How Did We Get Here: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the U.S.

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Abstract

The Council on Social Work Education requires all social work programs to include diversity content throughout the curriculum. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was enacted to address the need to integrate the workforce and eradicate prejudice practices against African Americans (Williams, 2017). With these measures in place racial and ethnic differences remain perceptible and are at the root of social and political divide. These laws were the catalyst for diversity, equity and inclusion but the focus has rapidly moved towards voluntary efforts surrounding these practices associated with diversity in the workplace and society as a whole (Williams, 2017). In the recent past, unarmed African Americans have been killed at the hands of police officers and white citizens that decided African Americans did not deserve basic human rights. African American individuals have been subjugated to racial traumas and discrimination for centuries, dating back to slavery, Jim Crow laws, black codes and segregation. Other marginalized groups including women, immigrants, individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities and LGBTQIA community are also negatively impacted by discriminatory practices. Organizations and institutions of higher education have incorporated statements on their websites on diversity and express their desire to recruit and attract faculty and students of color from diverse backgrounds (Nunes, 2021) however, issues still remain surrounding these factors in academia and in society (Olzmann, 2020).

Terms: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Microaggressions, Ethnocentrism, Discrimination, Stigma

First written by Tatum, "the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color are like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times, it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in." This quote depicts a unique insight into how prejudice seeps into and plays a part in our daily lives. Not only is it imperative to combat these biases privately, within oneself, but most importantly within the society (Otuyelu et al, 2016).

With the advances from the civil rights era, racial and ethnic differences remain perceptible and are at the root of social and political divide. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to address integrating the workforce and eradicating prejudice practices against African Americans (Williams, 2017). An objective of the Civil rights Act of 1964 was to make discrimination due to race, color, religion, sex and national origin illegal (Woody, 2017). In the past few decades there has been growing contention surrounding police interactions with minorities and racism throughout the country.

The poignant statement, I can't breathe started a movement in the African American community and beyond with the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, by white police officer, Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Chauvin was charged with second degree murder and sentenced to 22.5 years for kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. African Americans fear for their lives while white Americans make deadly decisions, due to unfounded assumptions about people of color, as evidenced by the deaths of Daunte Wright, Jamar Clark, Thurman Blevins, Travis Jordan and 12 year old, Tamir Rice, who was shot by police as he played with a toy gun (Moon et al., 2018); Philando Castile and Travis Jordan like many others, was also killed by those that were sworn to protect and serve.

Many people of color have lost their lives at the hands of police officers and white citizens that decided to take the law into their hands. Black males are not alone, there is Sandra Bland, who was killed in police custody; Breonna Taylor, killed by police in her home and Ahmaud Arbery, was stalked before being murdered by three white men while unarmed and jogging in a Georgia neighborhood. At the time of this writing another black man, Amir Locke, was killed by police in his home by police with a no-knock warrant. He was not named on the warrant.

Countless other unnamed and unknown African Americans have perished for being black due to white privilege, which is a false, unfounded belief by whites that they are better and/or superior to blacks. This belief was supported by the numerous unfair and unjust practices associated with slavery, Jim Crow Laws, black codes, segregation, mass incarceration, educational and health disparities, and economic gaps. These events have been the fabric of our lives and addressing these atrocities will involve all levels of the government, human resource leaders, administrators and organizations to address systemic inequities within their organizations, agencies and institutions (Graham, 2020).

These violent encounters people of color have with the majority population and the police can negatively impact their health, safety, well-being, life opportunities, education, employment, politics and their communities (Edwards et al., 2019). In many instances these behaviors are manifested in the form of microaggressions, they can be subtle, almost imperceptible, negative statements towards minorities (Davis et al., 2021). More often these behaviors can also be manifested in the form of physical violence not only towards African Americans but anyone who is different or thinks differently from white America. The U.S. Capital Insurrection on January 6, 2021, as a result of President Trump's speech which was laced with fabricated statements about the election being stolen from him. He encouraged his supporters to go to the capitol

seeking to overturn his defeat by interrupting the joint session of Congress. They violently attacked the U. S. Capitol armed with bombs, guns, riot gear, chemical agents and a desire to harm anyone standing in their way, including the Capitol Police (Knox, 2021). Society experienced social unrest with an outpouring of protest and marches taking place all over the world (Void-Homes, 2021).   Black people and white people took to the streets chanting, black lives matter; it became a movement. For a change, more white people than ever before, realized the extent of racism and discrimination against black people. A global protest was underway and highlighted a need for equity, equality, and accountability.

Edwards, et al., 2019 found people of color have a higher lifetime risk of being murdered by police officers than their white counterparts, this risk increases for those between 20 – 35 years old. However, black men and boys are at higher risk of being fatally wounded by the police. It prompted a number of agencies and institutions to examine the need for policies surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion or to strengthen existing policies in order to convey a sense of equity and fairness.   Acknowledging the pervasive elephant in the room has finally been recognized as a must in society,

Other Oppressed Groups

Latinos have also been subject to years of systemic oppression, a lack of equity and inclusion in their native land and here in the United States. American Latinos have endured psychological harm and ethno-racial trauma since they migrated to America. They have endured lynching's in Southwest America, segregation during Jim Crow, the Los Angeles Zoot Suit riots, and now aggressive immigration policies (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).   They have experienced trauma throughout the immigration process. Prior to coming to the U.S. many have

lived under the poverty level, endured political mistreatment, kidnapping, sexual abuse, and natural disasters (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

LGBTQ+

Members of the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) communities are an additional at-risk group to workplace seclusion (Jiles et al., 2021). An overwhelming number of LGBTQIA members have been fired and stigmatized for years. Due to societal orientation beliefs and locational bigotry, employees have lacked legislative protections against unjust terminations and hiring bias. On June 15, 2020, the Supreme Court affirmed, through Bostock v. Clayton County, that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 applies to all people. Therefore, discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation in any hiring or employment practice is illegal. Addendums and edits were made to Title VII to encompass this ruling (Oliveri, 2020).

In a review of 3,200 survey responses from current and former accounting professionals, 54% of LGBTQIA respondents reported their profession as equitable, and 55% said the trade is inclusive (Jiles et al., 2021). Participants expressed the need for a team effort from corporations to generate the change needed for widespread, positive impact. Jiles et al. (2021) also found a significant culture shift when a company intended to hire more people, women in this example. Once the mindset was locked onto the goal of recruiting, hiring, and retaining women was made, companies showed a transformation within the workforce gender totals. Women joined the trade, and both parties, corporate and gender, flourished. Study participants highlighted the need for workplace commitment to targeted actions that recruit, empower, coach, mentor, and sponsor more racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA professionals, and females into leadership positions will result in positive progress and forward momentum.

People with Disabilities

People who have disabilities, both intellectual and physical, also experience a lack of inclusion in society. Disability as Diversity in Fortune 100 Companies investigates the inclusion and diversity policies for people working in some of the most successful businesses in the United States (Ball et al., 2005). Findings included 42 companies having diversity policies that include people with disabilities within their definition of a diverse workforce, while 47% neither included nor excluded them, expressly, within their guidelines. Only 15% of these companies had supplier disability in their definition and allow the business owner with a disability to benefit from diversity programming. Research into the Fortune 100 companies yielded results by, in part, examining the diversity policies and identifying them as being inclusive, non-committal, and disability absent. Inclusive companies explicitly include people with disabilities in the definition of diversity. Non-committal includes companies that neither say nor exclude disabilities in their description. Disability absence specifies groups that do not mention people with disabilities. Thirty-nine (42%) of the ninety-two Fortune 100 companies with diversity policies expressly include this group in their diversity statements.

Unfortunately, many companies that include people with disabilities in their statements on diversity do not expand on what their commitment to them means in practice. For example, Ford Motor Company (Ball et al., 2005) is inclusive, yet it is not apparent that they have recruited or retained employees with disabilities. Ford's Employee Resource Groups program is designed to "provide support and fellowship, identify barriers, contribute to employees' professional development, and provide organized activated for employees of diverse backgrounds." This program focuses more on various minority groups, including African

Americans, Muslims, women, and Asian-Americans. The Ford company located in Britain does have a Disability Action Group, yet there is no group in place in the United States.

Women in the workplace

Women are contributors to workplace diversity and need to be included. It is no secret that gender inequality exists within the American workplace. Women are and have become integral parts of the American work environment. Women account for half of the workforce in most rich countries and those numbers are increasing (Srinivasan, 2018). Although most rich countries are adding women to their workspaces, many are still not gaining that female presence that is needed. Women bring much value to the table, they have different physical capabilities, ethnicities, and experiences that all contribute to their unique perspectives. The progression toward gender equity in the workplace seems to be a slow journey (Krivkovich et al., 2017).

Women are hired less often than men for entry-level positions in corporate America, even though women are 57 percent of college graduates (Krivkovich et al., 2017). There are two major trends found to put women at a disadvantage in the workplace. First, women experience a workplace flawed in favor of men therefore, they are not allotted as much opportunity as their male peers. Men are promoted at higher rates than women, and women of color are promoted at lower rates than men and receive less support from management (Krivkovich et al., 2017). Secondly, men often view their workplace as equitable and inclusive for women while women see the workplace as less equitable and inclusive (Krivkovich et al., 2017). Males' perspective skew how they view progress toward diversity in the workplace thus there is not much room for females to grow or get hired at certain companies.

With the incorporation of diversity statements and various programs focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion, issues still remain surrounding these factors in academia (Olzmann, 2020). These events of systemic racism, absence of equity and inclusion take place in politics, policies and practices that have upheld and supported discriminatory practices (Ware et al., 2020). President Trump vowed in his campaign for presidency to erect a wall between the Mexican border and the United States to make deporting Mexican immigrants a priority. He also worked to restrict Muslims from certain countries from entering the U.S. (Williams, 2017).

Individuals in decision making positions often use the excuse that the numbers of qualified applicants from diverse groups are finite or that they simply don't submit applications for current job openings. These explanations are provided as an avenue to avoid taking responsibility for not making diversity a priority in the workplace. Diversity in the workplace or community simply means there is representation of people from various ethnic and social backgrounds, abilities, gender, sexual identity and sexual origin; they adequately represent society (Olzmann, 2020). Demonstrating equity involves ensuring all people are afforded the same opportunities to accomplish the goal. There is a commitment by administration to increase diversity and implement policies and procedures to support diversity in the workplace. Inclusion is the act of appreciating the differences that each employee brings to the organization and welcoming the contribution of each individual (Graham, 2020).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Diversity

Greene (2021) found diversity, equity and inclusion are imperative for organizations to be successful. It increases creativity, and problem-solving skills (McCleary-Gaddy, 2019); provides a feeling of safety and various perspectives from employees (Neault & Mondair, 2011).

It allows innovation and it creates a positive work environment, which results in a strong and profitable workplace (Graham, 2020).

Neault & Mondair identified negative effects associated with diversity. Diversity can create conflicts between different groups, result in poor job performance and cause a decline in job satisfaction for some employees. It can also create divisiveness among social groups as a result of groups being classified as diverse (2011). A lack of diversity can result in employers and staff being insensitive to others culture. During an internship the summer of 2021, this author's placement had a "Hill Billy Day" as the theme for summer camp. The board of directors; two liberal white women and a conservative black woman planned this event. This event made the counselors of color uncomfortable. Staff discussed how this derogatory term refers to poor white people and could cause conflict with people of color dressing in what is considered Hill Billy attire on this specified day. This is why it is imperative to have diversity in the workplace and on boards.

Recommendations for Growth

The labor force in the U. S. is expected to become more racially and ethnically diverse by 2026 (Grissom, 2018). To improve DEI in the workplace, employers should acknowledge unconscious bias, close existing gaps in regards to gender equity, pay parity, flexible work hours, incorporate ongoing training programs; recognize and respect holidays of all employee's cultures, diversify all teams and work groups; encourage employee feedback and evaluate existing company policies to eradicate discrimination (Greene, 2021). Embracing differences among employees and working to incorporate changes in policies that will provide opportunities, where being fair involves creating an environment where individual's needs are met for all to have equal opportunities to succeed (Wong, 2019).

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