"The Trouble with *White Fragility*: Towards a Class Analysis of Resistance to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work by Administrators"

Cedrick-Michael Simmons

A dissertation

submitted to the Faculty of

the department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Sociology

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School

April 2023

"THE TROUBLE WITH *WHITE FRAGILITY*: TOWARDS A CLASS ANALYSIS OF RESISTANCE TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION WORK BY ADMINISTRATORS"

Cedrick-Michael Simmons

Advisors: Dr. Zine Magubane and Dr. C. Shawn McGuffey

In this dissertation, I show how the racial conflict theory promoted in the book White Fragility *isn't the only useful perspective to explain negative responses to the training and other activities by DEI administrators. Specifically, I argue a class analysis can illuminate the antagonistic relationship between DEI administrators and other stakeholders. Since DEI professionals are an extension of the management class, which is responsible for regulating the behavior of students and employees on behalf of employers in educational institutions, it is predictable that some students and employees will respond with silence, anger, and disengagement. If it is true that these negative responses cannot be reduced to* White Fragility, *then DEI professionals need to appeal to the interests of their audience and clearly show how their activities can actually be beneficial for students and employees despite the fact that they are extension of management.*

This dissertation includes three of my articles on administrators in higher education that helped me to develop the aforementioned argument. The first article argues that we should expect race-conscious student services administrators to experience role conflict when students complain about the ways that the executive-level administrators contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality. I contend that role conflict arises because student-centered administrators have to navigate the contradictory expectation of being an advocate for students with grievances about the institution while helping the executive-level administrators improve the reputation and revenue-stream for the university. Therefore, students cannot always expect student-centered administrators to effectively highlight and address their grievances. The second article argues that students who complain about inequity on campus should expect student-centered administrators to respond with self-help coaching. I use the term self-help coaching to capture the process when administrators teach complainants how to highlight and remedy organizational problems themselves. The third article focuses on the ways that student equity administrators (i.e. specialists who work in offices focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and multicultural affairs) frame their work as beneficial for students. Specifically, I describe three types of frames: expert accountability, affirmation, *and* advocacy. *In the conclusion, I show how DEI professionals can use this information to appeal to the interests of students and employees who recognize their antagonistic relationship with management*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank God for all of His blessings. Every breath is a gift, so I am filled with gratitude. This dissertation would not exist if it weren't for my best friend and princess, Sara Simmons. You were there for me when I was couch-surfing over breaks, trying to lead as a student organizer, making everyone stressed because I wanted to be good teacher, struggling to read and write due to anxiety, applying for jobs when it seemed like my dream became a nightmare, and waking up each morning feeling blessed to serve as a professional. You are the greatest gift and I hope I've made you proud.

I am so thankful for the hilarious, passionate, and complicated family. Lady Star and Grand Tone, you taught me about the power of faith and relationships. Anthony, you provide a base of loyalty, talent, and fortitude that I hope my children emulate someday. Adrienne, you are my sister and spiritual adviser. I'm so glad you keep me in line. My grandparents were always there to stabilize the foundation of faith, love, and community. I miss you every day, Grandma Presley. So much love to Mercedes, Uncle Paul, Uncle Mo, Aunt Jen, Jen (godmother), Aunt Missy, Aunt Kaiwana, and my many other siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and family members for always having my back. Thank you so much Mary, Dave, Jake, Ryan, and the rest of the HP family for being my rock.

There are tons of people from high school, college, and graduate school who helped me stay grounded and laughing through the years. Bo and Jared, you are my best men and my brothers for life. Kristy and Rebecca, you are the god-mothers that I've needed over the years. Your patience and advising has been priceless. Greg, you will always be my brother from another mother. My days with Big Red kept me humble and sane in college and in Boston. Candice, thanks for helping me develop my communication and mentor skills. It was easier for me to keep the faith because you kept the faith and succeeded. Shannon, you probably know my work better than anyone else because of the work you've done on this project. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me as I tried to make sense of these dynamics. Nicole and Mike, game nights and birthday parties remind Sara and I that we have an amazing extended family in Greece. Thank you to Roger, Belisa, Sean, Paula, Malinda, John, Mo, and the rest of the CSCRE/MLK Scholars fam for showing me what brilliance and leadership can look like in this flawed yet beautiful society.

Shawn and Zine, thank you for pushing me to reach higher expectations than I ever could have imagined. You never lost faith in me, even when I lost faith in myself. Being an adopted nephew and mentee to you two has been the security blanket I needed to get through grad school. I know I learned a ton because of you two. Natasha, I miss and appreciate dissertation seminar and one-on-ones with you. You have always created an environment of mutual respect and critical inquiry for grad students, and I am so thankful that you have worked with me throughout the years. Jackie, Caliesha, and Deniz, you were the unofficial mentors I needed to succeed in graduate school. I know we will be friends for life. Julie, you have been a role model for scholars who want to make a mark in public policy discourse. Thank you for opening up to share your wisdom with me and showing me that I did have a worthy perspective. Sarah and Sarah, I can't thank you enough for your patience and care as I attempted to be a scholar activist in graduate school. Max and Kyra, I consider you cousins at this point. Thank you for opening up your homes with us and treating Sara and I like family. I am so lucky that I was able to witness the brilliance and warmth from Elise, Samantha, Calista, Kyle, and my other fellow grad students. Ellen and Leigh, you are the best critical scholars of education and diversity that I know. Eradicate BC Racism, you all were the highlights of my time at BC. I hope I make you proud and I'm sorry it took me so long to appreciate the lessons you shared in Boston.

Thank you to the scholars and practitioners who challenged me to be a better sociologist and critical thinker. Kathy, Mike, Christine, Marc, SEL/Equity TOSAs, and the rest of our DO Equity Team, I cannot imagine working with a better group of professionals. Kathy, you are a unicorn and the best superintendent I could have asked for. Brandin, Mary, and the rest of the GOE members, I have learned far more from you than what I've gotten to share with you. As you know, Brandin, you are a role model. Shaun Nelms, you are the GOAT and one of my first role models in education. Thank you for continuing to help me be a better leader. Bernie Sanders, they did you wrong brother. Thanks to my Mount Rushmore of scholars: Adolph and Toure Reed, Barbara Fields, and Martin Luther King Jr.

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the book *White Fragility,* diversity trainer and multicultural education professor Robin Diangelo (2018) offers a theory of why her fellow diversity trainers should expect white employees to respond with anger and defensiveness to her education about racism. Specifically, Diangelo argues the negative responses—which include "anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation (p. 2)"—occur because white people are both socialized to internalize the racist myth of white superiority and insulated from any challenge to the view that they are entitled to any privilege they receive. Although I know many scholars and diversity trainers who rave about the book *White Fragility,* one problem with Diangelo's argument and the underlying theoretical framework—which I will refer to as a racial conflict theory for the rest of this introduction—is that it obscures the ways that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) administrators contribute to the negative emotions or silence from our trainees. Put differently, *White Fragility* authorizes the view that DEI administrators do not have to reflect on the ways that *our* identity, role, or social location can negatively impact the trainees' perception of us as educators. Therefore, this dissertation aims to help proponents of *White Fragility* and other DEI administrators recognize and address this limitation.

In this dissertation, I show how racial conflict theory isn't the only useful perspective to explain negative responses to the training and other activities by DEI administrators. Specifically, I argue a class analysis can also give DEI administrators useful analytical tools to interpret and respond to negative response that cannot be reduced to so-called "white fragility." A class analysis can help DEI administrators to develop a more empathic and self-critical

approach to conflict with the individuals we work to educate. For example, when I provide diversity training as the Director of Equity at a K-12 public school district, I recognize that the students and employees do not solely see me as an anti-racist African-American man who is a trained sociologist. Instead, a sociological understanding of class—which I will discuss later on--helps me to recognize that an antagonistic relationship may exist in my interactions with students and employees because I am also as a member of the "administration" or the management class of the school district. Since I am an extension of management—along with the various identities I bring with me—it is rational for the individuals who are subjects of regulation by management (i.e. students and employees) to be skeptical or even distrustful of my perspective on social justice. In other words, the power dynamic tied to class relations can also help explain why trainees may respond negatively or with silence when I ask them to engage in the vulnerable task of discussing racism and racial inequality in organizations. As a consequence, diversity trainers and DEI administrators like myself should not take any negative responses, silence, or disengagement from students and employees personally, nor should we assume that their responses are always caused by "white fragility" and a desire to reproduce white supremacy. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon diversity trainers and DEI administrators to see how we can use the knowledge of this conflict to try to humbly reduce skepticism and distrust from students and employees.

This dissertation includes three of my articles on administrators in higher education that helped me to develop the aforementioned argument. The first article argues that we should expect race-conscious[1] student services administrators to experience role conflict when students

---

[1] By race-conscious, I simply mean people who recognize the practice of double standards on the basis of ancestry is a pattern throughout institutions in the United States. In addition, they recognize that people identified as white have not been the targets of that social practice (i.e. "white privilege).

complain about the ways that the executive level administrators contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality. By role conflict (Stryker and Macke 1978), I mean situations when someone in a particular role has to navigate contradictory expectations that arise from their relationships with two different social groups. I contend that role conflict arises because student-centered administrators have to navigate the contradictory expectation of being an advocate for students with grievances about the institution while helping the executive level administrators improve the reputation and revenue-stream for the university. In other words, role conflict arises because student-centered administrators are expected to be an advocate for students and a consultant to management. The second article argues that students who complain about inequity on campus should expect their official advocates—the student services administrators on their campus—to respond with *self-help coaching*. I use the term *self-help coaching* to capture the process when administrators teach complainants how to highlight and remedy organizational problems themselves. The third article focuses on the ways that student equity administrators (i.e. specialists who work in offices focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and multicultural affairs) frame their work as beneficial for students. Specifically, I found three types of frames: *expert accountability*, whereby students have professionals who can use their specialized expertise on effective anti-discrimination practices to question and consult the decisions of other administrators; *affirmation*, whereby students benefit from having specialist who will listen, provide emotional support, and show they care about them when they have concerns; and *advocacy*, whereby students benefit from having professionals who will push for changes to organizational policies and practices on behalf of students.

The three aforementioned articles help to demonstrate why I believe a class analysis can shape the interactions between administrators working to address racism and racial inequality

(who I will now refer to as anti-racist administrators) and the subjects of our work. The first article demonstrates that the "anti-racism" of anti-racist administrators has to protect rather than threaten the reputation and revenue of educational institutions because they are a part of the management class. As a consequence, students and employees cannot fully rely on anti-racist administrators to represent their needs and interests when their conflict is with the other administrators of the educational institution. Skepticism and distrust towards the "resistance" offered by anti-racist administrators, therefore, is rational. The second and third articles show how administrators seeking to do achieve DEI goals for students can navigate this tension. Self-help coaching, advocacy, affirmation, and expert accountability are all examples of administrators constructing an image of themselves as leaders who serve the interests of students as opposed to solely being an extension of management's interests. Like the anti-racist administrators I interviewed, I believe my fellow diversity trainers and other DEI administrators should recognize that being a part of management does create tension between us and the people (both students and employees) we work to educate and support. Furthermore, like the anti-racist administrators I interviewed, I believe my fellow diversity trainers and DEI administrators should work to actively show how we can do things that are beneficial for students and employees even if we are part of management. Although an interest-based appeal cannot erase the aforementioned tension, it can build on the truth that the tension exists—a truth that scholarship like *White Fragility* does not give us the tools to even see as a problem.

BACKGROUND

Race and Racism

I begin with the premise that racism is a contemporary social problem that institutions have a responsibility to resist. When I say racism, I do not simply mean prejudicial attitudes or the violent practices of proud white supremacists. Instead, I agree with Fields and Fields (2014) contention that racism is both a social practice and the rationales for that social practice. They define racism as "the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard" (p. 17). In addition, I agree with Fields and Fields (2014), Golash-Boza (2016), and Jung (2015) contention that racism both presumes and reinforces the mythical belief that nature produced "racial" differences among humans. As Golash-Boza (2016) summarizes, racism includes the interpretive framework that "races are populations of people whose physical differences are linked to significant cultural and social differences and that these innate hierarchical differences can be measured and judged" (p. 3). Therefore, when I say that institutions have a responsibility to combat racism, I mean the responsibility to support resistance to both the practice of racism and the ideology of race.

There are plenty of studies showing that various institutions in the United States help to facilitate the reproduction of racism and racial inequality. Scholars of education (Harper and Hurtado 2007), the criminal [in]justice system (Van Cleve 2016), health care (Feagin and Bennefield 2014), and the labor market (Pager and Bonikowski 2009), have helped to challenge the myth that the civil rights movement transformed the United States into a "post-racial" nation. Yet there is far less sociological research that primarily seeks to improve and focus on the professionals and managers that institutions hire to address racism and racial inequality. There is a growing line of research that critically evaluates the work by DEI professionals (Ahmed 2012; Berrey 2015; Dobbin 2009; Kelly 1998. However, studies include interviews with administrators who work in offices that are designed to help students solve problems related to race and racism

(i.e. student affairs, multicultural affairs, and DEI offices). To help address this tendency, I decided to conduct interviews with administrators at postsecondary schools who are responsible for helping their institution advise, understand, and respond to students with grievances about their experiences on campus. I decided to focus on administrators at postsecondary schools mainly because I wanted to conduct research that would help me be a better adviser and educator for anti-racist students, teachers, and staff at schools that claim to value diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the next two sections, I discuss how this dissertation helps to show why racial conflict theory needs to be put in conversation with a class analysis.

Rethinking Racial Conflict Theory

When I initially started graduate school, I believed that the racial conflict theory outlined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva gave me all of the tools that I need to challenge racism as an educator[2]. Bonilla-Silva (1997) has repeatedly called upon social analysts to view the United States as a "racialized social system," or a society where "economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races" (p. 469). To be slightly more concrete, he asserts that a society is more "racialized" when there is greater variance in the life chances[3] of races. The relationship between the variance in life chances and race is summarized when Bonilla-Silva writes:

---

[2] I say "as an educator" because I wanted graduate school to be a pathway to a career as a professor, a DEI specialist who provides anti-bias training to students and administrators at schools (primarily higher education but also K-12), or as both roles before I eventually retire. When I graduated from high school four years prior, my main goal was to receive an education about racism so I could be the anti-racist educator that I wish I had as a African-American student dealing with racism at a predominantly white school.

[3] Simply put, life chances refers to the probability that a person or groups of people can obtain the resources to live a long and happy life. For a great description and summary of how sociologists can teach about life chances to students, see Miller (1992).

"The race placed in the superior position tends to receive greater economic remuneration and access to better occupations and/or prospects in the labor market, occupies a primary position in the political system, is granted higher social estimation (e.g., is viewed as 'smarter' or 'better looking'), often has the license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races, and receives [psychological benefits as a consequence]" (p. 470).

I call Bonilla-Silva's theory a "racial conflict" theory, because he argues that racial groups receive different rewards in a racialized social system and, consequently, they "develop dissimilar objective interests, which can be detected in their struggles to either transform or maintain a particular racial order" (p. 470). In other words, contestation between groups defined as "races" is predictable because the groups are seeking to either improve or maintain their access to the aforementioned social, political, economic, and psychological rewards. The implication is that "anti-racism" or resistance to racism in the United States occurs when individuals and institutions act to reduce white privilege—and the belief that white privilege is a myth—on social, political, economic, and psychological levels. In addition, the implication is that we should expect white people to resist efforts to reduce white privilege. My original intent, then, was to both teach students about and contribute to the ongoing research on the practices and mechanisms that facilitate the maintenance of white privilege.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the book *White Fragility* is a popular example of how a researcher and educator can use a racial conflict perspective to capture how white privilege is maintained in the United States. Furthermore, I use *White Fragility* because it is clearly intended to be beneficial for DEI professionals and other anti-bias educators like myself; when I talk to fellow DEI professionals from K-12 schools, the phrase "white fragility" usually comes up in

conversations about our efforts to address racist behavior by white staff, board of education members, or members of the surrounding community. In *White Fragility,* Robin Diangelo seeks to solve a puzzle that is all too familiar to diversity trainers and other educators like herself: emotional and defensive responses from white adults to the idea that the United States is a racialized social system. Diangelo argues that the defensive responses from white respondents to her education—which include "emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation" (p. 2)—are not random troubles with individuals. Instead, she argues it is predictable that white trainees would respond negatively to her education about racism and white privilege precisely because the United States is a racialized social system. As she notes in the introduction:

> "White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantaged. Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race" (p. 1-2).

Furthermore, Diangelo argues that the defensive responses are not only a *consequence* of the racialized social system, but they also help to *reproduce* the status quo. As she writes, "these responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy" (p. 2). To give an example, when a white woman cries and claims she is being made to feel guilty during one of Diangelo's diversity trainings, Diangelo argues that all of the attention is devoted from discussions about

combatting racism and "the people of color are yet again abandoned and/or blamed" (p. 134). Her argument can be summarized as follows: since the United States is a racialized social system that benefits white people—which then enables them to want to protect the status quo—and since white people rarely have to confront the reality that their life chances are tied to white privilege (and not just their character or behavior), then we should expect white people to be fragile and defensive during conversations about racism and white privilege.

Although I also believe that it is undeniable that racism is a pattern throughout the institutions of the United States, I do have a problem with the idea that silence or negative responses to anti-racism by DEI professionals can solely be reduced to the a desire of white people to maintain white privilege. To put my cards on the table, my aim in this dissertation is to challenge the idea that racial conflict theory gives us the answers we need—especially as DEI professionals—to explain the negative responses to our anti-racist activities from adults classified as white. To understand why I—an African-American sociologist and DEI professional who seeks to support anti-racism by individuals and institutions—would caution against the line of reasoning from Diangelo (at least in all cases), I will now turn to a brief discussion about class and capitalism.

RACE, CLASS, and CONFLICT

One major problem with the racial conflict theory offered by Bonilla-Silva and used by Diangelo is that it obscures the ways that class shapes behavior. When I say class, I do not mean income or education level. Instead, I mean the "location within the social relations of production" (Wright 1980, p. 177). At one end of the spectrum there are workers who sell their labor to employers. At the end of the spectrum, there are employers who "buy the labor power of workers and control that labor within the labor process" (p. 177-178). While race is an ideology

where human beings are believed to be differentiated by inborn characteristics, class concerns a relationship concerning what people do (Reed 2016). In addition, there is an asymmetry of power concerning class; workers need to work for wages in order to survive and, consequently, submit themselves to the dictates of employers (Chibber 2017). The worker is both the victim of domination (being told what to do) and exploitation (whereby employers can make workers produce more than what they can command in wages) in the relationship (Chibber 2017).

An understanding of class is important because it can help us to see a structural tension that exists between DEI professionals and the subjects of their trainings (which includes employees but can also include students at K-12 schools and postsecondary schools). For example, I work as a DEI professional for a K-12 school district. When I facilitate a training about racism, it is undeniable that my experiences as an African-American shapes what I say and do along with my prior training as a sociologist; I was motivated to be a DEI professional and a sociologist because I wanted to better understand the existence and remedies for racism in educational institutions. In addition, it is clear to me that some white employees and white students have a difficult time accepting the claim that racism is still a problem despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws. However, it is also true that many (if not all) students and employees (of every racial identification) see me as part of the *management class.* Put differently, the fact that I am an administrator hired by the superintendent to facilitate training about racism, highlight the district's commitment to DEI, and discuss ways they can be "anti-racist" at school shapes how the students and employees interact with me.

To clarify, administrators like me are not a part of the employer class. I do not have purchase the labor of anyone. Although I do sell my labor like the other teachers and staff who participate in a training, there is a critical difference between me and them. That difference is

that I am part of the group that is paid by the institution to help regulate the behavior of workers and students. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright (1980) argues that managers and supervisors "occupy a contradictory location between the working class and the capitalist class; like capitalists they control the labor of workers and at least some of the physical means of production, but like workers they are excluded from control over the accumulation process as a whole and are dominated within production by capital (p. 182). In other words, there is a structural tension that shapes the relationship between administrators like myself and the subjects of management. While I can empathize with their experiences of domination, since I also have to sell my labor and (like students) be told what to do by other people, I am unique because I am part of the class that works to regulate their behavior. As Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich note in their discussion about professionals and managers, there is an antagonism between my class and workers (and I would add students since they are also subjected to domination by management) that cannot be ignored. Managers benefit when employees (and students) adopt the cultural "toolkit" for solving problems that maintains the asymmetry of power; employees (and students) will likely experience the domination by managers as an injustice.

To return to the example of a training from DEI professionals, an understanding of *class* can help to explain why trainees could respond with defensiveness or silence as opposed to an embrace of our anti-racist education. When I and other DEI professionals provide a training, we are doing so because the employers of an institution have hired us to help them regulate the behavior of employees and students. I not only bring a range of identities and racial classifications with me into a training, I also act as an extension of *management*. When I invite people to "be vulnerable" and talk about their workplace, school, and country as a "racialized social system," I am asking them to talk about violations of the school's commitment to

diversity, equity, and inclusion in a space where they are vulnerable to domination by management. Robin Diangelo may not be an administrator when she provides a diversity training for corporations, but she is being paid by employers to discuss and help reduce harmful behavior that by employees.

Furthermore, a recognition of class can help to explain why even anti-racist employees and students may respond negatively to a training from DEI administrators like myself and others acting on behalf of management. The anti-racist employees and students may not only experience management as a form of domination, but they can also be upset and/or silent because diversity training has nothing to do with resistance to oppression by employers and management. To use the popular language of "bystanders and upstanders," DEI administrators like myself can encourage people to be "upstanders" when students or employees engage in racist practices. Yet I am not there to encourage employees or students to use their power to collectively push for the elimination of management or the elimination of unfair labor practices (which can include low wages). Put differently, it is conceivable for employees and students who see racism as a problem to nonetheless see me as a *bystander* in the wake of oppression by employers and management. As the work from sociologist Ellen Berrey (2015) and feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed (2012) demonstrates, the "anti-racism" from DEI professionals helps to simultaneously reproduce the class hierarchy of institutions and challenge the legitimacy of racial hierarchy.

To summarize, this dissertation begins with the premise that racism is a problem that individuals and institutions have a responsibility to address. My aim as a sociologist is to see how we can improve the ways we understand and address racism. While I believed that the racial conflict theory advanced by scholars like Bonilla-Silva gave me all of the tools I needed to complete that task as an educator and DEI professional, I learned in the process of completing

this dissertation that one significant problem with racial conflict theory is that it obscures the significance of class in shaping action. To give a clear example, Diangelo's book *White Fragility* uses racial conflict theory to help DEI professionals explain negativity and silence from the subjects of our diversity training. However, an understanding of class is a useful part of the "toolkit" of DEI professionals because it can help us to see other reasons why even anti-racist employees and students may respond with negativity and silence to our work. Specifically, I contend that seeing DEI professionals as part of *management* in a structure of class relations is vital as well. Since students and employees experience management as a form of domination, and since we are typically helping management regulate the behavior of students and employees (as opposed to helping students and employees reduce or eliminate that domination), then the negativity and silence we witness is no longer surprising; instead, it is predictable and understandable.

To be clear, I did not develop this theory solely from my experience as a diversity trainer or even as a student. Instead, I developed this theory in the process of completing the three articles that make up this dissertation. The first article, titled "Rethinking Colorblindness," shows how my interviews with student affairs administrators from one university pushed me to see how class shapes the ways that people respond to complaints about racism. All of the administrators were conscious of the existence of racism and they accepted the role of being an advocate for the needs and interests of students—including students of color. However, they also shared that they cannot fully legitimize the complaints and dissent from anti-racist student activists because they are also expected to submit themselves to the expectations, interests, and goals of the bosses that the activists are complaining about. This role conflict—contradictory expectations that are tied to a position—then helps to explain why students should be skeptical of the idea that administrators

can be advocates for their needs and interests if they are also paid by and accountable to the institutions causing harm. Although the article does not mention employees, I do think my argument holds for administrators who responsible for being advocates for the needs and interests of employees (such as DEI administrators) because those same administrators are also accountable to the institution where employees of color may have to deal with racism.

The second and third articles show how anti-racist administrators work to construct their work as beneficial for students despite the fact that they are part of management. In the second article, I show how the same administrators from the "Rethinking Colorblindness" article use *self-help coaching* as a response to complaints about racism and racial inequality from students. By helping students help themselves, the administrators are able to use their expertise about the institution to help students solve problems as opposed to simple inaction. However, I argue that self-help coaching helps to preserve their relationship with management because they can exculpate their responsibility to publicly and actively challenge the decisions of their colleagues and bosses; The students who *pay* to attend the university do work that is supposed to be done by administrators who are *paid* by the university. The third article examines how DEI administrators frame their work as beneficial for students. As I mentioned in the introduction, I found three types of justifications: expert accountability, affirmation, and advocacy. I argue DEI professionals in K-12 schools, like myself, would benefit from conducting their own interviews with DEI administrators in higher education as we deal with the conservative movement to frame our work as harmful for [white] students. In short, I believe that the four aforementioned frames—self-help coaching, expert accountability, affirmation, and advocacy—can also be used by DEI professionals to appeal to the interests of students and employees because show that we are more than an extension of management. If we forego a class analysis, then our apathy about

power dynamics will make us more similar to the victims of "white fragility" then we may be

comfortable to admit.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Berrey, Ellen. 2015. "The enigma of diversity." In *The Enigma of Diversity*. University of Chicago Press.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 1997. "Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation." *American sociological review*: 465-480.

Chibber, Vivek. 2017. "Rescuing class from the cultural turn." *Catalyst* 1, no. 1: 27-55.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2018. *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

Dobbin, Frank. 2009. "Inventing equal opportunity." In *Inventing Equal Opportunity*. Princeton University Press.

Edelman, Lauren B. 2020. *Working law: Courts, corporations, and symbolic civil rights*. University of Chicago Press.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and John Ehrenreich. 2013. *Death of a Yuppie Dream*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

Feagin, Joe, and Zinobia Bennefield. 2014. "Systemic racism and US health care." *Social science & medicine* 103: 7-14.

Fields, Karen E., and Barbara J. Fields. 2014. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso Books.

Golash-Boza, Tanya. 2016. "A critical and comprehensive sociological theory of race and racism." *Sociology of race and ethnicity* 2, no. 2: 129-141.

Harper, Shaun R., and Sylvia Hurtado. 2007. "Nine themes in campus racial climates and implications for institutional transformation." *New directions for student services* 2007, no. 120: 7-24.

Jung, Moon-Kie. 2015. *Beneath the surface of white supremacy: Denaturalizing US racisms past and present*. Stanford University Press.

Kelly, Erin, and Frank Dobbin. 1998. "How affirmative action became diversity management: Employer response to antidiscrimination law, 1961 to 1996." *American Behavioral Scientist* 41, no. 7: 960-984.

Pager, Devah, Bart Bonikowski, and Bruce Western. 2009. "Discrimination in a low-wage labor market: A field experiment." *American sociological review* 74, no. 5: 777-799.

Reed Jr, Adolph. 2016. "The post-1965 trajectory of race, class, and urban politics in the United States reconsidered." *Labor Studies Journal* 41.3: 260-291.

Stryker, Sheldon, and Anne Statham Macke. 1978. "Status inconsistency and role conflict." *Annual review of sociology* 4, no. 1: 57-90.

Thomas, James M. 2020. *Diversity regimes: Why talk is not enough to fix racial inequality at universities*. Rutgers University Press.

Van Cleve, Nicole Gonzalez. 2016. *Crook County*. Stanford University Press.

Wright, Erik Olin. 1980. "Class and occupation." *Theory and Society* 9, no. 1: 177-214.

Rethinking Colorblindness: How Role Conflict Shapes Administrators' Responses to Racial Inequality at a Predominantly White University

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which administrators, who identify racism as a contemporary social problem, are nonetheless pressured to maintain the status quo. To accomplish this task, I interviewed 13 race-conscious administrators who primarily advise students about ways to address racial inequality at their historically-white university. These key informants described how administrators who primarily work on policies and procedures for students on campus have two main, and sometimes contradictory, roles: 1) to help students access resources to address the roadblocks that arise in their pursuit of their degree and 2) providing recommendations to other administrators about ways to improve the reputation and revenue-stream for the university. I argue that their experiences of role conflict provide an important sociological framework for scholars and activists to situate attempts to combat racism within structural constraints. I show how the administrators do not experience role conflict when they are creating opportunities for people of color (POC) to educate white students and colleagues about their racialized experiences. In fact, this education is encouraged as a way to signify the university's attempts to create an inclusive environment for people of color as well as for white donors and liberal white students. However, administrators do experience role conflict when they attempt to document racism as a consequence of institutional practices due to the perceived negative impact on the reputation and revenue-stream for the university. Role conflict demonstrates how middle level administrators are incentivized to exculpate their responsibility to address racial inequality on their campuses.

Over the last several years, the *#BlackLivesMatter* (BLM) movement has sparked a wave of protests, demonstrations, and conversations about the invidious treatment of Americans identified as Black. While BLM originally focused on the disproportionate policing, incarceration, and killing of Black people in the United States, the BLM movement has expanded to address racial inequalities in education, housing, and employment. In this terrain, race scholars can contribute to this resistance by not only documenting the problems that the BLM movement seeks to address, but also identifying the ways that decision makers interpret anti-racist protests and demonstrations in the context of the organizations they work on a daily basis.

Higher education is one institution that has been the site of racial contestation regarding racism and racial inequality. In 2014 and 2015, anti-racist student activists organized protests and demonstrations at a variety of postsecondary schools to address problems like the disproportionate hiring and promotion of white faculty and the non-recognition of racism as an organizational problem by white students, faculty, and administrators. While sociologists have demonstrated that racist practices and racial inequality are legitimate problems throughout higher education, few have examined how academic and student affairs administrators (ASAAs) make meaning of protests on their own campus. This gap is important because college presidents and spokespersons often claim that the activists could have used the "proper channels" to present and address such grievances. I chose to focus on ASAAs, rather than the executive-level administrators (i.e. the board of trustees, president and vice presidents), because ASAAs are responsible for mediating the relationship between activists and executive-level administrators. In other words, ASAAs are important because they help to manage the "proper channels" that exist for students to voice their complaints about organizational policies and practices.

Using interviews with twelve ASAAs who work at Social Justice University (SJU) I conducted in 2015, I show how administrators make sense of the protests against racism and racial inequality by students on their campus. I found that the administrators experience role conflict when protests occur on their campus: on the one hand, they express an obligation to help students from underrepresented backgrounds to understand and address injustices on their campus; on the other hand, it is imperative for ASAAs to act in accordance with the policies and expectations that are authorized by the executive-level administrators. Based on these findings, I argue that the hierarchical and anti-democratic structure of postsecondary schools can help us to explain why administrators often fail to publicly support students' resistance to campus policies

and practices. In addition, I argue that the study of role conflict can help us understand the practices and mechanisms that lead to the reproduction of racial inequality. After presenting a brief literature review, my methods, and my findings, I conclude with a discussion about the implications for race scholars seeking to aid resistance to racism and racial inequality at postsecondary schools.

The Roles of College and University Administrators

Examining the contexts in which administrators determine how to address racism in higher education is an important contribution to the interdisciplinary study of the continuing significance of race in the United States. Higher education is popularly described as the "great equalizer" by which people access social mobility based on their merit and individual choices even within a racist, classist, and sexist society (Torche 2011). Administrators are the employees in higher education that are typically tasked with responding to the well-documented experiences of racism students face on campus with changes to institutional resources, policies, and procedures (Sedlacek 1999; Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000; Cabrera 2014; Ross 2016). Unlike students and faculty, these gatekeepers increasingly have the institutional power and responsibility to reform university practices that directly impact the lives and opportunities for students (Ginsberg 2011). Consequently, the experiences of these gatekeepers for institutional resources can illuminate the opportunities and constraints social actors encounter when attempting to "work within the system" to bring about social change. While research on racial attitudes in the post-Civil Rights Era have helped predict how Whites are more likely to minimize the existence of structural racism (Gallagher 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Omi and Winant 2014) we are left to wonder why the employment of anti-racist white and nonwhite individuals as administrators, who sponsor

discussions about racism as a contemporary social problem, fails to lead to address the persistence of racism on college and university campuses. As some scholars (Berrey 2011; Ahmed 2012) suggest, several questions are left unanswered in the literature on race and education: how do we explain the persistence of institutional racism (and frequent protests directed at the decisions made by administrators) in contexts where color-conscious racial projects are employed? Assuming that all administrators in higher education suddenly went to diversity trainings, developed a personal commitment to anti-racist literature and studying critical race theory, and voiced support for creating more diverse and inclusive universities, what constraints can we expect beyond the limits of their cognition? By using the racialized social systems perspective and role conflict as a way to account for the context in which these employees make decisions, this study shows how scholars and activists are able to gain a clearer understanding of how inequality is reproduced despite gatekeepers' expressed commitments to improve conditions for POC.

Racialized Social Systems and Role Conflict

The racialized social systems (RSS) perspective has been described as one of the three most important contemporary sociological theories to explain racial inequality as a structure of domination (Golash-Boza 2016). In contrast to popular "commonsense" conceptions of racism that identify prejudicial attitudes as the cause of persistent inequalities, Bonilla-Silva (1997; 2001; 2015) has continuously called on sociologists to uncover "the mechanisms and practices (behaviors, styles, cultural affectations, traditions, and organizational procedures) at the social, economic, ideological, and political levels responsible for the reproduction of racial domination" (2015 p. 75). In other words, an RSS perspective holds that racial inequality must be analyzed as a system of practices and relations between socially determined "races" that produce beneficiaries (for example Whites in the U.S.) and marginalized (or people of color in the U.S.) of the racial

structure. In addition, the RSS perspective explains "racial conflict" (such as anti-racist protests on college campuses) as the predictable consequence of whites' structural incentive to maintain the racial order and non-whites' incentive to resist the status quo.

The advantage of the RSS perspective for sociologists is that it represents a departure from the dominant race-relations paradigm that focuses on individual attitudes without any attention to social structure (Steinberg 2007). However, one of the main limitations of the RSS perspective is that scholars and activists aren't actually provided with analytical tools necessary to uncover the mechanisms that illustrate why social actors aid in the reproduction of racial inequality (Hughey et al 2015; Jung 2015). In particular, the RSS perspective does not help us to link organizational relations to the reproduction of racial inequality (Ray 2020). This oversight is important because organizations tend to be the site where resources are generated and distributed in unequal ways (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt 2019; Ray 2020).

One analytical tool that sociologists have used to account for the relationship between social action and organizational relations is the study of role conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal 1964; Rizzo, House and Lirtzman 1970). To briefly summarize, a social actors' role refers to the combination of expectations, rights, and responsibilities that come with their status or position (Gullahorn 1956). Role conflict arises in "situations in which incompatible demands are placed upon an actor (either an individual or a group) because of [their] role relationships with two or more groups" (p. 299). For example, an early study on role conflict showed that emergency respondents to crises, such as tornadoes, have to simultaneously help with assisting the larger community and yet have an obligation to ensuring their family's safety and security. The type of role conflict they experienced was shaped by whether they were with their families or near the site of crises, and how their different contexts determined which obligations they decided to address

when they had to choose one option. Furthermore, these studies have indicated the importance of analyzing the strategies they used to ensure their other obligations were met by others (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963; Floyd and Lane 2000; Kras, Rudes and Taxman 2015). In short, scholars can examine role conflict to help identify the social, political, and economic constraints that inform our studies of how people make decisions to address sensitive issues and moments of crises.

Research on the experiences of students shows that people of color experience role conflict in higher education when they are expected to educate their white counterparts about racism without exhibiting any physical or emotional reactions to the ambivalence and blindness to racial trauma on campus (Wilkins 2012; Gutierrez y Muhs, Niemann, Gonzalez, and Harris 2012). Scholarship on faculty roles in the academy show that people of color are expected to simultaneously offer counseling to students who experience racism on campus, sit on a disproportionate amount of committees about diversity that are rarely provided with resources to actualize their recommendations, and fulfill their research and teaching obligations to achieve tenure (Gutierrez et al 2012; Thomas and Hollenshead 2001). Due to time constraints, they experience role conflict when they have to choose between helping students cope, educating their white peers, crafting policy recommendations on committees, and achieving their professional goals despite the prevalence of racism in departments and teaching evaluations (Thomas and Hollenshead 2001). Similarly, managers hired to address problems related to racism and other "diversity" issues have the responsibility to help improve campus climates among students and employees in contexts where resources are more often distributed to career services, fundraising, and marketing their university already as an "inclusive" space for POC (Ahmed 2012). In sum, the RSS perspective combined with the study of role conflict helps provide a more nuanced account of the structural forces that shape and constrain social actors' responses to social problems.

Methods

Study Participants

I conducted in-depth interviews with 13 college administrators at one historically-white university in the northeast of the United States. The selection of participants and interview questions derive from the key informant technique. The key informant technique is an effective approach when gathering qualitative data that is difficult to unearth especially when dealing with sensitive information (Temblay 1957). Key informants are participants in "privileged" positions that can provide specialized information on local and/or organizational contexts and informal protocols that aren't typically documented and publicly available. By purposely selecting key informants that have access to valuable and sensitive information, this technique has proven to elicit insights into: the ways in which those in power organize, manage, and justify their encounters with those whom have more and less power (Elwyn, Edwards, Kinnersely, and Grol 2000); organizational processes (Pauwels and Hardyns 2009); and assessing organizational characteristics more generally (Frenk, Anderson, Chaves, and Martin 2011). This is important because the work on RSS suggests that institutional practices that reproduce racial inequality are increasingly overt in the post-Civil Rights Era.

Consistent with the key informant technique, participants were selected on the basis that they specifically work with shaping policies regarding the campus climate and advising students and employees about navigating existing policies and procedures. Consequently, administrators who occupy positions where their responsibilities and authority deal solely with finances, alumni affairs, career centers, information technology services, and others having little to do with student and employee behaviors were omitted. Utilizing public data on the university's website and annual "fact book" regarding personnel, I then collected a random sample of 50 potential participants to

23

contact. The random sample was generated using a computer program of random assignment for cases and I chose the participants who were assigned the numbers between 1-50.

The study was framed as an invitation to share their expertise about how they were trained and/or learned to help manage conflict and social problems in higher education. Of the 50 individuals contacted, 13 participated in the study. The interviews took place at a location of their choosing, and all of the participants opted to meet in their offices on campus. The duration of the interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 170 minutes based on the availability of the participants and the amount of additional information they wanted to share. In Figure 1, I provide a chart with the relevant characteristics and pseudonyms for the participants that I reference in the next section of this paper.

Several individuals responded but declined to participate because they didn't see themselves as "experts" on the topic of managing conflict among students and employees. As a result, the informants that did participate most likely had the most expertise and power to help improve the experiences of students on campus (Pauwels and Hardyns 2009). In his detailed description of the key informant technique, Tremblay identifies four research objectives in the data collection process:

1. To develop a definition of the dimensions involved
2. To discover boundaries of communities
3. To identify extremes
4. To increase knowledge of the problem (p. 691-692).

These were the same objectives I used as a framework when conducting the interviews with the key informants for this study. Specifically, I used the following guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews that reflect the previously stated objectives:

- *How do administrators typically define and discuss racism as an issue (or non-issue) on campus?*

- *Who are the different groups of people or individuals that significantly shape how administrators respond to racism on campus?*

- *What are the extreme cases of racism that administrators have had to respond to on campus and what factors shaped these responses?*

- *If I were a student or colleague asking for advice from yourself and peers about the opportunities and constraints to acknowledge and address racism, what would be your response?*

- *What additional information can you share about responding to concerns about racism on campus that students or the public would otherwise not have access to know about?*

The data collected from the interviews included information about practices and procedures about the sensitive topic of racism on campus. Hence, a note about my positionality as the interviewer and researcher is warranted. As a black male conducting the interviews, I recognize that many of the white informants most likely provided a conservative amount of examples regarding practices that may appear "racist" especially if they described their personal decisions. While this limitation is important, I argue that it was actually more relevant for this study to understand how administrators interact with POC who are waging complaints and demands. Furthermore, the goal of this study wasn't to produce generalizable data about all administrators but to investigate practices that may be logically generalizable as potential barriers for racial justice

in higher education. Finally, the informants talked about decisions that were the "commonsense" among fellow administrators that nonetheless led to discussions about socially undesirable practices many of the informants were willing to share because there were few opportunities to reference their concerns in ways that would be documented on campus. At the conclusion of the interviews, most of the informants emphasized their willingness to participate due to the potential to inform their peers when these examples are typically undocumented, and have the insurances that the researcher providing the analysis and recommendations for their profession would not violate their confidentiality and anonymity.

Analysis

As I stated previously, the RSS perspective focuses analytical attention on three concepts to understand how social actors reproduce inequality. First, I coded the data to the practices and rationales the informants referenced as ways in which resources are allocated on campus. By focusing on these processes of allocation, I drew on the insights from the RSS perspective that the racial structure helps explain why racial inequality persists. Secondly, I coded the data to identify the ways in which the informants rationalized this racial structure in ways that may justify the maintenance or disruption of the structure. These rationales help illustrate the conditions in which administrators may or may not feel institutionally supported to combat racism as a real social problem. Thirdly, I identified the ways in which the informants framed and addressed racial contestation on campus. These moments of conflict they experienced as administrators working to address racial inequality on campus helped me identify the constraints that they experienced, and that others in their position will likely encounter as well. While the informants differed when talking about their personal views or sentiments about how they should be able to act as administrators, I focused on the ways in which they talked about actual practices that are common

among fellow bureaucratic officials. Therefore, in alignment with the key informant technique, the data was analyzed to determine institutional practices and mechanisms that shape how they act rather than draw conclusions about their decisions as individuals.

Findings

The findings are divided into the following sections. In the first section, I detail the responsibilities and expectations for administrators who primarily work with policies and procedures regarding student conduct and opportunities on campus. In the second section, I identify the conditions in which administrators experience role conflict as they respond to students seeking support in their efforts to combat racism on campus. In the third section, I summarize the strategies the informants discussed as common among their peers when they are put into a position of role conflict. I analyze these responses with a focus on how their role conflict and strategies shapes the distribution of resources on campus. The analysis shows that despite the differing strategies of color-blind and color-conscious administrators, and white vs. POC in these positions, the responsibility to expend labor and resources to address racism as an institutional problem is typically displaced from administrative employees on to the students purchasing an education.

Chain of Command: The Mechanism for Channeling Student Issues into Institutional Policy

The informants stressed that the context in which administrators decide on what should be done about racism on campus has to take into account the distinction between administrators. I reference the informants who primarily work with students as student-centered administrators (SCAs). Also, I refer to their bosses who have the authority to determine how which policies, statements, and investments of resources are made on behalf of the university as executive-level administrators or (ELAs).

The institutional mechanism for fulfilling their roles as gatekeepers to help distribute resources and crafting campus-wide policies includes: students presenting their problems or proposals for funding to the SCAs, who then present these proposals or their amended recommendations to the ELAs seeking final approval. This "chain of command" is where expectations, values, and decisions are mediated by SCAs between students and ELAs. For example, Carl summarized this role as: "It could be brainstorming how to get things done. It could be advising them on how to get things done." To give additional clarity, he said:

> "Well, it usually looks like me trying to get a feel from the students of what it is they want to do…then it's trying to do as much ground-work with them to get as much information to file up the 'chain' as it were. [For example,] we ask students to create some kind of proposal about who [a speaker or artist] is, why they want to bring them, what's their purpose, what is the purpose of the program and how much it will cost…That sort of groundwork. And then I'll take that up the chain [of command] and say, 'The students want to do this' and I'll work with [ELAs] on that…'The students want to do this, let me know what you think.'"

As Carl points out, SCAs have two constituencies they are answerable to within this chain of command: students (and their representatives) and ELAs. Most of the informants referenced recommendations that reduce class sizes, improve quality of students and faculty, enhance application numbers and acceptance rates, increase fundraising and other initiatives that affect the university's revenue and rankings as "meaningful accomplishments" by the ELAs. For the SCAs, the important point is that these accomplishments are also helpful for students on campus while the ELAs value decisions that yield long-term financial and reputational gains for the university. For example, Franklin builds on this provided a snapshot of how his colleagues perceive the interests of ELAs:

> "What's the return on this investment- it may not be financial return but it could be we'll get better students, or the students will have better prospects in the job market or we'll attract better faculty. [For example,] there are all kinds of reasons to build a building that don't necessarily have a financial payout, but a school that doesn't have high quality facilities tends to start losing high quality students and faculty…There are certain things

that [SCA's] unit have total control over, so you can make those decisions. But there are other decisions where the funding comes from, where the authority comes from, the [ELAs'] offices, so you have to go through the chain [of command] and get people to buy-in at every level."

Similar to Franklin, the informants reiterated how SCAs may have autonomy over decisions within the realm of their offices but ELAs have control over funding decisions that impact the campus as a whole. To the SCAs, these decisions are comparable to a business transaction: resources are likely to be provided by ELAs if there are foreseeable returns on these investments. Therefore, the chain of command relies on SCAs achieving "buy-in" from ELAs by understanding how resources are allocated to proposals similar to businesses where managers seek investments from stakeholders.

While these considerations focus on macro-level decisions for the university, Jolene shared how the role of SCAs can best be understood as bridging the gap between micro-level issues shared by students with the macro-level decisions about policies and distributing resources prioritized by ELAs. Jolene said "if we want to provide conference funding for our students to attend conferences…[it] will increase name recognition for the school and visibility of our students and all of the great things that they are doing." As she points out, the convergence of interests between students wanting to attend conferences or having improved facilities with ELAs hoping for increasing the name-recognition and profitability of the university's brand are useful connections to make for SCAs hoping their investments will be approved. As Carl, Franklin, and Jolene comments illustrate, the chain of command is the mechanism by which SCAs can channel day to day concerns from students into recommendations for institutional policies and investments.

Pamela frequently described how a main aspect of being the middle-person between students and ELAs is ensuring that the concerns of students of color are considered important despite the fact that they are in the numerical minority of students, employees, and donors on their

historically-white university campus. When describing the work of her and colleagues that specifically help students of color she said:

> "We support students of color on this campus, help them navigate their journey…We also do advocacy on behalf of the students in different ways either for individual students or by sitting in committees across the university to make sure that they are recognized for their efforts and what they do, and that people are taking into account their experiences; That they...think about them and about the issues that they have, and to make sure that the [ELAs], if they need to take corrective measures, take corrective measures,[and] they take them into consideration with their decision-making."

Even Pamela, who works specifically as an advocate for POC students, noted how the role of SCAs are to ensure that students' concerns are taken into account by ELAs when determining policy and how to allocate resources. To summarize, the SCAs simultaneously advise students about ways to access resources on campus that address their individual needs (such as housing or fear to speak with administrators about racism they've encountered) or organizational needs (like funds for having a speaker come on campus), and provide recommendations to ELAs about potential investments to help students. These recommendations have to take into account the interests of the ELAs whose priorities center on helping improve the rankings and revenue-accumulation for the university. While this section focused on the clearly defined roles for administrators and the use of the chain of command as the mechanism available for SCAs to translate student concerns into investments from the university, the next section focuses on the conditions in which SCAs experience role conflict when addressing racial inequality as a student concern.

Role Conflict for Administrators Addressing Racial Inequality

Maintaining Trust with Students and Favor from ELAs

All of the informants agreed that institutional support is available for SCAs to at least *talk* about racism as a broad societal issue. This point was celebrated most often by the white SCAs

who felt the willingness to talk about racism as a social problem is important for creating an increasingly diverse and inclusive campus. For example, Elizabeth described a popular event she helped create on campus that has the mission of facilitating difficult dialogues about race on campus. She described the mission as the following:

> "We don't come to an agreement but we walk away and say thank goodness we can talk about it. Thank goodness we're talking about it in the context of values. Thank goodness we're learning that we can do this and that we need to be accountable to a bigger picture too and a deeper picture not just my own way. Hopefully we understand another point of view a little bit more deeply and sensitively…For example, race -- I think there's a real attention and effort to saying that's a problem in our society and we've got to do something about it."

Pamela also stated that during the winter months, with celebrations for Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr. day, the programs to award POC students for their hard work on campus are well-attended because "people want to make a statement, 'I'm not a racist. So I come to these things and I'm learning.'" Caroline also stressed how she "purposely ask[s] very strong students of color to facilitate seminars even though they are predominantly white, because I think that their status needs to be elevated and these [white] kids need to be realize that if they're racist or classist, it's time to challenge those beliefs." The supported discussions about racism focus on racism as an individual or macro-level social problem where POC students are the educators by which white students and employees can access distance from being seen as racist or engaging in potentially racist discourse.

Despite the use of scripts that "they're on the right track" as Jolene stated or "we're making strides" as most of the other white informants claimed, all of the informants described how the racial diversity among faculty and administrators would plausibly lead students to conclude that Whites are more likely to be hired and retained as employees on campus. Elizabeth openly stated

"We have a very white faculty and we have a very male faculty" and Jasmine characterized the relationship between political power on campus and race as the following:

> "For administrative staff heavily female. For leadership positions heavy white male. Few white females. Smaller amount of people of color…For the custodial and kitchen staff that's primarily Hispanic and Latino…The higher you go the whiter it gets. The lower you go the more people of color you see and then that's structural. I don't see that changing very much."

Jolene described how in her specific school at the university "there are no black faculty" and Samantha mentioned how her white female colleagues joke about how the ELAs who have the most formal and informal control over policies on campus are the "five white guys meeting." Carl and Justin reiterated this point by stressing how even as white men they can see how ELAs are "A lot of old white guys who are usually in positions of authority. I mean if you look at the administration of this institution it is exclusively white men, old white men" as Justin summarizes. Surprisingly, all of the informants talked about racial inequality as a problem evidenced by the rare instances of POC being hired and retained in positions of authority on campus. In other words, none of the informants claimed to "not see race" or advise students to stop "playing the race card" if they express critiques about the lack of racial diversity on campus.

However, informants also agreed that administrators experience role conflict when they are asked by students to condemn racial inequality as a problem specifically at their university, and to identify how they are working to hold their colleagues and the ELAs accountable for how they participate in the reproduction of racism on campus. Although Jasmine's responsibilities aren't specifically geared towards helping students of color on campus like Pamela, she expressed similar sentiments about her role as an administrator and POC herself to help POC students "navigate their journey" on a historically-white campus. However, a major roadblock she identified is the lack of racial diversity among faculty to educate students and work with fellow

faculty and SCAs. This roadblock is especially clear when her colleagues usually use the following script when asked to discuss racial diversity to potential and current students and employees:

> "They'll say we're 'the leading edge of diversity.' We have a [diversity and inclusion] leadership program. It's a grant that supports low-income, under resourced students so either you're a student of color or you're from a low-income background...Then you can get support that way...I think they base it all on that, which is a great program. But it doesn't change the culture around, and not every student is in that program."

A consequence is that when white SCAs are confronted by students seeking examples of the steps administrators have taken to address racial inequality on campus, their attempts to even interact with students of color are shaped by a rational skepticism that the problem will even be validated and addressed by them if they are also white administrators. For example, Caroline stated "the kids who need help the most are the kids who are least likely to ask. The kids of color will not ask, because they feel "oh I'm here, I don't deserve it" well that's bull; they deserve it just as much as anyone else." Carl described how he, as a white male, has to confront the reality that students of color may plausibly critique the lack of role models among administrators on campus and conclude that combating racial inequality fails to be an institutional priority when he said:

> "Well I know our students are concerned with the number of minority students and faculty on campus. And in the [ELAs] of the institution…Like 95% white male. And I'm a white male. I want to be in one of those [ELA] pictures someday but I don't want to be there in that sort of pigeonhole either. That's the professional challenge for me."

Therefore, the professional challenge for the white SCAs included the reality that as they attempt to advance their position up the chain of command to potentially become ELAs, the critiques from students of color about racial inequality failing to be priority from ELAs seems valid in their own observations as well. As white SCAs, role conflict arises when attempting to build trust with students of color because of a clear contradiction: their professional advancement partly hinges on addressing these critiques that are, ironically, evidenced by the fact that they occupy their positions and are more likely (as Whites) to become ELAs in the first place.

While the issues for white SCAs focused on building trust with students, both white and POC informants unanimously expressed disappointment with ELAs failing to translate recognition of inequality into investments to address racial inequality. Roger, Pamela, Jasmine, and Franklin all described a "normal" yet disappointing prioritization of market-based logics in discourse about campus-wide problems over attempts to change institutional practices by the ELAs. For example, Jasmine stated:

> "I know that I've been involved in certain conversations with certain VPs who just don't want to talk about it. They understand it's an issue. But it's what brings money, what makes [the university's] higher ranking -- those are their priorities and not necessarily are we inclusive, are we giving support to the students and faculty and staff that are of color."

As Jasmine's analysis of the opportunity structure at the university shows, even when students and SCAs felt supported in their efforts to talk amongst each other about racism as a societal issue, discussions with ELAs about campus-wide policies to address racial inequality are either unlikely or typically fruitless discourse. The POC informants also talked about POC students having similar disappointments about discussions with their white peers and SCAs. The supported programs to talk about racism are much more abstract than any consideration of how social problems affect their lives on campus. For example, Franklin reflected on panel discussions and town-hall events he attended in response to the protests from Black Lives Matter receiving national attention:

> "I do sense that students of color, especially in the last year with things happening nationally, may feel that their voices are not being fully heard, and that the community needs to be a little bit more thoughtful about how what is going on around the country in terms of interactions with the police…and how some of those issues translate into life on the campus."

Samantha described this issue with a focus on campus policies when explaining how campus climate surveys were considered by SCAs and ELAs at the time of the interviews. She said that ELAs and SCAs engaging in practices that leads to the documentation or naming of

racism as an institutional problem are hard because their employment and promotional prospects are dictated by ELAs. As previously discussed, these ELAs prioritize and assign value to "meaningful accomplishments" from SCAs that positively impact on the revenue and reputation of the university. When working on the campus climate survey, Samantha had an up-close view of how even ELAs are incentivized to avoid or minimize documentation of racism that will likely have a negative impact on these goals Samantha reiterated the point about this conflict in detail when she said:

> "We did sort of have a lot of discussion. So a [ELA], a new white guy who is very nice, was in all of these meetings because he was overseeing the staff questions…He's like 'I am hesitant' and he says this, 'I am really scared to ask questions that we don't want to know the answer to'…I mean, he gets persuaded. He's definitely a good guy who is interested in this stuff and really deep down cares about all humans. It was more than I thought… So we're not open to begin with so I think that's [from] what [ELAs] have been told. So this poor guy is new in the position. I know he wants to help people but he's like I don't know if we can say that. I think that's the pressure being put on him."

Similarly, When I asked Justin about the impact of having to answer to an almost all-white group of ELAs on the SCAs' ability to fulfill their role as advocates for students, he said discussions with ELAs about documenting the racialized experiences of students is difficult in part because ELAs are not also answerable to students. For example, when talking about his support for an online portal for students to document their complaints about bias after anti-racist protests erupted on campus, he reflected on the ELA's aversion to this idea when he said:

> "I am like this is not fucking difficult and I think [a bias response team] is a template for how you do it because it is not rocket science. You meet with people and listen to them. For administrators here at high level positions to not be able to meet with the students …and really manage a conversation is frightening to me. It just blows my mind [that] I can't even go more than that."

As both Justin and Samantha share, SCAs are in a position of role conflict when they witness ELAs either unwilling or unable to engage in discourse with students about the problems they face on campus. If the chain of command hinges on ELAs listening to concerns from students

and recommendations provided by SCAs, conflict arises when attempts to fulfill their roles rely

unreceptive constituents. This lack of receptivity also negatively impacts their ability to solicit

trust from POC students, especially for white SCAs, if there's a plausible understanding that their

calls for institutional change will yield little results.

Condemning Students Protests as a Method when the Chain is Broken

Building on our discussions about the pressure and tension that comes for SCAs and even

ELAs to avoid "ask[ing] questions that we don't want to know the answer to," the most commonly

referenced example of the conditions in which this tension arises was when students and faculty

organizing a die-in protest in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and other anti-racist protests on

college campuses. The informants unanimously agreed that the protests put them into a position

of role conflict because they were simultaneously expected to help condemn and punish students

for organizing a demonstration without receiving a permit approved by ELAs. However, by

helping punish students for organizing anti-racist protests they would be violating the trust they

attempt to develop with students of color that they are committed to validating and addressing their

complaints about racial inequality on campus. As Carl illustrates:

> "One of the buildings that were just recently renovated was just opening. It wasn't officially
> opened yet but they were fundraising through the [renovations], some high profile event
> for the University. And the students and the faculty members decided that that was the time
> and place that they wanted to do the die-in…The police wanted to identify who the students
> were and came to [other SCAs] to look at the tapes to identify the people…It goes against
> everything that I stood for. I did recognize a couple of people and I didn't say anything. Is
> that ethically challenged of me? Maybe. But I think I was holding myself to my own moral
> compass on the issue. But to me, it sort of speaks to the mentality of the leadership… I said
> I don't agree with this and the response was, 'Well you get paid by [the university], you
> need to do this!' I said ok, I'll go down there [and said]' I don't recognize anybody.'

While Carl was the only person who explicitly talked about being asked to identify students

for police officers on campus, all of the informants described how SCAs are put into a position of

role conflict when students can be punished for condemning racism through protests. On one hand, they are paid by the university and expected to help actualize the decisions provided by the ELAs about enforcing policies for student conduct. On the other hand, helping aid the punishment of students negatively impacts the trust that they are supposed to help combat similar issues that were being protested in the first place. In response the same protest on campus, Samantha provided details from a meeting she attended between ELAs about possible sanctions. She described how ELAs were also in a position of role conflict as punishing anti-racist students may negatively impact the reputation and revenue of the university rather than the impact on students. At one point an ELA stressed the need to expel the students for failing to receive a permit for the protest that the SCAs agreed would have been denied in the first place, "thankfully" another ELA had to threaten to resign in order to protect students from expulsion. While the threat was important, Samantha felt another explanation was plausible for the decision not to expel the students:

> "Would those kids have gotten expelled? I don't know. I bet enough people would have backed, [well] I think at one point too, which is totally the wrong reason, it was about the fear of publicity, right? If it got out that [the university] expelled students for standing up for this, maybe that's what helped. That's probably the only thing that the [other ELA] gave a shit about and that may have been the only thing that convinced [the ELAs]. I don't know."

When I asked Pamela about how the rush to criminalize rather than consider why people protested on campus impacted her relationship with students of color on campus she pointed out the distinction between how ELAs and SCAs were impacted. For ELAs, she said:

> "It's like let's control them, let's figure this out so they won't mess up our reputation. But they don't work with students. They leave at 5PM and they don't have interactions with students where the students are going to come back to them. Students come to me and they're like, 'What are you doing about it?' I was doing stuff! It's just they weren't things that I could discuss with them because they were administration things, talking to my colleagues creating awareness and trying to code some of the decisions they were making but those are not discussions I'm at liberty to have with the students… It's hard because yeah, many of the things I have to do as a[n SCA] is not visible to the students. But it's something I do because of my job I feel it's part of my job to bring this awareness to my

colleagues. But at the end of the day, the [ELAs] makes their own decisions and I'm an employee. I need to uphold whatever decisions they end up doing as an employee of the institution. It's hard. Personally it is hard."

The informants frequently stated that even if they personally feel protests are a rational approach to publically and financially pressure ELAs into investing resources to address racial inequality on campus, they are professionally obligated to condemn this method. However, helping with the punishment and criminalization of students simply trying to elicit a substantial response from ELAs negatively impacts their efforts to build trust with students working to help improve conditions for POC on campus.

Naming the Problem Yields Less Power to Address Racial Inequality

After talking about the rush to condemn protestors despite students receiving encouragement that the university is a site where they learn how to understand and address inequality, Roger shared how he learned to also manage his discourse to maintain his status as a SCA:

> "I am very careful around what I say in certain circles. If we are having lunch, if we were doing this interview I signed that consent agreement, so I won't be identified so it is one of those [situations] where if we are having lunch and we are having this conversation or whatever it is I let it rip. It is freedom of my office, freedom of my home almost and away we go and say anything. This is just smart. [But] if we are at a meeting and the [ELAs are] there why would I, on any planet get up, and start railing against the institution? And in fact I have changed my entire narrative. If you talk to anyone about their conversations with me, especially faculty, I am pro-university! I will make every excuse under the sun to appear as though I support the university."

Though SCAs are hired to identify and address student concerns, Roger's comments ironically equivocate voicing critiques about the university with "railing against the institution" and stressed how only in private moments will he "let it rip" because "this is just smart." As Jasmine similarly argued, though there are administrators whose job description suggests protections to publicly acknowledge and address racial inequality as an institutional problem, these

are "powerless positions." Therefore, she stated students cannot assume that ELAs are simply colorblind or ignorant, as the problem has more to do with the structure of power to actualize anti-racist policies rather than a lack of understanding when she said:

> "It's more of a business mentality of let's keep the show running and do things that we do well and promote that…All the times they give me these reports and they're like 'It's hidden, don't tell anyone about it.' It's like really? You don't want it public? You know what's going on, but you just don't want people to know about it. How many of these reports I've seen...So, I think [ELAs] know about it. I think they're having discussions about it but they keep it top secret. They don't want anybody to get that information either and they're just trying to run a business."

As the informants share in this section, this "business mentality" appeared to be normal for the SCAs as most of the informants talked about the conflict they experience when dealing with silence and rejection from ELAs if recommendations to address racism will be considered costly as the nature of their work. Therefore, the SCAs are in a position of role conflict once their colleagues also choose to focus attention on "meaningful accomplishments" like the rankings and revenue of the university rather than the experiences of marginalized students on campus. As Carl later states, "As it deals with vision, we haven't really embraced this is everybody's responsibility to some extent and how can we work with our majority of students to better understand these issues." When I asked why, he said "Because there is not a commitment to it on the highest level. Plain and simple. If there was a commitment to it, it would look different" with a clearly "matter of fact" tone. For the informants, conflict arises when the students and employees willing to acknowledge racial inequality aren't in a position of power to change institutional policies and practices.

All of the informants agreed that racial inequality is a problem on campus but also described how the structure of power and market-based incentives explain why inequality persists. Even though the informants who are POC more frequently described in rich detail how they

experience role conflict as SCAs, all of the informants acknowledged how the "business mentality" from ELAs negatively impacts their ability to help students' efforts to acknowledge racism. Therefore, adopting this business-mentality or assimilating to the culture of silence is profitable for their individual prospects as SCAs. In the next section, I describe how they have to utilize strategies to somehow signal to students their willingness to work policies to address the university's role in maintaining racial inequality without jeopardizing their own professional prospects as administrators.

Conclusion and Discussion

While the research on racism on college campuses has documented what critiques POC express about higher education and how they attempt to address these unequal conditions, few studies from social scientists have empirically examined how administrators determine how to address these concerns. The studies that do exist have often relied on content analysis of policies (Iverson 2007), reflections from students and faculty (Solorzano et al 2001) and university statements regarding how college administrators frame the issue in colorblind ways (Ross 2016). The studies that have relied on interviews with administrators noted the need for additional empirical work on the context in which these gatekeepers are incentivized to reproduce racial inequality regardless of their colorblind and color-conscious attitudes (Berrey 2007).

For this study, I focused on administrators who recognize the continuing significance of race as a way to help us move beyond the notion that colorblindness, or white ignorance, solely can explain why racial inequality persists. The key informants provided insight that highlighted the need to focus less on the extent by which administrators signal an awareness of structural racism and more on the contexts that partially determine how they marshal resources to address inequalities. For the informants in this study, the "chain of command" was vital for determining

how the structure of power, expectations, and incentivizes are managed between students and administrators in higher education. When attempting to publicly name racism as a problem that their colleagues and bosses privately discuss as an issue, administrators experience role conflict especially if their recommendations for institutional reform threaten the reputation and revenue for the university. Consequently, the chain of command and role conflict were mechanisms that enabled administrators to help advise students in ways that displace both risk and accountability from themselves onto students. This displacement of labor was consistent regardless of the types of rationales informants identified as the discourse used to discuss the causes of persistent racial inequality on campus.

These findings support a more sociological approach to understanding why social context is vital for research on why inequality persists. This study shows how organizational contexts shaped which discussions took place how the alienation of personal and professional lives for these gatekeepers help explain the gap between attitudes and behaviors (Weber 1946). The insights from these informants also reiterates the notion that social actors' agency must be placed within racial, political, and economic structures. By using role conflict as an analytical tool, this study illustrates how scholars can depict the relationship (rather than the duality) of individual decisions and structural constraints.

A major consequence is that exploitation of student labor was a seemingly rational strategy of displacement to resolve their conflict. Whether they expressed this contradiction in a sympathetic way to students or simply talked about this conflict in a "natural" or "matter of fact way," the implication seems to always point to students having to understand the inner workings, do the research, create proposals based on their analysis that are considered palatable by stakeholders and students, and do the work to build support for the proposal by presenting it to

committees. Instead of identifying these tasks as initiatives they pressure their peers to do despite their colleagues' resistance or fears, the informants' strategies centered on students offering their uncompensated labor to provide data and solutions that administrators have the responsibility to actually do. In other words, each of the strategies result in administrators advising students who pay to attend the university that it is their job to engage in practices that would otherwise be the work of administrators paid by the university. This exploitation is a direct result of the role conflict they are put in.

For students and employees within higher education questioning why POC and white allies turn to protests as a method for social change, this study identifies how "working within the system" to combat inequality is more likely to produce consent. Even administrators, who hold the institutional power and responsibility to combat racism on campuses, described how they are powerless if their anti-racist recommendations threaten the reputation and revenue for the university. Furthermore, insistence on naming racism as a campus-wide issue can negatively impact their employment and promotional prospects. As a result, these experiences of role conflict further suggest that justice and democracy through capitalist logics is an oxymoronic proposition (Greene 2011). Instead, even short-term changes in policies and procedures to address racial inequality appear to occur when institutions are "shaken" (Bonilla-Silva 2001); utilizing the chain of command and "working within the system" ensures that institutions remain on solid ground despite resistance. In fact, the administrators in this study acknowledged that protections for POC students who chose protests as a method were possible because of the negative impact on the market-standing of the university if they were expelled for exercising their "free" speech.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

Alexander, Michelle (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.

Baptist, Edward (2014). *The half has never been told: Slavery and the making of American capitalism*. Basic books.

Blackmon, Douglas A. (2009). *Slavery by another name: The re-enslavement of black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. Anchor

Bell Jr, Derrick A. (1980). "Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma." *Harvard Law Review*: 518-533.

Berrey, Ellen C. (2011). "Why diversity became orthodox in higher education, and how it changed the meaning of race on campus." *Critical Sociology* 37: 573-596.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. (2015). "More than Prejudice Restatement, Reflections, and New Directions in Critical Race Theory." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1: 73-87.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (1997). "Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation." *American sociological review* 465-480.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Cabrera, Nolan León (2014). "Exposing Whiteness in higher education: White male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating White supremacy." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 17: 30-55.

Carr, Leslie G. (1997). *" Colorblind" Racism*. Sage.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2002). "Black feminist thought." *Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge.

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. NYU Press.

Devers, Kelly J., and Richard M. Frankel (2000)."Study design in qualitative research--2: Sampling and data collection strategies." *Education for health* 13: 263.

Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, and Brent Hayes Edwards. (2008) *The souls of black folk*. Oxford University Press.

Elwyn, Glyn, Adrian Edwards, Paul Kinnersley and Richard Grol (2000). "Shared Decision Making and the Concept of Equipoise." *British Journal of General Practice* 50: 892-899.

Fields, Barbara J., and Karen Fields (2012). *Racecraft: The soul of inequality in American life*. Verso Books.

Fields, Barbara J. (2001). "Whiteness, racism, and identity." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60: 48-56.

Floyd, Steven W., and Peter J. Lane (2000). "Strategizing throughout the organization: Managing role conflict in strategic renewal." *Academy of management review* 25: 154-177.

Frenk, Steven, Shawna Anderson, Mark Chaves, and Nancy Martin (2011). "Assessing the Validity of Key Informant Reports." *Sociology of Religion* 72: 78-90.

Gallagher, Charles A. (2003). "Color-blind privilege: The social and political functions of erasing the color line in post-race America." *Race, Gender & Class* 22-37.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson (2007) *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. Vol. 21. Univ. of California Press.

Ginsberg, Benjamin (2011). *The fall of the faculty*. Oxford University Press.

Golash-Boza, Tanya (2016) "A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*.

Greene, Kyra R. (2011) "Why We Need More Marxism in the Sociology of Race." *Souls* 13, no. 2: 149-174.

Gullahorn, John T., and Jeanne E. Gullahorn (1963) "Role conflict and its resolution." *The Sociological Quarterly* 4: 32-47.

Gullahorn, John T. (1956) "Measuring role conflict." *American Journal of Sociology* 299-303.

Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris (2012). "Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia."

Harris, Cheryl I. (1993) "Whiteness as property." *Harvard Law Review* 1707-1791.

Hughey, Matthew W., and David G. Embrick (2015) "Paving the Way for Future Race Research Exploring the Racial Mechanisms Within a Color-Blind, Racialized Social System." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59: 1347-1357.

Hughey, Matthew W. (2007) "Racism with antiracists: Color-conscious racism and the unintentional persistence of inequality." *Social Thought & Research* 67-108.

Ioanide, Paula (2015). *The emotional politics of racism: how feelings trump facts in an era of colorblindness*. Stanford University Press.

Iverson, Susan VanDeventer (2007) "Camouflaging power and privilege: A critical race analysis of university diversity policies." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 43: 586-611.

Kahn, Robert L., Donald M. Wolfe, Robert P. Quinn, J. Diedrick Snoek, and Robert A. Rosenthal (1964) "Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity." Oxford, England: John Wiley

Kras, Kimberly R., Danielle S. Rudes, and Faye S. Taxman (2015) "Managing up and down: community corrections middle managers' role conflict and ambiguity during organizational change." *Journal of Crime and Justice* 1-15.

Leong, Nancy (2013) "Racial capitalism." *Harvard Law Review.*

Lieven Pauwels and Wim Hardyns (2009). "Measuring Community Organizational Processes Through Key Informant Analysis." *European Journal of Criminology* 6(5): 401-417.

Oliver, Melvin L., and Thomas M. Shapiro (2006). *Black wealth, white wealth: A new perspective on racial inequality*. Taylor & Francis.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant (2014). *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge,

Patel, Leigh (2015) "Desiring Diversity and Backlash: White Property Rights in Higher Education." *The Urban Review* 47:657-675.

Rizzo, John R., Robert J. House, and Sidney I. Lirtzman (1970) "Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations." *Administrative science quarterly*: 150-163.

Sedlacek, William E (1999). "Black students on White campuses: 20 years of research." *Journal of college student development* 40: 538-550.

Solorzano, Daniel, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso (2000) "Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students." *Journal of Negro Education*: 60-73.

Steinberg, Stephen (2007). *Race relations: A critique*. Stanford University Press, 2007.

Thomas, Gloria D. and Carol Hollenshead (2001). Resisting from the margins: The coping strategies of Black women and other women of color faculty members at a research university." *Journal of Negro Ed*

Torche, Florencia (2011). "Is a College Degree Still the Great Equalizer? Intergenerational Mobility across Levels of Schooling in the United States1." *American Journal of Sociology* 117: 763-807.

Tremblay, Marc-Adelard (1957) "The key informant technique: A nonethnographic application." *American Anthropologist* 59: 688-701.

Reed, Adolph L. (2000). *Class notes: Posing as politics and other thoughts on the American scene*. New Press.

Ross, Lawrence (2016). *Blackballed: The Black and White Politics of Race on America's Campuses*. Macmillan.

Weber, Max (1946). "Bureaucracy." *From Max Weber: essays in sociology* 196: 232-235.

Wilkins, Amy (2012) "Not Out to Start a Revolution" Race, Gender, and Emotional Restraint among Black University Men." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41: 34-65.

Williams, Eric (2014). *Capitalism and slavery*. UNC Press Books.

<u>Appendix</u>

FIGURE 1:

Name	Racial Identity	Gender Identity
Carl	White	Man
Caroline	White	Woman
Elizabeth	White	Woman
Franklin	POC	Man
Gregory	White	Man
Jasmine	POC	Woman
Jolene	White	Woman
Justin	White	Man
Pamela	POC	Woman
Patricia	White	Woman
Roger	POC	Man
Samantha	White	Woman
Sharlene	White	Woman

SELF-HELP COACHING: HOW ADMINISTRATORS MAKE STUDENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

While the persistence of discrimination and harassment at schools has been well documented, there are relatively few studies that focus on the administrators responsible for highlighting and addressing inequity on their campuses. This paper uses data from expert interviews with a purposefully-small sample of student policy administrators (SPAs) to fill this gap. Although the participants expressed their agreement with students' complaints about inequity on their campus, the author found that the SPAs championed a response to those complaints in practice that they conceptualize as self-help coaching, *whereby decision makers empower complainants to highlight and address organizational problems themselves. To explain why SPAs would champion self-help coaching despite the fact that they acknowledge their responsibility for addressing inequity, the author argues that scholars of gender, race, and education should recognize how organizational structure shapes and constrains actors' responses to inequities at postsecondary schools. SPAs, for example, are motivated to displace the risks and responsibility of addressing inequity onto the complainants because they are managers paid by organizational elites (i.e. the President and Board of Trustees) to advance their goals and interests. Finally, the author discusses alternative mechanisms for the remediation of inequalities at schools that do not depend on administrators working against their material interests as managers.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholars and activists have repeatedly demonstrated that organizational relations are critical sites for the reproduction of inequalities. Acker's theory of "gendered organizations" (1990) shows how cultural logics of masculinity and femininity are embedded in the seemingly gender-neutral structures of organizations. Therefore, it makes sense that the distribution of material and symbolic resources helps to reproduce gender hierarchies and inequality. Wingfield has revealed that gender interacts with race in ways that constrain the emotional performance of black employees (2010). In *Paying for the Party,* Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) highlight the relationship between the organizational characteristics of schools and the individual characteristics of students. Drawing on an ethnographic study of college women at one university, they argue that schools create pathways for students' experience that may help to solve organizational problems (i.e. solvency) but reproduces the advantages for elites. All of these studies challenge the pervasive view that the differences in individuals' merit produce gender and other categorical inequalities.

In this paper, I show how organizational relations can shape administrators' responses to inequity on their campus. During a period of three months, I conducted expert interviews with a purposefully small-sample of student-policy administrators (SPAs) who work at a private research university in the northeast region of the United States (NPRU). By SPAs, I mean administrators who are primarily responsible for developing and implementing policies related to the experiences of students at postsecondary schools. After describing the background and methods for this study, I present two main findings. First, the participants championed a problematic approach to complaints that I conceptualize as *self-help coaching,* whereby administrators use their expertise to train student complainants how to resolve organizational problems themselves. This finding is important because it shows how administrators who are not ignorant about inequity can respond by displacing their responsibility to prevent and address inequity onto student complainants. The second main finding centers around the relationship between organizational relations and administrators' responses to inequity. When I asked

them to justify the notion that students (as opposed to administrators) should address organizational problems, the participants uniformly identified the hierarchical organizational structure as a constraint on their ability to dissent against the school policies and practices themselves. Therefore, I argue that the reliance on administrators--who are accountable to the organizational elites rather than students--to address inequity probably helps to maintain the status quo at postsecondary schools.

BACKGROUND

Scholarship on higher education has shown that the ideology of meritocracy is a barrier to the remediation of categorical inequalities (i.e. gender and race). The ideology of meritocracy is the belief that the distribution of resources in a social system are determined by the talent and effort that is demonstrated by individuals (Cech and Blair-Loy 2010). With respect to higher education, the belief in meritocracy constructs race and gender inequalities as a reflection of the disparities in the skills and performance of students (Alan and Tienda 2007). Discourses that are promoted by some scholars and school officials, like the "racial achievement gap" and "gender gap," reaffirm the notion that there is something special about the students identified as "white" and/or "men" (Cech and Blair-Loy 2010; Warikoo 2016). This ideology helps to facilitate the reproduction of categorical inequalities because it obscures the significance of racist and sexist practices that exist in schools that include (but are not limited to) postsecondary schools. In addition, it authorizes the view that the only way we can address these inequalities is to improve the motivation and skills of individuals (Yosso 2005; Nielsen 2016). In short, the ideology of meritocracy obscures the significance of discrimination, harassment, assault, microaggressions, and other invidious practices that persist throughout higher education.

One of the "commonsense" ways to address gender and race inequalities in schools is to ensure that decision makers (both administrators and faculty) learn about the negative experiences of college women and other students from protected classes. Cultural competency workshops and anti-bias trainings seek to help individuals recognize their own potential to discriminate, legitimize stereotypes, and hold unconscious biases against people they deem to be "different." Campus climate surveys typically provide

students and educators with opportunities to report their perceptions of the culture and policies at their schools, so that experts (either internal or external) can provide their analysis of the data and recommendations for institutional change to the appropriate administrators. Committees with labels like "diversity and inclusion" and "bias response task forces" include a compilation of actors—who are often selected by administrators—who evaluate grievances and help administrators respond to problems on their campus. Each of these reforms presuppose the view that a decrease in the collective ignorance about discrimination, harassment, and assault at schools will lead to a decrease in categorical inequalities.

Recent studies on personnel specialists suggests that ignorance is only part of the problem; there are also organizational constraints that exist for the professionals and managers who work to enforce anti-discrimination policies. For example, Taylor's (2005) study of Title IX coordinators at an urban school district suggests that the specialists hired to address gender inequities are plagued by limited financial resources and the cultural expectation that they merely function as "window-dressing" rather than push for institutional change. In their book on diversity work at postsecondary schools in the United Kingdom and Australia, Ahmed (2012) shows have to navigate a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, they are ostensibly hired to help detect and address issues like institutional racism at schools; on the other hand, "Describing the problem of racism can mean being treated as if you have created the problem, as if the very talk about divisions is what is divisive" (p. 152). Thus, diversity workers have the difficult task of trying to address problems without speaking about—and thus being treated as—the problems that necessitate their existence. Using interviews with the complainants of workplace discrimination, Berrey, Nelson, and Nielsen (2017) shows how internal grievance procedures can function as a barrier institutional change. They find that human resources (HR) personnel may seem to be helpful and express their personal sympathies to the victims of discrimination, but public advocacy for the complainants can pose a risk to their own job. To make matters worse, they note that many plaintiffs reported that they were terminated after disclosing their complaints to the HR personnel. Although none of the aforementioned studies focus on college administrators who primarily work with students, they do show how interviews

with personnel specialists can expose the hidden barriers to the remediation of categorical inequalities within organizations.

I contribute to the research on inequity in higher education by conducting interviews with student policy administrators (or SPAs), or the administrators who work to enforce compliance with policies that center around students' behavior and experiences on a daily basis. I chose to focus on SPAs because of my experiences as an undergraduate student and graduate worker at multiple schools. It was the SPAs who were often advising and/or disciplining members of student activist organizations for protesting against racist, sexist, and homophobic practices on campus. By interviewing SPAs, I sought to understand how knowledgeable decision makers—that is, knowledgeable about the experiences, grievances, and recommendations for institutional change that are communicated by the targets of racism and sexism— make meaning of the "best practices" for disrupting the reproduction of race and gender inequality on their campuses. As I will show in the findings section, the interviews with the SPAs demonstrate why efforts to improve decision makers' knowledge about organizational problems can be mechanisms for the maintenance of race and gender inequalities.

METHODS

This article is based on expert interviews with SPAs who work at a school I call Northeast Private Research University (NPRU). I selected NPRU for two reasons. First, it is a school with a low acceptance rate and an endowment that is over a billion dollars; it does not struggle to compete for students and remain solvent, and presumably has financial resources available to accommodate the needs and interests of students. The second reason is that the organizational identity of NPRU centers around the themes of "inclusion" and "social justice."[4] For example, the mission statement of the school promotes the value of an education that teaches students how to understand and address inequalities on a global scale. As I will

---

[4] To protect the anonymity of the participants, I do not include any of the materials published by the school.

show in the findings, the administrators claim that their role is to model and uphold these values even if they do not work in a "diversity and inclusion" office on campus. Therefore, I believe NPRU is an ideal case for research that focuses on decision makers who should have the resources and knowledge to address complaints about organizational policies and practices from its students.

Qualitative researchers use expert interviews as a way to develop a "theoretically rich conceptualization of (implicit) stores of knowledge, conceptions of the world and routines, which the experts develop in their activities and are constitutive for the functioning of social systems" (Bogner and Menz, p. 48). Expert interviews seek to uncover the contextual knowledge that particular specialists develop as they interpret and act upon their social world. Experts, then, are the actors in specialized positions who possess "particular competences, and who consequently has a social status, or exercises a function, which places him/her in a position where she or he may be able to gain general acceptance for his or her action orientations and situation definitions" (p. 72). In other words, experts include the actors who have been designated as the holders of specialized knowledge about a particular set of social situations. In addition, I purposefully decided use a small sample of experts to interview. Small samples may not be permissible if the goal is to provide generalizable data about administrators in general. However, small samples for interview-based research is permissible if the goal is to enhance our understanding of a particular situation. As Crouch and McKenzie note, interview-based research with small samples should be judged on the basis that "such studies formulate propositions rather than set out to verify them - or, at least, convincingly demonstrate them (through reliance, for example, on ''representativeness'' and the persuasive weight of large samples)" (p. 492). By focusing on depth rather than quantity, the intent is to be "persuasive at the conceptual level, rather than aim to be extensive with intent to be convincing, at least in part, through enumeration" (p. 494).

During the summer of 2015, I generated a nonrandom sample of SPAs by e-mailing an invitation to administrators who worked in positions or offices where the word "student" was referenced. In the invitation, I explicitly mentioned that I sought to interview administrators who are interested in discussing

the strategies they have developed and used to address contestation on their campus and to create an "inclusive campus" for all students. Specifically, I included administrators who work in the "academic services" or "student involvement" divisions of the university and I excluded administrators who primarily interact with faculty, other administrators, and external stakeholders (such as potential students, alumni, government officials, etc.). Several administrators declined to participate because they felt they were not an "expert" on managing conflict and provided me with recommendations for other administrators to contact. Others simply stated that they were not available during the summer for an in-person interview. In total, I secured interviews with 13 SPAs who considered themselves to be the experts on managing student crises and creating an "inclusive" university. I excluded one of the administrators I interviewed because it was apparent that they rarely interact with students on a daily basis. Although I will not specify the identities of the participants in the findings to protect their anonymity, I do want to note that eight of the remaining participants identify as women. In addition, each of the remaining participants sit on diversity committees in their colleges, coordinate and participate in educational programs, advise student organizations, and/or adjudicate violations of the student conduct policies.

The interviews took place in their offices and lasted between 90 minutes and 220 minutes. During the first half of the interview, I asked the participants to describe the responsibilities, expectations, and resources that exist for SPAs. For the second half of the interview, I asked the participants to discuss both their personal and the "commonsense" strategies that SPAs can use to navigate situations when students highlight evidence of inequities and inequalities on their campus. Rather than focusing on student complaints about another individual student's racist or sexist comments, for example, I asked the participants to describe what they and their colleagues consider to be the "best practices" for responding when students followed the "chain of command" and disclosed their grievances about the school policies and practices.

To facilitate my analysis, I used the principles of abductive analysis to analyze my interview data. According to Tavory and Timmermans (2014) abduction refers to the "creative inferential process aimed

at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (p. 5). Scholars using abduction need to begin with an investigation of existing theories on a particular topic in order discover their un unexpected findings. The unexpected findings then become a basis for theory construction that is already in conversation with the existing social science literature on that topic. The task of the researcher is to develop a plausible explanation for the unexpected observation.

To search for my unexpected findings, I used note taking, memo writing, transcription, and coding of the interview data. From this process, I determined that the surprising data was that the administrators construct themselves as problem-solvers in the first part of the interview, but they championed remedial practices that position student complainants as the actors responsible for promoting institutional changes. After re-analyzing the data in order to explain this apparent contradiction, I was able to develop a mechanism-based explanation for my surprising findings: the SPAs probably promote self-help remedies because it allows them to address complaints from students in ways that will not jeopardize their own status as at-will employees. As I note in the third section of the findings, their promotion of self-help remedies makes sense if we consider the structural constraints that exist for SPAs and other personnel managers in bureaucratic organizations. Therefore, we have reason to believe that the assignment of anti-discrimination responsibilities to even the most knowledgeable personnel managers may be a mechanism for the reproduction of the status quo.

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into the following sections. In the first section, I describe the role of SPAs and how it relates to institutional change on campus. In the second section, I show how SPAs can respond to two organizational problems that the participants deemed to be legitimate: the overrepresentation of white men in faculty and administrative positions (or what they call a "diversity issue") and the "culture of silence" surrounding any criticisms of the organizational policies and practices.

Specifically, I show how the participants promoted a response that I call *self-help coaching,* whereby administrators use their expertise to help student complainants help themselves. In the final section, I take up the question of how the participants explain the apparent contradiction between the apparent role of SPAs and their responses to complaints they deem to be legitimate. I found that the participants repeatedly described the hierarchical organizational structure as a constraint on their ability to dissent against organizational policies and practices.

The Role of Student Policy Administrators

Although none of the participants work in any official "diversity and inclusion" offices or positions on campus, they took it for granted that there is a professional obligation for SPAs to address problems deemed relevant by students from underrepresented groups. In other words, they claimed that the role of a SPA entails that they work to understand and remedy students' complaints about organizational policies and practices. For example, when I asked Franklin—who works in an office in the "academic affairs" division of the university—about the types of student-related problems that SPAs have to address, they said:

> Every year we have issues where we have to consider the experience of women differently and it may affect certain outcomes. Then students of color, Latino, African America, Asian, each have different perceptions of how they want to proceed. It depends on the issue and you can't generalize within those groups. Different religious backgrounds, there are some students who come into school with their heads covered- that creates certain impressions and they may feel certain kinds of empowerment or certain kinds of stigma. Students who are lower income, which cuts across all groups, often feel that their needs or circumstances are not fully understood, or their perspectives…We want to be conscious of that and we want people to feel that those

differences are good and it's not our role to pretend they don't exist or make people focus only on the things we all share. We deal with difference.

Similarly, Caroline—who also works as an academic affairs administrator—claimed that they requested an appointment to a SPA role because SPAs can actively intervene to help students from "disenfranchised populations" access the resources necessary for graduation and successful careers. Summarizing their reasoning, Caroline said:

If you come from privilege, you've had access. If you've had access, you've had resources. You have been given the skills and processes and the protocols to know when to ask for help, and how to use that privilege, whether it be good or bad. Whereas a lot of the kids who are coming from marginalized and disenfranchised populations don't know how to do that. We make it very clear that our doors are always open. And as soon as a kid is absent, a professor tells me and I call them right in, regardless of who they are. [For example, I tell them] "Ok what's going on? Are you ill? Do you need help?" etc. And that's what we do. Our goal is to keep them here and get them out of here, and into good positions where they're gonna feel comfortable and do good.

The presumption that SPAs need to understand and "deal with difference" did not merely center around students' feelings about stigma or bias in their classrooms. Instead, the participants claimed that SPAs are responsible for detecting and acting upon complaints from members of student clubs and organizations. The aforementioned complaints can include, but are not limited to, claims that racism and patriarchy that are embedded in the policies and practices of their school. For example, Pamela works in the "student engagement" division of the university. When I asked about their work, Pamela said that they ensure that non-white students "are recognized for their efforts and what they do, that other people are taking into account their experiences…[and] to make sure that the campus, [when they need to], takes corrective measures." Jamie—who also works in the "student engagement" division—described SPAs as

"advocates" for the needs and interests of students. Jamie and their colleagues not only provide anti-bias trainings and act as advocates on diversity committees and task forces, but they also mediate the communicate between student activist organizations and the executive-level administrators (I.e. the president and vice presidents). To summarize their work as advocates, Jamie said:

> If there is a barrier to something or institutionally we have set up a policy or program that is inherently discriminatory or creates an environment for discrimination, we have to change it. So, if someone can articulate that to me and I haven't seen it before, then I'm going to do whatever I can to change or advocate for the change or help them advocate for the change.

In short, the participants suggested that SPAs have responsibilities that are akin to diversity workers. The clearest differences between SPAs and diversity and inclusion workers have more to do with the organizational position of the actors they primarily interact with; the latter group manages address the complaints from and/or invidious treatment of employees; the former groups' work deals with the complaints from and/or invidious treatment of students. Regardless, both groups include personnel who are assigned the responsibility of helping other decision makers address issues like racism and patriarchy within the organization.

Self-help Coaching

How should SPAs respond to actual complaints about inequalities on campus? The SPAs uniformly described responses that I conceptualize as *self-help coaching,* whereby administrators use their expertise to train complainants to navigate and address organizational problems themselves. Ultimately, self-help coaches seek to help individuals develop the capacity to become their own problem-solvers. I found this response to be surprising because, in the first part of the interview, the participants constructed SPAs as the actors who push for institutional change themselves. Yet self-help coaching displaces the risks and responsibility from themselves onto the student complainants. To illustrate this

approach, I focus on two complaints from students on their campus the participants deemed legitimate: the overrepresentation of white men amongst the faculty and administration and a "culture of silence" surrounding any critiques of school policies and practices.

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATIVE DIVERSITY

All of the participants claimed that the disproportionate representation of white men amongst faculty and administrators is a legitimate complaint they've received from students. For example, when I asked Elizabeth how SPAs should respond to these complaints, they stated "There's a situation where you've got to say, 'Yes, we've got to diversify more." Then, Elizabeth pairs their concession with questions for the student complainant that include "How will that happen," "are competent candidates stepping up," "is there a welcomeness," and "Is there a freedom to explore things here?" Initially, I was not sure if Elizabeth actually meant that SPAs should interrogate the complainants about the causes and remedies for a faculty diversity issue. When I asked for a clarifying example, Elizabeth said:

> I mean what we do around here is speak up! You know? Really speak up. Get your issue [out there] in a very articulate mode. Also, think through: What do you think you can do? And want to do about it? So, for the gender and ethnic and racial diversity [issue], one of the decisions that a group came up with—women, particularly last year—they really organized to go to the faculty and say, 'We really would like a more diverse reading bibliography in our syllabus. We have a whole lot of white men and we want voices that represent another perspective.' They went to a faculty meeting on that, and the faculty really tried to hear that. They're working with them now. So, I think here the conditions are pretty good for that.

The comments from Elizabeth illustrates how a SPA can simultaneously recognize an issue and exculpate their responsibility for addressing that issue. In this scenario, the SPA is no longer responsible for holding other decision makers accountable; The student is no longer responsible for simply communicating their grievances. Instead, the student is responsible for discussing the problems with faculty diversity, developing and presenting potential remedies, and holding the decision makers accountable; The SPA's role is to empower the complainants to use their voices to "speak up" and provide uncompensated labor to the university. It is important to note that Elizabeth saw no contradiction when she suggested that changes to hiring and promotional practices are indistinguishable from changes to the syllabi; complaints about the disproportionate employment of white and male faculty can be remedied by students if they push for more course materials produced by non-white and non-male scholars. By conflating the two practices, a SPA can present a solution that is feasible for a small group of student complainants.

Gregory also agreed with the premise that there is a lack of diversity amongst the faculty, as there is a lack of "role models" for non-white students. Although they believe that administrators recognize the problem, Gregory still claimed that SPAs should teach complainants how to push for institutional change themselves. To summarize their script for addressing complainants, Gregor stated:

"What a student needs to do is have clearly defined goals for change: What is the problem? What do we see as the problem? And what is the basis showing there is a problem? You have to show there is an issue. What would you like to see done about it realistically? What is the priority of doing these things about it? What's an order and what is a timeframe?

Gregory continued by describing how complainants should articulate their problems and solutions to organizational decision makers:

Students [should] ask the administration, 'In light of these issues, problems and so on'—even if you don't want to emphasize this is a horrible place if we don't fix it—[say] 'This is a place we can actually get better' [or] 'It would be useful to get better' rather than 'we have to because it is unfair.' Don't make them look bad and give them a couple solutions…My advice would be, 'Yeah, I know it is not enough. Yes, I know it is small potatoes. But you have to do these things in a way they can be done. In a perfect world [we] would wipe out all inequality and make it all fair right now.' I would say, 'carefully design your solutions, creative solutions, most palatable solutions.' Once you have those, then go on.

Both examples show how self-help coaching is a way for SPAs to shift from the role of an advocate and problem-solver to an expert helping students solve problems themselves. It was clear to me, throughout the interviews, that the participants believed that the empowerment of complainants was an archetypical model for SPAs to address complaints about problems coded as "diversity and inclusion" issues. The consequence of this archetypical approach to complaints is that the students who use the "proper channels" end up are instructed to provide an education and "palatable solutions" to the organizational decision makers; in practice, the SPAs students are trained to take on the risks of dissent.

Culture of Silence

The six participants who routinely interact with student activists claimed that students have legitimate complaints about a culture of silence regarding "social justice issues" amongst administrators. Like the "blue wall of silence" amongst police officers (cite), the norm for administrators to avoid discussions about activities that can have a negative impact on the status of their colleagues. Pamela, for example, said that "overall [NEPU] is a really nice environment" and a "culture of niceness" that makes it

hard for anyone on campus to "talk about difficult issues because that's not nice." When I asked Pamela to identify the problems that are undiscussed, they said:

> "Race, of course. People don't want to talk about race. People don't want to talk about LGBT [or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] issues, gender issues. And now that the definition of gender has expanded, like gender identities, people don't want to talk about that."

Justin helps to enforce the student conduct policies and produces programs designed to promote a culture of inclusion for students with varying identities related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Throughout the interview, Justin expressed their frustration about the culture of silence amongst administrators and how it constrains their ability to even interact with student complainants. They claimed "it is not rocket science" to address these complaints; administrators should be willing and able "meet with people and listen to them." Roger, who helps manage the policies and programs produced by student organizations, said that they work in a terrain where "snitches get stiches," or administrators who publicly complain about organizational policies and practices expect to be punished by their superiors. The implications for student complainants, according to Roger, is a routine of suppression whereby "our first effort is to squash and then…maybe next…to punish and then, maybe next, to [develop] plans."

When I asked how SPAs should address this culture of silence amongst administrators, they also framed these situations as opportunities to be self-help coaches for the complainants. For example, Justin suggested that SPAs should train students to view civil disobedience as an ineffective mechanism for producing institutional change. Rather than telling what complainants *need* to do, Justin draws on their experiences working with the senior administrators to tell complainants what they *should* do to address their complaints:

> This is how you sell these types of things. People do not want to hear 'nobody does that' or 'we are doing this wrong and so we need to fix.' It is more of, 'This is just something that is a good

practice that we should start doing' and 'we will do it, and here is the group and how can we do this, and how we can incorporate you.' That is how it happens.

Similarly, Jamie claimed that the complainants are responsible for deciding how they will address the problems related to organizational policies and practices. SPAs should help complainants avoid risky behavior:

I'm not one to say, 'do a rally or don't do a rally.' But I am the one to sort of articulate the rationale behind doing or not doing something, and then let them decide. [For example, I say] 'If you want to rally, go right ahead! But then there are ramifications for that. Not just [ramifications] for you as an individual—If there is a rule, you might be breaking the code of conduct—but also as an organization and as a cause…' And in some cases, they have decided to do things on their own and that's totally fine, and I try to remain an advocate for them as best as I can.

By framing the delegitimization of agitation as a tool to help students be "effective," Justin and Jamie transform the student complainants into the subjects of complaint. Like Ahmed (2012) describes in *On Being Included,* the complainant becomes the problem. On top of that, the complainant is then told that they need to resolve the problem in a way that is commensurate with the existing policies and procedures. Any collective action or civil disobedience is dismissed as ineffective despite the fact that we know such resistance is usually a mechanism for institutional change (Gronert 2019; Ferguson 2017; Stulberg and Chen 2014; Rogers 2012). In addition, Pamela claimed that SPAs should encourage complainants to work alongside them on the "diversity and inclusion" programs and policies. Specifically, Pamela said that SPAs should highlight the opportunities "where [students] can work with administrators in the university to look at policies, respond to programming or things that are in the

works, to provide their candid feedback because we do want it. It's helpful and we want their perspective." If students want to use protests and demonstrations to "call attention" and create "some bad will" with the other administrators, Pamela claimed SPAs will have to avoid supporting that dissent. Instead, the role of the SPA is to create and promote opportunities where they can work together on committees because "the work of change happens in the day-to-day work of a committee. That's when change happens, looking at policies, looking at the language and implications. That's hard work and it requires communication and good will." Pamela shared what they considered to be the best advice for complainants:

> So, if you're going to have spokespeople, choose your best students. Maybe the other ones can be supportive, like doing research…doing the flyers, and getting students to come to rallies. But the spokespeople, you want to make sure they are your best students: the most articulate, the most clear, and people who can work with different kinds of people—work with friends and with administrators. Make sure you do your research. Make sure you are clear on what you want. Be clear about the specific things you want. Administrators listen!

On the one hand, the participants frame SPAs as the problem-solvers on campus. On the other hand, the participants construct themselves as self-help coaches when they discussed their efforts to address concrete examples of problems on their campus. By using the self-help coaching approach, SPAs can help to reproduce inequality despite the fact that they may recognize and even agree with students' complaints about organizational policies and practices. In other words, we cannot reduce their promotion of self-help as a result of their ignorance that racism and patriarchy are contemporary social problems. The relevant question, then, is why would actors who express a commitment to addressing inequity nonetheless champion a self-help approach to concrete cases of inequity? In the next section, I show how the personnel managers' location within the hierarchical structure of accountability may help to explain these surprising findings.

Conflicting Obligations

What can motivate SPAs to construct students as responsible for addressing problems on campus? I argue that these findings are not surprising if we consider the material interests of the SPAs. Like Title IX coordinators and diversity workers, SPAs operate within a hierarchical structure where their authority, salary, access to organizational resources, and duties are determined by the organizational elites (i.e. the Board of Trustees). Due to their structural location, there are clear risks for SPAs who legitimize or support threats to the status quo. In other words, their role as the proponents of students' needs and interests conflicts with the fact that they are accountable to the organizational elites. Therefore, it makes sense that the SPAs would want to try and support student complainants in ways that will not jeopardize their current job and future professional prospects.

The structural tension was most apparent in my interviews with the participants who work as advisors for student activist organizations. For example, Jamie recalled that an undergraduate student group organized an anti-racist silent demonstration next to a "near a high-profile event for the university" without the permission of the executive administrators. In response, Jamie said the "police ended up recording everybody" and later asked the SPAs to help "look at the tapes and identify the people." When they told their supervisor that their request violated their obligation to the students, Jamie said they were told "Well, you get paid by [NEPU] so you need to do this." When I asked how their colleagues responded to this request, Jamie said:

> I think there were a lot of people wrestling with some things for sure. And then at the first [meeting with police officers] that we did as a group, there were definitely people who were chiming right in. But I honestly think they didn't get it. You know, it was just in the moment and they weren't really connecting it to the bigger picture, which is a sort of disappointing realization

as a colleague. But it's not my place to say what you should and shouldn't do right? And then there were people who were felt like '[NEPU] does pay me, I'm morally obligated to do what my employer asked me to do,' which is another issue on that side. It's like, what side do you stand on? It's tough.

Jamie's reflection on the meeting with police officers illustrates the contradiction that SPAs have to navigate. After SPAs use expertise and status to develop social ties with the victims of inequity, their employers can instruct them to aid in the surveillance and punishment of student activists. Pamela also discussed the risks that arise for SPAs when students publicly dissent against the official policies and practices of the school. When I asked Pamela to describe the implications for administrators who decide to publicly support the students' resistance to organizational policies and practices, she discussed compared the differences in the precarious status of tenured faculty and administrators. Pamela mentioned that even she would help facilitate the punishment of administrators who violated their loyalty to their employers, even if they were motivated by anti-racist protests:

Faculty have tenure some of them, but they have academic freedom. As staff members we don't. We are employees of the institution. If you do something like that, you get fired. And higher education is a small field. So, you'll get fired from this institution because you're a 'troublemaker.' I wouldn't hire somebody who comes like that to my office. [I would] call my colleagues at that institution and ask, "What happened to that person?" [If they said,] "They got fired," I'm not going to hire them. I wouldn't. I'm sure other colleagues wouldn't.

Although the beliefs of SPAs like Pamela may correspond with the claims made by anti-racist activists, their precarious status as a manager shapes their responses to racial contestation. While tenured faculty have some labor protections, there are no such protections for SPAs; the administrators are employees serve at the pleasure and will of the president. As a consequence of their status as at-will

65

employees, it is in the interests of SPAs to avoid being labeled a troublemaker, or someone who increases the risks for the organization. In addition, Pamela suggests that it is in the material interests of SPAs to avoid hiring subordinates who were labeled a "troublemaker" and, as a result, fired from another university. Even a SPA who works as a spokesperson and advocate for non-white students, has a wealth of knowledge about the complaints from those students, expresses support for the goals of anti-racist protestors, and helps to provide anti-bias trainings to students and employees feels compelled to avoid activities that publicly challenge the policies and decisions of the organizational elites.

The structural tension was also evident when I asked the participants about their own attempts to legitimize students' complaints about inequity themselves. It seemed like "common sense" to the participants that SPAs should not actively highlight and/or share information that could possibly elicit anger from superordinate officials. For example, Jasmine is works in the academic affairs division. According to Jasmine, non-white students often disclose their complaints about discrimination to her, as she is one of the only non-white personnel in her school. When I asked her if the executive administrators would be motivated to respond to these complaints if she was able to present clear evidence to them, she said:

> I don't know. I know that I've been involved in certain conversations with certain vice presidents who just don't want to talk about it. They understand it's an issue. But it's, 'What brings money? What makes [NEUP] a higher ranking [school]?' Those are their priorities and not necessarily, 'Are we inclusive? Are we giving support to the students and faculty and staff that are of color?' I would assume that it's more of a business mentality, of 'Let's keep the show running and do things that we do well and promote that.'

Before I could ask a follow-up question, Jasmine clarified that her "assumption" is actually an inference based on her own experiences working with executive administrators:

That wouldn't be an assumption, of not taking it too seriously, because I've seen reports. All the

time, they give me these reports. They're like, 'It's hidden, don't tell me about it.' It's like

'Really? You don't want it public? You know what's going on but you just don't want people to

know about it.' How many of these reports I've seen…like someone just gave me a report about

the faculty and staff that are Latino. I can't show it to anybody. It's secret because it shows

everybody is in housekeeping and everybody is in dining. Nobody wants to know that there's

nobody in the faculty. It's very small. So, I think they know about it. I think they're having

discussions about it but they keep it top secret. They don't want anybody to get that information

either and they're just trying to run a business.

Roger also discussed the hierarchical structure as a constraint on their ability to express support

for students' complaints about their experiences on campus. Although Roger has helped with the

development and presentation of "campus climate" audits on campus, they said "The problem is that "[the

university] has more weapons than we have, and the last thing you do is bad mouth your employer. That

is just basic boring stuff, right?" Due to this asymmetry of power, Roger repeatedly claimed that it is

fairly obvious why SPAs will not actively and publicly support criticisms of the university: they are paid

by the university. As a result, anonymous interviews really are disruptions of their routines (Crouch &

McKenzie 2006) whereby SPAs can provide their candid analysis of the problems on campus:

I am very careful around what I say in certain circles. If we are having lunch, if we were doing

this interview I do not expect [any issues.] I signed that consent agreement so I won't be

identified. If we are having lunch and we are having this conversation or whatever, it is, 'Let it

rip!' It is the freedom of my office, freedom of my home—almost—and 'away we go! Say

anything!' This is just smart. If we are at a meeting and a vice president is there, why would I, on

any planet, get up and start railing against the institution?

Justin also claimed that the executive administrators prioritize the "business" of the university, but for different reasons. While Jasmine highlighted the suppression of negative information, Justin discussed the negative implications of having positive statistics surrounding diversity and inclusion:

> Students will put up with a lot, because they want that degree…So there is a lot of stuff that we probably do not even know about. And since that isn't an issue, retention is not our issue and we are like maybe the one percent of schools where it isn't, we just don't have to try as much. I find that most of our services and programming is pretty rudimentary student activities stuff is pretty rudimentary, you show movies, the balls, the dances and all of that and that is not bad that is what is asked for here but it is pretty simple. So, if all of a sudden, your 'student of color numbers' dropped 10 points, that would be a point when things would start happening.

Reflecting on a situation when executive administrators decided to discipline student protestors on campus, Justin then mentioned that there was no negative impact on the applications and retention of students identified as racial minorities the following year:

> The [protests against police violence] were right at the height of the enrollment cycle and [admissions] decision-time, and we had the biggest class ever, the most acceptances, many students of color, more than [before]. So, I was like 'Oh here we go. So just another kind of metric that [suggests that] we can just do our thing and we are going to get the people because we are marketable and valuable and people want it. So, why would we change it? That is the biggest thing: There is no need for it change really for the enterprise to not be successful.

If their employers want them to help stabilize threats to the reputation and income of the educational organization, then it makes sense that SPAs will believe that it is irrational to support complaints and resistance by a portion of the student body. By positioning themselves as self-help coaches, SPAs can privately express their support for student complainants without taking on the risks of dissent themselves. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that a structural contradiction arises when

68

personnel managers are assigned the responsibility of implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination policies.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The prevalence of discrimination, assault, and harassment at postsecondary schools has been well documented by feminist scholars and activists. Yet research on the administrators who are responsible for addressing inequity is rare. Popular approaches to race and gender inequalities in higher education seek to combat the ignorance of organizational decision makers. The premise of approaches like anti-bias education and campus cultural audits is that decision makers are unable and/or unwilling to recognize the significance of problems like racism and sexism on their campuses; therefore, we should expect decision makers who *know* about these problems to actively intervene to *combat* these issues on their campus. While I do not deny that unintentional and/or willful ignorance are barriers to the remediation of race and gender inequalities, my findings suggest that ignorance is only part of the problem.

The research presented here shows how the administrators' responses to inequity cannot be reduced to their ignorance or knowledge about the negative experiences of students on their campus. Instead, this research suggests that the location of administrators within the organizational structure of schools is crucial for our understanding of how inequalities are maintained and reproduced. If SPAs do not have any incentives or mechanisms to dissent against organizational policies and practices—without risking their salary—then we have reason to believe that the structural location of administrators constrains their ability to address the inequities highlighted by students on their campus. These findings help to confirm the view that we cannot fully understand the reproduction of inequalities if we ignore the organizational relations that actors inhabit.

To clarify, I do not believe that the participants are merely "bad people" or "liars" about their commitment to address inequity. The main reason why this study was so difficult to write, from a critical

perspective, was because the participants were clearly interested in addressing problems like patriarchy and racism on their campuses. They reminded me of the administrators in the academic and student affairs divisions of my undergraduate school that provided me with the social and financial resources I needed to even view graduation as a real possibility. Instead, I believe that the SPAs are like Title IX coordinators, diversity managers, and other personnel managers: they have to navigate a structural contradiction, as they are tasked with addressing problems without the necessary resources (including workplace protections) that could enable their success. The anti-democratic hierarchical structure of their university (and not their levels of ignorance or commitment) is the constraint that helps to explain why an approach like self-help coaching seems tenable. If they recognize and highlight this constraint themselves, they will lose the trust of the students and their colleagues (at best) and can lose any current or future opportunities for employment in that field. Helping students help themselves is a way to minimize the damage when they are pressured to help silence and punish the victims. The unintended consequence is that a self-help approach helps to facilitate the reproduction of inequality.

More broadly, my findings may help to explain why there is a lack of progress on anti-discrimination goals where there are policies and professionals working to address inequalities. For example, in their interviews with diversity managers in Australia and the United Kingdom, Ahmed (2012) shows how the institutionalization of anti-discrimination programs creates a paradoxical situation for the those who wish to speak about racism in organizations. On the one hand, diversity managers are ostensibly employed to disrupt the organizational silence about racist discourse and practices. On the other hand, the very existence of the diversity managers (and other anti-discrimination practices) can be mobilized by other decision makers to delegitimize complaints about racism. Ahmed writes "racism is heard as an accusation that threatens the organization's reputation as led by diversity. Racism is heard as potentially injurious to the organization" (p. 146). As a consequence, even the diversity managers themselves are incentivized to avoid the language of racism or else they can be constituted as "the problem" as well. In their ethnographic study at a Fortune 500 corporation in the United States, Berrey

(2015) shows how the structural position of diversity managers limits their ability to actually hold organizational decision makers accountable. In the wake of restructuring at the corporation, the diversity managers were incentivized to avoid questioning employers' decisions because "their work assignments were determined by their superiors, who evaluated them formally and informally" (p. 223). Given the fact that they are middle-level managers, the practitioners worked to simultaneously create a more egalitarian workplace while demonstrating how their employment and resources are serving the interests of organizational elites (such as increasing profit and prestige). If managers are accountable to the organizational elites, then we should not expect managers to hold organizational elites accountable in a way that serves the interests of students and employees.

Ultimately, I conclude that institutional change will have to be motivated by external sources of accountability. Unions have been central to structural changes in the workplace that goes against the interests of executives and provide concessions to employees (Reed 2020; Ahlquist 2017; McAlevey 2016). Since SPAs and other personnel managers are constrained by their obligations to their employers, it is reasonable to believe that collective struggles for power by unions—which can include the right for employees and students to vote for their advocates and adjudicate grievance procedures themselves—can be one remedy. Feminist and/or anti-racist movements have been, and continue to be, effective mechanisms for institutional change (cite). Anti-discrimination policies and practices were partially a result of the pressures waged by coalitions of feminist, anti-racist, and other movements demanding civil rights protections for the oppressed (Reed 2020; Berrey 2015; Dobbin 2009; Rosenberg 2004). Lastly, it is reasonable to believe that the almost-complete abdication of civil rights enforcement by the U.S. Government has made matters worse (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). If colleges and universities are allowed to develop internal solutions, and if officials are rarely held accountable for failing to prevent and address the invidious treatment of non-white and non-male students, then we should expect officials to develop ceremonial approaches to inequality that prioritize the stability and imperatives of the schools themselves. In the meantime, it is essential that we recognize and act upon an unfortunate truth: structural and

institutional changes will neither come from anti-ignorance trainings nor will it be ushered in by

managers employed by organizational elites.

WORKS CITED

Acker, Joan. "Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations." *Gender & society* 4, no. 2 (1990): 139-158.

Ahmed, Sara. *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Ahlquist, John S. "Labor unions, political representation, and economic inequality." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 409-432.

Alon, Sigal, and Marta Tienda. "Diversity, opportunity, and the shifting meritocracy in higher education." *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 4 (2007): 487-511.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton. *Paying for the Party*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Berrey, Ellen, Robert L. Nelson, and Laura Beth Nielsen. *Rights on trial: How workplace discrimination law perpetuates inequality*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Berrey, Ellen. *The enigma of diversity: The language of race and the limits of racial justice*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Bogner, Alexander, and Wolfgang Menz. "The theory-generating expert interview: epistemological interest, forms of knowledge, interaction." In *Interviewing experts*, pp. 43-80. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009.

Cech, Erin A., and Mary Blair-Loy. "Perceiving glass ceilings? Meritocratic versus structural explanations of gender inequality among women in science and technology." *Social Problems*57, no. 3 (2010): 371-397.

Crouch, Mira, and Heather McKenzie. "The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research." *Social science information* 45, no. 4 (2006): 483-499.

Dobbin, Frank. *Inventing equal opportunity*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *We demand: The university and student protests*. Vol. 1. Univ of California Press, 2017.

Gronert, Nona Maria. "Law, campus policy, social movements, and sexual violence: Where do we stand in the# MeToo movement?." *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 6 (2019): e12694.

Kelly, Erin, and Frank Dobbin. "How affirmative action became diversity management: Employer response to antidiscrimination law, 1961 to 1996." *American Behavioral Scientist* 41, no. 7 (1998): 960-984.

McAlevey, J. (2016). *No shortcuts: Organizing for power in the new gilded age*. Oxford University Press.

Nielsen, Mathias Wullum. "Gender inequality and research performance: moving beyond individual-meritocratic explanations of academic advancement." *Studies in Higher Education* 41, no. 11 (2016): 2044-2060.

Reed, Toure. *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism*. Verso, 2020.

Rogers, Ibram H. "The Black campus movement and the institutionalization of Black Studies, 1965–1970." *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 21-40.

Rosenberg, Gerald N. "The 1964 civil rights act: The crucial role of social movements in the enactment and implementation of anti-discrimination law." . *Louis ULJ* 49 (2004): 1147.

Stulberg, Lisa M., and Anthony S. Chen. "The origins of race-conscious affirmative action in undergraduate admissions: A comparative analysis of institutional change in higher education." *Sociology of Education* 87, no. 1 (2014): 36-52.

Taylor, Judith. "Who manages feminist-inspired reform? An in-depth look at Title IX coordinators in the United States." *Gender & Society* 19, no. 3 (2005): 358-375.

Tavory, Iddo, and Stefan Timmermans. *Abductive analysis: Theorizing qualitative research*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Warikoo, Natasha K. *The diversity bargain: And other dilemmas of race, admissions, and meritocracy at elite universities*. University of Chicago press, 2016.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. "Are some emotions marked" whites only"? Racialized feeling rules in professional workplaces." *Social Problems* 57, no. 2 (2010): 251-268.

Diversity Management Frames: How to Legitimize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work

in Education

ABSTRACT

How should proponents of diversity, equity, inclusion offices at K-12 schools respond to critical students, staff, and community members? In this paper, a sociologist and DEI professional argues that proponents should not only highlight the significance of racism, but also collect "street data" from DEI specialists in higher education. The "street data," or qualitative research, should include interviews with DEI specialists to see what interpretive frames they use to show how their work is beneficial for students. To demonstrate this argument, the author uses interviews they collected with twenty DEI specialists who work at postsecondary schools. The author found three types of frames: expert accountability*, whereby students have professionals who can use their specialized expertise on effective anti-discrimination practices to question and consult the decisions of other administrators;* affirmation*, whereby students benefit from having specialists who will listen, provide emotional support, and show they care about them when they have concerns; and* advocacy*, whereby students benefit from having professionals who will push for changes to organizational policies and practices on behalf of students. The author concludes with a description of how DEI specialists can apply these frames to serve students at a K-12 public school district.*

INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, the legitimacy of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and practices in public schools—K-12 and postsecondary schools—is under attack. Conservative politicians and pundits have led an organized effort to convince parents that DEI policies as harmful to the students that schools serve, especially white children. At some K-12 school districts throughout the country, some parents have used the rhetoric of the conservative anti-DEI campaign to lobby for seats on school boards. Every day, I have an up close and personal view of this dynamic; I am a DEI specialist at a suburban public school district where a group of parents are seeking to replace current school board members with a campaign that includes the elimination of DEI policies and practices. DEI policies and practices are harmful for all children, they argue, because they are "divisive." Like other supporters of DEI policies and practices, I am wrestling with the question of how I should defend and support the expansion of our districts' efforts to create the best learning conditions for all students with the recognition that we have historically done an especially poor job to do so for our students of color.

In this essay, I offer one strategy that my new DEI specialists in K-12 school districts can use to legitimize DEI offices in the wake of the aforementioned backlash. Specifically, I argue that new DEI specialists should use "street data" to discover the ways that other DEI specialists justify the view that their activities are beneficial (rather than harmful) for students. Leadership coaches Shane Safir and Jamila Dungan (2021) offer the concept of "street data" to refer to the data that "take us down to the ground to observe, listen to, and gather artifacts from the lived experiences of stakeholders" (p. 57). In other words, street data is asset-based qualitative research on the experiences of students that treats equity as a core value and serves as a tool for

institutional change. To demonstrate my argument, I draw on my experience collecting "street data" through interviews with a purposefully small sample of DEI specialists who work at colleges and universities.

My analysis of the data revealed three *diversity management frames,* or lenses that DEI specialists use to show how their activities are beneficial for students. The three diversity management frames were expert accountability, affirmation, and advocacy. Although I have been skeptical and critical of DEI work in the past (Simmons 2020), the street data helped me see how I could help improve the learning conditions for students as a DEI specialist. In the conclusion, I provide concrete examples for the ways that educators can use street data to craft a vision for the work by DEI specialists in K-12 school districts. All of the concrete examples of application are informed by recent work as a DEI specialist at a public-school district.

BACKGROUND

As a sociologist, I begin with the premise that research should not only be concerned with descriptions of social problems, but also solutions for public issues (Prasad 2018). I agree with Monica Prasad's (2018) that social science scholarship that is driven by a desire to address public issues "can be a catalyst for breakthroughs in the basic understanding of society: posing new questions, suggesting new research paths, and demanding new methods" (p. 394). One example of problem-solving sociology that inspires my work is the research on anti-discrimination practices. For example, we know that negative stereotypes—whether they are explicit or implicit biases—are contemporary issues that contribute to the reproduction of inequalities (Eberhardt 2020). In their attempts to help employers solve the problem of

workplace inequality, Kalev et al (2006) analyzed the effects of the typical strategies that employers use to reduce managerial discrimination. The sociologists surprisingly found that employers' most popular solution—mandatory anti-bias training—is the least effective remedy for reducing discrimination, and their findings suggest that mandatory anti-bias training may actually have adverse effects. Their study shows how solutions for problems can actually be mechanisms for the maintenance of the status quo.

In this essay, I focus on a problem that I've discovered as a sociologist who works as a DEI specialist: the need to defend DEI policies and practices in education. By DEI specialist, I mean a professional who is hired by organizations to focus on the oversight of antidiscrimination goals. After the civil rights movement successfully led the federal government to outlaw discrimination and push organizations to take proactive steps to reduce discrimination (i.e. affirmative action), employers created equal opportunity and/or affirmative action offices to help them develop their antidiscrimination policies and practices (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). However, the conservative Reagan administration successfully reduced the enforcement of affirmative action in the 1980s (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). Faced with threats to their profession and status, the affirmative action and equal opportunity specialists collaborated with other human resource managers to reframe their activities as tools to maximize the benefits of an increasingly diverse population of workers and consumers (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). Regardless of whether the specialists claimed to help with affirmative action compliance or "diversity management," the specialists maintained the role of helping employers devise measures to reduce the invidious treatment of people on the basis of race, gender, and other protected categories. As Kelly and Dobbin note, the diversity managers' activities of "announcing the organization's commitment to nondiscrimination, training managers and holding them accountable, providing career

development advice, encouraging mentors and network contacts, and identifying career paths were all common to [Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action) programs" (p. 979). Therefore, I view the defense of DEI policies and practices as the protection of strategies that employers and administrators can use to proactively combat discrimination.

I recently started working as a DEI specialist at a suburban school district in a town where the population tends to lean conservative in elections. My fellow DEI specialists, educators, and administrators in the region are struggling with conservative politicians' and pundits' contention that DEI activities are harmful to students (Wallace-Wells 2021; Scwartz 2021). When I started the position, I met with parents, community members, and teachers who openly shared that they were either opposed to or skeptical of the idea that students can benefit from the existence of DEI personnel, policies, and programs. Besides simply ignoring the skeptics, one obvious and potentially effective remedy for the framing of DEI practices as a harmful threat to the well-being of students is to highlight the evidence that racism (and other invidious practices of exclusion) is a prevalent problem that needs to be addressed in the United States (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Pager et al 2009; Wun 2016; Skiba et al 2011; Smolkowski 2016). By racism, I mean Fields and Fields (2014) conceptualization of racism as both the social practice of a double standard on the basis of real or perceived ancestry and the interpretive frameworks used to rationalize that double standard. Highlighting persuasive evidence of racism can be useful, in my experience, because there is tendency amongst some Americans categorized as white to use the ideology of postracialism to minimize efforts to address racism and racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2006). By postracialism, I mean the framing of the United States as a "colorblind" society whereby any attempts to discuss and address racism are irrational or even "reverse racism" against white people (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

In this essay, however, I identify another response to skeptics and critics for my fellow new DEI specialists: collecting "street data" on diversity management frames from DEI specialists who work in higher education. As I mentioned previously, Safir and Dungan (2021) offer the concept *street data* to refer to qualitative data collection that focuses on the voices and experiences of students "on the ground" so that schools can get closer to the goal of equity. They specify that equity is achieved when there is no correlation between student achievement/disciplinary outcomes and ascriptive statuses like race and gender. They claim that their argument is useful and novel because administrative efforts to improve student outcomes at schools tend to privilege quantitative data; it is not common for schools to use focus groups, interviews, observations, and other forms of qualitative research with an eye towards challenging deficit ideologies. While Safir and Dungan call on practitioners to focus on qualitative research on students to help schools get closer to the goal of equity, I argue that proponents should use so-called street data to discover what I call diversity management frames.

I offer the concept *diversity management frames* to capture the lenses that DEI specialists use to talk about the ways that their practices are beneficial for students. The logic is simple: if we want to improve our strategies for addressing the skepticism towards DEI practices, then we need to study the specific examples and frames that DEI specialists use to legitimize their work. Even if we have much evidence about the existence of racism, street data on diversity management frames is useful because it can help us to develop evidence and clarity to show how the hiring of DEI specialists can actually be beneficial for students. Put differently, we should address skepticism of DEI work by directly challenging the argument that our remedy is harmful

as opposed to solely demonstrating that there are problems that need to be solved. In addition, I have found this approach to be useful because the skeptics and critics who I meet with—in my role as a DEI specialist—can rarely identify concrete DEI practices that the believe are harmful for students. To further demonstrate this argument, I will draw on my interviews with DEI specialists who work at postsecondary schools to highlight examples of diversity management frames.

METHODS

In 2019 and 2020, I conducted interviews with 20 DEI specialists in higher education for my dissertation research. To find my participants, I created a list of colleges and universities in two states in the northeast. Then, I contacted DEI specialists on the list until I completed interviews with twenty of them. I decided to stop at twenty because I sought a purposefully small sample of respondents for my interviews, which aim to discover concepts based on themes in the participants' claims about the role of a DEI specialist as opposed to "delineated categories and the number of 'hits' in them" (Croch and McKenzie 2006, p. 488). In other words, my intention was to develop concepts through an exploratory qualitative study as opposed to make generalizable claims about DEI specialists. With a small sample that is exploratory in nature—as opposed to research that seeks to confirm hypotheses—I knew that I would be able to have ample time to closely examine the participants' answers to my questions.

The participants had a range of titles that are related to DEI. For example, the titles of my participants included terms like diversity, inclusion, equity, multicultural affairs, social justice, and intercultural affairs. The rankings of the participants varied as well; 10 participants work in

senior-level positions (i.e. Vice-Presidents, Chief Diversity Officers, or Associate Provosts) and the other 10 participants work in middle management roles (i.e. directors, coordinators, and special assistants). 17 of the participants identify as racial or ethnic minorities and 3 of the participants identify as white. 14 of the participants identify as women, 5 identify as men, and 1 identifies as non-binary. As far as location, the participants are divided evenly amongst two states in the northeast United States. Only 2 of the participants worked at the same university, meaning the 20 participants come from 19 different postsecondary schools. Although the locations, titles, and identities of the participants vary, my intention was to focus on the themes that existed for the DEI specialists regardless of those specific differences. Although the participants all worked at colleges and universities, I believe the findings are still relevant for DEI specialists who work in K-12 school districts when the DEI specialists in both settings are working to improve learning conditions for students.

Each of the semi-structured interviews focused on four broad topics. First, I asked the participants to discuss the path they took from undergraduate school graduation to their current role. Second, I asked them about the resources and expectations that employers often place upon DEI specialists. Although I sometimes asked about the specifics of their current jobs, I typically asked them to use their experiences and expertise to talk about the resources and expectations for DEI specialists in general. Third, I asked them to share how DEI specialists work to address the needs of students with those aforementioned resources and expectations. It is important to note that the participants rarely talked solely about students of color. Instead, they often referenced the fact that they work to support all students (including white students) and sometimes specified students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ). Lastly, I asked the participants to share any advice they have for students considering a career as a DEI professional

in the future. To cover each of these four broad topics, the interviews usually lasted between 90 minutes and 210 minutes.

At times, I asked the participants to clarify their answers, provide examples to support their claims, and even respond to follow-up questions from potential skeptical students. For example, I asked some of the participants to explain how they believe DEI specialists should respond when student activists complain that administrators are not adequately addressing DEI issues. I frequently asked about situations when they witnessed their employers treat them or other people on campus unfairly. Due to the sensitive nature of these discussions, I have provided pseudonyms for the participants and provided few details as possible that could indicate their true identities (including the places where they work).

It is important to note that I began this interview project as a critic of the idea that colleges should hire DEI specialists. To be clear, my skepticism was not tied to the myth of postracialism that I mentioned previously. Instead, my main criticism was that the work by DEI specialists are too conservative rather than too radical. As a graduate student who worked for a stipend and some benefits, I learned that DEI specialists could not address the main grievances that I had as a laborer: the need for graduate students to have living wages and to be use their collective power to demand improvements to our working conditions. From a labor perspective, it seemed obvious that the trustees and senior administrators of my graduate school relied on "anti-racist" rhetoric and DEI offices as window-dressing; I needed more political and economic resources to improve my learning conditions, but the trustees and president of my university operated as if I needed diversity training or an anti-racist speaker series. In short, it is reasonable for class-conscious scholars and workers to be skeptical to DEI activities even if they believe that racism is a contemporary social problem.

By the time I finished the interviews, I learned to appreciate the work they do within the constraints of bureaucratic organizations. Specifically, I started to notice that the DEI specialists talked about the work they do to help students in ways I found persuasive—even as a critic. This is why I developed the concept diversity management frames; I wanted to capture the ways that the DEI specialists legitimized their work with clarity. I decided to code the data with a focus on the persuasive interpretive frames that emerged. In addition, I conducted the interviews in a political climate where former President Donald Trump and other conservative politicians and pundits framed DEI specialists as threats to the well-being of students at public schools, as I mentioned above. Ultimately, the interviews inspired me to apply for the position of a DEI professional with two major caveats: I wanted to be a DEI professional who focused on helping students in a context where I could apply my knowledge of the diversity management frames and I wanted to be a member of a labor union. I was able to secure a student-facing position at a K-12 school district where teachers and administrators, including myself, are members of unions. I was hired by the district where I graduated from high school, which features over 10,000 students and 17 schools in suburb that tend leans conservative. It was in this context that I decided that a focus on diversity management frames could help to solve a practical issue: developing responses to the notion that DEI work is a threat to the well-being of students.

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT FRAMES

In this section, I demonstrate the value of "street data" for DEI specialists and their supporters at public school districts. Specifically, I draw on street data from my own experiences as a professional and my interviews with DEI specialists to highlight three diversity management frames. I offer the concept diversity management frames to reference the interpretive

frameworks or lenses that the professionals use to discuss the ways that someone in their role can address inequities that students face at schools. The three diversity management frames that emerged from my interviews who work at postsecondary schools are expert accountability, affirmation, and conditional advocacy. In what follows, I start by providing an example of how I have used the diversity management frame to explain my role to students and teachers as a practitioner. Then, I use examples of the diversity management frame from my interviews with DEI specialists in higher education. I conclude each section with examples of each diversity management frame in action at public school districts.

EXPERT ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout my first year as a DEI specialist, colleagues informed me that the security guards are a "tough crowd" for discussions about racism and inequality. As I prepared to deliver my first professional development session for the security guards, I knew that I had to approach this "though crowd" with a really persuasive case for why my work is needed in our district. I decided to use a metaphor tied to exercise since I knew fitness and strength were values for the security guards.

I started with a reference to New Year's resolutions: every year, I notice that many people choose weight loss as their goal of self-transformation. I then told them I needed to some help advising my friends who will inevitably choose weight loss as their goal. Specifically, I asked them to let me know which option is probably a more effective strategy for ensuring weight loss: (A) hire someone tell me about the importance of weight loss for an hour or several hours, or (B) hire a personal trainer to help me identify achievable goals, develop an effective

plan for reaching those goals, and follow-up with me on a routine basis to make sure I am sticking to the plan? The answer is usually pretty obvious: if you truly care about weight loss as a goal, then B is better than A (and a combination of both would be great too). Even if success cannot be guaranteed, it seems pretty reasonable to stakeholders and skeptics that someone is more likely to change their habits of behavior if they know someone will be holding them accountable to goals that they co-created.

Then, I make it clear that school districts, colleges, and other educational institutions have a choice on how to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable learning environment. One option is to hire a professional or a company to provide anti-bias training to employees. The training would expose teachers, staff, and administrators to the ways that individuals develop and unconsciously act upon stereotypes in contexts like the classrooms or a hiring committee. The second option is to hire a DEI professional to help employees identify achievable antidiscrimination goals for contexts like the classroom or a hiring committee, develop an effective plan or strategy for reaching those goals, and to ask questions when they see gaps between their behavior and their goals. If the leaders of educational institutions want the best shot at fulfilling their DEI goals that are ostensibly designed to improve the learning conditions for students, then they would choose the second option. The great part about the second option is that leaders of educational institutions can simply make sure that when they hire a DEI specialist to provide that accountability, they are also skilled enough to provide professional develop sessions about implicit biases and other topics they deem to be important.

"…[C]ritique the very institution that pays you"

Chris, a Chief Diversity Officer, repeatedly framed DEI specialists as the administrators who use their expertise to question and inform the decisions of other administrators (including the president) at schools with antidiscrimination goals. The college leaders can ask him for advice and he can help to oversee its execution:

> "Would I say [the president] is a diversity expert? No, no, he's not. But he shouldn't have to be. That's why he hired me. He's also not the chief financial officer or the advancement person, he's the President. So that's what I think is valuable, is having a president that will let you do your job and he'll do his job."

Chris suggests that it is obvious that presidents should surround themselves with specialists to oversee various administrative goals, and diversity is no exception. As the expert, DEI specialists like Chris serve as a consultant and the ideal situation is one where the president respects their expertise. I asked if this relationship was typical and he said, "No, absolutely not." Instead, in his experience, it more common for presidents to believe that they can just assume "I'm a smart person, can't I just lead the diversity office?" In other words, the common and regrettable scenario is one where a president believes that it takes a smart person in general to oversee progress on DEI goals as opposed to assigning responsibility to a specialist. The implication, then, is that leaders who take DEI goals seriously should assign oversight responsibilities to a specialist and respect their expertise.

The other administrators on a president's cabinet can benefit too, as they have a specialist who can help them develop and execute antidiscrimination goals. To give an example of how this relationship works, Chris said:

"On some level, my colleagues expect me to lead. And what that means is I provide

suggestions for what I think they should be doing. So let me give you an example. Right

now, after we created our Office of Equal Opportunity, you know, the suggestion was [to

other senior level administrators], 'Okay, now we need to get all your people trained. So I

need you to sign up for a training.' And just today, I got an email from [a senior level

administrator]. He was like, 'Do you think it's time for my entire [department] to go

through training?' And I was like, 'Yes, I do.' So that's the kind of relationship that I

want. I want a relationship where, yes, I want them to think about their unit, and I want to

help them think about their unit."

The DEI specialist doesn't have the authority to dictate what the president or other

administrators do. However, they do have the authority to act as consultants on how their

colleagues can act in accordance with the institution's values. If equal opportunity is a value,

Chris suggests, then it is vital that other senior level administrators create opportunities for

members of their units to be trained by DEI specialists. To ensure that accountability exists

throughout the chain of command, Chris even successfully lobbied for the Board of Trustees to

create a committee that "deal[s] with diversity and inclusion issues." To explain why this activity

was important, Chris said:

"The point of it is to help create accountability. Like, I now have someone on the trustees

to whom I share accountability, right? I bring them information, they get to comment and

inquire and the whole thing. And it's one of those things that also makes the CDO, you

know, more like the other senior positions in the cabinet. Other senior positions in the cabinet have responsibility to the Board of Trustees. When I got here, I didn't. But then I thought, why not? [The other senior positions are] presenting on what you're doing and how this affects the institution as a whole. I need to be doing the same. So we created it."

As a senior-level administrator, Chris recognize that his colleagues had opportunities to present their goals and information to members of the universities' board of trustees. Those structured interactions are important because the trustees hold the administrators accountable. By successfully advocating for the creation of a diversity and inclusion committee, Chris ensures accountability in two ways: the trustees can now help him hold the rest of the administrators accountable for making progress on DEI goals, and Chris helped the trustees and administrators close a gap between their DEI values and their institutional practices. Chris's reflections on his work as Chief Diversity Officer help to demonstrate that accountability from DEI specialists can lead to significant changes to institutional practices.

My interview with Karen also helps to show the utility of accountability from DEI specialists. Karen, a Chief Diversity Officer, advised me that DEI specialists have to be a careful problem-solver with much self-awareness. The reason, she said, is that Chief Diversity Officers are "an insider and you're also an outsider, and you have to stay in the outsider mode enough to be able to critique the very institution that pays you." To clarify what she meant, Karen claimed that "you have to be deeply invested in the institution and engaged. So you know the people, you know the issues, you're trusted, you're respected. So you can speak truth to power." On the one hand, you are a part of the system of bureaucratic administration; you develop trusting relationships with other administrators and you develop a commitment to the institution that pays

your salary. On the other hand, a Chief Diversity Officer is responsible for highlighting the ways that the institutional environment can be harmful for students and employees. The fact that this tension exists for Chief Diversity Officers helps to illustrate why their role is so crucial. If leaders of educational institutions want to make their DEI goals a reality, then they need to hire someone who takes on the responsibility of critiquing the institution with the interests of students and employees of color (and other marginalized groups) in mind.

Karen provided several examples of situations where she criticized the institution to lobby for changes. For example, lobbied her president to include "social justice" in DEI discourse because "we have to always be connecting to revealing larger systems of oppression and how they play out her" as opposed to simply asking everyone to "b[e] nice to folks of color, or folks who identify as gay or from any other marginalized group." A focus on proper etiquette for intergroup interactions can be important, but she wanted other administrators on campus to critically reflect on the ways that the structure and culture of the university may create barriers to success for particular groups of students. According to Karen, she told her university's president:

> If you don't look at how inequities are built into the policies, the practices, the norm, the curriculum of college and university life, then you're actually missing where the problem is. And we can do workshops all day long that make people feel good about diversity, but that doesn't mean the environment stops being oppressive or non-inclusive for folks from historically marginalized groups.

Changing the DEI discourse to include social justice wasn't just about the words. It was also about the directive that flows from the words. If social justice is explicitly mentioned when the school talks about their antidiscrimination goals or resources, then Karen believes that her role expands to address how the campus environment can perpetuate the oppression of groups of students and employees. Later in the interview, Karen shared the tactics she uses to highlight gaps between the president's and other senior administrators' decisions and their commitment to social justice for students and employees:

> "One of my strategies has been to put it in the voice of someone else. So I might say, 'That's an interesting perspective. However…if I were a student, here's how I would respond to that.' Sometimes that actually works. Or, 'what I've heard from students is x, y and z.' or, "If I was the family of a student, here's how I would respond to that. Are we ready?' Sometimes I'll say, 'We should anticipate that students will not be happy with this decision.' Other times I've just said, 'I think that's unethical.'"

As an insider, Karen gets to be in the room where policy discussions between the president and other senior administrators take place. To fulfill her critic or outsider role, she has to develop rhetorical tools that can persuade her colleagues to reconsider decisions she believes will deviate from the school's commitment to social justice. Whether she asks her colleagues to do thought experiments from the perspective of other stakeholders, consider the potential resistance from students, or respond to being called out for an "unethical" practice, Karen is still fulfilling the role of holding her colleagues accountable. She admitted that the accountability can

be risky "because it's not what people want to hear," but it is necessary because the white administrators of universities—who she framed as "good liberal white folks who perceive themselves as always doing the right thing"—tend to only do DEI work that offers few benefits to students and employees from marginalized backgrounds:

> "[White administrators are] doing the stuff that's not complicated. It's not hard. It doesn't change the core of the institution. They're doing all of the window dressing. And then the longer you're there, the more likely it is you're calling on people to do the work that's at the core. And that work at the core shakes the people in the institution in a way that they don't want to have to really examine those systems, processes, or themselves."

To summarize, DEI specialists are useful because they can hold authority figures accountable to their antidiscrimination goals. They can use their expertise to help leaders (i.e. presidents or superintendents) develop their strategies for reaching their DEI goals. They can lobby for changes to the existing policies and practices so that other stakeholders (i.e. board members) can provide accountability. They can use their insider access to push leaders to consider the implications of their language and decisions on various stakeholders, even when it may be risky to do so. The absence of DEI specialists can then be viewed as an absence of accountability.

AFFIRMATION

Last year, a group of three wise student leaders from one of the high schools in my district decided to create their school's first Black Student Union (BSU). The three young ladies were already involved in other extra-curricular activities and had no problem advocating to their principal for institutional change. They specifically wanted a BSU, though, because they wanted to talk with other Black students about topics that were based on their unique experiences at the predominantly white high school. For example, the three student leaders were passionate advocates for strategies to make their school's curriculum responsive to the interests of Black students, such as the creation of an African American history course. The principal provided her enthusiastic support for the creation of the BSU.

As the Equity Director for the district, I often receive or hear about complaints regarding the existence of a BSU. For example, I helped the BSU organize an event for Black History Month that featured plenty of food, dancing, a disc jockey, and a guest speaker. A Euro-American mother of a student in the district sent me an e-mail to question why the district supported a "separate union for a single race." After speaking to the aforementioned principal and my supervisor, I sent a lengthy response clarifying that the BSU actively mentions that all students are welcome to participate in the club and their events in any advertisements. In addition, I explained that there is a long history of school districts, colleges, and corporations supporting affinity groups for people who have historically dealt with discrimination, social isolation, exploitation, and symbolic violence. In other words, it is hard to explain why a BSU shouldn't exist in spaces where there are unions to address the exploitation of different subgroups of our workers (i.e. teachers, support staff, bus drivers, etc.), empowerment groups and programs for women, space and resources given to gay-straight unions, and affinity groups

for English language learners. The parent or any of their fellow opponents of the BSU have not accepted my invitation to continue the dialogue.

This story, which I do share with students and colleagues, illustrates one of the ways that students can benefit from the existence of DEI practitioners: affirmation for students who want to address inequities at school. If student learning is more likely to occur when they have adults who demonstrate care for their identity and values through action, then students benefit when they have DEI specialists who can provide that affirmation—especially if they are surrounded by educators who often deploy postracialism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) and underclass ideologies (Reed 2016) in conversations about inequalities. As I frequently hear from students and staff who care about racism and other inequities, it can be nice to have at least one administrator to validate that "you're not crazy" for trying to highlight and address these issues.

"[She] could have very well been my daughter"

Tiffany, a Chief Diversity Officer, shared that she has experience as a DEI specialist in educational and corporate institutions. Regardless of whether they are in an educational or corporate setting, Tiffany expressed the belief that it is necessary for DEI specialists to know how to build a rapport with a variety of stakeholders. Specifically, she said "the characteristics of someone in this role should be about building bridges, building trust, building relationships." The DEI specialist builds that rapport by asking questions and actively listening to various stakeholders before they start to ask anyone to do things for them. For example, when Tiffany started her current job as a Chief Diversity Officer, she investigated a series of questions concerning the schools' relationships with a variety of stakeholders in the broader community:

"You know, one of the things I did when I first got here is not only meet folks internally, but also to go into the community to say, 'Hey, you know, tell me, what are your thoughts about the institution? How are we perceived? What relationship do you have with the campus? Do you do business with the institution?... Also thinking about community-based organizations, you know, how do we partner with community-based organizations to make certain that they too understand how it is that we can build strong alliances with the institution.

Listening shows that you care and helps to build trust. Once she develops those positive relationships, Tiffany believes that she has laid the foundation to ensure that students (and faculty) are treated fairly:

"Knowing that our students are going into the community that's supporting these businesses, we can't afford for our students to be treated any way then less than respectful. Right? So, it's important that I'm out there saying, hey, how can we partner? Oh, by the way, our students are spending their dollars here…and not only are our students spending dollars, but our faculty and staff are spending dollars as well.

My interview with Tiffany showed me that the act of listening and working to care for students can take a DEI specialist into some unexpected territory. It is in that unexpected

territory that DEI specialists can provide affirmation for students in ways that others (including their parent or guardian) may not be able to. For example, Tiffany shared a story where some students complained to her that their friend was both handcuffed and arrested by the university police because their friend "violated a no-contact order." When Tiffany visited the student to gather more details, the student confirmed that "I went into the building. I shouldn't have gone into the building, but I did." The student shared that she went into the building, a residence hall, because she used to live in that building and wanted to visit her friends. Tiffany was upset by the arrest because she knew for sure that "police have discretion and I know what it means to be nineteen years old and at nineteen years old, you make decisions that she wouldn't have made at 50-something years old." In other words, Tiffany felt that the punishment was more harsh than necessary for a mistake made by a teenager.

To further contextualize the issue, Tiffany felt like this injustice was part of a broader pattern. Specifically, she said that after working at several academic institutions, "I've never heard of students being arrested at the rate anywhere else throughout my entire academic history as I have here." She felt that the arrests were tied to a financial motive of the police officers on campus; she said that it is "because they want to do the overtime." Yet whenever she asks anyone on campus to explain why it seems routine to arrest students, "no one can explain it to me."

Tiffany couldn't do much to change the situation since the Chief of Police noted that the police officers didn't break any policies. In addition, all of her fellow senior-level administrators took a "hands off" approach to the situation. To help the student navigate this situation, Tiffany approached the student like a family member and promised the students' parents that she would go to court to support the student and spare them the financial costs of a trip:

"Now she's got to go downtown in front of a judge. It was all I could do not to cry in front of her when she told me this. Now I'm face timing with her parents who are from Africa to explain to them, No, you don't need to come up here to go to court with your daughter. She'd bear an additional financial expense. Right? In addition to the fact their daughter was going to pack up and leave school. So now I'm thinking, here's a child, someone else's child who could have very well been my daughter."

Unfortunately, I didn't get to hear how the situation ultimately ended. However, I do know that the interview helped to demonstrate that DEI specialists can be the administrator who listens and shows grace to students and their families in difficult cases, even when other administrators decide to take a "hands off" approach.

Taylor, a Chief Diversity Officer, shared that one of their key roles is to improve the campus culture by "being able to educate and support students so that they have a more inclusive and welcoming kind of experience when they're on campus." The metrics for success, in general, are "retention and graduation rates" as well as "campus climate surveys to really gauge inclusion and belonging across the board." According to Taylor, one of the barriers to success on these issues is that people—including other administrators and educators—tend to be silent bystanders who distance themselves from critics of people who complain about institutional practices:

"If you have issues with the school, you're on your own. And what's very problematic about that is there's not voice in numbers because everyone's looking to protect

themselves. And I understand that because people have families, people don't want to put themselves at risk. But when you share your stories [about injustice at school] you're exposing your concerns with the institution, and people don't lean in to want to help unite and fight in numbers. People step away, usually, because they don't want to get themselves in trouble and don't want to put themselves in harm's way. So now you're at an institution with people that know you've been discriminated against, see the discrimination, but will never speak up and say anything."

It would be easy to use a deficit ideology to interpret the silence and inaction of individuals in response to discrimination. For example, many of my colleagues and students would probably conclude that Taylor works with individuals who are either ignorant or simply don't care about equity. However, Taylor points to a sociological problem that is well-documented from scholars of discrimination and exploitation. One classic example is the culture of silence in police departments, whereby officers refuse to provide incriminating details about their peers out of loyalty (and fear of retaliation) to their peers. Feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed argues that diversity discourse can function as a public relations strategy for organizations. As a consequence, diversity discourse can cultivate an environment where complaints about racism are interpreted as an attack on the good will and reputation of the organization as "diverse" and "inclusive;" the people who "speak about racism become the blow, the cause of the injury" (*On Being Included* p. 145). Flecha (2021) argues that one barrier to addressing sexual violence is second-order sexual harassment, or "the harassment experienced by individuals who support victims and is the direct result of such support" (p. 76). The risk and failure to reduce the risk of second-order sexual harassment can contribute to a culture of silence amongst witnesses of

sexual violence. Sociologist Vivek Chibber argues that one source of stability for capitalism despite the existence of exploitation and growing inequality is "resignation" by laborers. Resignation occurs when "workers accept their location in the class structure because they see no other viable option" (p. 105). Collective consent, as opposed to collective resistance, exists in part because people without income-generating assets need to work for a living; the risks of organizing or joining collective action to address exploitation are often too high, making silence or covert forms of individual resistance rational.

While other professionals may be silent bystanders for the social, political, and economic reasons discussed above, Taylor constructs DEI specialists as the people responsible for breaking this tendency to affirm the targets of injustice (including but not limited to students). Taylor stated, "A majority of the time, folks just want to have someone that's there to listen. And I think a big part of it is being validated." They continued with:

> "There are significant wins [like] being that person that can be there to really talk to that student, or really help validate someone's experience, or designing programs, or even putting on training or educating others. I mean, these are small, incremental changes at very big institutions that do create, that do shift the culture, you know.

Taylor genuinely believes that the affirmation via listening and sharing the perspectives of some students at professional learning sessions are all important because they know what it's like to go to schools without that support:

But knowing that I'm able to be there as a support, even if it's just to listen or to give them suggestions, or guidance, or really help them establish programs or find networks or community is so incredibly important, because I didn't have that when I was a student. So even though I'm not creating the major change, where it's impacting everybody together, I feel like at least on a daily basis, I'm able to help in a one-on-one kind of capacity, knowing that I'm not really sure others would be there to do the same thing. So I do take this very seriously. I think that's what keeps me going every day, because at least I'm helping that individual person who will in turn, help another person, and so on and so forth."

In sum, my interviews show how affirmation and validation can be used as diversity management frames. Tiffany showed me the value of schools having DEI specialists to support students who may be one of the targets of inequities like over policing for economic reasons. At the very least, Tiffany could be that one administrator who cares for a student having to interact with the criminal justice system so their parents can be assured that their student has a familial-like figure looking out for them. Taylor showed me the value of schools having DEI specialists to listen and legitimize complaints about discrimination. Other administrators may be aware students' complaints about racism, but inaction from that administrator is a real possibility. Therefore, students benefit when they have at least one professional who is responsible for making sure they feel heard and part of a community that treats discrimination as a legitimate problem.

<u>ADVOCACY</u>

I was recently asked by a teacher to speak to a in my district about the role of a DEI specialist. The class was for high school students interested in pursuing a career in teaching, so I knew that I could assume that my audience cared about the learning conditions and needs of students. Although we had a common value, I struggled to prepare my presentation because I was used to speaking to college students and professionals as opposed to high school students. When I asked my wife for advice, she tentatively let me know that she was interested in what I came up with because even she didn't have a good metaphor or concept to capture my line of work. She could talk about specific situations when I helped a teacher or superintendent, but I never really gave her a clear frame of reference to understand my role and describe it to other people. After I got over my embarrassment, I went to my whiteboard with even more urgency; I now had to make my role make sense to high school students and my best friend.

Thankfully, my wife's admission helped to clear my brain fog. In just a few minutes, I finally discovered a useful concept to talk about the role of a DEI specialist and why it is important: applied sociology. Broadly speaking, someone is engaging in "applied sociology" when they use sociological concepts and/or methods consult authority figures or the general public on how to act (Perlstadt 2006). What I do for a living, then, is take the skills I developed in my pursuit of a PhD in sociology and act as a consultant to help school leaders remove barriers to success that may exist for groups of students. By framing DEI work as applied sociology, I was able to link concepts that the high school students and my wife already knew to the new knowledge I was offering about my role.

Luckily, the presentation to the high school students went really well and my wife had an easy-to-grasp concept to talk about my role. In the presentation, I told the students psychology (a

topic they knew about) was similar to sociology, except we study and develop theories about groups of people as opposed to focusing on the minds of individuals. In addition, I told them that there are many sociologists and psychologists who study the status quo because they want to understand how we can improve the well-being of people; we don't just study personal or social issues just for the sake of studying it. For example, I mentioned that I wanted to study how administrators think about race and racism because I wanted to increase my knowledge on how schools can better address racism and racial inequality. Then, I outlined the basic steps that I used to study topics as a sociologist:

1) Collect data

2) Identify themes or patterns

3) Examine research that can help us to explain and address the social problem

4) Educate and advocate for social change.

I knew this was a little too abstract, so I went through the steps with a focus on a topic that is pretty common for DEI specialists: the ethnicity and racial categorization of teachers. For the first and second steps, I shared how I collected demographic data on the students and teachers in our district. I found that roughly 65% of the students identify as white, yet 97.5% of our teachers identify as white. Before I continued, I made it clear that no one is arguing that white teachers can only teach white students. Instead, the tension exists when our district claims to value diversity and yet there is a clear pattern in the data: we have a largely homogenous population of teachers[5]. For the third step, I shared that changing our recruitment practices as a

---

[5] We also had a great conversation about the reasons why it is valuable to have a diverse population of teachers and the social factors that could lead to a mostly-white population of teachers in our suburban district. For example, the students mentioned that it is important for all groups of students to have teachers who can possibly

district could be a clear and effective way to respond to this issue. For example, the district could pay for an administrator or teacher to promote our district to future educators at a Historically Black Colleges and University. For the fourth step, I shared that I worked with equity specialists from other predominantly white districts in the region to advocate for the financial resources to start recruiting students from several HBCUs to our districts. I emphasized that the main reason I love my job as an equity specialist is because I get to apply the four steps I used as a sociologist to advocate for changes that benefit high school students.

As an educator, I like the moments when I can clearly see the "lightbulb" turn on in the heads of students. I saw the class go from halfway disengaged to full-on engaged. The best part, though, was that I was able to make an announcement that made all of the students thrilled: the district has agreed to allow over 100 students attend the trip to visit HBCUs in Washington D.C. In other words, the trip would serve two functions: the recruitment of Black teachers and a student tour of HBCUs. "The best part," I shared, "is that no student would have to pay to attend the college visit." The students were elated. I simply felt lucky to have a clear-cut example where I successfully advocated for something that was clearly beneficial for students in my district.

"Let's knock on some doors and figure this out."

The interviews revealed that DEI specialists can use advocacy as a diversity management frame. With this frame, diversity specialists are constructed as professionals who promote the

---

be role models with similar experiences and/or identities. We also talked about historical legacy of redlining, an explicitly racist culture in the past, and more recent examples of racism as parts of the equation too.

perspective of students—especially students of color—to other administrators and/or educators and advocate for resources they believe will improve the well-being of students. This advocacy is conditional, though, because they cannot publicly join and support students that dissent against the decisions of the most powerful and privileged social group at institutions: employers.

Sam, a diversity coordinator, originally went to graduate school to become a social scientist. However, in the process of finishing their dissertation, Sam decided that they no longer wanted to pursue a tenure track professor job at a university. Although they had careers in politics or advocacy organizations in mind, Sam ultimately decided to work as a diversity specialist at a university. To explain why they landed on a career as a diversity specialist, Sam referenced a time when their former students (meaning when they taught classes as a graduate student) needed an advocate:

> During my very first semester teaching, I had a couple of student athletes come up to me, who were on the women's soccer team at the time and said like, 'Look, you know, we're taking your gender class, but we're realizing that we don't have any support for LGBTQ+ athletes here. Like there's nothing, there's not even like a student group, for athletes about this…' And so they said, 'can you help us advocate and like, put this together.' And like, I'm a dumb grad student at this time, like, I'm in my third year, I'm like, 'yeah sure, like, let's knock on some doors and figure this out.'

By choosing to help the students push for an affinity group to support athletes who identify as LGBTQ+, Sam volunteered to be an advocate for students who needed it. Two clear

benefits came from her advocacy. The first is that Sam was able to not only help the students advocate for the affinity group, but she ended up "writ[ing] the transgender student athlete policy for the university." The second is that she "got freaking lucky" because she was told to work with a senior administrator who became her mentor during graduate school. Sam continued to explain why her mentor played an important role in her life:

"I got very lucky [with my mentor] because she's a mover and a shaker. And she never sees a problem that is too big to tackle. And so, because I have her as a model of being such an advocate for students, and being such a well-respected administrator across campus and in the region, you know, I felt like I could kind of be like her, in a way."

Sam's experience working with her students and her eventual role model paved the way for her career as a DEI specialist. She felt proud of her students and herself for their successful push to change campus policies. She developed faith in the idea that administration can be an opportunity to be a courageous advocate for students as she worked with another woman modeling that possibility. As a DEI specialist, Sam would have the opportunity for more joy and pride through student advocacy that she couldn't get necessarily get as a social scientist.

When I shifted the conversation to her experiences on the job, Sam provided a more recent example of advocacy for students that made her proud. In the school year preceding our interview, Sam and several of her fellow DEI specialists at the university sponsored what she called "a unity trip, where we took…47 students to Washington, DC for four days." The trip was not a celebration of unity, but an attempt to promote unity among the "student leaders of color on

campus" and reduce the infighting among the students. The office of DEI specialists at her college supervised the multicultural student clubs (such as an African Student Union and a fraternity that primarily serves students identified as Latino), and her colleagues were worried that the infighting would negatively impact the specialists' ability to make sure the clubs could access financial resources from the college:

"So as a diversity office, we're like, 'Hmm, this has got to stop because you're making our work harder. Because the administration wasn't willing to invest more money if these students are going to constantly be written up for conduct violation. We're all like, okay, we're gonna spend a few thousand dollars and drag them to DC, put them on a bus. Let's go. Let's go learn about our history. And then, we're gonna room you with who you were fighting with."

She shared that the infighting had nothing to do with policy or decisions by the administration. Instead, it was "19-year-old BS [or bullshit] like, these seniors don't like these freshmen in this group and [one student] hit on so-and-so's boyfriend." Regardless of the reasons why there was infighting, Sam and her colleagues used the trip to help the student leaders see that their advocates would have a harder time supporting their activities on campus and "making our jobs hard." Furthermore, it was in the students' self-interest to build solidarity at a predominantly white campus because "I guarantee that the students that don't look like you are probably not going to support you like you can be supporting each other." Fortunately for the students and the DEI specialists, Sam shared that their plan worked. The infighting stopped and

some of the students went on to successfully pursue additional leadership roles on campus. It was also nice, she shared, that she could see the students buy into the idea that the DEI specialists are their advocates:

"It was nice to see them start to get it, start to understand what our work as staff is really there for in the college and how we're really there to support them. We're not just people that are, you know, working in our offices all day and don't care about them. It was very rewarding."

My interview with Kailyn also illustrates the way that DEI administrators provide affirmation for students even when it is difficult. Kailyn (1:01), a multiculturalism specialist, described herself as "an empath" with an uncanny ability to listen and connect with individuals—even the "white folks that were overt racists." She said:

"So I literally talk to students from all backgrounds. And do I have a spiritual belief and a value system? Absolutely. But I also respect everyone else's ability to have their own. I can sit down and have a conversation with somebody that's an atheist. I can sit down and have conversation with somebody that's Wiccan and learn. Like I want to know like, How did you become a witch?"

Kailyn advised me that there is a tension between her personal feelings and her role as an advocate. She said, "I've had to put my feelings to the side, often to make sure that my students have what they need. And that can make this work harder because, there are days that I come home and I'm like, 'Why? Why am I doing this to myself? Like, this is hard.'" To explain this tension, Kailyn referenced a verbal dispute on a committee between herself and a vice president on campus.

The university started the aforementioned committee in response to a wave of anti-racist college student protests in the year 2015 (Libresco 2016). The committee's task was to implement demands for institutional changes published by their school's Black Student Union. Before they complete their committee's work, Kailyn says that she had to organize several "healing circles for my babies" following the murder of two white police officers. The healing circles were part of a broader response to some students' concerns that the country's conflict surrounding systemic racism and police violence; some students approached her with concerns like, "I'm scared to leave my room," "I don't want to be black," and "how do you undo systemic racism?" Furthermore, some concerned students questioned the lack of any statements and affirmation from the senior administrators of the university. She recalled, "So they're like, why isn't senior administration saying anything? Like, why you are only safe space? Like why when something happens is it only you that's responding to us? And that broke my heart." As a remedy, Kailyn decided to advocate for a public statement from the senior administrators about these concerns to the committee charged with implementing the Black Student Union's recommendations. Kailyn summarized the verbal dispute between herself and the "white male vice president" as the following:

"I said, you know, the students are waiting for senior administration to address them. And he's like, 'But you're an administrator and you addressed them? So why is there a need?' And I said, 'Well, they want somebody besides me. Like I'm always addressing them. And I'm black, too. So it's very different for me to address them than for somebody that's senior administration to address them.' [He replied,] 'But aren't you an administrator?'"

The vice president rejected the idea that Kailyn was distinct from anyone else in the administration. From Kailyn's perspective, however, it made sense that the students made the distinction because of her racial identification and the fact that she was not a member of the senior administration who could make public statements on behalf of the university. In addition, Kailyn felt that the vice president failed to see that DEI specialists need to act as insiders and outsiders. On the one hand, they are part of the administration of the university. On the other hand, they are advocates who create unique spaces for students to vent and share their unfiltered thoughts on personal and public issues.

To help the senior administrator see the duality, Kailyn stressed that "I'm an administrator and I'm also a safe space. Sometimes I'm those things simultaneously, sometimes I have to pick which one I am. In this regard, I had to show up as a safe space because they wouldn't have felt safe with me if I showed up as an administrator." Unfortunately, the senior administrator "raised his voice" repeated their contention that Kailyn was an administrator just like him. Although the senior administrator expressed confusion about this dual role, Kailyn shared that she believes he was really raising his voice and projecting his anxieties on to her

"because he didn't want to say that the president didn't want to write a letter addressed to the students."

After some time, the situation did have a positive ending. Kailyn left the room frustrated because none of the other 15-20 people in the room intervened. However, several people did send her text messages and one colleague shared that she did not deserve that since "you're doing your job." In addition, one Black alum on the committee reaffirmed Kailyn's comments by asking why his fellow alumni were only hearing about Kailyn showing up to support Black students during the contentious time period. An hour after the meeting, Kailyn says she received an email from the senior administrator apologizing for his behavior, asking if he could bring her lunch to discuss the issue further, and admitting "I can learn a lot from you." They met for two hours and their relationship was "amicable going forward."

As the interviews suggest, advocacy can be one diversity management frame. Sam showed how DEI specialists can push for resources to help build solidarity among student leaders after infighting creates unnecessary divisions. By sponsoring the trip to Washington D.C., Sam and their colleagues were able to help the student leaders see that there are adults at the university who will lobby for a significant amount of money to restore social ties. Kailyn showed how DEI specialists can act as the middle-person between critical students and senior administrators. Attempts to voice the concerns and demands of students to other administrators can shore up a DEI specialists' identity as an advocate. However, their advocacy can lead to conflict with the subjects of their demands, such as the senior administrator who negatively responded to Kailyn's comments about some students' desire for a public statement. Regardless of how other administrators respond, the point still stands that DEI specialists can be advocates for organizational resources on behalf of students.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This essay sought to underscore the argument that "street data" can be a useful tool for educators and administrators pursing the goal of equity in public school education. In the book *Street Data,* Safir and Dugan call upon K-12 educators and administrators to rethink the treatment of quantitative data as the sole method for data collection. They persuasively argue that "street data," or qualitative data that treats the voices of students as assets, should be prioritized by administrators and educators in order to reach our goals for school improvement. While the authors focused on street data collected from students, this essay demonstrated that street data collected from DEI specialists—including but not limited to DEI specialists who work with students in higher education—can be useful for new DEI specialists who are working to defend our policies and practices in K-12 schools.

When I collected street data from DEI specialists in higher education, I found three diversity management frames—the lenses that individuals use to describe the benefits of having DEI administrators at schools. Under an expert accountability frame, students benefit when there are specialists to question and oversee progress on the antidiscrimination practices of a school's administration. Under an affirmation and validation frame, students benefit when they have professionals who are responsible for legitimizing, caring for, and listening to complaints about invidious institutional practices like discrimination. Under an advocacy frame, students benefit when they have professionals who are responsible for publicly supporting recommendations for institutional change to address problems identified by students. These diversity management frames are useful because they can help defenders of DEI practices at public schools not only talk about the problems (like racist practices from authority figures) that need to be addressed,

but highlight the specific ways that DEI practices can provide clear benefits for students in educational institutions.

As a new member of the DEI profession, I have personally seen the value of using these diversity management frames to speak to skeptics and critics. Yet that is not the only benefit. One other benefit is that new DEI specialists can use the diversity management frames to develop practices and policies to support students. To apply expert accountability, for example, new DEI specialists specific schools in a district develop "equity imperatives" for their school improvement plans. In *Listening Leader*, Safir defines an equity imperative as the "moral standard toward which your team, school, or system will thrive" (p. 200). Safir also states that it "serves as a *call to action* (her emphasis) that emerges from the current-state story" and tends to focus on patterns of disproportionate outcomes. The Chief Diversity Officer can not only help schools develop their equity imperatives, but they can also ensure that the schools implement practices that are actually effective. For example, I frequently have to challenge the pervasive view (or arguably a myth) that mandatory anti-bias training is an effective antidote for discriminatory behavior. As a result, I am tasking the districtwide equity committee with reading the book *Getting to Diversity: What Works and What Doesn't* so we can come to a common understanding as to how research (as opposed to popular culture or books that provide abstract notions of antiracism like *How to be an Antiracist*) can inform our antidiscrimination practices.

To apply advocacy, a school district can institutionalize a relationship between a chief diversity officer and students who are passionate about using their voices to improve learning conditions for students. To use an example from my district, the director of school improvement and I started a "Student Equity Design Team" this year. The team includes at least four students from each of our district's four high schools (for a total of 16 students) who were nominated by

their principals. On a monthly basis, my colleague and I conduct workshops geared about equity, culturally responsive education, and "street data." By the end of the school year, the students will collect their own street data by conducting focus groups with their peers using questions they generated. After they collect and analyze the data, the students from each high school will present one recommendation concerning equity that they want the director of school improvement and I to both review and publicly promote the following year. Rather than solely having one or two students sit on various district committees, the format of the Student Equity Design Team teaches students how to use research on public issues (as opposed to their own personal troubles) to push for institutional change.

To apply affirmation, a school district can enable diversity specialists to devote a significant portion of their time on creating venues to build a rapport with the students from historically marginalized backgrounds. For example, I am usually a participant in the district office "walkthroughs" of our schools and focus on introducing myself to students. I work with teachers from throughout the district to help create celebrations for significant times like Black History Month that feature student performances. I help develop professional learning opportunities for staff that often focus on the unique barriers that students of color face at predominantly white schools. I worked with a group of staff to develop a Juneteenth celebration that raised money for scholarships given to students who express a commitment to return to our district as a culturally responsive educator in the future. We are still developing new ways to show our students that we care about them in a world where issues like racism unfortunately persist.

One limitation of my research is that I have a small sample size of twenty participants. The small sample size prevents any definitive generalization about DEI specialists in general or

specifically in higher education. As I mentioned previously, I contend that small sample sizes can be advantageous in exploratory studies that focus on depth instead of the quantity of social phenomenon. Furthermore, I agree with Luker's (2009) contention that the value of qualitative research is the discovery of arguments, while quantitative research is useful for verification. Future research can focus on the question of which diversity management frames are more or less common. Lastly, it is important to note that the main argument isn't that DEI specialists will use the three aforementioned diversity management frames. Instead, I sought to demonstrate why equity proponents should collect street data from DEI specialists and, consequently, improve the quality of their diversity management frames in terrains where DEI work is increasingly framed as harmful for students by conservative activists.

<u>WORKS CITED</u>

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2006. *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Crouch, Mira, and Heather McKenzie. 2006. "The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research." *Social science information* 45, no. 4: 483-499.

Chibber, Vivek. 2022. *The class matrix: Social theory after the cultural turn*. Harvard University Press.

Dobbin, Frank, and Alexandra Kalev. 2022. *Getting to diversity: What works and what doesn't*. Harvard University Press.

Eberhardt, Jennifer L. 2020. *Biased: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see, think, and do*. Penguin.

Fields, Karen E., and Barbara J. Fields. 2014. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso Books.

Flecha, Ramón. 2021. "Second-order sexual harassment: Violence against the silence breakers who support the victims." *Violence against women* 27, no. 11:1980-1999.

Kalev, Alexandra, Frank Dobbin, and Erin Kelly. 2006. "Best practices or best guesses? Assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies." *American sociological review* 71, no. 4: 589-617.

Kelly, Erin, and Frank Dobbin. 1998. "How affirmative action became diversity management: Employer response to antidiscrimination law, 1961 to 1996." *American Behavioral Scientist* 41, no. 7: 960-984.

Kendi, Ibram X. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World.

Libresco, Leah. 2016. "Here Are the Demands From Students Protesting Racism at 51 Colleges." *FiveThirtyEight*. fivethirtyeight.com/features/here-are-the-demands-from-students-protesting-racism-at-51-colleges.

Luker, Kristin. 2009. *Salsa dancing into the social sciences*. Harvard University Press.

Pager, Devah, and Hana Shepherd. 2008. "The sociology of discrimination: Racial discrimination in employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 34: 181-209.

Pager, Devah, Bart Bonikowski, and Bruce Western. 2009. "Discrimination in a low-wage labor market: A field experiment." *American sociological review* 74, no. 5: 777-799.

Perlstadt, Harry. 2006. "Applied sociology." *21st Century sociology: A reference handbook* 2: 342-52.

Prasad, Monica. 2018 "Problem-solving sociology." *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 4: 393-398.

Reed Jr, Adolph. 2016. "The post-1965 trajectory of race, class, and urban politics in the United States reconsidered." *Labor Studies Journal* 41.3: 260-291.

Safir, Shane, and Jamila Dugan. 2021. *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin.

Safir, Shane. 2017. *The listening leader: Creating the conditions for equitable school transformation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Schwartz, Sarah. 2021. "Who's really driving critical race theory legislation? An investigation." *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/whos-really-driving-critical-race-theory-legislation-an-investigation/2021/07

Simmons, Cedrick-Michael. 2020. "I'm Black and afraid of 'White Fragility'." *The Bellows. Available online: https://www.thebellows.org/im-black-and-afraid-of-white-fragility/(accessed on 18 June 2020)*.

Skiba, Russell J., Robert H. Horner, Choong-Geun Chung, M. Karega Rausch, Seth L. May, and Tary Tobin. 2011. "Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline." *School psychology review* 40, no. 1: 85-107.

Smolkowski, Keith, Erik J. Girvan, Kent McIntosh, Rhonda NT Nese, and Robert H. Horner. 2016. "Vulnerable decision points for disproportionate office discipline referrals: Comparisons of discipline for African American and White elementary school students." *Behavioral Disorders* 41, no. 4: 178-195.

van Leer, Kevin A. Ferreira, Kimberly M. Ashby, Sriya Bhattacharyya, Gloria G. McGillen, and Cedrick-Michael Simmons. 2021. "When Students Listen: A Co-Constructed Autoethnography

of Graduate Student Activists Eradicating Racism in Higher Education." *Global journal of community psychology practice* 12, no. 3: 1-23.

Wallace-Wells, Benjamin. 2021, "How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict over Critical Race Theory." *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory.

Wun, Connie. 2016. "Unaccounted foundations: Black girls, anti-Black racism, and punishment in schools." *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4-5: 737-750.

CONCLUSION

When I started this dissertation, I believed that the racial conflict theory outlined by Bonilla-Silva (1997) gave anti-racist scholars and educators all the analytical tools we needed to be effective. I embraced the idea that races were groups with disparate access to political, economic, social, and psychological rewards. I believed it was imperative that students and staff reckoned with the fact that white privilege is a social problem that we have a responsibility to resist. I assumed that anyone who attempted to talk about class, capitalism, and remedies for economic inequality (such as unions) were too fragile to have the really radical conversations about race, racism, and racial disparities. I thought graduate school would give me some skills to change the worldviews and behavior of other people. I didn't expect my research and experiences in graduate school to fundamentally change my worldview and behavior as an anti-racist educator.

This dissertation includes three articles that help to explain why I believe racial conflict theory is insufficient for my fellow anti-racist educators, which includes sociologists, student affairs administrators, and DEI professionals. As I mentioned in the introduction, racial conflict theory can authorize the problematic view that an internalized sense of superiority tied to white supremacy helps to explain why some adults exhibit negative responses to the anti-racist education of DEI professionals like *White Fragility* author Robin Diangelo and I. Racial conflict theory fails to help DEI professionals see that dissent and disengagement can also be expected by people who see us as an extension of the management class. As a DEI professional, I also have to confront the fact that I am part of a class of people who aids with the control and regulation of behavior for students and employees. We should expect resistance to domination. In addition, since I am part of that management class, it is reasonable for students and employees to be

skeptical of the idea that I have their best interests and needs in mind; if students and employees want someone to publicly dissent and/or support dissent against the policies, decisions, and legitimacy of my bosses, then I cannot fulfill their needs and expect to keep my job. Even if "white fragility" may be an accurate explanation sometimes, it can also be the case that students and employees are class conscious and, consequently, recognize that the revolution will not be managed.

I expect some of my critics to push against the idea that DEI professionals are an extension of an oppressive social group. It goes against the image that my fellow DEI professionals have cultivate for ourselves as "change agents" who work for "the oppressed." However, just because my argument is depressing, it doesn't mean that the explanation is false. Put differently, I may want to view myself as a Black Neo from *The Matrix* who can go inside and outside of "the system" to support systemic change. However, a class analysis reveals the depressing reality that it is reasonable for employees and students to see us as consultants for Agent Smith and his colleagues. In my opinion, failure to accept that my argument is even *possibly* true may be a case of bourgeois fragility; like the sufferers of "white fragility," professionals and managers may find it difficult to see how their status is tethered to the reproduction of domination and exploitation by employers and management; like the sufferers of "white fragility," defensive responses from professionals and managers helps to prevent critical conversations about the power dynamics that are tied to inequality. In short, I recognize that my argument could be seen as counter-productive for the project of anti-racism by my fellow administrators working to be "change agents" at schools.

Taken together, though, I do believe my three articles can lead to a fruitful conversation about ways to improve our working conditions as DEI professionals. For example, the article

"Rethinking Colorblindness" suggests that administrators who work to serve the interests of students (and employees) who have complaints about racism will probably struggle to navigate contradictory expectations. On the one hand, their bosses expect them to be loyal proponents of the institutions' goals, status, and strategy for revenue accumulation. On the other hand, their bosses expect them to advocate for the needs and interests of students. The task for employers, then, is to realize that DEI professionals will need ample resources to convince students (and employees) that they can provide tangible benefits that addresses the real problems that students (and employees) face. In other words, employers are setting their DEI professionals up to fail if they do not give DEI professionals ample time, money, and human resources to challenge the idea that a DEI professional is solely an extension of management. That can include giving DEI professionals opportunities to publicly voice some of the critical perspectives of the students and employees they claim to serve.

The second and third articles can be useful for DEI professionals because they show how other administrators work to build trust with the populations they serve. Based on my experience as a critic of DEI work, a DEI professional, and a student who benefited from relationships with DEI professionals, I do think there are clear ways that employers need to do to ensure our success. For example, in order to be an effective "self-help coach," a DEI professional will likely need ample time to be visible to students and employees; an office where students and employees can feel comfortable sharing their concerns; the recognition that employers should not ask DEI professionals to break the trust they develop with students and employees who share criticisms of the institution; professional learning on how to be an effective coach especially when students and employees have a legitimate fear of retaliation; clear expectations from employers on what type of coaching will be penalized. In order for a DEI professional to be an

effective advocate, source of expert accountability, and source of affirmation, employers will need to give DEI professionals a reasonable budget per person they are expected to support; they will need to have frequent access to executive level administrators where they can push for change without any fear of retaliation (i.e. shooting the messenger); they will need to spend much of their first few years simply finding ways to build emotional and social ties with students and employees; they will need to have ample time and money to build their expertise on anti-discrimination practices, barriers to organizational change, and conflict management; they will need other administrators to never ask them to publicly condemn other advocacy groups on behalf of management (such as unions and affinity groups) or do anything else that can clearly negate their status as an advocate for students and employees. If an employer fails to provide these clear resources, then it is incumbent upon us to question whether we should continue to lend our credibility to the institutions' supposed commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Lastly, this dissertation sought to contribute to the growing body of critical research on DEI work. The work by Berrey (2015), Dobbin and Kalev (2022), Edelman (2020), Ahmed (2012), Thomas (2020). Their research suggests that it is imperative that we expect a decoupling between an organization's commitment to DEI and the reality for students and employees on the ground. Since the courts treat the existence of DEI policies and practices as evidence against complaints of discrimination—regardless of whether there is evidence of efficacy—employers are able to use DEI policies and practices as a form of window-dressing (Edelman 2020). DEI policies and practices help to reinforce employers' and managers' control over how organizational problems are addressed (Edelman 2020; Berrey 2015). Employers can use the language of "diversity" as a public relations strategy that does little to address the complaints of racism and white privilege from students and employees (Berrey 2015; Thomas 2020; Ahmed

2012). To make matters worse, employers' most popular practice for reducing discrimination, mandatory anti-bias training, is not effective. (Dobbin and Kalev 2022). This dissertation extends this line of research because it shows how administrators attempt to navigate these dynamics in order to help students. In addition, all of the aforementioned research suggests that the problem with DEI work isn't that it is too radical—a claim I hear from anti-DEI community members where I work as a specialist. Instead, the research suggests that DEI policies and practices are too conservative to address the legitimate concerns about employers and managers in organizations.

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Berrey, Ellen. "The enigma of diversity." In *The Enigma of Diversity*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation." *American sociological review* (1997): 465-480.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2018 *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

Dobbin, Frank, and Alexandra Kalev. *Getting to diversity: What works and what doesn't*. Harvard University Press, 2022.

Edelman, Lauren B. *Working law: Courts, corporations, and symbolic civil rights*. University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Thomas, James M. *Diversity regimes: Why talk is not enough to fix racial inequality at universities*. Rutgers University Press, 2020.