

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

General Student Scholarship

Student Scholarship

2022

An Agent of White Supremacy: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Karolina Barrientos

karolina.barrientos@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/stdtpapers>



Part of the [Educational Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barrientos, Karolina, "An Agent of White Supremacy: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" (2022). *General Student Scholarship*. 2.

<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/stdtpapers/2>

An Agent of Systemic White Racism: Diversity Equity and Inclusion
Karolina Barrientos'22
SOCL 214 Racism
Fall 2021

An Agent of Systemic White Racism: Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), initiatives are increasingly popular in higher education and corporate institutions although they have been around for more than 50 years. Following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and subsequent protest, there was a surge of interest in DEI jobs (Tran 2021). DEI is deplored by corporations and higher education in situations in a performative way to suggest to the racially oppressed that they are anti-racist. Rather than end systemic white racism, DEI upholds it.

At Trinity College, DEI is made up of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Women and Gender Resource Action Center, and the Queer Resource Center. Each office has its own director and responsibilities and represents a different marginalized identity as can be assumed by the office titles. The mission of the department is to, “work collaboratively with partners across campus to ensure that all members of the Trinity College community feel included and have the resources and support they need to thrive.” Some of the objectives stated in the DEI Action Plan are to “provide educational opportunities on racial and social justice,” “increase Trinity’s capacity for providing dialogue opportunities,” and “collaborate with campus partners to increase the intercultural knowledge and competence” (Trinity College, DEI Goals and Action Plan 2021). Many of the action steps needed to meet these objectives are implemented through various forms of training and workshops for the campus community. But are these practices effective means for dismantling systemic white racism? Although DEI is proliferating across the country; white supremacy remains prevalent in our societal institutions.

To truly understand how diversity equity and inclusion actually work towards upholding systemic white racism, we must first understand the historical context of DEI and how it came to be. We must then understand what is meant by systemic white supremacy and how ingrained it is in society. And finally, by using sociological theories and concepts we can see how DEI in fact upholds systemic white racism and white supremacy. Systemic white racism is complex and deep, but at its root, centers race and whiteness as a mechanism to organize society. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will be defining systemic white racism as the practice of whiteness as pure and normal that it is the power that allows for societal advantages and access to opportunity structures over those not deemed white. It is legitimized by the othering of races and anti-Black practices enacted by whiteness and those that consider themselves to be white (Williams 2020: 44).

Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives can be traced back to the modern civil rights movement of the 1960s and 70s and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is important to note that the only reason these motions were accepted by the United States empire was because of what critical race theorists call material determinism. Material determinism argued that “because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it,” so when there are series of triumphs “in the civil rights litigation [it] may have resulted more from the self-interest of elite whites than a desire to help blacks” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 7). This legislation along with the rise of discrimination suits filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission led many companies to adopt some form of diversity training to abide by the law and avoid lawsuits (Anand and Winters 2008: 357). This again is a clear instance of interest convergence of material determinism, the fact that diversity training would theoretically improve

the work environment but will only be implemented once it is known that there is an economic gain or rather an avoidance of lawsuits and payouts.

DEI exists to normalize racism by attempting to make change through a micro lens by focusing on correcting the behaviors of individuals in higher education and the corporate world through training and workshops. However, to truly effect change and create a racism-free world one must eradicate the whole system, not work within it. C. Wright Mills (1959) alludes to this ideology in the sociological imagination, he states that those personal troubles of an individual can be explained and understood to be influenced by the larger society and be seen as a public issue (Mills 1959:8). To understand racism as individual interactions amongst members of society is to ignore the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in the foundation of the United States. Anti-Blackness looks at the racialization of a black body based on it not being white. The general theory of anti-Blackness is rooted in the fact that the black body is synonymous with slavery and thus social death. It argues that anti-Blackness is rooted in slavery and is thus the foundation of the United States, economic, political, and social systems (Farley 2021).

Anti-Blackness and DEI are connected through the commodification of the black body and the existence of a “racial hierarchy tells people that that as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape the commodification of capitalism” (Smith 2012: 289). Since anti-Blackness is ingrained in the very making of the U.S plays an integral part in socializing everyone in the nation, thus, it is not possible to destroy white supremacy simply by focusing on changing the individual bigots. The anti-Blackness and racial capitalism stemming from slavery and the overall dehumanization of the black body has led to the normalization of whiteness and what it means to be non-white. Whiteness is what tells us who is a slave and who is not while making opportunity structures such as education and housing difficult for people of color,

specifically Black people to attain. Systemic white racism is not upheld by the actions of an individual rather the collective consciousness of society and practice of individuality. To move away from white supremacy, we must move away from the entire system to ensure eradication.

DEI was originally created to protect systemic whites not to eliminate it. DEI is what Williams (2020) calls a “nice racism” a form of “white supremacy [that] conceptually and structurally obscures how raced relationships or social ties between self-identified whites and groups create, securely maintain, and excuse systemic white racism” (46). “Nice racism” hides the truth behind whiteness as it allows for “whites” to hide behind their identity and leads to the refusal to acknowledge their collective role in sustaining and upholding systemic white racism in society. This is where DEI comes into play. DEI is a way of reorganizing people and assimilating them into the larger institution of life, if DEI was for radical change, it would be about reallocating power (Tran 2021). Diversity Equity and Inclusion work towards upholding a protecting the institution while making minimal changes to the power relations. DEI initiatives simply center whiteness and establish the understanding that racism can be solved at the micro-level of society and ignores its pervasiveness (Williams 2020: 46-47). DEI, here at Trinity say that they stand for making sure that “all members of the Trinity College community feel included and have the resources and support they need to thrive” (Trinity College, DEI Goals and Action Plan 2021)

The real harm that comes with DEI is how they support their students of color; DEI provides students with coping mechanisms and accommodations in order for them to assimilate into the white educational institutions as they are rather than radically transforming them. This is again where whiteness comes into play. Because whiteness allows “whites” to believe that racism is practiced in individual settings and not see how they themselves enact and benefit from

whiteness there is the false notion that it can be eradicated from the individual level. This leads to whites enrolling and participating in various diversity training and workshops so they can become allies. Allies, however, are not how one transforms the institutions and structures (“Accomplices not Allies” 2019). DEI trains “whites” and others in power to approach racial oppression as racial and oppressive issues in individual situations never on how those systems are structural and need to be dismantled. To dismantle systemic white racism, we don’t need training that creates allies, we need accomplices. Accomplices are people willing to commit the “crime” of destroying oppressive regimes by working alongside oppressed people to build new people centered institutions (“Accomplices not Allies” 2019). If DEI was to do the work that it believes it does, it would be creating leaders and accomplices that would tear down a system by all necessary means.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives are agents of systemic white racism in that they allow whites to remain in power and uphold the illusion that through modifications of an individual’s behaviors can there be a racism-free world. That however is not the case. DEI, here at Trinity, is an agent of the college and will at the end of the day protect and uphold those in power at this institution. Only when all voices of students from othered backgrounds are raised and those in power emulate the needs of those students will Trinity work towards being anti-racist.

Bibliography

“Accomplices Not Allies.” *Indigenous Action Media*, Retrieved August 27, 2019

(<http://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex>).

Anand, Rohini, and Mary-Frances Winters. 2008. “A Retrospective View of Corporate Diversity Training From 1964 to the Present.” *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 7(3):356–72. doi: [10.5465/amle.2008.34251673](https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2008.34251673).

Anon. n.d. 2021. “DEI Goals & Action Plan.” *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*. Retrieved November 4, 2021 (<https://www.trincoll.edu/diversity-equity-inclusion/goals-and-plan/>).

Delgado, Richard and Stefancic, Jean. 2017. *Critical race theory: An introduction*, p. xvii-29 New York: NYU Press.

Farley, Anthony Paul. 2021. “Toward a General Theory of Anti-Blackness.” Pp. 82-104 in *AntiBlackness*, edited by Moon-Kie Jung and Joao H. Costa Vargas. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*, excerpt. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Andrea. 2012. “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing.” Pp. 285-294 in *We Have Not Been Moved: Resisting Racism and Militarism in the 21st Century*, edited by Elizabeth Martinez, Matt Meyers, and Mandy Carter. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Tran, Kim. 2021. “The Diversity and Inclusion Industry Has Lost Its Way.” *Harper’s BAZAAR*.

Retrieved November 4, 2021 (<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a35915670/the-diversity-and-inclusion-industry-has-lost-its-way/>).

Williams, Johnny E. 2020. "The Unblackening 'White' License and the 'Nice Racism' Trope." Pp. 43-56 in *Protecting Whiteness, Whitelash and the Rejection of Racial Equality*, edited by Cameron D. Lippard, J. Scott Carter, and David G. Embrick. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press.