed 2012).

This book and other scholarship on diversity establish how doing the work of diversity within bureaucratic spaces is often disempowering, frustrating work constrained and by institutional forces (Ahmed 2012; Ahmed 2018; Swan and Fox 2010). For Ahmed (2012), diversity becomes the "institutional duty" of people of color within the organization to not dwell upon the negative realities of racism. She found that doing antiracist work, or even merely speaking explicitly on racism, within the institution feels like hitting a brick wall: bringing these issues up is perceived as motivated by anger and creating tension (Ahmed 2012:157). Diversity practitioners are silenced and constrained as the institution bars the over mention of racism, as it "is treated as a breach in the happy image of diversity;" universities utilize diversity as "a happy sign of the overcoming of exclusion" (Ahmed 2012:153).Thus, the university constrains explicit acknowledgement and addressment of racism within the institution. For Ahmed (2012:111), diversity practitioners are often forced to engage with the "happy talk" of diversity, resulting in work that consists of hitting metaphorical brick walls constraining explicit addressment of racism.

In "Rocking the Boat: Women of Colour as Diversity Workers," Ahmed (2018:333) continues to explain the difficulties of diversity work for women of color. She notes that women of color "often come to embody the promise of inclusion within universities," a promise that necessitates labor on the part of these women. Thus, women of color must not only perform the "happy talk" of diversity, they become a symbol of it, and this happy performance may hide both organizational failure and diversity workers' experiences of the failure (Ahmed 2018:333). Women of color are tasked with ticking the boxes of diversity work with their own physicality, necessitating additional work (Ahmed 2018:335). Women of color diversity workers are constrained by the obligation to do diversity "right," and if they fail to do so, they "become a problem" (Ahmed 2018:337-8). Thus, women of color are constrained by being expected to not "rock the boat" of diversity (Ahmed 2018:339).

Similarly, Swan and Fox (2010:569) also point to how racial minorities are seen as embodying diversity. They acknowledge how other scholarship on diversity sees the "political agenda of diversity" as being co-opted via "professionalization and managerialization," thus deradicalizing it (Swan and Fox 2010:571-572). They additionally note how some scholars view management knowledge, especially human resource management, as compromising diversity and in opposition to activist-oriented approaches (Swan and Fox 2010:572). In addition to the constraints of embodiment and professionalization, the authors also note how the word diversity can be constraining for diversity workers at times (Swan and Fox 2010:578). However, while noting various organizational constraints on diversity work, the authors also highlight the ways diversity workers enact micro-political strategies to resist deradicalizing forces, thus nuancing the understanding of diversity work as exclusively constraining and disempowering.

However, despite diversity's popularity throughout the early 1990's in particular, it has since declined, much like the inclusion efforts before it (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1626). Diversity over time became watered down, as the concept expanded to include "a wide array of characteristics…Diversity of thought, lifestyle, culture, dress, and numerous other attributes appear on a par with diversity of sex and race" (Herring and Henderson 2011; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1590-1). After diversity rhetoric's decline after its preeminence in the early 1990's, the language of DEI along with a set of practices and policies arose in institutional spaces as a response to the watering-down of the concept of diversity. By around the mid-2010's, scholarship was being conducted that explicitly acknowledged and focused on DEI practices and policies (Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma 2023). Thus, DEI arose as the newest iteration of inclusion and diversity efforts in a long lineage of inclusion practices and policies intended as corrective of prior versions. In a study published in 2020, Barnett (2020:20-1) notes how "Many higher education institutions in the United States (US), particularly" historically white and predominately white institutions, "recognise diversity, equity and inclusion as essential to their institutional missions, creating" departments as well as programs committed to DEI.

Nevertheless, though there is less literature specifically on DEI, given its recent origin, research still suggests some of the critiques leveled against diversity rhetoric apply to DEI as well, in particular the findings that doing diversity and DEI-based labor within bureaucratic contexts is disempowering and exasperating. Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma's (2023:1221) study on racialized equity labor (REL), highlights how those doing REL, which includes DEI work, often took on additional labor at the expense of "their time, well-being, or career development." They also emphasize how diversity "can be leveraged…in ways that work against addressing systemic racial disparities," a common critique against diversity in earlier scholarship that pointed to the ways in which diversity functions as a legitimizing force for universities, often failing to address systemic inequalities (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma 2023:1220; Holland and Ford 2021). Given that universities continue to be inherently not race-neutral structures, it is unsurprising that in the period of DEI practices and policies "'diversity regimes' characterized by benign commitments to individual-level differences and inclusion" have still been found to exist within spaces of higher education (Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma 2023:1214).

I build upon the understanding that DEI labor is often disempowering and difficult in this project (Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma 2023). However, my study also departs from this understanding, as I found that while the participants in this study indeed find DEI work to be disempowering, exhausting, and discouraging, they also create and seek out motivation and innovative strategies that allow them to continue on with reform work in the face of and despite bureaucratic obstacles and forces. Additionally, the existing literature provides descriptions of the ways bureaucracies wield diversity efforts and racialized equity labor (REL) and the experiences of those tasked with implementing it. However, the experiences of diversity workers provided do not so explicitly lay out the tensions existing between the pockets of effectiveness through which diversity-centered work, in this case DEI implementation, occurs on the ground and the bureaucratic forces and structures the workers have to navigate in order to continue doing the work. I argue that many DEI workers are able to build worlds of collaborative DEI implementation and use the deeply embodied nature of the work in order to do good despite, and in the face of, navigating tensions and disempowering forces that come along with doing radical work within a bureaucratic space.

The Politics of Bureaucratic Reform

In addition to the foundational understandings found within the literature on diversity as well as DEI, the broader body of literature focusing on reform work within bureaucratic contexts brings forth a comprehensive offering of insights regarding the mechanisms and on-the-ground realities at play in institutional reform work. Scholarship that focuses upon reform, broadly defined, occurring within bureaucracies speaks in a myriad of ways to questions underlying and framing my own thesis: What happens when radical ideas and movements enter into bureaucracies and organizations? How do individuals remain motivated to do reform work and maintain optimism? How do reformers do the work within bureaucracies and organizations?

Similar to the consensus within the DEI literature, much of the reform literature notes the preeminence of deradicalizing and co-opting forces that take hold once radical ideas and movements shift into bureaucratic spaces (Sims 2017; Sweet 2021; Meyerson and Scully; Swan and Fox 2010). Scholarship attributes these processes of deradicalization and co-optation to various sources and causes. Sims (2017:108) points out how “outsized expectations” placed upon reformers and the limited means they are provided with to do their work limits the radical transformations possible. He also describes how unanticipated blindspots and divisions crop up once reform enters the bureaucratic space, resulting in “rote and scripted behavior,” instead of radical change (Sims 2017:165). Thus, despite radical goals, attempts at reform fell victim to rationalizing forces of conventional operations of bureaucracy. In her discussion of how women who survive domestic violence go through a process of becoming survivors and good victims, Sweet (2021) also notes how radical movements become tempered upon entrance into bureaucracy, this time the state. According to Sweet (2021:36-8), deradicalization occurred because feminist had to invoke “therapeutic expertise” for their movement in order to appeal to policy-makers and obtain state funding. The adoption of conservative discourses in order to enter the state helped anti-violence workers reach their goals, but at the cost of political radicalism (Sweet 2021:54).

Meyerson and Scully (1995) in their discussion of tempered radicals, individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations, but are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of the organization,” map out what occurs when radicals within bureaucracies attempt to enact reform while their ideologies collide with bureaucratic goals. They note how tempered radicals are placed in the difficult position of having dual-identities and speaking to multiple audiences, the difficulty of which may lead to full assimilation into the organization (Meyerson and Scully 1995:590). Similar to what Sims (2017) points out, reformers are often put into challenging positions of balancing radical reform with bureaucratic expectations, leading to assimilation, deferring of radical goals, and cooptation. Often to garner trust, radicals defer more radical goals. Additionally, the longer activists remain in bureaucracies without working towards external movements and ideas, the ability to resist cooptation decreases (Meyerson and Scully 1995:593). Swan and Fox (2010:571-572; 578) also acknowledge how professionalizing and manageralizing forces, as well as the ways in which the language of diversity "could attract certain types of vocabularies and ignore others," can result in deradicalization of diversity work. Thus, according to the scholarship on reform within bureaucracies, deradicalization and cooptation often seem to occur due to the difficulties placed upon reformers to balance radical goals with limited resources and bureaucratic standards, as well as the pressures and needs to adopt certain bureaucratic rhetorics, frameworks, and ways of doing as a means to obtain necessary resources and to ease challenges that come with attempting and achieving reform. The cost of being able to access certain resources and the benefits of entering bureaucracy seem to come at the cost of radical activism and autonomy from managerial and rationalizing mechanisms.

However, of the works that speak to matters of deradicalization and cooptation, most also bring forth arguments claiming that reformers within bureaucracies enact particular strategies in order to "do good," while still managing to operate within the bureaucracies' limits (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Swan and Fox 2010; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017). Thus, the authors of these works acknowledge the derailing and deradicalizing nature of doing reform within institutions, but also acknowledge the agency and strategies used by reformers to navigate and pushback against such forces. Operating with a similar orientation, my work seeks to nuance the already-established understanding that DEI work is disempowering and constrained within the context of the institution. While forces of disempowerment and co-optation are in fact occurring within the University in regards to DEI, reformers have certain embodied connections and seemingly counterintuitive strategies for navigating the tensions and challenges that accompany their reform work.

The reform literature is helpful in providing my research by speaking to the oft-informal politics of every reform work and the accompanying strategies and micro-politics of resistance to bureaucratic deradicalization and cooptation. These works highlight a tension between reformers' motivations and ways of "doing good," and the bureaucratic limitations and complex forces of deradicalization and cooptation, speaking to broader themes of power and resistance in the everyday enactment of politics. My research focuses on the everyday politics of reform work and the tensions inherent in enacting reform within the context of bureaucracies, showing how DEI workers constantly navigate between the rationalizing forces of bureaucracy and their own affective ties to the work, thus enacting strategies of everyday resistance and institutional change. Through this lens of reform work as entailing agency and strategic, micro-political forms of resistance in the face of rationalizing forces, this body of literature offers a lens through which to view DEI workers' experiences with DEI as a constant navigation of tensions in which they affectively and strategically commit themselves to their personal definition of "doing good" within the context of the University. "Doing good," a phrase found in other literatures within the context of the politics of NGOs, is applied here to mean enacting and implementing any DEI-related practices and changes that the individual DEI workers in this study perceive as beneficial, impactful in a positive way, and aligned with their personal perceptions and ideals of how DEI work should operate. What it means to "do good" and accomplish this good work may look different for each DEI worker, and the strategies used to achieve this ideal of "good" may also vary.

Racialized Organizations

While scholarship on reform work within bureaucratic contexts offers insight into what obstacles, motivations, and mechanisms that are at play when individuals go about "doing good" within organizations, they often lack an explicit acknowledgement of the systemically racist nature of the environments in which reform work is being enacted. However, for this project I am pulling from Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations to operate with the understanding that the University being analyzed in this research is an inherently and systemically racialized organization. In his work, "A Theory of Racialized Organizations," Ray (2019) argues that that organizations are not race-neutral structures, but rather that race is inherently embedded into them. He proposes that the racialized organizations do four things in particular: they "enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups," they legitimate unequal distribution of resources, within organizations whiteness functions as a credential, and the process of decoupling formal rules from practice is racialized in nature (Ray 2019:26). A particularly notable aspect of this theory of racialized organizations for the context of my research is the way in which whiteness operates as a credential, providing "access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies, and expanding White agency" (Ray 2019:41). In other words, universities appear race-neutral while in actuality work in the interest of whites at the expense of nonwhites (Ray 2019:41). Hand-in-hand with whiteness functioning as a credential is the understanding of the ways in which bureaucratic mechanisms and forces are intrinsically racialized. According to Ray (2019:26), the decoupling of formal rules from practice within organizations is not simply a neutral mechanism of bureaucratic structures. Rather, decoupling is itself a racialized process.

Approaching my case study with this framework, I analyze and examine the University as a structure systematically designed to favor whiteness while presenting as racially neutral. Ray's (2019:42) discussion of the racialized decoupling is particularly pertinent to this research as it emphasizes how "Racialized organizations often decouple formal commitments to equity, access, and inclusion from policies and practices that reinforce, or at least do not challenge, existing racial hierarchies." My work operates with the foundational understanding DEI work as disempowering and riddled with bureaucratic obstacles, thus possessing a theoretical and empirical understanding of the ways in which the University's formal DEI policies and commitments decouple from actual implementation and practice in particular, racialized ways (Ahmed 2009; Ahmed 2012; Swan and Fox 2010). Although informed by the literature on bureaucratic reform and its discussions of deradicalization, cooptation, and resistance, this project couples this orientation with the acknowledgement that the University in which DEI work is being implemented is a racialized organization in which racism is structurally *embedded* within the institution, shaping all facets of its operation, and is not merely an additive force of oppression that happens to also exist within the scope of the University.

Conclusion: Doing DEI

I approach my case by building on the scholarship reviewed here. More specifically, I understand the work of DEI as a historical descendent of affirmative action as well as a neoliberal panacea that performs inclusion and often functions as a legitimizing tool for an inherently racialized organization: the University. Thus, the DEI work the participants of my study are implementing occurs within the context of a structurally racist institution that operates in such a way that credentials whiteness while appearing racially-neutral and decoupling DEI practices from formal commitments that the University touts in an effort to perform inclusion.

With the understanding that the University is a racialized organization, the next chapter proceeds to discuss how Black women DEI workers experience DEI in an inherently and explicitly racialized, embodied way. I explicate how DEI is an embodied practice for Black women involved in DEI work, and how this deeply affective and corporeal experience of DEI motivates these women in their work, but also puts them in a difficult position in tension with the bureaucratized side of DEI work. I then show how these Black women DEI workers experience these tensions and the ways in which they strategically navigate and manage them in order to continue to implement DEI work as a simultaneously embodied and bureaucratized practice.

CHAPTER 3

DEI as Embodied Work

"You are the point where the lines meet. A meeting point becomes a sore point."

-Sara Ahmed (2009), "Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists,"

(2009)

Introduction

"Why am I feeling like I'm hitting my head up against a brick wall? And that's because I think at times, I was putting 90% of my efforts towards dismantling systems that have been here." A Black woman staff member of the University who lives a busy existence as the director of various DEI-related efforts, told me offering a candid description of how it feels to be engaged in DEI work within the University. For her, DEI work entails trying to fight and dismantle systemic oppression that she had no role in erecting, systems of oppression well-beyond the capabilities of one individual to dismantle. Similar sentiments are found across the literature on DEI work, making evident that DEI work is often experienced as emotionally taxing, deradicalizing, and disempowering work (Ahmed 2009; Ahmed 2012; Swan and Fox 2010). Strikingly, she used almost the same phrase to describe the disempowering nature of DEI work that also appears in Ahmed's (2012:26) interviews with diversity practitioners: "banging your head against a brick wall." Evidently, the disempowering reality of feeling as if you are constantly hitting against a brick wall is a widely shared experience across contexts for those engaged in the work of DEI.

The difficulties and obstacles that accompany diversity work noted by other scholars of diversity and DEI were evident throughout my interviews but surfaced in especially poignant and overt ways during my interviews with Black women engaged in the work of DEI. Stories of “brick walls,” institutional obstacles, and interpersonal challenges arose with a recurring frequency, accompanied with earnest expressions of frustration and anger. These downsides and challenges linked to DEI work were expressed amongst Black women within the roles of student, faculty, and staff alike, all within different locations within the University. A Black woman student in her first year of her undergraduate studies already had stories of disempowerment and institutional blockages despite being the youngest person that I spoke to throughout my interviews. During the course of our conversation, she mentioned her involvement in a predominately white sorority as their Director of Inclusion. She then proceeded to tell me about a discouraging instance in which she received a meager $100 budget for DEI-related events she was expected to plan and implement:

> Okay, so I'm Director of Inclusion in my sorority…But in my sorority, we had a big budget, and Sisterhood has like $3,000 dollars or $5,000 dollars and New Member has like $20,000 dollars. I get my budget and it's only $100 dollars. I'm just like, what? Like, I can't do anything with this.

This scant budget, which according to the previous DEI Chair, is a fifty dollar increase from the prior year, discouraged her and made her question being a part of a sorority where “not that many people look like” her. Meanwhile, my interview with a Black woman faculty member and one of the inaugural members of the university-wide DEI committee, unknowingly set a precedent for a recurring theme throughout my interviews: feelings of frustration and anger as predominant emotions arising through DEI work. In her particular case, she cited feeling frustrated when people will not listen to her, “won’t listen carefully” when she is merely trying to go about doing her DEI-related duties. A Black woman staff member working in human resources articulated the disempowering, emotionally draining nature DEI work eloquently, offering a holistic expansion upon these experiences expressed by others, describing the physical and emotional exhaustion of doing what she dubbed “the full cycle of DEI work:”

> As someone who does that full cycle of DEI work from discovery to creation, to implementation, I'm exhausted. And there are days, depending on the work that I'm doing, if I've done a particularly long education session, or it's been a particularly taxing or emotional education session, where I literally have to be like, okay, I'm gonna go lay down now. Like, that's it, that's all I've got today fully tapped out. I'll see you tomorrow.

These vignettes and examples offer a glimpse into the disempowering and obstacle-ridden reality of doing DEI. Regardless of one’s position within the University, participants find themselves hitting up against bureaucratic brick walls.

Yet, as the scholarly literature and my data indicate, people continue to do the work of DEI even while constantly confronting disempowering realities. Why, despite insufficient funds, resistance from others, emotional and physical exhaustion, and brick wall after brick wall, do DEI workers carry on with enacting reform? As I analyzed my data, a theme emerged across numerous interviews that speaks to this question: DEI workers continue the work due to DEI work being a deeply and intimately embodied practice for DEI workers that neither them, other individuals, nor institutional forces are able to undo. Enactment of DEI reform is profoundly entangled with DEI workers’ identities, life experiences, and emotions in ways that cannot be entirely bureaucratized.

Embodiment

The Black women in my study spoke about their experiences and work within DEI in terms of embodiment, as DEI being integrally intertwined with their interpersonal lives, self-perceptions, and corporeal existences. Namely, many of the Black women interviewed, who make up around 46% of the sample, speak at length about the deeply embodied nature of their work. For these participants, the boundaries between their formal work, personal identities, and passions are blurred and overlapping. Even while there is acknowledgement of the bureaucratized, strategic side of DEI work, the participants' descriptions and sentiments towards their work speak to a deeper embodiment that transcends, and even conflicts with, the institutionalized aspects of the work.

The blurred boundaries between the formal work and embodiment are explicitly laid out by a Black woman graduate student working towards her doctorate degree. As the only graduate assistant for the University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, she provided candid insights into the blurred boundaries between DEI as a profession and as an embodied experience when she noted: "I am DEI, I'm a Black woman. So I think that a lot of the work that I'm doing, I don't even consider it work because it's my daily life." For this participant, there is no delineation between her formal DEI work and her everyday, lived experience. Relatedly, the faculty member who served as an initial member of the University DEI committee spoke of the embodied nature of the work in terms of her identity as a Black woman and mere existence within the institution operating as a form of DEI work even outside the scope of her formal involvement in the work. As a faculty member in a humanities department, her identity and area of academic expertise come into play in how she experiences the embodied nature of DEI work:

> …by virtue of being a Black woman who teaches European history. I also knew, you know it's been, ... the history of my professional experience, that I already disrupt people's perceptions, right? Because I can't tell you how many times on this campus and elsewhere, the assumption is that when I say oh, I teach history, the assumption is I teach African American history. So I've learned to say, very quickly, I teach *European* [emphasis added] history. And then often people are like, "I don't know what to do with that." You know? So I guess what I'm saying is that this work, if you think about my person in regards to what I teach, and how I teach, in that sort of indirect way, I guess I've always been involved a little bit in DEI work in in terms of compelling people to think differently about what it is a Black person or any other person can do. Or should do.

In her particular case, being a Black woman who teaches European history challenges and upends people at this predominantly white institution's expectations, which are that she teaches African American history. By being a Black woman teaching in a subject area people at this University do not expect of a Black woman, her embodied existence, as she puts it, compels people on this University's campus to think differently about what a Black individual, or anyone, can do. She describes her physical personhood and what and how she teaches as indirectly constituting a form of DEI work. Being a Black woman teaching European history is to do DEI as her mere existence challenges people's perceptions of what a Black woman can do. Thus, DEI work is not only deeply tied to her identity as a Black woman, but it is so embodied that her existence in her particular identity and career operates as a form of doing DEI work even when she is not actively implementing it through formal labor.

This faculty member also articulated this embodied nature of the work through a discussion of how their racialized, gendered identities operate as perceived qualifications for being the "right" candidate to do formal DEI work. When asked what she thought made her the right choice for her DEI roles in the institution, she pointed to her identity as a Black woman as a primary reason for why the Provost selected her for her formal DEI job in the institution:

> I don't think I'm right for DEI work, broadly speaking, but on this campus at that moment, I think I was the right person because of my work around and with and through the curriculum…And quite honestly, because I'm a person of color. Right? .... I mean, I understand that's the way it works. You want to have in that, especially the inaugural role, you want that person not to be a white person.

The staff member who offered the description of hitting a brick wall at the beginning of this chapter expressed a similar sentiment in regards to her identity operating as a qualification to do the work of DEI. In response to being asked the same question regarding what makes her the right person to do the work, she replied:

> I feel like I'm the right person to do the work because of my lived experiences as a Black woman who has lived DEI , and I'm going to add the SJ which stands for social justice, right? I've lived that for 43 years.

For her, the primary qualification to do the work of DEI is her own lived experiences as a Black woman for 43 years. Although both this faculty member and staff member also mentioned qualifications in terms of education and professional work experiences in their interviews as well, their embodied existences as Black women are acknowledged by themselves, and in the case of the faculty member of a humanities department, the person electing them to this work, as qualifications to do the work of DEI. As a Black woman, daily life is to do DEI.

However, the embodied nature for this staff member transcends her perceptions of qualifications, and later into the interview she described her embodied ties to the work in a more transcendental and spiritual sense, describing the work in terms of a spiritually-ordained calling. She is a Black woman and staff member who works as the head of various DEI-related entities within the University and described herself as having been in the space of DEI work within higher education since 1998. In discussing her personal motivations in doing the work, she identified herself as a “change agent” whose motivation to enact change is in her DNA:

> …it's in my DNA and my ancestors fought too hard for change to happen. So I can't sit idly by and say change has arrived. And there's no more work to be done. I'm motivated by my ancestors. I'm motivated by my own story and experience. And I'm motivated to leave the world better than I found it.

Here, this staff member described her motivations for doing DEI work in both very corporeal and transcendental terms. Identifying herself as a “change agent,” she stated that this motivation and desire to enact change is in her physically, within her DNA. She also alluded to her ancestors, describing how they fought too hard for change for her to be able to sit complacently and not also fight for change. Motivations to do DEI work is embodied in a material sense of the word, but also through identification with her ancestors, personal story, and experiences. Continuing to describe her personal connection to DEI work, she said:

> …I cannot escape who I am when I get up every morning. And I will also say the personal that ties me to this work is because I was called to it. It's my purpose. I didn't go into it wanting it to be, I thought I was going to be on television. like I'm a broadcast radio, television and film major from undergrad, I thought I was going to be doing that. And God said otherwise. So I stepped into my purpose.

Citing the literal embodiment of DEI in the sense of her personal identity, she went on to describe her calling to the work, explaining that her original career goals shifted due to God saying it was not her path. For her, DEI work transcends a career, and is in fact a divinely ordained life's purpose that she chose to follow. Despite the difficulties she acknowledged as implicit to doing this work, her deeply personal, embodied connection has helped motivate her throughout a career in DEI within higher education for over twenty years.

This same staff member also experiences the embodied nature of the work in other ways outside of qualifications and divine calling, providing an example of the double-edged nature of embodied practices. During our interview, she shared with me an experience she cites as the moment she realized that DEI work was her calling. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, she walked into a class where she was the only person that looked like her. Before she could even say a word, the professor said, "...you may want to switch out of this class." The professor who said this to her was a white male and in her words, he said this to her because he "saw that I was the only person of color in the room and basically said, you probably should switch out of this class." This professor dictated her worth and deemed her incapable of handling this course simply upon the basis of her identity as a person of color in an otherwise white room. Although she remained in the class, she described how this experience "cracked her." She spoke of this experience as being a pivotal moment that motivates her to ensure no one else ever is made to feel the same way.

When discussing this experience, she went on to further elaborate upon the burdens of carrying both her race and gender upon her both within the context of this specific instance, but in the realm of DEI work more broadly:

> I think that people don't understand when you're doing this work and you're also a part of the community, it's double jeopardy. It's double jeopardy. Because it's almost like offering yourself triage. Like I'm trying to help students, faculty and staff feel a sense of belonging as a minoritized group, but I'm also maybe wounded. It's like, it's trying to lead while bleeding is what I've said to people before. I'm leading and supporting an advocacy of others while I'm also bleeding.

Here, she spoke to the difficulties that come with a deeply embodied work and calling. During our discussion of the experience in undergrad, she explained: “I'm a Black woman. I'm not just a woman. And I'm not just Black. So that's already a challenge in and of itself. But then I had to carry the weight of not just my race, but my gender on me.” In our conversation she pointed out the unique burdens that accompany existing as a Black woman, and in the case of DEI work, the “double jeopardy” that comes with trying to help people while you yourself are a part of the same community. Although the embodied nature of DEI work can operate as a qualifying mechanism and a motivating force, it also brings forth the affective and deeply personal challenges of trying to do the work as a Black woman. As this particular staff member puts it, doing DEI as an embodied practice means that you are leading others while bleeding.

These quotes from Black women doing the work of DEI indicate that they experience DEI work as inherently embodied. The embodiment of DEI work for these participants serves as a force keeping DEI workers in the work despite obstacles, challenges, and resistance. It is much harder to step away from the work or undo the practice when it is integrally connected to one’s personal identity, particularly in terms of the intersection of race and gender for Black women.

DEI work transcends the formal job and work within the institution, instead acting as an integral part of their daily lives, with one participant articulating it as a divine calling. DEI work cannot be undone or halted by brick walls, because these participants' identities, as Black women in their particular roles within the institution, are doing the work of DEI even when they are not conscientiously engaged in the formal practice. However, as the staff member's story of the double jeopardy of doing DEI work as a Black woman highlights, while the embodied nature of the work keeps participants continuously engaged in the work, it also poses tensions with the bureaucratized setting of the University and the accompanying institutionalized DEI work they are tasked with. Deeply embodied work is deeply felt work, an affective reality oftentimes at odds with the realities of bureaucratic reform work. The embodiment of DEI work does not exist in a vacuum separate from the bureaucratic power of the University, but rather, "power operates on and through bodies and the meanings attached to bodies" (Fotaki and Pullen 2019:5). However, the tensions that exist between the embodied practice of DEI and bureaucratic rationalization is not a universal experience, but rather they impact Black women in ways that they do not for other DEI workers.

The deeply embodied nature of DEI work and the bureaucratic tensions that accompany it are undeniably racialized experiences that are experiences that cannot be undone or escaped by the Black women doing much of this work in the University. A white woman faculty member noted the difficulties of the work, but emphasized the higher personal and professional costs faced by colleagues of color in doing DEI:

> I would say the work is really hard. And it's really emotional for a lot of people. And it comes at a cost. I've watched people's careers stagnate. I've seen people change jobs, taking sort of lesser jobs to try to take care of themselves. But I've watched a lot of my colleagues struggle with major illness, because um I think, the way it impacts our lives. And I think those who are doing the work for Brown and Black pay a higher cost for that, because they both are facing the kind of struggles of doing the work…So I, you know,

> applaud everyone who's doing the work. But I also recognize that white people who are doing the work have it a heck of a lot easier than those who are Brown and Black, who are facing even more painful and raw kinds of judgment and rejection from their own communities when they don't see the work happening as quickly as it needs to.

Here, she acknowledged that DEI work in general is hard and comes at emotional, professional, and even physical costs. However, as she highlighted in this quote, the costs are higher for the people of color engaged in this work. The costs are indeed higher when the nature of DEI work is that of a deeply embodied practice in constant tension with the bureaucratized setting in which they work.

However, although the vast majority of DEI workers in my sample experiencing the work as embodied are Black women, there is one outlier to this pattern. In addition to the Black women's experiences of embodiment discussed above, one other participant, a white and Jewish man working as a high-level administrator also described his motivations and ties to the work in an embodied manner. In our discussion, he described his personal motivations for doing DEI work as being due to his experience living as a Jewish person within a country that is "more not Jewish." For him, his motivation explicitly "living as a Jewish person" in a social environment that both within this University and the country more broadly, is largely "non-Jewish." Due to this experience tied to his ethno-religious identity, he said feels almost as if he has "a special sense of empathy for anybody who doesn't fit into the majority." Coupled with growing up in a social justice-oriented community with a rabbi for a father, living as a Jewish person allowed him to experience diversity-oriented work in an embodied manner. Describing his upbringing as involving helping other people who have "been othered" as well as his serving on diversity committees in high school, he said: "that's just who I am." Thus, experiencing DEI work as embodied is not an experience necessarily exclusive to Black women, though their unique intersecting racialized and gendered identities shape their ties to DEI work in a distinct way. In this particular participant’s case, it was not only being raised in a Jewish community that motivates him to do diversity-oriented work. Rather, it is also his experience *living as* a Jewish person in largely non-Jewish environments that motivate him and allow him to experience DEI work also as an embodied practice.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss in greater depth the tensions that arise between the embodied side of DEI work and the bureaucratic, professionalized side, as well as how DEI workers manage, negotiate, and balance these tensions and disjunctures.

Tensions between “Head and Heart Work” of DEI

“It's the way in which I can be both visible and invisible. At the same time, it's just bizarre.”

Participant 1 (a Black woman faculty member)

Ahmed (2009:42) again offers valuable insights into the complicated realities of the embodied nature of DEI work by describing the “sore points” of embodying DEI: “The desire for you to embody diversity (which can feel like a desire both for you and for what you embody) comes from the right place…And yet it creates its sore points…” As much as embodiment is tied to a sense of purpose, motivation, and a deep feeling of qualification regarding the realm of DEI work, the inability to delineate the lines between personal identity, everyday life, and formal, institutionalized work creates tensions and sore points that DEI workers have to navigate and negotiate as they enact reform work within a bureaucratized space.

A Black woman staff member serving as a DEI expert in human resources articulated this tension in great detail, describing what she calls the head and the heart work of DEI. When I asked her how long she has been engaged in DEI work, she went on to say:

> …there is a distinction between the head and the heart of DEI work. And for many of us, like if I think of myself as someone who's done DEI work from the heart perspective, that has been a lifelong journey, right, as a person who occupies this intersection of identities and this body, DEI work is my life. It is part of how I have to learn to navigate, it's how

> I've had to build relationships, it's how I've had to network professionally, understanding the nuances of those things, from the heart perspective…And that's often how folks want to approach DEI work is that heart piece like we should be doing this because it's the right thing to do. In a corporate context, that is not always the case, there are folks who are not engaged in the heart work of DEI. They don't care in the same way that someone who's approaching it from that heart space does. So that's when you have to think about what I call the head space of DEI, which is what I think most sort of social justice workers are doing, which is understanding how to dismantle structures, understanding the importance of policies, and practices, understanding the importance of the people who are participating in those structures, framing those arguments, understanding the return on investment for companies around DEI-related focused work. That headspace that usually speaks to, you know, the market, the money, the employees, the business side.

She told me how when she is trying to explain to people how to become a professional DEI advocate, she makes sure to explain to them this distinction between the head and the heart work of DEI. Expounding upon these concepts, she described the heart of DEI work as being the DEI work that is a lifelong journey, citing how her distinct intersection of identities make DEI her life, alluding to the deep embodiment of the work cited by others throughout my interviews. However, she also distinguished the head space of DEI, or the more formalized, professionalized side of the work. She described the head space as the work done by social justice workers such as understanding how to dismantle structures and understanding the importance of policies and practices, as well as understanding the financial, corporatized, and money-driven side of the work. For this staff member, not everyone who engages in the head space of DEI work is also engaged in the heart work, describing how those who lack this embodied side of the work do not care in the same way as those that do. Regarding her own timeline with DEI work, she told me that she has been engaged in the heart space of DEI her entire life, while the more formalized, head space side of the work has occurred in the last 15 to 20 years, the side of the work in which she thinks of herself as “a DEI practitioner.” Thus, similar to other participants, in the embodied sense of DEI work has been a lifelong labor.

By offering me this helpful distinction between the heart and head spaces of DEI work, this human resources staff member very eloquently highlights and describes a tension that often occurs between the more embodied, personal DEI work and the business-motivated, institutionalized side by acknowledging that the heart work of DEI is not alone sufficient within bureaucratized context. The head work of DEI must be implemented when dealing with formalized DEI work and is not described by her as something that can be avoided when in a professionalized position of DEI work. However, in this participant's particular case, her current professional position within the University actually helped her negotiate and ease these tensions that occur when embodied and bureaucratized DEI work intersect. In discussing the head and the heart of DEI work, she informed me:

> …I think, professionally, I'm in a space right now, where both of those things are in alignment. And I get to kind of do both of those things every day. And not all folks get to do that. So I recognize how unique that is that I get to approach my work as a DEI professional, from both of those angles, that I do it, and I help people understand that it's about the community, and it feels good. But I also sit with C-suite folks, high level business folks and help them understand how good DEI also helps them make money. Right? Or helps them not lose employees, or improves their brand, helps them recruit like, right, so I think I'm in a place where I can do both of those things. And that's a nice space to live because I think it sort of fills me up in different ways to be able to approach the work in both of those lanes.

Due to her formal job within the University, she is able to negotiate the tensions between embodied and formalized DEI work. In speaking of this ability to reconcile the two, she acknowledged how "not all folks get to do that." Of this unique alignment of the heart and head of DEI work, she explained how getting to exist in a space that allows for both creates fulfillment. This sense of fulfillment in turn gives her the ability to approach her work from both the head and heart of DEI work. Her personal description and experience navigating the heart and head spaces of DEI work illustrate not only the tensions inherent between the embodied, personal work of DEI and the professionalized and corporatized side of it, but also how one DEI worker is actually able to negotiate and alleviate these tensions through her formal position within the University. This mechanism of alleviating these tensions via a professional position within the institution provides a perhaps seemingly counterintuitive example of how the tensions within enacting DEI work can be negotiated and balanced.

This staff member's ability to align the heart and the head spaces of DEI work does not always entirely relieve the tensions. Although she acknowledges her luck in being in a professional role that allows her to do both the embodied and bureaucratized work of DEI, she later in the interview expressed a conflict between her desire to maintain a business-focus in her work, but the unavoidable emotional intensity the work brings:

> So I think, even as someone who wants to approach this, from a very business focused way, it is impossible to not have an emotional response to this work almost every day. I think that's why so many folks feel that sense of burnout, because it is highly emotionally taxing work.

Her desire to approach DEI work in a business-focused way, yet being unable to deny the emotional responses to her work bring forth this tension between bureaucratized DEI work and the intense emotional responses that come along with the embodied nature of the work, thus leading to burnout. Serving as an example of these articulated tensions inherent between the business side of DEI and the emotional facets of the work, she also told me during our interview about her involvement in community conversations that had occurred in response to things that had transpired on campus. She was assigned the role of moderator in some of the sessions that she described as being "very emotional and highly charged." She explained to me how after one of these sessions, she walked into the kitchen where a friend/colleague found her and she "just lost it." In her own words, she had had to restrain her emotions during the session and "had moderated through the trauma." Through moderating these conversations, she told me that she had been trying "to do really good work for" for the University, but reached a point where she had what she described as a breakdown “behind the scenes” of the event. Notably, ten minutes after having this breakdown she went back into the session to talk “with the cabinet and answer more questions and help think about next steps.” The demands of the formal work not only brought forth difficult emotions that she felt she had to repress and control, but it also left her no time to even sit with the emotions that she was working through.

This story from this staff member exemplifies the tension that exists between the formal requirements of the work and the emotions that accompany it. For her in this scenario, she had to completely repress her emotions throughout the sessions she was tasked to moderate until she was able to find a more private space in which she could confide and express herself to her fellow DEI worker and friend. Poignantly, there was not even time for her to fully process her emotions or decompress before she had to return to the session, once again having to suppress emotions for the sake of the formal requirements of the DEI work at hand. The expectation of assistance and labor surrounding matters of race and racism occurs for Black women and those perceived as Black women within academia, as Jalia Joseph (2022) discusses in their narrative of interactions between day-to-day race-making processes and the white space that is academia. Joseph (2022:1466) explains they understand the importance of race and racism conversations, but rejects this form of labor due to being “worn out, no longer interested and just fed up.” Similarly, this staff member’s formal job required her to engage in this emotionally-taxing labor and she herself wanted to do what she perceived as important work for the University, yet she found herself emotionally and mentally worn out and broken-down. In her own words, this “emotional work is always there” in DEI work, a constant tension that DEI workers must navigate. Thus, even for DEI workers that are able to better balance the tension between the personal and embodied and the bureaucratized sides of the work, the tensions do not entirely dissipate. The emotional burdens cannot be entirely suppressed despite a strong desire to take a “business-focused” orientation towards DEI work within the University.

The faculty member in the humanities department also cited experiencing this tension and difficult balancing act between the emotions that arise from deeply embodied work and the pressure to maintain “professionalism.” When I asked her if there are any particular emotions that arise in this work, she mentioned feelings of frustration and a loss of respect for colleagues, as noted earlier in the chapter. She continued on to describe the experience of being “the face and voice” of changes being implemented via DEI and thus having to endure faculty expressing negative reactions to the changes she is trying to work on enacting. She went on to explain how after such exchanges, faculty members will come back to her and say that they were not upset with her. She described to me how such interactions feel and impact her personally: “...it felt like an attack on me, it was an attack on me the way in which people can't, or don't realize the degree to which this work has a personal component for me.” Here, she told me that the people having negative responses to the DEI work she is trying to enact fail to understand that their responses are not only a response to the work itself, but to her on a personal level. Since the work is so deeply embodied and entails a deep level of emotional investment, faculty members’ treatment of her in the context of her professional work are in fact personal and not just professional criticisms. They are a personal attack due to the embodied nature of DEI work for this faculty member.

In discussing her difficulty dealing with these issues that arise with colleagues, she then went on to describe in more detail the challenges in balancing the personal and professional elements of DEI work:

> Basically, I guess what I'm saying is they're micro aggressions except that I feel like I've been clubbed. It doesn't feel micro at all. And the way we say they don't even recognize

> that their behavior is offensive to me. So I think it's not really an emotion so much as a response. And, but also knowing that as a person of color, especially as a woman of color, in those situations it is usually beneficial to remain cool and calm even though I'm seething on the inside because of the whole angry Black woman stereotype. And I know h I guess, you know, so the fatigue would be the other emotion. Fatigue. Because of the way in which I have to govern my own emotions and maintain a level of professionalism in moments where I feel my colleagues are being completely unprofessional.

In this quote, she described candidly to me how these instances of microaggressions against her do not feel small or micro, but as if she is being clubbed. The intense language she uses in describing how these interactions impact her highlight the intense emotional toll this work takes on her. Meanwhile, through her own lens and perspective, the people dealing these blows appeared to remain unaware of how their behavior is offensive and hurtful. Tying these experiences to the embodied nature of the work, she discussed her cognizance of how her racial and gender identities impact how she feels she can and should respond in these interactions. As a Black woman, she felt a pressure to remain outwardly cool and calm despite her anger due to the "angry Black woman stereotype." This stereotype ensures that expressing anger as a Black woman "is then to confirm your position as the cause of tension" (Ahmed 2009:49). If she were to respond in anger, she would be confirming to those she is interacting with that she is the problem, and not their offensive behavior.

For Black people broadly within white spaces, and certainly for Black women due to their distinctly gendered and racialized experiences, if they "respond with anything other than an even tone or say they are fed the fuck up, then" they are not considered "a team player" (Joseph 2022:1467). Even though she is "seething on the inside," this faculty member realizes the way her identity as a Black woman means expressing anger would make her be perceived as the cause of tension. In a white space of higher education, the expectation is for Black individuals to "lessen the blows of white violence to ensure white comfort" (Joseph 2022:1466). This faculty member’s felt obligation and pressure to maintain calm in the face of microaggressions is evidence of how the white space that is the University prioritizes its own racialized status quo, in which a Black woman faculty member must navigate grapple with racial, gendered stereotypes and accept violence against her to protect the feelings of those flinging microaggressions towards her.

In her study on gendered racial microaggressions, “tools of gendered racism” that take the form of “insults, invalidation, and erasure,” experienced by Black women undergraduates at a historically PWI, Veronica Newton (2023:165-6) noted how controlling images, such as the angry Black woman, influenced how Black women responded to microaggressions. Just as this faculty member felt pressure to remain outwardly calm, the Black women undergraduates also did not want to be perceived as the angry Black woman “for fear of perpetuating the stereotype” (Newton 2023:172). Newton (2023:172) highlights how having to manage these gendered racial microaggressions “creates additional emotional labor for Black women.” By noting how it is “usually beneficial to remain cool and calm” despite internal anger, this faculty member showed how she is aware of how speaking out of anger would ultimately not only position her as the cause of tension in interactions within her job, but also feed into the controlling image of the angry Black woman. This pressure to manage her responses to these gendered racial microaggressions and remain outwardly calm is additional emotional labor that this Black woman DEI worker must do that other DEI workers who do not experience simultaneously gendered and racialized oppressions are exempt from.

In addition to feeling the need to internalize her anger, she also described to me the fatigue that comes with the need to govern her emotions and maintain professionalism in contexts in which her colleagues fail to maintain professionalism in their interactions with her.

This example of the complexities and emotional burdens cited by this Black woman faculty member explicitly highlight the deeply embodied nature of the work, both in terms of the emotional, personal investment, but also the way in which her identity as a Black woman shapes how she is able to respond to challenges. Receiving and having to strategically respond to upset colleagues also displays the tensions inherent in the work between the embodied nature of the work and the bureaucratized pressures and expectations to maintain a calm facade, even in the face of overt microaggressions. She had to maintain professionalism and a cool exterior to stave off accusations of the angry Black woman stereotype while her colleagues failed to acknowledge the personal component of the work for her and felt free to respond emotionally and unprofessional towards her trying to implement her formal, institutionalized DEI work.

Due to their unique attachment to the work and positions within the University, DEI workers in some senses play the role of the “tempered radical” (Meyerson and Scully 1995). They find themselves not only deeply committed to the cause of their work, but enact it as an embodied practice. Tempered radicals, as mentioned in Chapter 2, are individuals who are attached to an organization while simultaneously harbor commitments “to a cause, community or ideology” that is a departure from, or potentially in conflict with, the organizational culture (Meyerson and Scully 1995:585). Much like these “tempered radicals” described by Meyerson and Scully (1995), DEI workers face particular challenges, and sometimes opportunities, due to their positionality in the institution and orientation to their work. They must find strategies to balance their personal ties to the work with the bureaucratic constraints and professionalizing forces that accompany their formal roles within the organization. Namely, balancing the bureaucratic, professional side of DEI with the intractable embodied elements of the work requires a heavy emotional burden and precarious balancing act for DEI workers within the

University. Unlike the human resources staff member’s job position allotting her the ability to negotiate, at least to a good degree, the tensions between embodied and bureaucratized sides of DEI work, the faculty member cited no such ability to negotiate the tensions inherent in her work. Perhaps her formal role within the University as a faculty member restricts her ability to strike such a balance compared to a staff member whose formal job title includes the word “DEI.” The staff member, by her own acknowledgement, is lucky to be in a formal role within the institution that allows for the negotiation of the tensions between the head and the heart work of DEI, an opportunity not presented to every DEI worker. Although perhaps not in a formal role that makes it easier to balance the tensions intrinsic to the work, prior to our discussion about the emotions arising out of DEI work, in the context of being asked about how her political orientations motivate her DEI work, she told me:

> It's like, I am such an optimist it's ridiculous. So it's like, maybe even verging on being a hopeless romantic, but okay. But, I don't think I could stay in that work if I didn't have that kind of optimism. If I was completely pessimistic all the time, I think I would have left this work, probably within about six months of starting it.

Not having the same ability to negotiate and navigate the disjunctures that accompany the work, this faculty member possesses other ways outside of her job role to deal with the difficulties of DEI work. For her, being an unceasing optimist is what allows her to stay in the work despite challenges and difficulties. For this staff member, balancing tensions came about through the unexpected avenue of her formal location within the institution, while this faculty member lacked such external assistance, but maintained a level of optimism that operated as a motivating force and shield, allowing her to push through the hypocrisies and brick walls.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss DEI work as an embodied practice, and how this embodied nature of the work helps to explain why Black women DEI workers continue to implement DEI despite its oft-disempowering nature. For all of the Black women in my sample, DEI work is inseparable from their personal identities. In many senses, to exist as a Black woman within a racialized organization is to do DEI, even if one is not actively engaged in formal DEI work. In addition to living in a body that *is* and *does* DEI by merely existing, DEI work is also for some a God-ordained purpose, a destined calling. In the second section of this chapter, I highlight a tension that exists due to the nature of the work: a tension between the “heart” and the “head” of DEI work. For these Black women, DEI work cannot be undone due to its embodied nature. Simultaneously, however, they are tasked with bureaucratized and formal DEI work within the University that in many ways is at odds with the deeply personal, embodied ways in which these women experience and are motivated by DEI work. Yet, despite these tensions between embodiment and bureaucracy, Black women diversity workers manage to negotiate such tensions in various ways. For some, their formal position within the bureaucracy actually helps them in balancing the heart and head of DEI work, while others are left to their own interpersonal strategies of maintaining optimism in the face of push back and overt microaggressions while attempting to implement formal DEI changes within the institution.

Through the firsthand experiences and accounts of the individuals I spoke with, it becomes apparent that these Black women DEI workers are able to continue doing DEI in the face of disempowering brick walls due to the embodied nature of the work. Yet, this embodiment is a double-edged sword, often at odds with the realities of implementing DEI within a bureaucracy. However, due to this sense of embodiment for these Black women, DEI is not a task or job so easily undone or quit. As a result, Black women DEI workers often find sometimes unexpected ways in which they manage the disjunctures inseparable from the reality of doing DEI work, even sometimes striking a fulfilling balance between the personal and the businessoriented. However, as I spoke with these DEI workers about their feelings, motivations, and challenges of their work, a particular element of the formal, institutionalized side of the work emerged: the disjointed, decentralized nature of DEI work occurring within the University. In the next chapter, I highlight this particular challenge that accompanies doing DEI work within the University, but as another testament to how embodied practices cannot be undone, I also discuss how DEI workers engage in the act of small world-making in the face of institutional-level disaggregation.

CHAPTER 4

DECENTRALIZATION AND POCKETS OF WORLD-MAKING

Introduction

Many of the participants that I spoke with are or were involved in some capacity with the University-level Diversity & Inclusion Committee, a university-wide committee implemented to foster a university community that is committed to diversity and inclusion. When I asked a faculty member and one of the initial members of the DEI committee what she felt the committee was achieving, she bluntly told me: “Erin right now, I’m not sure the committee is achieving much.” She expressed to me that the University-level Diversity & Inclusion Committee seemed presently to be “a committee still sort of in search of a function still or a role, or… a way to remain relevant on this campus.” Continuing, she told me that she could not even remember the committee’s agenda from the last meeting, “which oughta tell you something about the committee itself, unfortunately,” she admitted. She spoke with me about her perceived issues with the committee at some length, going so far as to describe the main reason why she feels the University continues to struggle in regards to DEI work:

> And I will say candidly to you that one of the things I've come to realize, in doing the work of DEI on [the University’s] campus is part of the reason I think we struggle, and part of the reason why we remain decentralized in this work is because *there is no overarching strategy* [emphasis added].

This sentiment of the University lacking an overarching strategy and unity for DEI work was expressed by most participants throughout my interviews. Perceptions of DEI work as decentralized, siloed, and disjointed appear as a general consensus of many doing the work of DEI throughout the institution. The decentralized nature of the bureaucratic DEI practices is an integral facet of the experience of doing DEI within the University, one that must be contended with and navigated by DEI workers in their attempts to implement good work.

We know from the political and organizational sociological literature that it is not unusual for there to be disjointedness within bureaucracies. This acknowledgement of disaggregation operating at the level of the institution is particularly prevalent in literature on the disaggregated state. Works by scholars of the State, such as Gupta (2006), Orloff (2017), and Sweet (2021), have long been highlighting the ways in which the state bureaucracy is not a monolithic, autonomous entity, but emphasize instead the organization's many aims, and how actors and groupings of actors throughout the bureaucracy work in disjointed and sometimes conflicting ways. I find the University operates similarly, appearing to my participants as a functionally fragmented bureaucracy in which a multitude of actors in various locations are engaged in the work of DEI in the face of disjointed organizational operations and lack of overarching bureaucratic strategy.

Various scholars writing on bureaucracies, organizations, and development have noted the existence of "pockets of" efficiency, effectiveness, expertise, and productivity, respectively that occur within disaggregated institutions (Leonard 2010; Dumitrescu 2021; Burns et al. 2008; McDonnell 2017). Though a term used in the context of public organizations, government, and government-affiliated agencies, pockets of effectiveness is a useful term to adapt to a similar phenomenon I found emerging in discussions of the decentralization of DEI work within the University. Leonard (2010:91) defines "pockets of effectiveness:"

> as public organisations that are reasonably effective in carrying out their functions and in serving some conception of the public good, despite operating in an environment in which most agencies are ineffective and subject to serious predation by corruption, patronage, etc.

In conjunction with my data painting a portrait of a disaggregated bureaucracy in which DEI work is disjointed and siloed, I also found stories of these "pockets of effectiveness" across which DEI workers manage to continue to "do good" despite the decentralized nature of the work. By "do good," I refer to the ability of the DEI workers to implement and achieve their intended goals and ideals that they perceive their work as ideally accomplishing. Pockets of DEI effectiveness, or communities existing within the larger University social world, made up of DEI workers collaborating and communicating, make it possible for them to enact and implement the DEI-related practices and policies they strive towards in spite of larger bureaucratic forces that often disempower and derail. In the words of a staff member working in Human Resources, DEI work in the University consists of "pockets of people working on stuff, but none of it is collectively defined." Good work is being done, even when, harkening back to the words of the faculty member, the University is lacking an overarching, unified DEI strategy.

Thus, my research revealed a nuanced picture of the bureaucratic realities faced by DEI workers and the strategies they use to circumvent and continue their reform work despite University-level disaggregation. Though DEI workers' realities in enacting change may at times be at odds with the broader institutional narrative of DEI, they utilize multiple strategies within and across these DEI-centered pockets of effectiveness in order to engage in small world-making that allows for collective, and often successful, enactment of DEI work throughout the University. In defining small world-making, I build from a quote from Ruha Benjamin (2021): "Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within." Meaning, through collaboration within and across communities of DEI workers, these pockets of effectiveness, the DEI workers manage to create and establish spaces within the University that motivate, drive, and allow for the continued implementation of

DEI reform within the institution, thus resisting disempowering forces from the larger social world of the University. Through the creation of these smaller worlds of active DEI collaboration and reform, DEI workers are also able to reform and even dismantle facets of the larger world of the University that go against goals of good DEI work.

Decentralized DEI Work

A recurring theme that interviewees noted was the nature of the University's own bureaucratic disaggregation and the resulting disjointed and siloed nature of DEI work within the institution. The more that I spoke with administrators and faculty, a picture came into focus of the University's organizational complexity as it pertains to DEI, and how the operation and location of such work within the institution has altered over time. Some of my participants who have been employed at the University since the initial implementation of DEI efforts in the institution mapped out the evolution of DEI work and its move towards a more disjointed structure. The participants who cited such issues expressed concerns over the impediments and impact that the fragmentation and disjointedness may have on the university's DEI efforts long-term.

A high-level University administrator I interviewed traced the implementation of the university-wide DEI committee's history, explaining its shift from an active, top-down effort to its current status as a less active committee that mostly involves reporting updates from DEI work occurring around campus. He explained the initial founding of the university-wide DEI committee and the inclusion of a Chief Inclusion Officer as a cabinet position as a response to a student-led movement during which students from underrepresented groups at the University posted online about their experiences with racism and feeling unwelcome at the institution due to being minorities. Many of these posts went viral on Twitter, prompting the chancellor to implement significant DEI-related changes within the institution. According to this administrator:

> That first year to two years the committee was really doing work. It was a working committee, right? ... we put out campus climate surveys, and we held town halls, and we broke into subcommittees to develop some action plans, andd it was really fruitful. I mean, a lot of good things came out of that. So for example, we now have an annual DEI Award that the University gives out, to recognize the people who are really doing great work in this space. Over the last couple of years, that committee has sort of morphed into, hey, we're gonna to meet once or twice a semester to make sure that we're updating everybody on what's happening around campus. So it's less a working committee and more of a reporting out committee, ... it may be natural, but I find it a little bit frustrating. I don't think that that's the best use of everybody's time. And I think we've missed some opportunities.

Here, this administrator clearly articulated the ways in which the experience of doing DEI within the University has evolved over a span of seven years. The implementation of much of the primary DEI initiatives and efforts began as a top-down response to student mobilization, with the chancellor-founded DEI Committee serving as the unified hub of the various DEI-related programs and efforts being put into practice. However, over the years, the Committee that once was the collective spear-heading the DEI efforts within the University became a less active presence in the institution, instead functioning as a “reporting committee” in which individuals doing DEI work in various spaces around campus report-back on efforts being made. This reduction of the University-wide committee to a less-active role caused feelings of frustration for this administrator as he views it as not being an ideal use of time. For him, the stagnation of the committee inhibits DEI workers’ abilities to do good work, something that creates a sense of frustration in his efforts. A graduate student who in her words, “jumped on it [the Committee] to represent” Graduate Student Senate, similarly felt that the Committee was not actively addressing what she perceived as big issues within the institution:

> So the DEI committee. I'll be very honest, I was very disappointed with what we do. Basically, we met once last semester, and it was like an introduction…And I was ready to

> put some things on the table to start talking about them. At the end, after introductions, there was this pause and no one was saying anything…I was very sad that we as a collective, were not coming to talk about what for me what the big issues were.

For her, feelings of disappointment and sadness arose due the lack of activity occurring within the Committee. The lack of addressment of what she perceived as pressing DEI-related matters evoked negative perceptions of the University-wide DEI Committee as well as negative emotions due to these perceived impediments to enacting change.

A little later on in the interview, the graduate student further elaborated upon how she felt about the University's DEI Committee and how it failed to live up to her expectations:

> …Oh, this will be great. This will be the most incredible platform for me to be expressive, and to be able to share what I see and what I feel could be done. That was what I had hoped. But then I realized that the higher ups already came with their own agenda and what they wanted to talk about and address and anyone else that was bringing something to the table wasn't going to be heard. That's what I felt. That's what I walked away feeling after that initial meeting.

At first, she felt excited at the prospect of participating in the Committee, viewing it as an ideal forum to share her ideas for DEI reform. However, she quickly realized that the Committee was not actively functioning as a space of collaborative engagement and discussion. She walked away from their first meeting feeling unheard and with her expectations unmet. Thus, from the accounts of the administrator and faculty member, we see DEI work over the course of less than ten years shifting from a top-down, collective approach to a much more disaggregated and siloed effort occurring in various pockets within the University, lacking a unified and active Committee serving as its head. For these DEI workers, this lack of unity within the Committee caused both organizational impediments to their work as well as accompanying feelings of frustration, disappointment, and sadness.

When probed about what I perceived as the disaggregation of pockets of DEI work occurring presently in the institution, the same high-level administrator agreed with my impression, stating: “I think it has gone from, we were doing these things in silos to thinking about it institutional wide to becoming more siloed.” According to him, DEI work has experienced a bit of a circular evolution in which it began as siloed, decentralized work within the institution, shifted to a more collective, university-wide practice in the face of student-led pressures, back again to a decentralized situation occurring in various locations throughout the University. Other participants also noted the presently-siloed nature of DEI work occurring within the institution. A faculty member with long-term involvement in the university’s DEI initiatives and efforts, echoed the administrator’s observation of a current lack in university-wide DEI strategy:

> And I will say candidly, to you that one of the things I've come to realize, in doing the work of the DEI on [University’s] campus is part of the reason I think we struggle. And part of the reason why we remain decentralized in this work is because there is no overarching strategy. There, every unit has its own strategy, and none of those strategies are connected to anybody else's strategy. So and I think that's also one of the reasons why the DEI Committee, sort of flounders is because there's nothing to there's nothing to it, you know there's nothing to latch on to there's nothing to help promote, you know, on a on a on a university wide scale, because there's no university wide strategy for DEI, that I'm aware of.

The faculty member noted the existence of various units within the institution with DEI strategies, but also highlights the disconnection between them. She cited this decentralization of DEI work as one of the reasons that the university-wide DEI Committee flounders, or as the high-up administrator observed, functions only as a site of reporting not action. For this faculty member, the University’s lack of a university-wide strategy for DEI presents an issue for the success of DEI within the institution. Since the work is siloed, there is nothing to grab onto and disseminate more broadly across the institution. A staff member in Human Resources, expressed an almost-identical sentiment as the faculty member, stating: “I do not think that [University] has done a great job of an actual university strategy, around DEI, as a full-fledged institutional concept." For the woman in human resources, it is not that DEI work has become increasingly siloed over time as alluded by the high-level administrator, but rather to her, the University has not effectively established a university strategy around DEI at all. A top-down, unified attempt is merely non-existent for some, while for others it has eroded throughout the lifespan of DEI efforts within the institution.

Another staff member felt similarly that the lack of a cohesive, collectively-known purpose behind the DEI Committee is an issue for the university's DEI efforts. I had mentioned earlier in the interview that when I asked participants what they perceive the Committee as doing they often did not have concrete, specific responses. Referring back to this comment, she expressed how she felt participants' inability to describe what the DEI Committee does is a real issue:

> ...you kind of touched on it before where when you ask folks, what is it that your DEI committee is doing and they really couldn't put something behind it? That's a problem. You know, too many times, institutions or even organizations will do DEI, and it's just to check a box. It's not sustainable. If you ask them down the line, did this really work? They can't tell you because they really didn't invest in trying to make sure that whatever DEI initiatives they put forth was successful. Also, it just can't be a one and done thing. It needs to be within people's strategic mission, vision and plans, right? Like if people are building out institutions or building out 5, 10-year, 20-year plans, where's the DEI part of that? And it shouldn't just be over here. It should be threaded throughout the entire strategic plan. It should be top to bottom, left and right of an entire institution and it cannot be left upon one person, one area of a campus, a few individuals, 'specially if those individuals are part of the community, because then what happens if we are no longer here? Then it becomes are those initiatives, are those programs, are those offices still in existence?

While this staff member, working as a director of a center, office, and program, expressed concerns over the long-term detriments of lacking a strategic DEI mission, vision, and plan, the first-year undergraduate student, felt the way committees were designed and functioned could improve the way DEI work moves through the institution. She suggested the creation of "a committee of students and faculty, and being kinda committed to DEI, and making fun and engaging events for all of [the University].” Alluding to the siloed nature of DEI work in the University, she continued:

> And getting people like me who you know, won awards or are committed to change…getting committees of us that can help create change around [the University’s] campus and asking us what can we do to help...So getting us all together that we can brainstorm ideas with each other to make DEI as fun and engaging it as essential as it is like to [the University’s] campus.

For this freshman attending the University, the University needs new sorts of committees, composed of staff, faculty, and students, thus providing those committed to DEI work a chance to come together and feed off of each other’s ideas to ensure DEI has an active, engaging presence in the institution.

The words of this staff member and the undergraduate student echo and corroborate the concerns of the faculty member, staff member in HR, and the administrator: the DEI Committee is not actively operating in such a way that there is a united, collective strategy being implemented around DEI that allows for long-term, collaborative work. For the staff member who expressed concerns over the University’s lack of overarching strategic mission, if DEI remains the responsibility of one section of campus or individuals, the work and achievements being done in the name of DEI run the risk of being as temporal as the individuals within the institution. If DEI is not a part of overarching strategic missions, vision, and plans and instead remains left up to one individual or pocket of campus, the long-term impact of these efforts may not have lasting impact upon the institution. All of these participants, despite doing DEI in differing locations throughout the University, noticed a common feature of DEI practice in the institution: that the work of DEI occurs in pockets, lacking a university-wide strategy and collective implementation of practices and initiatives.

This perceived decentralization causes a sense of frustration and disappointment for the participants' efforts in enacting DEI-related institutional change. The matter of decentralization is not exclusively an organizational issue that threatens the long-term strategic DEI goals, it is also an affective challenge for those tasked with coming up against bureaucratic decentralization. As the experiences of both a high-up administrator and a graduate student make clear, their experience of the Committee as an inactive, non-collaborative work environment led to feelings of frustration, disappointment, and sadness over what they felt was lost opportunities to make their voices heard and enact significant change. However, these feelings of frustration over perceived obstacles to DEI work make available a particular form of collaboration and community-building to strategically navigate decentralization.

Pockets of Effectiveness and DEI World-Making

"Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within." -Ruha Benjamin

As I explained in the previous section, participants observed that DEI work largely occurs in a siloed manner, with the efforts occurring within smaller units across the University, rather than via a unified, overarching DEI strategy. However, despite the widely-noted decentralized nature of DEI work occurring within the institution, participants observed that this bureaucratic reality did not entirely negate the ability of DEI workers to do good work across the University. Feeling frustrated and inhibited by the decentralized nature of top-down DEI efforts, units, departments, offices, and collectives of individuals in various locations throughout the University actively work to do the work of DEI despite bureaucratic decentralization and disjointedness. Within and across these "pockets of effectiveness," these groups of DEI workers manage to be "reasonably effective in carrying out their functions" pertaining to DEI, thus doing good despite a lack of collective DEI strategy (Leonard 2010:91). These pockets of DEI effectiveness also combat feelings of frustration and disappointment, generating motivation and hope for the DEI workers, affectively spurring the continuation of DEI through collaboration and collective world-making.

Participants frequently tempered their discussions of the decentralized nature of the work at an institutional level with acknowledgement of the continuation of good DEI practice still occurring throughout the University, regardless of a unified strategy. When asked what the University could improve upon in terms of DEI and what she would like to see changed, the staff member working as a DEI expert in HR told me frankly: “We have still not done a great job of actually creating a proactive package of DEI-related initiatives and concepts to move the university forward.” However, in expressing her grievances regarding the lack of a package of DEI initiatives and collective organization surrounding DEI, she also pointed to the fact that good work is still occurring despite these bureaucratic obstacles:

> There are folks who have been tasked with that and again, are doing good work. But they aren't supported at the institutional level with the, with the kind of DEI strategic planning needed to do that quickly. So it is again, pockets of people working on stuff, but none of it is collectively defined.

This quote begins to nuance the understanding of the decentralization of DEI work in the University. Similar to the other participants quoted within this chapter, this staff member acknowledged the lack of collectively defined DEI work and the absence of an overarching DEI strategy. However, she also pointed out that there are in fact individuals within the institution that are “doing good work.” In her own words, there exist “pockets of people” doing the work of DEI, regardless of, in spite of, a non-unified top-down DEI strategy. The high-level administrator I spoke with also nuanced his acknowledgement of the decentralization and lack of an overarching DEI strategy by pointing out how “the flip side to not having this sort of this sort of comprehend comprehensive, overarching vision of the future of DEI at [the University] is that we allow space for individuals, for whom it's very important to sort of run with it." For him, the general lack of unified, comprehensive nature of DEI work actually works towards its benefit by allotting freedom and space for individuals to enact DEI how they wish. In his discussion of this upside of decentralization, he openly expressed the upside to this organizational reality: "I do think that we have I wouldn't call it free rein, but we have a lot of latitude in what we as individual units can do. So that is sort of the flip side to it." Thus, both of these participants, the staff member and administrator, nuance the realities of decentralized DEI work, pointing to the existence of units with the relative freedom to do what they please regarding enacting DEI-related reform.

While discussing the University's path from siloed DEI efforts, to more unified, and then back to decentralized work, this administrator in the upper ranks of the institution also made sure to emphasize to me the continued existence of good work and practices pertaining to DEI that are occurring in their own spaces across campus:

> So I think that there are lots of great things happening in the Gender Resource Office and in the [business] school, and in [the college of liberal arts]. So, there are things that are happening, but I totally agree with that. I will say again, that it's not, I don't want to paint such a negative light, because I think there are some things that are happening in big ways that do affect a lot of students, and faculty and staff, thinking about hiring practices. And these are things that most people don't think about, but I think HR has done a really nice job of attempting to diversify our employees, the relatively new intercultural center.

Although he agreed with my observation that DEI work within the institution is siloed and disaggregated, this did not equate to there not being any good DEI work occurring within the institution for him. Despite the lack of a centralized DEI strategy, he noted how various "pockets" within the institution continue to implement important and notable DEI-related practices and programs. According to his perception of the organizational topography of DEI in the University, various academic departments, hiring processes, and human resources are all engaged in the work of DEI within their own units. Notably, the University within the past few years created an Intercultural Center, a change largely headed and pushed by students. He seemed particularly impressed by the work of creating and implementing this new DEI-affiliated center on campus, stating:

> So I just think, I think symbolically, it's really neat, what it shows, but also what it says about the universities willingness to work with students. And, I think our faculty of color in that space too, to say, "Hey, we want to, we want to meet you where you are."

Despite being a high-up administrator within the University, he did not shy away from offering frank critiques and concerns he had regarding the University in light of DEI. However, much like the staff member in HR, he also went out of his way to emphasize the continued existence of sorts of "pockets of effectiveness" throughout the organization in which individuals and collectives continue to do good work in spite of top-down decentralization of DEI practices. Thus, a more complex story emerges regarding the organizational layout of DEI within the institution as being simultaneously disempowering and empowering in its disaggregated state. Pockets of effectiveness sustain the work of DEI despite bureaucratic constraints and derailment of collective action.

Discussions and scholarship surrounding DEI have often pointed to how these concepts often operate as legitimizing tools for institutions that only superficially appear to invest in causes they openly laud. Efforts by organizations to implement DEI often take the form of DEI or diversity-washing more so than concerted reform efforts that address systemic inequality, power, and privilege (Bell and Hartmann 2007:906-9; Berrey 2015; Herring and Henderson 2012; Holland and Ford 2021; Banks 2022:150). Despite these performative tendencies of DEI practices occurring within institutions, pockets of effective DEI work remain active within the University, with individuals and collectives often working both within and across these DEI pockets in order to do good and enact substantive change. In the previous chapter, I discussed how the embodied nature of DEI work operates as a double-edged sword, causing difficulties for workers while also motivating and sustaining their work in DEI. These pockets of effective DEI work spread throughout the University operate in a similar fashion: while the siloed and decentralized nature of DEI work within the institution is far from ideal, it also allots a degree of freedom and what I will call "small world-making" within and threaded across these units engaging in DEI work. These pockets of good, though a result of bureaucratic disaggregation, help sustain the work, allowing for small, dynamic worlds of DEI to flourish and enact substantive change within the University. Other scholars have highlighted the benefits of collaboration, alliances, and working with others towards common goals when enacting reform within bureaucracies. Scholarship spanning organizations, political sociology, and social movements literature have pointed to the particular ways in which emotions and "intellectual dynamics," collaboration across different groups and units of actors, as well as coalition-building amongst like-minded reformers within organizations assist in furthering the goals and practices of reformers within bureaucratic spaces (Parker and Hackett 2012:22; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017; Meyerson and Scully 1995). Similarly, my participants highlighted the ways in which they found ways to motivate themselves and sustain their reform work within and across the various DEI-focused pockets of effectiveness scattered throughout the University.

For example, when asked who she works with on a daily basis, a Middle-Eastern woman faculty member, who is involved in DEI work at the college and university-wide level, told me: "I immerse myself in a lot of things," and then proceeded to map out who she works alongside with and the various locations within the University these collaborations occur. She explained to me that she is in contact with her colleagues in her program and her specific department as well as the Dean of her college. Additionally, she also engages in work with those outside her own college and department: “I also work with people across the university, you know. So people know that I'm doing DEI work. So there's an English department search, and they've asked me to sit on their search. Right? So things like that.” She informed me that as a faculty member, who she works with regarding DEI work depends on “what's important to you and how you wanna get involved in university life.” For this faculty member, despite being affiliated with a particular college, department and academic program, her DEI work occurs both within these units but also transcends them as well.

Similarly, the administrator mentioned earlier in the chapter spoke in great detail of the specific things he as an individual and his own office within the University did in regards to DEI work, despite a relatively dormant university-wide committee. Similar to the faculty member, he informed me that he did engage with DEI programs and practices occurring within the broader scope of the University. However, in a different vein, he acknowledged that most of his day-to-day DEI work occurs internally within his own office; he then proceeded to describe the wide variety of DEI reform occurring within his own particular pocket of the institution. He described to me how about five years ago, his office underwent a reorganization and restructuring that entailed creating a team of individuals whose job is to “lead the work” pertaining to DEI. For him, it was important to foster a philosophy in his unit of the University “that DEI is the real work. And it's just a matter of how you can slot yourself in to make that happen.” He and his unit enacted reform within their arena of the University in order to ensure that everything they are doing is occurring through a lens of access and DEI work, and that the rationale is not have one DEI-related employee whose job is DEI, so the rest of the unit can “focus on the real work.” As a staff member high-level within the administrative ranks, his DEI-related efforts largely occur within the scope of his own bureaucratic pocket of the University. According to his own account of the various restructurings and practices implemented, him and his colleagues have created a rather vibrant and active "pocket of efficiency" as it pertains to DEI work, in contrast to the decentralized and dormant nature of DEI work occurring at a university-wide scale.

Despite expressing a similar opinion to this administrator and informing me that she felt the university-wide DEI committee was not achieving much, a faculty member with long-term involvement in the University's DEI practices, did offer a unique lens on how she perceived the committee as still serving a certain purpose of helping sustain the worlds of DEI within the University. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, she felt that DEI work remains decentralized, with every unit having its own strategy unconnected to everyone else's strategies. However, she also thought that:

> …this committee still has a function in that it brings together folks from across campus who are, who are within their units, engaged in the work of DEI, so that it serves a function in terms of supporting and sustaining community among those of us who are doing that work.

Her perspectives on the university-wide committee paint a nuanced picture of the organization, operations, and placements of DEI work within the institution. Similar to other participants I spoke with, she noted the decentralized nature of DEI work presently within the University, observing how the university-wide DEI committee seems to be in many ways dormant and passive. Yet, she also noted how DEI work occurs in units across the institution who have their own, varying DEI strategies, and that the committee still does offer a context in which DEI workers from these units across campus can come together, thus functioning as a sustaining force for DEI work in the University. Thus, these three participants all acknowledged the existence of DEI work occurring within units, departments, offices, etc., with DEI workers periodically connecting outside of their own pockets of DEI effectiveness and engaging in work that spans across and throughout the University.

The existence of vibrant pockets of engaged DEI work within the University is also noted outside the realms of administrators and faculty members. When asked if there is a high level of collaboration amongst doing DEI work and if those engaging in this work get along and work well together, a first-year undergraduate student, told me:

> I can definitely say that's a yes for me, just because DEI is such a small niche group at [the University]. So we all are very close. So we all work pretty close together…we all work together and bounce ideas off each other. And host collaboration events all the time. Yeah, we don't really have any issues with conflicts, that kind of way. We usually collaborate pretty good together, work together pretty well.

As a freshman in college, thus only having been in the institution and engaging in DEI work there for a brief period of time, she has already observed the small, but highly collaborative and active nature of DEI work occurring within the University. In her own experience doing DEI work thus far, those engaged in the work are a small grouping who work intimately together in collaborative ways that involves brainstorming and hosting events. She paints a picture of a close-knit group of collaborators who though numerically small, managed to produce DEI work without significant conflicts with one another.

Meanwhile, the other undergraduate student I spoke with also observed decentralization and pockets of efficiency, but explicitly in the realm of student DEI-related activism. When broadly discussing pushback and tensions regarding DEI within the University, an undergraduate who was a rising junior, mentioned a student group that around 2016 collaborated and sent a letter to the University listing grievances and changes they wanted to see implemented in regards to race/DEI-related matters at the University. Although this occurred before she was attending the University, she told me that she had spoken with students who had been present during this period and had good knowledge of the events that transpired. According to her, this student coalition that had pushed for much of what became the University’s DEI-related efforts, wanted to continue their coalition, but that it “Is basically very decentralized now, from what I can see, but decentralized in a sense of everyone's doing a little bit of something in different areas, and just adding on to it.” Her knowledge of student-led DEI-related efforts provides a different lens on the organizational nature of decentralization and pockets of work occurring throughout the institution. From her understanding, the student coalition that had originally come together to express grievances and enact reform within the University eventually became decentralized over time, yet the work did not come to a screeching halt. Rather, individuals are all “doing a little bit of something in different areas,” and still contributing to enacting reform, just not in the context of an overarching, collective coalition. Thus, students’ efforts did not disappear with decentralization, but they did become more siloed in units of the University in which individuals are still engaged in such work.

What these insights from administrators, faculty, and students all offer is a picture of DEI workers crafting small worlds of collaborative, active, and often effective DEI practices and reform in spite of bureaucratic, top-down decentralization. Although DEI within the University is perceived as lacking an overarching, collective strategy, DEI work does not cease to occur within the institution. Rather, DEI workers engage in the crafting of various worlds inside their own pockets of the institution through which they sustain and implement good work. The decentralized, siloed nature of DEI work is a double-edged sword in that it operates as a disempowering and sometimes constraining force upon those attempting to enact DEI reforms, but it also opens up spaces for DEI workers to create their own worlds comprised of collaborative, engaged, and continuous implementation of DEI reform.

Conclusion

This chapter serves to map out the decentralization and disaggregation of DEI work occurring at the institutional level within the University. Throughout my interviews, participants expressed concerns and feelings of frustration and disappointment over the lack of an overarching DEI strategy, a presently inactive university-wide DEI committee, and siloed units in which DEI occurs without the leadership from a top-down unifying force. However, in the second section of the chapter, I bring forth the nuances of the decentralized nature of DEI work within the institution. Although disaggregated and siloed, DEI workers are still finding ways to enact good work and implement DEI reform within their respective pockets of DEI effectiveness. Just as many participants are constantly navigating the tensions found within the embodied nature of DEI work, they also must navigate the tensions arising out of decentralization. Also similar to the embodiment of the work, the decentralization of the work operates for participants as a sort of double-edged sword. The disaggregated, siloed realities of DEI work can feel disempowering, constraining, and limiting for those trying to enact change within the institution.

However, the relative autonomy allotted by this decentralization also allows DEI workers to create their own DEI-focused worlds within the larger world of the University. These pockets, or worlds, work amongst themselves and occasionally collaborate as a wider DEI community in order to continue engaging in the work of DEI. Though perhaps lacking an overarching strategy or top-down guidance, DEI workers also retain a sense of relative independence and freedom from bureaucratic regulation and standardization that would otherwise risk watering-down and disempowering their work. Thus, DEI workers find ways to navigate and work against and around the disempowering effects of bureaucratic disaggregation by leveraging their relative autonomy and networks of fellow DEI workers, creating pockets, or small worlds, of lively and highly collaborative DEI work that in turn serve to combat disempowerment and sustain both the motivation and implementation of institutional DEI reform. In the Conclusion after summarizing the prior chapters, I explore the sociological significance of this study, broadening the lens and discussing the implications and future directions of this research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

DEI practices, policies, and efforts have become institutionalized within spaces of higher education after the rise in popularity and subsequent watering-down of diversity as a tool for inclusion. However, DEI has also been at the forefront of recent socio-political debates and controversies. As such, scholarship focusing on DEI, especially within higher education, is particularly relevant within the broader socio-political and cultural milieu. Building off of literature on diversity and DEI, especially that which focuses on DEI work within organizations, this project examined, via a case study of a private, PWI University, the motivations and reasons DEI workers engage in the work of DEI despite institutional constraints and disempowerment. I explored how DEI workers experienced often disempowering and constraining organizational mechanisms and how they went about navigating these forces in order to enact their perceptions of “good work” and continue implementing DEI-related change within the institution.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review on diversity and DEI within higher education, bureaucratic reform work, and racialized organizations. I trace the chronology of organizational inclusion efforts, from Civil Rights legislation and affirmative action to the popularity of diversity rhetoric in the early 1990’s. The scholarship notes how diversity became popular throughout the ranks of higher education, and describes how it became wielded as a legitimizing tool for universities to perform racial inclusion while ignoring systemic inequalities (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015; Holland and Ford 2021). The literature then notes diversity rhetoric’s subsequent decline, which ultimately led to the shift towards DEI as an attempt at correcting the faults found within diversity rhetoric (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001:1626). The scant scholarship on DEI points to the ways in which DEI and DEI work are often used as a form of symbolic capital for universities, while DEI work is found to be difficult and disempowering, indicating that the critiques leveled against diversity rhetoric apply to DEI efforts as well (Hamilton, Nielsen, and Lerma 2023).

In this thesis, I build off of the understanding that DEI work, like other forms of diversity work, is experienced and articulated as disempowering and riddled with organizational constraints, but I also nuance this narrative by pointing out how DEI workers remain motivated despite constraints, enacting various strategies to navigate and find hope amongst the bureaucratic tensions. My thesis builds upon this literature to further explicate and hone in on the tensions between the DEI work implemented by those tasked with the labor and the bureaucratic forces and mechanisms that the DEI workers must constantly navigate. My work addresses a gap in literature by highlighting not only the existing constraining forces bearing down upon DEI workers, but also the ways in which DEI workers find motivation and innovative strategies to navigate bureaucratic tensions.

I also engage with literature on reform work within bureaucracies. This scholarship highlights the informal politics of reform work occurring within organizations, and how reformers engage in various strategies and negotiations in the face of deradicalization and cooptation. My work engages with these ideas of the everyday politics of reform work to understand how DEI workers go about enacting change in the face of bureaucratic obstacles, building off how this scholarship highlights the tension between reformers' ideas of "doing good" and the constraints and conventions of the organization in which they work. Lastly, I discuss Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations that understands organizations as not racially neutral, but rather as existing as institutions with race/racism integrally embedded into them and their functions. I operate with the understanding of the University studied in this thesis as an explicitly racialized organization, not a race-neutral institution in which racism can occur. Utilizing Ray's (2019) theory, I approach understanding the experiences, perceptions, social worlds, and enactment of DEI work within this University as occurring within an inherently racialized space in which whiteness is treated as a credential (Ray 2019:41).

Chapter 3 then discusses how and why Black women DEI workers manage to stay motivated to engage in DEI work despite its frequently disempowering nature. I highlight how these women experience DEI work as a deeply embodied practice. For them, DEI is inseparable from their lived, personal, and corporeal existences. DEI's embodied reality serves as both a motivating force and an occasional obstacle when in tension with the bureaucratized side of their work. While these women experience DEI as an embodied practice, they must also navigate the "head" of DEI work, or the bureaucratized, formalized side of the work. Oftentimes, the bureaucratic facets of DEI are integrally at odds with the embodied experience of DEI, leading the women to find ways to strategically navigate this tension. While some of these women found that their formal position in the University allowed for a balancing of the tension, others pulled from more interpersonal strategies to navigate tensions. DEI as an embodied practice means that the work cannot be simply undone via bureaucratic forces, thus these Black women involved in DEI work remain motivated through the "heart" work of DEI. Notably, a white Jewish man administrator also experienced his DEI work as an embodied practice, leaving open the possibilities that other demographics of DEI workers also enact DEI as an embodied practice.

In Chapter 4, I shift towards a focus on the organizational mapping of DEI work within the University, discussing how many DEI workers that I interviewed perceived and experienced

DEI work within the University as bureaucratically decentralized and siloed. The DEI workers experience feelings of frustration and disappointment regarding the decentralized nature of the work, often expressing that they feel it may cause harm to DEI efforts within the University. However, I also pointed out how DEI workers navigate the decentralization in order to continue to implement DEI practices within the institution. Allotted a level of autonomy due to a lack of top-down unity in DEI efforts, DEI workers create their own effective pockets within the University in which they collaborate to engage in good work. They engage in small-worldmaking in which they create collaborative communities of DEI-focused work, working within and sometimes across pockets of DEI effectiveness, thus using the relative autonomy of DEI efforts to their advantage. This collaborative work helps to motivate and sustain DEI work despite potentially disempowering institutional forces that decentralize DEI.

Sociological Significance

My study engages and expands upon the literatures of Diversity and DEI, reform work within bureaucracies, and theories of racialized organizations. Understanding my site as an inherently racialized organization, I provide rich, qualitative insights into how DEI workers experience and perceive their work and why DEI workers continue the work of diversity despite disempowerment and constraints. Though the scholarship on DEI, and DEI within higher education more specifically, address the bureaucratic constraints and disempowering forces pressing down upon those doing DEI work, my thesis focuses explicitly on the tensions found between DEI workers' motivations, perceptions, and experiences and the rationalizing bureaucratic mechanisms and forces of the institution. My thesis maps out the particular motivations and strategies wielded by DEI workers that allows them to navigate bureaucratic obstacles that work to derail and disempower their reform efforts.

While existing literature has established that diversity work is often disempowering and riddled with bureaucratic obstacles, my work offers insights into why some DEI workers, namely Black women, sustain motivation and desire to continue doing the work of DEI (Ahmed 2009; Ahmed 2012; Swan and Fox 2010). For the Black women in this study, DEI is an embodied practice, and thus cannot simply be watered down, eradicated, or undone via disempowering bureaucratic forces. While the work is often frustrating, disempowering, and difficult, the Black women DEI workers also are deeply affectively drawn to and tied to the work: they do DEI through existing in their own bodies. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of the motivations behind doing DEI work, bringing forth that DEI is an embodied practice for Black women DEI workers. Given the limited number of non-Black women of color in my sample as well as the instance of the white, Jewish man experiencing DEI as embodied in my sample, it is plausible but unestablished through my sample that DEI may operate as an embodied practice for other people involved workers as well. I suspect this may be the case for DEI workers with marginalized identities, especially individuals whose identities are numerically and culturally minoritized in the spaces they work, such as people of color, Jewish people, and perhaps women.

This project also offers insights into how DEI workers respond to and navigate top-down decentralization of DEI work through the cultivation of pockets of effectiveness and creation of active world-making in which DEI workers sustain motivation and hope to “do good,” strategically navigating disempowerment and decentralization. This study highlights how DEI workers continue their reform work through collaborative and community-oriented niches of DEI work within a larger institutional context, showing how reform work may continue in the face of larger bureaucratic forces and mechanisms that go against the goals of groups of DEI workers.

Broader Implications

Given the broader socio-political climate surrounding matters of race and racism, DEI, and critical race theory, DEI work is an ever-relevant and important type of reform work occurring within institutional contexts. Specifically, DEI continues to be a highly contested matter within the context of higher education, as "college administrators say their so-called DEI efforts are an effective strategy to repair decades of exclusionary policies and practices that repelled communities of color from their campuses," while Republican politicians press for the destruction of DEI, stating that "the practices violate free speech, break antidiscrimination laws, and are a misuse of public money" (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2023). Garnering insights into the motivations, lived experiences, and labor of DEI workers within a University provides valuable insights into the motivations and strategies of negotiation utilized by DEI workers to enact change despite larger disempowering forces and sources of opposition within a bureaucratic context.

DEI as an embodied practice points to more than the difficulties and additional labor that accompanies the reality of embodying "the promise of inclusion within universities" for women of color (Ahmed 2018:333). It also highlights how embodiment motivates Black women engaged in DEI work and makes DEI difficult to simply undo. Even in the case of concerted attacks against DEI and efforts to ban it from spaces of higher education, the embodied nature of DEI transcends institutional bounds. DEI as an embodied practice means that attempts to bureaucratically, or even legally, bar DEI may only succeed so much in its eradication. If many of the individuals choosing to engage in the work of DEI enact and embody DEI simply through their existence, then this opens up an avenue for embodied resistance. DEI as an embodied practice allows for "the use of the body as a mechanism for opposition" against the continued assaults against DEI's existence (Swan and Fox 2010:578).

Additionally, the various strategies DEI workers use to navigate the tensions between their practices and bureaucratic mechanisms also speak to the resistance and strength found within the enactment of DEI work. While the University serves to decentralize and silo DEI work, DEI workers in this study exhibit the ability to engage in pockets of DEI efficiency in which communities of reformers collaborate to implement DEI. This small world-making occurring in the face of bureaucratic forces highlights the endurance of DEI workers and the sustainable nature of DEI. In a political moment in which DEI is on the receiving end of a reactionary movement, much like its predecessor affirmative action, the various strategies of negotiation and resistance on the part of DEI workers points to ways in which individuals and collectives engaged in DEI can push back again attempts to derail their efforts. Thus, the ways in which DEI workers understand DEI, are motivated to enact it, and the strategies used to negotiate tensions and implement reform highlight how DEI workers are not helpless in the face of disempowerment and constraints, but rather possess significant agency in the face of opposition, showing how reform movements, even in bureaucratic contexts, can successfully respond to and go up against efforts to eradicate systemic social change.

Future Directions

Although my thesis offers insights into the motivations behind DEI work, such as DEI as an embodied practice, it is unknown the extent of how many DEI workers experience the work as such. In my sample, the Black women were overwhelmingly the ones experiencing DEI as embodied. The small number of white women, non-Black women of color, and the Black man in my sample did not express themselves as having this experience and tie to the work. Due to the small number of non-Black women of color within my sample, it is unclear whether or not this experience of DEI as embodied occurs for other demographics of DEI workers. However, the experience of the white, Jewish man is a notable outlier in my own sample of another individual experiencing DEI work as embodied. Future research should explore DEI as an embodied practice at more depth, particularly regarding who experiences it as such across racial and gendered lines.

Future research should also further explore how DEI work is organized and distributed across different organizational and bureaucratic contexts, offering more insights into the tensions that occur between DEI workers and bureaucratic forces, as well as how DEI workers in these various contexts navigate, resolve, or work around such tensions and obstacles. I suspect that this particular site is not the only one in which DEI workers engage in variants of small world-making in order to effectively implement DEI in the face of decentralization and other top-down constraints.

More broadly, my research nuances and complicates understandings of DEI work implementation within bureaucratic contexts and the ways in which DEI workers experience and go about “doing good” in the face of constraints and obstacles. Although a case study, my thesis further fleshes out the myriad of ways in which DEI workers understand, experience, and go about doing the work of DEI in the face of disempowerment and organizational restraints. Research in the future should continue to delve into both the affective side of the work and the organizational mapping of DEI within institutions, focusing on the motivations and micropolitics of resistance and negotiation DEI workers use to continue to enact change and “good” in the face of bureaucratic constraints and disempowerment.

As Patricia Hill Collins (2010:26) notes, “People who care about their communities, and projects that harness emotions for political ends possess a staying power.” The DEI workers in this study display this investment in community and the motivating power of emotions, often balancing affectively-driven ties to DEI work and creating pockets of social worlds centered around the goal of implementing DEI-centered reform, thus signaling a resiliency and staying power regarding the continuation of DEI within the University. While bureaucratic forces can work to deradicalize, disempower, and stunt reform work occurring within institutional boundaries, the experiences and actions of DEI workers exhibited in this case study highlight their agency and strategic navigation done in the implementation of change that occurs in the face of, and in resistance of, constraining and disempowering bureaucratic forces.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Sara. 2009. “Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists.” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12(1). Retrieved July 18, 2023 https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320802650931).

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Retrieved October 16, 2023 (https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ugalib/detail.action?docID=1173269).

Ahmed, Sara. 2018. “Rocking the Boat: Women of Colour as Diversity Workers” in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*, edited by J. Arday and H. Mirza. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Retrieved October 16, 2023 (https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5).

Alfonseca, Kiara. 2023. “DEI: What Does it Mean and What is its Purpose?” *ABC News*. Retrieved September 6, 2023 (https://abcnews.go.com/US/dei-programs/story?id=97004455).

Banks, Patricia A. 2022. *Black Culture, Inc.: How Ethnic Community Support Pays for Corporate America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Barnett, Rachel. 2020. “Leading with Meaning: Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matters in U. S. Education.” *Perspectives in Education* 38(2). Retrieved November 18, 2023 (https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie/article/view/4521/3928).

Bell, Joyce M. and Douglas Hartmann. 2007. “Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of "Happy Talk.” *American Sociological Review* 72(6). Retrieved April 16, 2022 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/000312240707200603?journalCode=asra).

Benjamin, Ruha. 2021. “Ruha Benjamin.” Retrieved October 13, 2023 (https://www.ruhabenjamin.com/).

Berrey, Ellen. 2015. *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and David Dietrich. 2011. “The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634(1). Retrieved December 8, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/0002716210389702).

Burawoy, Michael. 1998. “The Extended Case Method.” *Sociological Theory* 16(1). Retrieved May 15, 2022 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/0735-2751.00040?saml_referrer).

Burns, Nancy, Laura Evans, Gerald Gamm, Corrine McConnaughy. 2008. “Pockets of Expertise: Institutional Capacity in Twentieth-Century State Legislatures.” *Studies in American Political Development* 22(2). Retrieved August 3, 2023 (https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/studies-in-american-political-development/article/abs/pockets-of-expertise-institutional-capacity-in-twentiethcentury-state-legislatures/F3DEC1E16FBC101228A54DCE6ED1990F).

Clarke, Victoria and Virginia Braun. 2017. “Thematic Analysis.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12(3). Retrieved November 16, 2023 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613).

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2010. "The New Politics of Community." *American Sociological Review* 75(1). Retrieved October 13, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122410363293).

Cuádraz, Holguín Gloria and Lynet Uttal. 1999. "Intersectionality and In-depth Interviews: Methodological Strategies for Analyzing Race, Class, and Gender." *Race, Gender & Class* 6(3). Retrieved August 25, 2023 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/41674900?seq=1&saml_data=eyJzYW1sVG9rZW4iOiI4MjY1YjQwNi03ZWYzLTQ5YjQtYjdjYS1kNmEzMTM1ODQ3ODYiLCJlbWFpbCI6ImVjYzkxMzY5QHVnYS5lZHUiLCJpbnN0aXR1dGlvbklkcyI6WyJlMWE2ZWYyNy0xMWQ4LTQ0NGYtOTM3ZS01ZjNhNDExMzIwNTkiXX0).

DiMaggio, Paul J. and Walter W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48(2). Retrieved November 22, 2023 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095101?casa_token=r3_au9h-eaQAAAAA%3AUlSeh8v2q0cpI8QkM0PwtyMa1xEvbNa2PQrTFgLUheXGW1W6E-KXPR04n_3sdozO59YN5X4by6pmC3EcAoFMY1owywIwsKnyqdezWRzztCdGFP1K0Wg&seq=1).

Dumitrescu, Lucian. 2021. "'Pockets of Efficiency' in a Low Capacity State: Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21(3). Retrieved August 3, 2023 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683857.2021.1929390).

Edelman, Lauren B., Sally Riggs Fuller, and Iona Mara-Drita. 2001. "Diversity Rhetoric and the Managerialization of Law." *American Journal of Sociology* 106(6). Retrieved November 11, 2023 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/321303).

Fotaki, Marianna and Allison Pullen. 2019. *Diversity, Affect and Embodiment in Organizing*. Cham, Switzerland: Macmillan. Retrieved October 16, 2023 (https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-98917-4.pdf).

Gupta, Akhil. 2006. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics and the Imagined State" in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, edited by A. Sharma and A. Gupta. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. Retrieved February 3, 2023 (https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ugalib/detail.action?docID=7104555).

Hamilton, Laura, Kelly Nielsen, and Veronica Lerma. 2023. "Diversity is a Corporate Plan": Racialized Equity Labor among University Employees." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(6). Retrieved November 18, 2023 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2022.2089049).

Herring, Cedric and Loren Henderson. 2012. "From Affirmative Action to Diversity: Toward a Critical Diversity Perspective." *Critical Sociology* 38(5). Retrieved May 2, 2022 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0896920511402701).

Hewson, Claire. 2017. "Research Design and Tools for Internet Research." in *The Sage Online Handbook of Research Methods (2nd Ed.)*, edited by N. G. Fielding, R. M. Raymond, and G. Blank. London: Sage. Retrieved October 16, 2023 (https://oro.open.ac.uk/48050/2/Fielding%20et%20al%20Hewson%20chapter%20-%202nd%20ed%20FINAL%20VERSION.doc.pdf).

Holland, Megan M. and Karly Sarita Ford. 2021. "Legitimating Prestige through Diversity: How Higher Education Institutions Represent Ethno-Racial Diversity across Levels of Selectivity." *The Journal of Higher Education* 92(1). Retrieved May 2, 2022 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00221546.2020.1740532#:~:text=Through%20analyzing%20the%20admissions%20webpages,student%20populations%20than%20less%20selective).

Joseph, Jalia. 2022. “Generations Later: The Same Furious Passage of the Black Graduate Student.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 66(11). Retrieved November 13, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00027642211066030?casa_token=zW0sN5L0bH4AAAAA%3AixUdG4VHolgusjK0oWzbk0iGg6jQzt2DCegmco5JgnQlFzR6VQjkoMxjUD9xYVPYe-UEe_7CL7t6).

Leonard, David K. 2010. “‘Pockets of Effective Agencies in Weak Governance States: Where are They Likely and Why Does it Matter?” *Public Administration and Development* 30(2). Retrieved August 2, 2023 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pad.565).

Lerma, Veronica, Laura T. Hamilton, and Kelly Nielsen. 2020. “Racialized Equity Labor, University Appropriation and Student Resistance.” *Social Problems* 67(2). Retrieved November 5, 2023 (https://academic.oup.com/socpro/article/67/2/286/5488730?login=true#no-access-message#no-access-message).

Lochmiller, Chad R. 2021. “Conducting Thematic Analysis with Qualitative Data.” *The Qualitative Report* 26(6). Retrieved November 16, 2023 (https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol26/iss6/19/).

Maher, Kit. 2023. “DeSantis Signs Bill to Defund DEI Programs at Florida Public Colleges.” *CNN*. Retrieved September 6, 2023 (https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/15/politics/desantis-signs-dei-defunding-bill/index.html).

McDonnell, Erin Metz. 2017. “Patchwork Leviathan: How Pockets of Bureaucratic Governance Flourish within Institutionally Diverse Developing States.” *American Sociological Review* 82(3). Retrieved August 3, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122417705874).

McGee, Kate. 2023. “Gov. Greg Abbott Tells State Agencies to Stop Considering Diversity in Hiring.” *The Texas Tribune*. Retrieved September 6, 2023 (https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/07/greg-abbott-diversity-equity-inclusion-illegal/).

Meyerson, Debra E. and Maureen A. Scully. 1995. “Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change.” *Organization Science* 6(5). Retrieved March 3, 2023 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/2634965?saml_data=eyJzYW1sVG9rZW4iOiI2MzdjY2JlNi0yZTUwLTQ2ZTYtYWRlYi0wYTk3ZDQxYmI3ZTIiLCJlbWFpbCI6ImVjYzkxMzY5QHVnYS5lZHUiLCJpbnN0aXR1dGlvbklkcyI6WyJlMWE2ZWYyNy0xMWQ4LTQ0NGYtOTM3ZS01ZjNhNDExMzIwNTkiXX0).

Newton, Veronica. 2023. “Hypervisbility and Invisibility: Black Women’s Experiences with Gendered Racial Microaggressions on a White Campus.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 9(2). Retrieved November 11, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23326492221138222).

Orloff, Ann Shola. 2017. “Gendered States Made and Remade: Gendered Labor Policies in the United States and Sweden, 1960-2010” in *The Many Hands of the State: Theorizing Political Authority and Social Control*, edited by K. Morgan and A. Orloff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved October 16, 2023 (https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/many-hands-of-the-state/gendered-states-made-and-remade/01310923DD6DC5680FAD6E48EB701ADA).

Parker, John N. and Edward J. Hackett. 2012. “Hot Spots and Hot Moments in Scientific Collaborations and Social Movements.” *American Sociological Association* 77(1). Retrieved February 23, 2023 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0003122411433763).

Portocarrero, Sandra and James T. Carter. 2022. “Diversity Initiatives in the US Workplace: A Brief History, Their Intended and Unintended Consequences.” *Sociology Compass* 16(7). Retrieved November 5, 2023 (https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/soc4.13001).

Ray, Victor. 2019. “A Theory of Racialized Organizations.” *American Sociological Review* 84(1). Retrieved April 30, 2022 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0003122418822335).

Reich, Jennifer A. 2021. "Power, Positionality, and the Ethic of Care in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Sociology* 44. Retrieved September 28, 2023 (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11133-021-09500-4#citeas).

Sims, Christo. 2017. *Disruptive Fixation: School Reform and the Pitfalls of Techno-Idealism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Small, Mario Luis. 2008. "Lost in Translation: How Not to Make Qualitative Research More Scientific." in *Report from Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research*. Washington, DC: National Science Foundation. Retrieved September 28th, 2022 (https://socthesis.fas.harvard.edu/files/socseniorthesis//files/small_lost.pdf).

Swan, Elaine and Steve Fox. 2010. "Playing the Game: Strategies of Resistance and Co-optation in Diversity Work." *Gender, Work and Organization* 17(5). Retrieved February 23, 2023 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2010.00524.x).

Sweet, Paige. 2021. *The Politics of Surviving: How Women Navigate Domestic Violence and Its Aftermath*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2023. "The Assault on DEI." Retrieved Oct. 8, 2023 (https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-assault-on-dei?cid=gen_sign_in).

Ura, Alexa. 2023. "Hispanics Officially Make Up the Biggest Share of Texas' Population, New Census Numbers Show." Retrieved November 16, 2023 (https://www.texastribune.org/2023/06/21/census-texas-hispanic-population-demographics/).

Verhoeven, Imrat and Jan Willem Duyvendak. 2017. "Understanding Governmental Activism." *Social Movement Studies* 16(5). Retrieved April 13, 2023 (https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1338942).