

# **Diversity initiatives in the US workplace: A brief history, their intended and unintended consequences**

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## **Abstract**

Diversity initiatives are designed to help workers from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve equitable opportunities and outcomes in organizations. However, these programs are often ineffective. To better understand less-than-desired outcomes and the shifting diversity landscape, we synthesize literature on how corporate affirmative action programs became diversity initiatives and current literature on their effectiveness. We focus specifically on working with mechanisms that make diversity initiatives effective as well as their unintended consequences. When taken together, these literatures point to several inequality-specific omissions in contemporary discussions of organizational diversity initiatives, such as the omission of racial inequality. As we contend in the first section of this review, without affirmative action law, which initially tasked US employers with ending racial discrimination at the workplace, we would not have diversity initiatives. We conclude by providing directions for future research and elaborating on several core foci that scholars might pursue to better (re)connect issues of organizational diversity with the aims of equity, equality and social justice.

## **Introduction**

Our goal in this article is to offer a brief history of diversity initiatives in the US workplace and to review research that highlights which diversity initiatives work and which do not. The aim is to provide a basic understanding of these interventions and strategies. We specifically (1) synthesize literature surrounding how corporate affirmative action programs became diversity initiatives and (2) discuss contemporary research on the aims and efficacy of diversity initiatives. Such discussion offers a window into shifting organizational logics over time as well as insight

into the weaknesses and limitations of contemporary diversity programming, especially when it comes to questions of racial inequality, fairness in organizations and social and economic justice. Diversity initiatives, by way of background, are generally defined as the implementation of one or more practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantage in society (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009). While initial literature on diversity initiatives in US workplaces centered attention on discrimination of racial minorities within organizational contexts, there has been a well-documented shift in this body of research—a shift that seems to increasingly omit the history and goals of affirmative action to end discrimination in the United States and that moves to overly generalized discussions of diversity. Edelman et al. (2001) highlight a prime example, pointing to the disassociation of diversity rhetoric from civil rights law as “the managerialization of law.” They define this process as one “by which legal ideas are refigured by managerial ways of thinking as they flow across the boundaries of legal fields and into managerial and organizational fields” (Edelman et al., 2001, p. 1589). One consequence of managerial discretion in this context is that these conceptions of diversity have merged a variety of non-legal dimensions of diversity (e.g., personality traits) with the legally protected statuses such as race and gender under the same categorical umbrella, thus muddying the goals and boundaries of diversity initiatives more broadly (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022).

The disassociation between diversity initiatives and inequality that we are discussing is unfortunately often mirrored in academic research that shapes organizational diversity best practices and programming. No less troubling is that this work sometimes equates effective organizational diversity with simply recognizing *different personal experiences* (i.e., those not necessarily tied to inequality and marginalized status). Indeed, without the first executive order

calling for affirmative action to end *racial* discrimination, we would not have had diversity initiatives implemented in the US workplace to begin with (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). It is for this reason that, in our view, it is imperative that research attend to racialized inequalities and histories when considering workplace diversity initiatives and effectiveness.

We begin by providing a brief overview of the evolution of diversity initiatives and key shifts in the United States, then turn to current work exploring the mechanisms that help bolster the effectiveness of initiatives that facilitate positive progress—that is, “increased target representation, reduced gaps in career success between targets and nontargets, and increased target inclusion” (Leslie, 2019, p. 538). This synthesis of literature provides a broad understanding of diversity initiatives and their intended and unintended consequences in the workplace. We conclude with a discussion providing directions for future research and elaborating an agenda for how scholars can further extend their examination of organizational diversity initiatives.

### **A Brief History of Diversity Initiatives in the United States**

While many are familiar with diversity initiatives within their own organizations, most are unaware of what laid the field for this billion-dollar industry (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Prior to Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, it was legal to refuse to hire a Black person or to fire a working woman when her life circumstances changed (e.g., when she got pregnant) in most of the United States (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021). To combat such explicit and rampant discrimination faced by Black and female employees, President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 in 1961 (Pierce, 2014). The intent was to affirm the government’s commitment to equal opportunity for all persons qualified to work.

Kennedy's Executive Order specifically asked government contractors to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin" (Exec. Order No. 10925, 1961). It also established the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which was directed by then Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Congress followed up in 1963 by passing the Equal Pay Act, which protected women against wage discrimination (Nelson & Bridges, 1999; for a history of the gender gap, see Goldin, 1990). The order was followed by Congressional passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin (Civil Rights Act, 1964). These initiatives had one shared, common goal: equitable treatment for marginalized groups in the workplace.

The year 1965 ushered in more foundational changes for affirmative action. First, Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Order 11246. This order reinforced the requirement that federal contractors should not discriminate in employment and must take affirmative action to ensure equal opportunity based on race, color, and national origin (Exec. Order No. 11246, 1965).<sup>1</sup> Second, on July 2, 1965, the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity became the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Since its establishment, the EEOC has been the primary enforcer of employment discrimination law (Knight et al., 2022).

The EEOC is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of his or her race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, age, disability or genetic information (Age Discrimination in Employment Act, 1967; Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Civil Rights Act, 1964; Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, 2008; Pregnancy Discrimination Act,

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Johnson added sex to the list in 1967 and religion in 1968.

1978). Today, EEOC laws cover employers with at least 15 employees (20 employees in age discrimination cases), and the commission has the authority to investigate charges of discrimination against employers who are covered by the law (see Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). In sum, the 1960s brought significant reforms that allowed for diversity initiatives to be born.

### **The 1980s: Threats from the Government and the Role of Personnel Experts**

These prior legal formulations changed U.S. workplaces, to be sure, yet neither Kennedy, Johnson, nor other subsequent lawmakers and legislative bodies offered clarity on what affirmative action was precisely or what equal opportunity would or should look like. Such lack of clarity—and corporate uncertainty as to whether or how law would be enacted—created a void for a network of professionals in the personnel area to become what Dobbin (2009) referred to as *equal opportunity experts*. These equal opportunity experts were managers who determined what both equal opportunity and discrimination meant in practice and the American organizational landscape—not judges, lawyers, or lawmakers. As a result, most of our current anti-discrimination policies and diversity initiatives are attributed to the work of personnel experts, who were left with minimal guidance from the federal government to create initiatives through which they would identify discrimination, prevent it, and create equal opportunity (Mathews, 1998).

Although personnel experts drew inspiration from a variety of sources, it is important to note that oftentimes these experts lacked guidance and evidence-based insights upon which to base their initiatives. Furthermore, few were trained to evaluate the efficacy of the initiatives they ultimately implemented (Edelman et al., 1999; Kaiser et al., 2013; Paluck, 2006). As such, they tried to rectify any vagueness of Executive Order 10925 by drawing blueprints for corporate

equal opportunity programs, redesigning personnel systems, and ultimately becoming the architects of new corporate compliance strategies without the necessary expertise (Dobbin, 2009).

During the 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of companies were proud of their anti-discrimination initiatives (Berrey, 2015). Affirmative action became an integral part of the corporate personnel management philosophy and practice which prevailed during those decades (Anand & Winters, 2008). As a result, Black unemployment sharply declined during the 1960s and 1970s (Anderson, 2004). However, when Ronald Reagan came into office on January 20, 1981, he pushed for reduced government involvement in the private sector, including in affirmative action initiatives.

Equal opportunity experts tended to view shifts with the Reagan administration as potential threats to their profession. Indeed, many members of the Reagan administration considered affirmative action practices as transgressing standards of fair competition (Edwards, 1987). Dumbrell (1988) cogently explains that under the executive government there ensued a series of efforts to undermine affirmative action procedures, both those inherited from prior bureaucratic practice and those imposed by court order. One consequence by human resources professionals was the reframing of affirmative action and equity aims as something more flexible, if not politically ambiguous, and that might better be framed as “diversity.”

### **From Affirmative Action to Diversity Initiatives**

Federal compliance requirements did not fully change during the Reagan era, but his administration cut both staffing and funding at the EEOC and at what is now called the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), reducing the sources for monitoring employment practices (Gutman, 1993). Fearing the extinction of their profession, personnel

experts engaged in a rebranding of equal opportunity. This rebranding project involved a change in their rhetoric of justification. Instead of proposing that companies should adopt equal opportunity practices to comply with the law, personnel and equal opportunity experts proposed that companies needed to implement these programs as part of a strategic advantage to help members of diverse groups perform to their potential. This type of rhetoric aligns with what scholars call “the business case for diversity” (e.g., Cox, 1993; Cox & Beale, 1997; Hubbard, 2004), that is, that a diverse workforce, instead of a homogeneous one, produces better business results.

When trying to find the causes of the lack of equal of opportunity, personnel experts claimed that managers were biased when making important decisions such as hiring, promoting, and firing. In order to find a possible solution, personnel experts thought that managers could gain awareness of their biases through generalized diversity training and that this awareness might help change it (Anand & Winters, 2008; Bezrukova et al., 2012). Some popular approaches to end managerial bias in firms are: 1) to try to rule it out through bureaucratic procedures (e.g., job descriptions), 2) to train away bias (e.g., diversity training), and 3) to punish bias or reward lack of bias through bonuses and diversity performance evaluations (Kalev et al., 2006). These practices are informed by the breadth of research on cognitive biases, which peaked during the 1960s and led behavioral scientists to identify new dimensions of bias that could explain the processes that lead people to discriminate (Miller, 2003).

In the six decades that have passed since Kennedy passed Executive Order 10925, hundreds if not thousands of U.S. organizations have implemented diversity initiatives. However, many of these initiatives have been decoupled from the original call to take affirmative action to end discrimination. This is evident in significant and enduring gender and racial/ethnic

inequalities in employment as well as persistent, if not prevalent, and ongoing forms of workplace segregation (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012) and discrimination (e.g., Byron & Roscigno, 2014; Dobbin & Kalev, 2019, 2021; Roscigno et al., 2007). Below we discuss contemporary literatures on diversity initiatives and some underlying mechanisms that make some of these initiatives effective and others either not effective or problematic in their unintended consequences.

### **Diversity Initiatives: What Works and What Does not Work**

Given the growing landscape of diversity management, what has research shown relative to what works and what does not? Although often ambiguous and undifferentiated, diversity initiatives provide stakeholders with at least some information about the values and priorities in an organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Most large organizations embrace some form of diversity initiative, and over 80% have released statements denouncing racial injustice (Agovino, 2020), yet diversity programming may serve mostly as window dressing (Kalev et al., 2006) and in ways that bureaucratically legitimate ongoing discrimination and inequality (Roscigno, 2011). It is thus important to treat seriously and interrogate what types of diversity initiatives have improved the experiences of marginalized people and what diversity initiatives have not improved their experiences (see Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kalev et al., 2006).

### **What Diversity Initiatives Seem to Work as Intended?**

One aforementioned consequence of managerial discretion on diversity initiatives is that over time these programs and definitions have broadened to include non-demographic and/or non-stigmatized identities at the cost of marginalized people. Examples include policies emphasizing the advancement of “all employees” rather than those who have been and continue to be marginalized. Some advocacy in these regards has included an emphasis on “diversity of



thought” (Bastian, 2019)—an emphasis that nearly completely obscures attention to racial and gender equity and inequality.

Although viewpoint diversity can certainly be contextually important (e.g., Cannella et al., 2008; Menz, 2012), it is important to note that identity-conscious practices—that is, those that consider both individual merit and demographic group identity in organizational human resource decision-making—result in better employment outcomes for women and minorities. In this regard and drawing on data from human resource vice presidents at over 100 organizations, Konrad and Linnehan (1995) found that the presence of identity-conscious structures positively predicted the employment status of women and people of color in management. Additionally, Kalev and colleagues (2006) report that targeted programs like diversity networking and mentoring groups are associated with increased representation of White women in management positions. These findings are also supported by subsequent follow-up work that highlights similar trends among the adoption of identity-conscious structures (e.g., Dobbin et al., 2015; Richard et al., 2013; Thomas, 2005)

Another area of success relative to diversity initiatives seems to be when such efforts are tied to goal setting (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002) and scrutiny from governing bodies (Edelman, 1990, 1992). Research in this vein has examined the impact of enforcement actions on workforce demographics. In one classic study, Leonard (1985) found that affirmative action goals and concrete timetables were the largest predictors of organizational diversity. In another now classic study, scholars used over 30 years of EEO data and found that affirmative action plans significantly increased the chances of White women and Black men in management while reducing the chances of White men in management positions, particularly when there was accountability and oversight (Kalev et al., 2006).

Scholars have also considered how accountability and transparency improve the benefits of diversity initiatives. Specifically, research shows that having people or committees dedicated to reducing inequality provides more much needed support to ensuring those goals are met than simply relying on individual actors. Committees with the ability to a) review and edit performance-related reward decisions and b) share data on those decisions were best equipped to reduce critical pay gaps between men and women in organizations (Castilla, 2015). Moreover, tying diversity performance evaluations to bonus structures (i.e., making bonus pay, in part, contingent on how well managers do hitting their diversity-related goals) appears to be associated with increased racial diversity in organizations (Richard et al., 2013). In sum, research largely supports the idea that concrete diversity goal-setting especially when coupled with oversight can provide tangible benefits to marginalized populations in organizations.

Diversity training when it comes to employees has a longstanding history as the organizational go-to to redress discrimination and increase heterogeneity among employees. These trainings tend to vary in their structure, delivery, and areas of focus, but tend to coalesce around this common goal. Some scholars have argued that recent developments in diversity training are “pointless” (e.g., Noon, 2017) while advocating for something better informed by research (Swan, 2009). Others have asserted that the focus on unconscious bias is problematic because it tends to absolve perpetrators of discrimination, which leads them to be held less accountable and perceived as less worthy of punishment when their behavior is attributed to implicit bias.

Meta-analytic evidence on outcomes from over 250 studies helps provide clear insights into under what conditions and for whom these trainings can be beneficial. Berzukova and team

(2016) have conducted the most comprehensive meta-analysis to date and found that overall diversity training has a positive, long-lasting effect on cognitive learning but that attitudinal and behavioral effects decay over time. Additionally, they report that mandated training had larger effects on subsequent behaviors than voluntary; longer trainings had better outcomes than short, one-off trainings; trainings that varied instruction type were more effective than those that only had one type; and the more women present in those trainings, the larger the effect size (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Although some existing forms of diversity training may be effective for addressing individual biases and improving employee relationships, this seems to be less true when oversight, clearcut goals and accountability are lacking. Other forms of diversity training, as we discuss below, seem to either not work at all or tend to be counterproductive.

### **What Diversity Initiatives Do Not Work and Why?**

While researchers and practitioners have uncovered a number of interventions and strategies that have some positive impact on workforce diversity, much scholarship has highlighted how inequality endures despite diversity efforts. That is, certain strategies do *not* have positive effects on the representation, integration, or felt experiences of people who belong to marginalized groups while, in other cases, diversity efforts actually backfire. In this section, we highlight two critical ways that diversity initiatives fail: colorblind ideologies and managerial discretion. In the former, people and organizations adopt diversity frames that obfuscate the ways in which race and White supremacy permeate structures, policies, and practices. The latter—as suggested above in our recognition of the importance of oversight and accountability—points to the fact that managerial discretion seriously undermines diversity initiative effectiveness. We begin with a discussion of colorblind ideologies.

One important insight from recent organizations literature, inequality research and cultural analyses is that *colorblind processes and framing by organizations* tend to undermine genuine diversity efforts (Block, 2016; Ray & Purifoy, 2019; Roscigno, 2011). Colorblind ideologies refer to beliefs that seek to divorce race from issues fundamentally shaped by structural racism. In this way, people might attribute the consequences of racism (e.g., health disparities or food deserts in Black communities) to individual choices (e.g., not prioritizing health or bad eating habits; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004; Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Burke, 2017) rather than to either discriminatory actions or institutionalized processes. Though colorblind ideologies has been theorized across the spectrum of social sciences (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2016; Neville et al., 2013), sociologists have long interrogated the consequences and challenges of these ideologies.

Importantly, Bonilla-Silva (2001) notes that while ideologies themselves do not provide guidance on how one should act or engage, they provide the building blocks and basic principles for people to make sense of and view the social world. The predominance of this ideological approach helps explain why Embrick (2011) discovered that managers at Fortune 1000 companies overwhelmingly excluded race from their definitions of diversity and lacked the ability to detail how they were advancing marginalized people within their organizations. Further, an analysis of employees at over 130 agencies found that the implementation of broad, personal attributes including work history, role, and work style actually resulted in lower promotion rates for racially marginalized employees (Naff & Kellough, 2003). The use of colorblind logics and framing by organizations facilitates inequality under a different, more insidious, amorphous guise—something akin to invisible smog in the air we breathe (Bonilla-Silva, 2012).

One way in which colorblind logics are enacted in ways that detract from discussions of inequality and/or equity is for organizations to simply emphasize or even “amplify” meritocratic principles (Apfelbaum et al., 2016; Leslie et al., 2020; Roscigno, 2011). By considering workplace rewards and status as a product of a person’s competence, racial (and other group) discrimination is simply ignored. Research by Castilla and Benard (2010) demonstrates that, not only are these practices not beneficial, they are detrimental. Specifically, they find that organizational merit-based pay programs reproduce inequality; in their study, managers gave monetary rewards to male employees over equally-qualified female employees when they believed their organizations to be more meritocratic.

No less problematic than the invoking of colorblind logics in ways that reify the status quo in organizations is *the relegation of power and decision-making to individual managers*. As we have highlighted above, managers often construct the meaning of and implement diversity initiatives. This generates a clear tension between organizational desires (promoting or advancing diversity) and managerial desires (autonomy over decision-making). In contexts where companies implement testing to help mitigate bias, managers shift standards or only test certain populations to achieve the outcomes they desire. For example, foundational work in social judgements research shows that when a target fails to act in a stereotype-consistent manner (e.g., by being Black and competent), people shift the standards along which they choose to evaluate that person (Biernat & Mannix, 1994) to those that establish or reiterate double standards for marginalized people (Foschi, 2000). More recent examinations into this phenomenon showed that in white collar hiring situations where candidates took similar exams, only women and people of color had their scores scrutinized or used as a way to disqualify them from consideration while White male candidates who scored poorly did not face the same

scrutiny (Rivera, 2015).

Research on social judgements also highlights a foundational problem with other systems put in place. Given that we know managers have their own desires, motivations, and preferred candidates, the fact that they shift and enact double standards also permeates other central facets of organizational life. This includes, for example, performance evaluations and reporting structures. Research has documented repeatedly that performance evaluations are biased such that they can penalize people of color (e.g., Elvira & Town, 2002; Parsons et al., 2011) and women (e.g., Bauer & Baltes, 2002; Heilman & Caleo, 2018) more than equally performing White men.

Additionally, it seems that grievance structures, rather than curbing discrimination in the workplace, often create fertile ground for retaliation claims (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022) or dissuade victims of discrimination from pursuing their grievances. On this latter point, Kaiser and colleagues (2013) used experiments to highlight how non-marginalized group members assume that grievance structures are fair and consequently become less able to detect when discrimination may, in fact, be happening. This is supported by research that documents that diversity initiatives shape how organizational actors engage with both the organization and those who are beneficiaries of those programs (e.g., Dover et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2018; Wilkins et al., 2015).

### **Future Research Possibilities**

When we engage in sociological conversations around diversity initiatives in organizations, we traditionally refer to the compelling empirical evidence that scholars have provided to show what DEI practices work and do not work (e.g., Dobbin et al., 2011; Kalev et al., 2006). As we have shown, the literature also offers a clear timeline of the evolution of diversity initiatives. An initial

lack of clarity around affirmative action among personnel experts eventually led to the rise of diversity management (Dobbin, 2009). There has been a longstanding dissociation of diversity initiatives from their origins and treatment in civil rights law (Edelman et al., 2001).

Additionally, there are ongoing ambiguities in interpretation across localities and between and within organizations (Berrey, 2015). Despite such contributions, there are important gaps in the literature that we hope the field will address over the next decade. Doing so, we believe, can make our conversations around DEI richer and hopefully also make related programming that much more effective.

For example, we currently lack an understanding of how social-organizational processes shape the everyday life of diversity personnel in U.S. universities, which, in addition to being educational spaces, are also workplaces. Given the critical role of DEI workers in the endeavor to include members of historically disadvantaged groups in universities across the United States, we encourage scholars to do research on diversity officials, those who carry out the tasks associated with diversity work in organizations beyond corporate America. While there is forthcoming work studying this population (e.g., Portocarrero & Eyal, 2022) and work studying professionals who do what Wingfield (2019) calls equity work, (e.g., Wingfield & Alston, 2013), we do not know what conditions enable or constrain diversity workers (that is, people who hold official diversity titles).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In an ever-shifting landscape wherein diversity initiatives permeate all organizations, our review offers a brief history of these programs in organizations. We have highlighted the importance of considering the relationship between affirmative action and diversity initiatives.

Furthermore, we have shown how various actors (e.g., academics, corporate actors, workers, et cetera) took an active role in reducing the ambiguity around the purpose of diversity initiatives. Though the United States is considered a weak state, executive orders play an important role in the maintenance of diversity initiatives. For example, in 2011, Barack Obama issued Executive Order 13583, which established a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce. The framework of this executive order was enhanced in the subsequent administration through a Diversity and Inclusion strategic plan. The plan reaffirms the commitment of the Department of Commerce to provide equal opportunity to all applicants and employees while fostering and supporting a diverse workforce. We encourage readers to continue paying attention to how societal events and legislation change the foci of organizational diversity initiatives. We also reveal a small fraction of the literature that explains which diversity initiatives work and which ones do not work as intended with the hopes to provide a basic understanding of these interventions and strategies.

Our review also highlights the importance of societal events in shaping approaches to diversity initiatives. Future research could look at whether major social events—for example, the murder of George Floyd, which ignited a wave of protests across the country—can affect organizational policies, do so in a manner that may prod some to reconnect to racial history and/or antidiscrimination motives of diversity initiatives, and in a way that recalibrates the goals of implemented initiatives. Such events might arguably also change the rhetoric and discussion surrounding diversity. In this regard, we now have foundational research on rhetoric around organizational diversity initiatives and how that rhetoric sometimes overlooks racism and racial inequalities in favor of “happy talk” (Bell & Hartmann, 2007), the ways in which it most often reifies bureaucratic hegemony (Roscigno, 2011), how this rhetoric is economized (Thomas,



2019), and how the cultural meanings of diversity become associated with organizational and political activities (Berrey, 2015).

There is an urgent need to recenter race and equity in conversations and research on diversity initiatives. It is one thing to argue that diversity should be broadened to include other social identity categories. We do not entirely disagree with this aim. Rather, we believe that diversity programs and initiatives at present still have yet to rectify and provide redress to the groups they were originally intended to benefit (e.g., King et al., 2022). Indeed, discrimination remains rampant in organizations (Quillian et al., 2017; Roscigno, 2007), marginalized employees still feel excluded and inhibited in their self-expression (Alegria, 2020; King et al., 2022; Martinez et al., 2017), women and people of color still struggle to be promoted at equal rates to their peers. Recent research also shows that people of color suffer severely from the spillover of racialized violence and trauma in the world (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). These facts beg for more scholarship that, at its core, interrogates what diversity initiatives are *currently* doing, what they are *meant* to be doing and what they *should* be doing. We look forward to engaging in such work ourselves and look forward to reading related work by others.

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