

White DEI professionals' perception of their contribution to advancing workplace diversity, equity and inclusion: leveraging and decentering whiteness

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Abstract

Purpose – This research applies social identity theory (SIT) to examine how White diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals perceive their role and contributions to advancing workplace DEI.

Design/methodology/approach – Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to structure and guide the study, and data were collected from interviews with 16 White DEI professionals.

Findings – The SIT concept of social categorization was selected as a framework to discuss the findings, which were divided into two sections: in-group identity and out-group identity. The participants' in-group identities demonstrated how the participants leveraged the participants' Whiteness to grant the participants the influence and agency to perform DEI work. The participant's out-group identities revealed how the participants attempted to decenter the participants' Whiteness and unpack insecurities related to the participants' White identity and DEI contributions. Each of these findings has been associated with a specific role: leader, beneficiary, ally and pathfinder.

Practical implications – The practical implications of this study are critically examining White DEI employees' lived experience to develop an understanding of Whiteness while holding White people accountable for DEI efforts within workplaces.

Originality/value – Deeper and more honest conversations are needed to explore the phenomenon of how White DEI professionals enact and perceive the DEI contributions of the White DEI professionals. Therefore, this paper will provide further discussion on literature concerning White individuals engaged in organizational-level DEI work.

Keywords Social identity theory, Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), Whiteness

Paper type Research paper

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, programming and reporting have traditionally been the responsibility of the human resources (HR) department. In a study led by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the results indicated that those who identify as White and work in HR are likely to “see” discrimination in the workplace three times less than their Black HR counterparts (Gurchiek, 2020). There is also evidence that those who identify as White have a higher tolerance for workplace racism (Hunt *et al.*, 2021).



These findings have motivated the purpose of this study, which is to explore how White DEI professionals perceive their role and contribution to workplace DEI.

Most of the critique about workplace DEI initiatives seems to focus on the rationale (i.e. business case training versus morality case) and outcomes (i.e. changed behaviors, mental shifts, organizational change, etc.), but there is minimal attention focused on the individuals who take on the responsibility to foster DEI in the workplace. Exceptions include diversity management practitioners and scholars who have and should continue to debate the effectiveness of those who identify as White engaging in, and especially leading DEI agendas (Collins *et al.*, 2021; Salter and Migliaccio, 2019). This study adds to this discussion by holistically examining the lived experience of 16 White DEI professionals who represent multiple industries, social identities and DEI functional areas.

When considering the positionality and impact of White individuals undertaking the mission of DEI, a few perspectives have emerged. On one hand, a perceived benefit is that those who identify as White and help facilitate DEI work can be more effective in building bridges and educating other White people (Collins *et al.*, 2021). A counterpoint is that those who identify as White will never be as effective at delivering antiracist education due to the lack of lived experiences (DiAngelo, 2018; Flynn, 1999). Of particular concern is that White individuals can resort to inaction when they feel “in over their head,” out of their comfort zone and/or challenged beyond their understanding (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014).

This debate provides impetus for more research. Deeper and more honest conversations are needed to explore the phenomenon of how White DEI professionals enact and perceive their DEI contributions. Our research’s aim is to provide further discussion on literature concerning White individuals engaged in organizational-level DEI work. The theoretical framework of SIT will be reviewed, followed by a description of the interpretative phenomenological research with 16 participants and findings of the study that discuss the experience of White DEI employees navigating their workplace. The practical implications of this study are critically examining White DEI employees’ lived experience to develop an understanding of whiteness while holding White people accountable for DEI efforts within their workplaces.

White professionals facilitating organizational-level DEI

Research examining DEI within the context of the workplace has generally focused on “organizational demography” and the “removal of obstacles to [allow] the full participation and contribution of employees” (Roberson, 2006, p. 217). In this study, DEI efforts are acknowledged as attempts to increase the representation of underrepresented groups, establish equitable outcomes and provide a welcoming environment that values diverse people, perspectives, cultures and interests. The integration of DEI into HR functional areas dates back to the 1980s after many affirmative action programs were ending (Kollen, 2016) and several corporations were losing discrimination lawsuits (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). At the onset, the objective of DEI initiatives was to minimize disruption to productivity and reduce personnel conflicts, but now the focus is slowly shifting to reflect a moral imperative (Wong, 2019). Yet, completely shifting away from the business case within organizations seems unlikely. DEI professionals will still have to justify their work to organizational leaders, which Carrillo Arciniega (2021) described as “selling diversity to [W]hite men” (p. 228). If this is true, DEI work will remain at risk of being performative or at risk of putting forward initiatives and commitments that cannot be delivered on, thus causing more harm to the movements (Wellman, 2022). Velasco and Sansone (2019) explained that because White professionals account for more than 50% of workers in private industries, and White men are overrepresented in leadership positions, DEI efforts will be ineffective without their buy-in and participation. Wellman continues with an example of the Black Squares that many

people, including companies, used to show support of #BlackLivesMatter and the lack of resulting resources following this campaign to support Black individuals within the workplace such as advocating for better policies (2019; Kalina, 2020).

When discussing survey results of how White people have responded to greater efforts to promote DEI, Dover *et al.* (2016) explained that some participants indicated they felt threatened by “pro-diversity” initiatives and at risk of being targeted because of their White identity, which made some participants unwilling to engage with their BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) colleagues, especially with those identified as Black. Although there has been heightened attention to anti-Blackness after the murder of George Floyd and the racial protest in May 2020, prior research acknowledged anti-Black racism as a pervasive social and organizational issue (Ashburn-Nardo *et al.*, 2017; Larson, 2016). This is further supported in recent academic research in management in which some researchers argue that due to the fear of this backlash, research is moving forward in an “anesthetized,” for fear of addressing this or that sensitive topic head on (Paché, 2022).

There are few studies that have explored how White DEI professionals approach their work through a race-conscious mentality (i.e. Liberman *et al.*, 2011; Smith and Redington, 2010), but more recent studies are needed to reflect the numerous changes within society and progress made within diversity management discourse. Moreover, having an awareness of how individuals perceive their self-concept through their social identity is essential to realizing the centrality of race within this particular study, especially as it relates to Whiteness, known as the experience, power and privilege associated with being White (Grimes, 2002).

Theoretical framework

Social identity theory (SIT) is a human behavior theory explaining how and why individuals identify more strongly with certain groups of people based on salient identities such as race, gender or age and the impact of that alignment to a group of people with similar identities (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). There are three cognitive processes of SIT: *social categorization*, *social identification* and *social comparison* (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). *Social categorization* is the process in which an individual cognitively determines social identity markers to categorize themselves into groups based on similarities with other individuals (Turner *et al.*, 1987). *Social identification* is an individual’s knowing of their belongingness to a group and that an individual attributes some value to belonging to that group (Tajfel, 1972). Postmes *et al.* (2013) expands on this theory by identifying two components of social identity: positive value and relationship between oneself and the in-group. *Social comparison* is an individual comparison between oneself and others. The benefits of social comparison are linked to improve self-enhancement and reduce uncertainty in social situations (Marescaux *et al.*, 2021).

Social categorization and race

The salient categories of *social categorization* include race, age and gender (Stolier and Freeman, 2016). Researchers theorize that race is a more salient identity than other identities in some research (Zhou *et al.*, 2014) due to the stable basis for *social categorization* in social settings where there are race divides (Van Bavel and Cunningham, 2009).

The result of *social categorization* is that an individual is more likely to respond to a person of a different social group with the characteristics of the social group versus seeing individual characteristics of the individual. This social categorization is inevitably hierarchical, reflecting that social environment individuals are navigating due to the nature of how social categorization reinforces the moral superiority of the social group an individual selects into (Presaghi and Rullo, 2018).

In this research, we are focusing on those who have socially categorized themselves as White. Whiteness is not only identifying the biological elements of European ancestry, but also social and cultural identity (Eichstedt, 2001). As Swan notes, “[W]hiteness has been conceptualized through various perspectives as a constellation of social and cultural practices, a performance, a bodily style, a discursive practice, a psychosocial process, a strategic resource, an epistemology, lived body experience, and a relation to space” (2017, p. 548). Thus, it is difficult for White people to see their “Whiteness” in their everyday actions and behaviors and more challenging for them to see their own role in dismantling systems that have benefitted White people and excluded People of Color to a large degree, often without explicit awareness of doing so (DiAngelo, 2018).

Theorists argue it is important to identify Whiteness in research, especially in discussing race, for two main reasons. The first reason is a perceived lack of awareness of White identity by the dominant culture, even though marginalized communities are acutely aware of its existence (Owen, 2007). The second reason is to deconstruct the social concept of race and encourage accountability (Applebaum, 2016). Research has indicated that action toward accountability is critical for White people to begin to address systemic racism and ultimately take part in dismantling systemic racism (Applebaum, 2010). Over the last ten years, much of the research about SIT and race relations has focused on bias, prejudice and stereotyping and the impact that SIT has on these cognitive functions (Ferrucci and Tandoc, 2018; Brown, 2000). Recent SIT research has attempted to explain the role of competitive category usage (Klauer *et al.*, 2014; Ferera *et al.*, 2018; Hu *et al.*, 2022), cross-cutting categorization (Goar, 2007) and the concept of organizational belongingness (Ombanda *et al.*, 2022). The latter has been used to understand perceptions of minimization from the standpoint of minorities (Siu Chow and Crawford, 2004), which has subsequently explained the need and success of employee resource groups (ERGs) (Welbourne *et al.*, 2017). In a similar way, SIT can potentially help understand how White DEI professionals leverage and decenter their Whiteness to advance DEI in the workplace.

Methodology

According to Smith and Shinebourne (2012), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is best used for relatively new research topics about which little is known and topics viewed as inherently complex. This is the case for White DEI professionals. Their experience is both understudied and arguably complex. There seems to be a scarcity of peer-reviewed scholarship that unpacks the duality of Whiteness in the context of work, and there is a limited understanding of DEI work as a career and a profession. On account of these overlapping curiosities, the aim of this study is to apply a race-conscious lens to explore the participants’ perceptions of their DEI role and contributions to advancing DEI in the workplace. This objective is parallel to the following research questions.

- RQ1. What is the lived experience of White DEI professionals who get paid to enact workplace DEI within their organization?
- RQ2. How do White DEI professionals perceive their role within their organization?
- RQ3. How do White DEI professionals perceive their contribution to advancing workplace DEI?

One of the distinctive features of IPA is that the researcher is interested in understanding the participant’s world and viewpoint as a strategy to learn about the phenomenon under investigation (Nizza *et al.*, 2021; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Essentially, the way the participants examine their world and their personal experience is considered the data, and the way researchers interpret the participants’ perception is a part of the analysis. Thus, the underlying objective is to make sense of the participants’ experiences. In this study,

how the participants understand, utilize, accentuate and attenuate their Whiteness for the purposes of their job DEI responsibilities was the main focus. Leveraging and
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Researchers' positionality

In phenomenological research, the researchers are not assumed to be able to detach from their preconceptions; thus, it is important to understand the role of the researchers in the research. The research team is composed of five researchers. One contributor identifies as Black, three authors identify as White and another identifies as Asian. We all identify as cisgender and female. Four of us are educators and researchers focused on leadership, management, DEI and HR. The remaining author is a graduate assistant.

Although our names and abbreviated profiles were included in the recruitment materials, a deliberate decision was made by the Black researcher (and supported by the remaining authors) to refrain from the data collection process. This meant that the Black researcher did not conduct interviews to minimize any potential discomfort or lack of transparency from participants when they were asked questions about their race, allyship efforts and experience with facilitating antiracism initiatives at work. However, the Black researcher led the data analysis in collaboration with the other researchers who each conducted the interviews.

Data collection and participants

Purposive sampling was utilized in this research study, given the need to find participants who were "relevant to [the] research question" (Lee and Lings, 2008, p. 214). Initially, a convenience sample of potential participants was contacted directly by researchers, due to their known characteristics as a person who identifies as White and working in a paid DEI role at a large organization. To supplement these efforts, convenient sampling methods were used by posting materials on *LinkedIn*, a social media site for professionals. Participants who responded to the post were asked about their main job responsibilities to ensure it was within the scope of the study, and then participants were invited to join a *Zoom* meeting with two researchers, who also identified as White. The participants were each sent an electronic consent form, which shared the purpose of the study. Each meeting was audio recorded, lasted from a minimum of 60 min and then was transcribed, which amounted to over 80 pages of text. These documents were stored within *Nvivo*, qualitative software, which provided researchers the opportunity to collaboratively engage with the data.

Participants

Relevant demographic information was collected from each participant (see [Table 1](#)), and it was determined after the first 10 interviews that the sample pool needed more diversification. Although IPA research promotes an idiographic approach to data collection and analysis and IPA encourages modest homogenous samples (Brocki and Wearden, 2006), we sought more male representation. Since there were initially no cisgender heterosexual males, we extended our recruitment efforts beyond our initial point of saturation to ensure they were included in the study, which resulted in a total of 16 interviews.

There was diversity among the participants' DEI job responsibilities. A couple of the participants held executive leadership positions and other participants represented different DEI functional areas, such as compliance, analytics, onboarding, consulting and general DEI programming. Different industries were represented as well. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

Data analysis

There is a consensus among IPA researchers that both convergent and divergent experiences enhance the richness of the data (Larkin *et al.*, 2006; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith,

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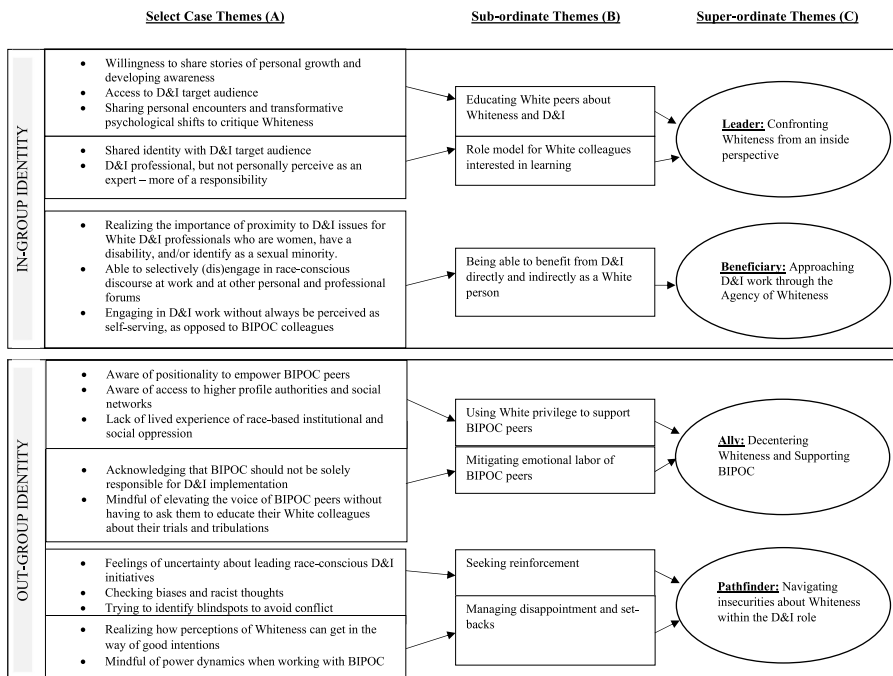
Participant	Name	Gender	Age/Generation	Sexual orientation	Industry
1	Amy	Cisgender female	Gen X	Heterosexual	Healthcare
2	Brenda	Cisgender female	Baby Boomer	Heterosexual	Financial services
3	Caitlin	Cisgender female	Millennial	Bisexual	Government
4	David	Cisgender male	Millennial	Gay	Technology
5	Erin	Cisgender female	Millennial	Heterosexual	Retail
6	Francine	Cisgender female	Gen X	Heterosexual	Pro sports/ entertainment
7	Gillian	Cisgender female	Millennial	Lesbian	Consulting
8	Heather	Cisgender female	Millennial	Heterosexual	Retail
9	Ian	Cisgender male	Millennial	Gay	Securities
10	Jason	Cisgender male	Millennial	Gay	Retail
11	Kelly	Cisgender female	Gen X	Heterosexual	Consulting
12	Luke	Cisgender male	Millennial	Heterosexual	Retail
13	Matt	Cisgender male	Millennial	Heterosexual	Media
14	Nate	Cisgender male	Baby Boomer	Heterosexual	Non-profit
15	Oscar	Cisgender male	Millennial	Heterosexual	Retail
16	Pam	Cisgender female	Gen X	Heterosexual	Real estate

Table 1. Participants' information (N = 16)

Source(s): Table by authors

2004; Yardley, 2008); and therefore, an iterative process of analysis is recommended and should be recognized as a central component of IPA research. Smith *et al.* (2009) referred to this as the hermeneutic circle, a way of conceptualizing the data as a dynamic relationship that requires researchers to look at each individual transcript as a critical “part” that contributes to understanding the “whole” phenomenon. We adopted this approach by focusing on the cumulative meaning added by each participant’s contribution. To achieve this level of specificity, a six-step IPA process recommended by Smith *et al.* (2009) was closely followed and a seventh step was added based on the adaptation offered by Charlick *et al.* (2016).

The first step involved becoming well acquainted with the text and the second step consisted of capturing initial reactions through thorough notations. The level of focus and detail needed for each case reflects the idiographic foundations of IPA research. When given careful attention, Smith and Osborn (2003) suggested the notations and reactions captured from each transcript should be rich enough to qualify as a stand-alone investigation of the phenomenon. Thus, the data collected from each of the 16 participants were analyzed in sequence, marked for initial codes and treated as unique and individual cases. After 16 interviews, we determined we reached saturation with no additional themes emerging from the data. Data saturation included a saturation table in which common themes were logged after each interview to determine if new themes were emerging in each subsequent interview (Kerr *et al.*, 2010). Within each case, initial themes emerged, which was consistent with step three of IPA. Subsequently, the initial themes in each case were integrated to complete the fourth process in IPA (see Figure 1, column A). Step five involved forming sub-ordinate themes, which are patterns that emerged across the 16 individual cases (see Figure 1, column B). Step six involved clustering the sub-ordinate themes to draw conclusions, known as superordinate themes (see Figure 1, column C). At this stage of the research, member checks were completed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research with the goal of ensuring that our initial interpretations were in alignment with each of the members involved in the research (Goldblatt *et al.*, 2011). A seventh step was included to associate theory and other referents to make final interpretations of the collective findings. For this step, SIT was used



Source(s): Figure by authors. Structure of diagram inspired by Corley & Gioia (2004)

Figure 1.
Theme progression

to pursue a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by categorizing the participants' social identities through an in/out complex in reference to their race and professional DEI role.

Discussion of findings

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants' DEI job responsibilities encouraged their proclivity to think about the implications of race and racism. As a result of approaching their work with a race-conscious awareness, it was evident that the participants routinely compared their experiences and interpretations with individuals from different racial groups. The participants expressed an interest in how they were perceived by their White colleagues. When considering how the participants engaged in social comparison and reflected on their social identifications, the concept of social categorization was selected as the main framework to discuss the findings, which were divided into two sections, *in-group identity* and *out-group identity*.

The participants' in-group identities demonstrated how their Whiteness granted them the influence and agency to perform their DEI work. The participant's out-group identities revealed how they attempted to decenter their Whiteness and unpack insecurities related to their White identity and DEI contributions. Each of these findings has been associated with a specific role: *leader*, *beneficiary*, *ally* and *pathfinder*.

Leader: confronting whiteness through the influence of whiteness

The participants shared how they obtained their DEI roles. There were some participants who applied for existing positions, many participants disclosed that their position was a part

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of new DEI programming and projects, there were a few participants who were appointed to their DEI position and a couple of individuals who claimed to have no prior DEI work experience or interest in advocating for DEI within the company prior to being in a DEI role. The latter was the case for Brenda, who shared that in her organization the newly appointed vice president of DEI knew her “*reputation for getting things done.*” Although she did not have any official training, she explained that she took the DEI position because she agreed that her project management, change management and people management skills needed to be involved with a major initiative such as DEI.

Most of the participants did not hold high-profile leadership positions, but it was evident that many of them were leaders among their peers. Some participants mentioned that they were recognized as DEI experts within their organization, so they had higher expectations to always exhibit desirable DEI behaviors, which was not necessarily their goal. Some participants seemed more comfortable with that responsibility, while others rejected that pressure. This reaction was expressed by Ian:

I don't want it to come across like I'm teaching people because I need to be taught myself. And so, having that open mindset that I will continue making mistakes I'll continue needing to learn and grow in my own journey as a White person and learning how I can best show up.

Other participants were much more willing to embrace the pressures and responsibilities of their DEI role. Gillian said:

Leadership is keeping DEI [at the] top of mind as a major priority and providing strategic guidance for them. If I'm being real, it is a lot of hetero White folks in leadership, who are just not keeping the work top of mind. It's all bottom-line business [and so] we're here to stay in their ear and ensure they're all doing DEI and infusing it organically into the initiatives that they're already prioritizing.

Whether or not participants were comfortable with being a leader in their organization, the majority of the participants accepted the responsibility to help educate their White colleagues to understand the complexity of their power and privilege. There were a few participants who went a step above and explained they also provided guidance on how to use their power and privilege to support their BIPOC colleagues (see subsequent section).

Sharing their testimonies of personal growth, using analogies and contemporary examples of White supremacy and sharing their own ways of conceptualizing complex ideas and perspectives within DEI discourse were often mentioned as strategies to educate their White peers. When discussing antiracism, for instance, Luke explained that his White colleagues are more likely to engage in conversation when his talking points are structured with a solution approach and a personal touch. He said:

I think about antiracism on three different levels – the personal, interpersonal, and systemic because it helps me think about what success looks like at each of those levels . . . On a personal level, it's identifying and interrupting biases and anti-blackness and racism . . . Lately, for example, if I have a racist thought or I see a person of color and I have a sort of one of those immediate thoughts like being able to catch myself and recognize it and have an anti-racist thought, in return. And then I think success means for me lately has been not feeling shame when that happens.

Drawing connections to DEI scholarly discourse and ideologies were identified as other ways to inform their White colleagues. On several occasions, the participants referred to the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) and Okun's Ladder of Empowerment (2016) as tools to help their well-intended White colleagues realize that their Whiteness is not confined to negativity. Those participants explained that they routinely return to these frameworks and other models to remind themselves and others that their White identity and positivity can coincide with one another.

Beneficiary: approaching DEI work through the agency of whiteness

In the context of this study, the participants' role as a beneficiary is reflective of how their White identity provides them with advantages to perform DEI work. To describe this role, this finding refers to how some participants perceived being White and engaging in DEI work does not always carry the same expectations or connotations as their BIPOC colleagues. Even participants who carried marginalized identities indicated their White identity gave them a sense of agency that was not given to their BIPOC peers. This was explained by Amy who said:

I know that I have value being White and I can reach other White folks [and so] I see a unique opportunity. Sadly, I see White folks listening to me differently than my peers of color [and so] I can help in moving this work forward . . . and maybe that's why I've been hired at organizations as a White woman.

This notion of Whiteness as a source of agency was further described by Francine who said, *"I know that I can have a message delivered that won't be perceived as angry because I'm White and blonde."* Similarly, Jason, who identifies as gay, said *"I deepen my voice and mask my identity to be heard."* In each of the above instances, the participants realized the power granted in their Whiteness and their ability to be seen as an "insider" in the dominant group to help facilitate change.

Other participants shared the same realization and discussed how to leverage the inherent power from their White identity and use their privilege to accomplish their DEI work. Kelly specifically talked about consciously excluding terms and labels that could cause her White colleagues to feel attacked, so she used coded language like "oppressor" instead of "racist" or "White supremacy." Kelly also said:

White folks also code switch to advance DEI efforts. Hence, discourse in DEI work is persuasive, which means a heightened sense of care and intentionality must be considered with each move to achieve anticipated outcomes . . . [This is because] everyone has been socialized to operate within whiteness. Meaning our culture is White, our systems are set-up to support Whites, and the value placed on whiteness is much higher than any other social identity.

Each of the above considerations of Whiteness focused on how the participants were able to use their White identity to engage their White colleagues about DEI issues. These insights also made it apparent that the participants were able to benefit from doing DEI work with limited risk due to their in-group identity.

This idea is specifically connected to comments made by participants about DEI work being something different from antiracism efforts, which was described as something much more challenging. For instance, Kelly referred to antiracism as *"controversial and fraught."* Kelly also said:

DEI practitioners are going to pull on different levers. And for me . . . my lane is working with White leaders. Now, do those White leaders also need to be exposed to DEI officers and consultants of color? Yes, they do [but] a major challenge right now is cancel culture, which has really contributed to this notion that White people are so afraid of the people of color in their organizations and being called "alt-right."

Not all participants shared the same apprehension as Kelly. Exceptions were those who took a strong stance and willingness to engage in antiracism work, such as Amy and Oscar who both have close proximity to race through interracial relationships, Gillian who actively engages in public policy and Ian who emphasized the implications and dangers of performative allyship.

Attention to race and racism within DEI practice continually resurfaced as a crucial talking point as the participants discussed their job responsibilities. However, the remaining findings illustrate how the participants identified how their White identity interfered with their personal and professional DEI efforts.

Ally: decentering whiteness and supporting BIPOC

Mio and Rodes (2003) described an ally as “an individual in a sociopolitical demographic group on the upside of power who actively advocates for individuals or classes of individuals in a different sociopolitical demographic group on the downside of power” (p. 107). This role is applicable to the participants who demonstrated a desire to decenter their Whiteness when supporting issues that impact their BIPOC colleagues; therefore, the idea of being an ally was aspirational. Many participants mentioned that their White identity limited their ability to have the same lived experience and connection to antiracism work as their BIPOC colleagues.

Additionally, many of the participants explained that they would like to see race relations improve, but they are not always equipped or allowed to focus on antiracism efforts at work due to the priorities in the organization’s DEI plan. This barrier was also related to how some participants problematized the idea of being an “ally.” Oscar said:

I don’t discourage people from coming out and saying they’re an ally. But, I’d like people to take a step further and really be an ally. What are you doing to be an ally? Don’t just call yourself an ally.

David also shared his concern about being recognized as an ally. He said:

I just feel like it’s not me to be the one to decide whether I am an ally or not. I feel like it’s not a constant badge that you get to wear forever. Like it’s something that is demonstrated in actions on a daily basis. So, I can choose an action in one context, that is, an action that created allyship and demonstrated that I’m an ally and a few hours later, I can do something that completely refutes that . . . so I wouldn’t be an ally in that moment.

The above statements seemed to be aligned with the idea that “racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be racist one minute and an antiracist the next” (Kendi, 2019, p. 10). Thus, the role of allyship appeared to be accompanied with a heightened sense of accountability and commitment to taking action, which might not always be attainable within the participants’ scope of work despite their focus on DEI.

Not all participants shared this level of concern about allyship. Although other participants realized the constraints of elevating antiracism initiatives within their professional role, they shared goals of how to support antiracism on a personal level – not necessarily through organizational change. Thus, some participants described an ongoing tension of feeling a responsibility to engage in antiracism work as a way to “*take on the emotional labor of BIPOC,*” as described by Brenda. Brenda explained that it took her time and experience to realize the additional taxation on her BIPOC colleagues. She said, “*I now understand about putting all the work on the backs of the people who are underrepresented and have been oppressed.*” Francine had a similar realization:

I really grapple with working in this space as a White person. And whether I should or shouldn’t? I mean I have these thoughts all the time, like what am I doing, am I appropriating? I don’t know. And then, on the flip side I’m like well, it should definitely not be all up to People of Color to do the hard work to change systems that are actively oppressing them. You know that’s not fair either. And we’ve all seen companies who have a White leadership then hire the first Black executive to lead DEI . . . but that’s not how it should be either.

Other participants expressed a similar dilemma and mentioned ways they supported their BIPOC colleagues. Ian explained that relaying the concerns of BIPOC to organizational leaders or sharing the perspective of his BIPOC colleagues in spaces where they are not represented is a “*responsibility to advance diversity and equity and amplify the voices of BIPOC.*” Heather described a similar approach and referred to the importance of how storytelling and counter-storytelling can be a starting point to consider change or a turning point to mobilize action. Francine took a more radical approach. She said:

I'm very interested in pointing out inequities, so a disrupter is who I am. I identify closely with John Lewis' idea of "good trouble." I firmly believe we all need to get in good trouble more than we do . . . I know I get excluded because of it. I was excluded from a meeting that I know I should have been in and I tried to draw attention to it. You know what I heard back about it? [My White colleague] said I love that you're trying to go about making change, it's just I would do it more quietly.

Although the participants were at different stages in their careers and had different philosophies about their capacity to contribute to antiracism, it was evident that each of the participants sought to do more about racism. They understood that their development as an ally was guided by their self-awareness and the relationships they had with their BIPOC peers. Collins *et al.* (2021) explained that without well-intended White folks engaging in ally development, they run the risk of being bystanders in the ongoing movement to cultivate a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. With this in mind, confronting and unpacking their assumption about Whiteness seemed crucial to how the participants envisioned their DEI role.

Pathfinder: navigating insecurities about whiteness within the DEI role

The role of *pathfinder* refers to situations when the participants found ways to navigate their insecurities about their Whiteness when attempting to contribute to workplace DEI. Each participant described their struggles in unique ways. Luke, for instance, discussed feelings of uneasiness because he believed that he was "*profiting*" from doing DEI work. Although he deemed the work necessary, he seemed to think that White people should not make money for finding ways to be more welcoming and fairer to marginalized groups. Brenda made a similar, yet different comment about the conflict between her White identity and DEI corporate career. When describing the job search for DEI corporate positions and being White she said:

I do not believe in reverse discrimination, no such thing. But I certainly can relate more personally to feeling like opportunity right now is not at my advantage. And, I also just hate even saying that because it sounds like a whiny White person who's privileged . . . But, I want to make changes in this world and I can make them in that role.

Pam also referred to a situation where she applied to a DEI position and assumed she did not get the position because of her White identity. She said:

I put my name as somebody who could lead the DEI team [but] I think [the hiring manager] knew it was probably best not to have another White person lead our diversity team and that's okay, you know? I mean there was never a conversation about that, but that's okay.

Amy and Pam appeared to position Whiteness differently from the first few findings, which emphasized the advantages of their White identity. Instead, they shared examples of how their White identity seemed to place them at a disadvantage.

Other participants talked about their journey of trying to intentionally step back and give their BIPOC colleagues the opportunity to lead. Gillian said:

I think at first, I felt really defensive and attacked, because it wasn't something that I had facilitated. Over time, I realized I should really center this work from folks of color. Like, this happens all the time, it's the White savior complex - White people getting all the credit, White people stealing work, or robbing folks of work. And I don't think that's what I did but it's a product of being White and privileged.

The above comment mentioned precautions pertaining to White DEI professionals being overbearing in the shared responsibility to co-create social change in the workplace. This concern was discussed by other participants, such as Nate who provided an example of how he consciously checks his White privilege when working with his Black colleagues. He said:

White fragility is always on my mind when I'm receiving critique from People of Color. But it's hard to take critique. It's hard for me to take critique. I really try to listen and be intentional about checking in, especially with my African-American colleagues.

Nate's comment refers to how he felt it was necessary to receive support and reinforcement from his colleagues. Thus, the buy-in he sought, especially from his African-American colleagues, seemed to be an act of respect. The previous comment (from Gillian) suggests that without this step, White DEI professionals run the risk of reproducing White supremacy. Similarly, each of the remarks within this theme involved the participants finding a way to keep their Whiteness "in check" by critiquing themselves and/or receiving feedback from their peers.

Conclusion, implications for practice and future research

The purpose of this research was to deepen the understanding of how White DEI professionals perceive their role and contributions toward workplace DEI. In reflecting upon the main themes of the participants' experiences as a *leader*, *beneficiary*, *ally* and *pathfinder*, it was apparent that the social categorization of being a member of an in-group and out-group influenced how White DEI professionals perceived their work. This conclusion has implications on the learning, development and engagement of aspiring and practicing White DEI professionals seeking to elevate their role as an organizational change agent.

Implications for practice

In regard to the findings about the participants' in-group identities, there is reason to believe that White DEI professionals could benefit from more organizational support. The participants did not reference any organizational tools or forums that guided their professional DEI practice. Unlike BIPOC organizational members who might have the option to seek assistance and support through ERGs (Welbourne *et al.*, 2017; Sisco, 2023), White DEI professionals who are unassociated with a marginalized identity (i.e. women, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer), disabilities, etc.) might not have the same option. They could potentially find value in multiracial communities of practice that regularly engage in dialog about the complexities of DEI. Formalized training and clear expectations about DEI goals (i.e. determining whether or not antiracism is a DEI priority) could be beneficial as well. In turn, the added stability and assistance offered by the organization might ease feelings of anxiety and insecurity pertaining to the out-group identity findings. More broadly, this study can serve as a resource for organizations to acknowledge and respond to the unique personal and professional complexities of White DEI professionals. Those preparing to pursue DEI work might find value in understanding the positionality and experience of the participants in this study as well.

Future research

Learning how the participants perceived their racial identity in relation to their job responsibility prompted thoughts about their job satisfaction and well-being. Exploring these variables within a longitudinal and/or a comparative study looking at DEI professionals from other races and social identities could serve as an expansion of the current study. Unpacking the relationship between the participants' personal commitment to DEI and their organizational commitment might also complement our findings and elevate our understanding of what conditions and incentives advance DEI in the workplace. Apprehensiveness toward allyship is another focus area that could be enlightening. More specifically, insights about why allyship is problematic to some White DEI professionals, as indicated in the third finding of this study, is not fully comprehended. Although there is research that has explained barriers to bystander intervention (Collins *et al.*, 2021) and resistance to organizational DEI initiatives (Bohonos and Sisco, 2021), how employees

draw boundaries between their workplace identity and socio-political affairs outside of work is still an under-researched phenomenon.

Additionally, exploring team dynamics in future iterations of this study could be quite useful as White DEI practitioners often work with other DEI practitioners and interface with other functional teams in partnership to achieve organizational DEI goals (Hays-Thomas and Chrobot-Mason, 2022). The relational dynamics within DEI teams as well as inter-team dynamics would offer insight into the socio-political implications of DEI work. Using a race-conscious and intersectional lens to approach this research is necessary, and it could be enhanced through a comparative analysis study. Overall, we advocate for more scholarly, rigorous research focused on DEI within the context of work. We also encourage everyone to critically reflect on what role each of us, individually and collectively, contributes to dismantling racism in the workplace.

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