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The Trials and Tribulations of Informal Diversity Workers and How Leadership Can Help: A Qualitative Analysis

Sierra Renee Kane
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF INFORMAL DIVERSITY WORKERS AND HOW
LEADERSHIP CAN HELP: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

by

Sierra Renee Kane

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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May 2023

ABSTRACT

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF INFORMAL DIVERSITY WORKERS AND HOW LEADERSHIP CAN HELP: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

by

Sierra Renee Kane

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Sarah Riforgiate, PhD

A crucial part of including diversity, equity, and inclusion within the workplace involves the efforts of diversity workers (Ahmed, 2017) who introduce equitable and inclusive measures, policies, rituals, and customs into the workplace. Informal diversity workers voluntarily or involuntarily conduct this unpaid labor within their organizations to enact inclusive and equitable measures. This dissertation analyzes informal diversity workers' experiences and the unique communication challenges they encounter, how they overcome these challenges, and how leadership can aid them in DEI efforts.

Informal diversity workers offer unique perspectives as company employees with insight into the organizational culture while conducting informal DEI procedures. This dissertation adopts an interpretive fieldwork method by interviewing 17 informal diversity workers from various organizations across the United States. Research questions include, *What are the communicative challenges that informal diversity workers face when implementing DEI into organizations? How do informal diversity workers combat challenges when implementing DEI into organizations? How can organizational leaders communicate support and advocate for informal diversity workers?*

Findings illuminate unique challenges informal diversity workers experienced. Diversity workers struggled with conceptualizations of success and the ever-changing nature of success

within DEI work. Second, White-identifying participants discussed diversity as racially bound, perpetuating essentialism and Whiteness. Diversity workers also described how their work was not taken seriously by organizational members and leadership. Lastly, this informal diversity work was described as emotionally taxing.

Diversity workers overcame these challenges through self-preservation and building a community. Self-preservation was achieved by leaving the organization, accepting challenges as a part of their job, and justifying challenges. Diversity workers also discussed the importance building a community which allowed them to have a safe place with people who share similar values.

Further, this study provides practical steps that organizational leaders can take to support informal diversity workers and enact DEI measures for sustainable change. Findings indicate that leaders can aid diversity workers by embedding DEI initiatives within the organization's makeup through consistent communication, training, and hiring practices. Second, leaders can use their organizational power and employ communication strategies to collaborate with diversity workers to further DEI initiatives.

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Chapter One: Dissertation Rationale and Preview

Uma: And while the institution has many tall claims of, you know, making it an inclusive space, encouraging diversity, ensuring equity, I think that all of these claims were not really backed up by actual efforts or action. Now, there were institutional efforts... There are always problems and committees and subcommittees, but on the ground, if you were to ask me about the culture, I didn't see a lot of that culture actually play out.

.....

Olivia: I just remember that people were joining [the diversity team] and it was kind of like it felt like an after-school thing, right? It was still during the workday, but it was like there was no leadership. There was no hands-on leadership. It was all employee run.

.....

Lelah: Committees are useless. That's how I see that. But what I do is that people know that the students of color stop in my office and they know that if a student tells me that they've experience like a micro aggression. I'm ruthless and I shame people for doing those things. Because of that, I play the role of a watchdog. That's my diversity work.

These three quotes illustrate challenges informal¹ diversity workers faced as they worked to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their organizations. Each participant described unique organizational constraints that related to their jobs as informal diversity workers. As Uma, stated, diversity work is often difficult because organizations fail to act in ways that impact actual organizational culture (“I didn't see a lot of that culture actually play out.”). Whereas Olivia commented on the difficulties due to the lack of seriousness her DEI committee received from organizational members (“It felt like an after-school thing.”). Lastly, Lelah highlighted the problematic nature of diversity committees, relaying how “Committees are useless” and do not bring about any positive change.

For several years, macro discourses of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Me Too movement, Stop AAPI² Hate, and the LandBack movement have led to a heightened focus on

¹ Informal is used to describe diversity workers who conduct work that is not part of their job description and thus, do not get paid for this extra work. I use the term informal and unpaid rather than volunteer due to participants with non dominant identities conducting informal diversity work because they have to, not because they volunteer to do so.

² Asian American Pacific islander

DEI and those who are doing this work. Social movements such as these focus on racial justice and equity also motivate organizational impetus to develop policies and practices that grapple with and address social inequality. DEI work has increased in prevalence within organizations and public institutions (Basu Farreca, 2020), and organizational members face challenges implementing sustainable DEI practices (Ahmed, 2012, 2017). DEI is not just a trend, but rather is becoming a part of the very fabric of organizations (Nicholson, 2023), necessitating further research. Diversity workers are important to organizations as they contribute to DEI initiatives. Introducing DEI initiatives into the workplace cultivates an inclusive environment, which encourages employees to perform at their best (Nicholson, 2023; Stephens et al., 2008). Further, these inclusive climates create a positive working environment where employees feel safe and secure (Reimert, 2021).

DEI research primarily focuses on paid diversity workers (Ahmed, 2012, 2017; Gatrell & Swan, 2008), diversity practitioners (Kahn, 2013), organizational consultants (Mease, 2016), and chief diversity officers (Williams, 2013) whose main job is cultivating diverse organizational space and inclusive cultures. Paid diversity workers are hired full time to focus on equity and diversity (Gatrell & Swan, 2008) and are often described as specialists called upon by organizations or institutions to define diversity and create training courses (Kahn, 2013). The overall goal of organizational paid diversity workers is to reduce and end workplace discrimination and harassment of minority groups (David & Bagher, 2010). Organizations often justify these changes because they believe it will increase their image and economic bottom line (O'Leary & Weathington, 2007).

Regardless of these goals, primarily focusing on paid DEI work overlooks important contributions of the many employees who bear the brunt of DEI work, either out of necessity or

voluntarily. Only 50% of Fortune 500 companies have paid diversity workers within their company (Goldstein et al., 2022). Since only half of companies have paid diversity workers, this creates conditions where informal diversity workers³ carry the load of diversity work, especially considering that many organizations may not be willing to hire paid diversity consultants or to embed DEI practices within their spaces. For example, organizations may feel that hiring employees who have non-dominant identities (by race, age, ability, gender, etc.) can operate as a site for visible diversity (Ahmed, 2017) and that practice is sufficient. Unfortunately, individuals who represent these embodied sites for diversity are often tokenized as diverse hires and typically expected to help solve issues of diversity and inclusion (Puwar, 2004), making them de facto informal diversity workers. Additionally, instead of hiring paid diversity workers, organizations sometimes create volunteer DEI committees where employees are expected to work together and strive to make positive change for their organization. Considering that informal diversity workers are an integral and unique piece of the DEI landscape in organizations, this group also warrants study.

Unlike paid diversity consultants that work across several organizations (Mease, 2016), informal diversity workers are embedded within organizations and are privy to insider cultural knowledge about how DEI initiatives are integrated because of their organizational membership. Informal diversity workers experience firsthand how their own DEI initiatives are impacting (or not impacting) their organization. Employees, especially informal diversity workers, live the work in their jobs (Buzzanell, 2020) because of their identity as well as their passion for diversity work. Furthermore, diversity workers with non-dominant identities are privy to

³ I use the term “informal diversity workers” instead of terms like “volunteer diversity workers” to erase the assumption that every unpaid diversity work conducts this work on a volunteer basis. Rather, using terms like “informal diversity worker” and “unpaid diversity worker” allow space for those who conduct this work because they have to in order to make themselves feel more safe and comfortable in their organization.

understanding organizational hierarches and systems better than those with dominant identities (McDonald, 2020). This occurs because diversity workers with non-dominant identities need to understand dominant groups to survive and thrive within the organization (McDonald, 2020). Due to the importance of inclusive climates within organizations (Cheung et al., 2018; Javed, et al., 2019), interviewing informal diversity workers about their experiences is useful to provide a holistic view of the intersectional experiences of being a diversity worker and an employee within the organization.

Furthermore, informal diversity workers have an important vantage point and unique perspective to further DEI work as both an employee and a diversity worker. Paid diversity workers are often in administrative leadership positions within an organization or outside consultants (Williams, 2013; Mease, 2013). However, informal diversity workers simultaneously perform work in a paid “official” position within their companies on top of conducting informal DEI work (Wright, 2009); this adds a different perspective compared to paid diversity workers. Organizational hierarchies can divide workers both theoretically and physically (Zoller & Ban, 2020) and thus, diversity workers who hold non-leadership positions understand their organization’s complexities from an employee standpoint because they are in the trenches of the organizational landscape.

Informal diversity workers are at a unique intersection in that they are not recognized with legitimatizing organizational titles or pay as DEI professionals but can offer important organizational cultural knowledge. To be paid for a position means that individuals have authority over that position (Zoller & Ban, 2020), because diversity workers are not paid for their work, they do not hold the same types of power in their informal positions. As Drago (2007) explains, work that is unpaid typically is not seen as being legitimate labor. For example, in the

earlier quote by Oliva, she noted that diversity work feels like “an after-school thing” because her committee was not taken seriously among organizational members and leadership – lacking the legitimate power in the organization to enact change. Compared to paid DEI employees or consultants, informal diversity workers likely face different constraints in implementing DEI initiatives including challenges exercising legitimate power to implement changes.

Additionally, because informal diversity workers do not have legitimate power through a DEI position title, they often experience bureaucratic red tape when working to enact change. Bureaucratic procedures, such as chain of command, waiting for policy to be initiated, going through superiors, and enduring lofty steps to enact change, are examples of how bureaucratic procedures are embedded and hinder change that diversity workers try to implement (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015). Bureaucratic procedures create norms and expectations of how change should be fostered within organizations (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015) meaning that this type of change may be the only avenue through which informal diversity workers may feel like they can enact change. These formal communication chains of commands are problematic for advancing DEI work (Wilson, 2013), especially for informal diversity workers.

Even while informal diversity workers experience constraints in their legitimate authority in organizations, they also may have access to strategies that paid DEI workers do not. In other words, informal DEI workers may develop ways to work around bureaucratic procedures and can conduct work that relates more to their mission and identity. For example, Laleh’s quote at the start of this chapter explained “committees as useless” and instead Laleh conducted diversity work on an individualized level related to combatting microaggressions (i.e., “I play the role of a watchdog. That’s my diversity work”). Laleh’s challenge reinforced the problematics of institutional walls, which paid diversity workers frequently encounter (Ahmed, 2012), yet her

position as an informal diversity worker allowed her to step out of organizational constraints and conduct diversity work individually.

Considering the challenges that informal diversity workers potentially encounter, they likely use different communication strategies than paid diversity workers to overcome challenges enacting DEI initiatives. Understanding how uniquely positioned informal diversity workers use communication to enact change expands current DEI scholarship. Therefore, this study is designed to better understand individuals who are conducting informal diversity work to contribute insights regarding organizational constraints and ways to better support DEI work.

Further, to advance DEI improvements, informal diversity workers need allies, particularly leadership allies, to create sustainable change. A primary goal of this project is to identify and provide organizational leaders with pragmatic solutions to aid informal diversity workers in achieving holistic change. Alberto (2016) contends that leaders are pivotal to organizational and culture change. Importantly, changing leaders' behavior, actions, and language would likely have a greater influence on organizational change because of structural processes that may dismiss informal diversity workers' efforts. Focusing on how leadership can support diversity workers negates individualistic ideologies that informal diversity workers are responsible to gain support from leaders. Therefore, this project works to identify how leaders can assist informal diversity workers, cultivate DEI initiatives, and work to undo historical wrongs within organizations.

Organizational leaders are important catalysts for aiding diversity workers in enacting and sustaining DEI measures. Individuals in leadership positions also play an important role in maintaining and enforcing inclusive workplace climates (Ahmed, 2017; Alberto, 2016; Buchanan et al., 2014; Cheung et al., 2018; Javed, et al., 2019). In Key-Roberts et al.'s (2020)

organizational climate model, leaders are a key ingredient to promoting inclusive behaviors and policy implementation. Leaders can promote inclusive behaviors and policy implementation through modeling behaviors or communicating and acting in ways that reinforces the importance of informal diversity workers and DEI implementation (Key-Roberts et al., 2020).

Furthermore, there is a need to bridge DEI initiatives and practical recommendations to organizational practice. Despite extensive research proposing new DEI training models (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Key-Roberts et al., 2020; Lindsey et al., 2020) and reviewing literature on DEI and organizational training (David & Bagher, 2010; Kulik & Roberson, 2008; McGuire & Bagher, 2010) there is a disconnect between this research and organizational implementation. This body of work, with the exception of some studies using survey methods in organizations to test theoretical models (Buchanan et al., 2014; Cheung et al., 2018; Roberson et al., 2009), is largely removed from the organizational context. This disconnect between academia and organizational settings necessitates additional research in organizations about DEI initiative implementation effectiveness. Further, Ruiz-Mesa's (2022) advocates for communication scholars to take up this work because they are sufficiently positioned to analyze DEI communication problems and recommend solutions for communicative practices within the organizational landscape. Considering the need to better understand the unique communication experiences of informal diversity workers and ways leadership can support these informal diversity workers and organizational DEI efforts, this dissertation analyzes 17 in-depth qualitative interviews with informal diversity workers to understand their experiences, the ways they use communication to overcome challenges, and how leadership can aid diversity workers and DEI initiatives.

Ultimately, my dissertation contributes to understanding and advocates for informal diversity workers' voices in relation to leadership practices to create a ripple effect and increase inclusive organizational climates wherein DEI initiatives can be more effective. Additional work is needed to understand communication that can resist sedimented practices of prioritizing heteronormative, ableist, White and masculine identities and performances. Therefore, this study provides an in depth understanding of the complex dimensions of informal diversity work and can aid in advocating for pragmatic solutions towards holistic equality, equity⁴, inclusivity, and diversity. Further, this study provides a basis for creating practical and pragmatic communication steps that organizational leaders can take to support informal diversity workers and enact DEI measures for sustainable change. In doing so, this dissertation reiterates the importance of leadership in enacting DEI initiatives and aiding diversity workers.

Dissertation Preview

This first chapter has provided an impetus to further study the unique communication experiences of informal diversity workers and explore ways leaders can support their efforts and DEI work more broadly. My second chapter presents an in-depth literature review of DEI scholarship relating to organizations. I begin by discussing how Whiteness functions within organizations to create barriers for diversity workers. I then share relevant research regarding how organizations treat diversity and how this treatment impacts diversity workers and change implementation. Next, I present research on paid diversity workers and discuss informal diversity workers. Lastly, I preview scholarship on leadership and inclusive climates related to my study on informal diversity workers.

⁴ The "equity" concept is associated with fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits. "Equity" takes individual circumstances into consideration, while "equality" usually connotes sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons (Espinoza, 2007, p. 345).

My third chapter describes my study methodology. I begin by discussing my researcher positionality and the impact my identity has on my research, and how I conceptualize and understand identity. Then I explain my recruitment process and how I collected data through in-depth qualitative interviews. After, I describe my participants and the variety of informal diversity work they conduct, particularly the differences between individual diversity work and working on DEI committees. Lastly, I discuss how I collected data through 17 in-depth qualitative interviews and how I thematically analyzed my data.

The fourth chapter details my study findings. To answer my first research question related to the communication challenges informal diversity workers experience, I split up my findings into four main sections: ambiguous definitions of success, diversity definitions, not being taken seriously, and emotional burnout. I then present how informal diversity workers overcome challenges through two main themes of self-preservation and community. My final research question and findings explain how leadership can aid diversity workers and is presented in two overarching themes: prioritization of DEI and collaboration.

The fifth chapter connects existing research to my findings. My discussion relates pertinent research to challenges and how informal diversity workers overcome challenges. Then, I discuss research relating to leaders and leadership, including how leaders can aid informal diversity workers. The sixth and final chapter explores future directions, limitations and concludes my dissertation. Future directions and limitations of this project are connected with emotional work, gendered aspects of diversity work, positionality of diversity workers, and the different aspects of diversity work. I then explain the implications and importance of the contributions of this dissertation. Lastly, I include a prologue describing how structural neoliberal ideologies impact informal diversity worker's ability to enact holistic change.

Chapter Two: How Diversity, Diversity Work and Leadership are Treated in Organizations

Patricia: I think the piece that really led me to get into it [informal diversity work]... *sigh*... was getting pregnant and really encountering in a pretty profound way how the physical environment as well as the way that the organization is set up is very... challenging isn't the right word...it is hostile to people who have different perspectives, different needs, different bodies.

.....
Patricia's quote explained why she started engaging in diversity work, describing the organization as a hostile entity, one that treats bodies unequally. To fully grasp Patricia's emotional sentiment, it is important to review research pertaining to organizational hostility in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). My study is designed to add to this conversation and extend understanding. Additionally, to better explore and understand the challenges diversity workers like Patricia experience in their organizations, I begin by detailing the inherent institutional walls (Ahmed, 2017) that diversity workers often experience when they try to enact change.

Further this chapter discusses research on how organizations treat diversity and how this treatment inherently impacts diversity workers. I detail how, historically, organizations center and privilege White, male, heterosexual, and ableist identities. Because of dominant identity privileging, diversity work is often not prioritized within the organization or deemed unnecessary (Ahmed, 2012). I then discuss how organizations treat diversity, including the problems of the business case for diversity which uses diversity initiatives as a tool for economic gain (O'Leary & Weathington, 2007).

Finally, considering the business case, I explain how diverse hiring practices give the optics that organizations care about DEI initiatives (Bendl et al., 2015). Because diversity work can often function as public relations (Ahmed, 2012, 2017), I relate visible diversity to organizational commodification (Swan, 2010). Diversity also operates at an organizational level

through the treatment of those with visible non-dominant identities. Employees and informal diversity workers who have visible non-dominant identities are treated as exotic (Gastrell & Swan, 2008; Puwar, 2004) and expected to bring new ideas into the organization. Those treated differently in organizations are treated as such due to the pervasiveness of Whiteness.

Whiteness in Organizations

Historically, Whiteness⁵ and masculinity are embedded within an organization's character and life (Puwar, 2004) and have become an invisible standard for what is considered acceptable and professional, creating a hegemonic norm within organizations (Bendel et al., 2009). Acker (2006) argues that organizations function as *inequality regimes* and explains how, historically, people in power produce norms within organizations to deem what is and what is not appropriate (Blithe, 2015). Inequality regimes reproduce practices, processes, actions, and meanings to create norms that sustain inequalities along socioeconomic class, gender, and racial lines (Acker, 2006; Blithe, 2015). Therefore, many formal and informal organizational practices are based on normative ideas about men, women, femininity, masculinity, race, sexuality, class, and ability (Gatrell & Swan, 2008).

Reiterating Acker's claims, Puwar (2004) argues that spaces are centered and created around what they call the *somatic norm*. The somatic norm is a historical construction wherein contexts generate and maintain the embodiment and belonging of White male bodies (Puwar, 2004). Functioning as an idealized construct against which others are measured, the somatic norm creates an othering process for those who do not fit within it (Puwar, 2004).

⁵ The decision to capitalize Whiteness co-aligns with my decision to capitalize White, Black and other racial signifiers by treating them as proper nouns. While Whiteness is not always capitalized in certain academic work that has influenced my understanding of identity in this dissertation (such as, Mudambi et al., 2022), capitalize Whiteness indicating that there are arguments for both the capitalization and non-capitalization of such racial signifiers. Overall, I capitalize Whiteness to treat White as a proper noun and to illuminate the ways that Whiteness survives and is supported both explicitly and implicitly within our institutions (Mack & Palfrey, 2020). I discuss this more in depth in my methodology section.

Puwar's (2004) discussion on the somatic norm can be related to Whiteness within organizations, specifically how the somatic norm reinforces Whiteness through othering identities. Whiteness functions as a strategic rhetoric within the organizational landscape to maintain power and keep Whiteness at the center (Nakayana & Krizek, 1995). For example, Ward's (2008) study on White normativity within a LGBT+ organization describes how Whiteness sustains itself through this organization's statistical, logistical and rationale corporate approach to diversity. Ward's (2008) findings indicate that Whiteness works through hegemonic structures and organizational cultures thus operating as a strategic rhetoric far more pervasive and adaptive than one's racial identity.

Historically and currently, organizations prioritize certain identities and performances related to the function of Whiteness as the ideal (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012; Bendl et al., 2009). These standards, norms, and behaviors within an organization, as well as their processes of naturalization, connect certain performances with Whiteness (Toyosaki, 2016). Ideologies relating to professionalism and dress codes provide a great example of how Whiteness operates past skin color and permeates into norms of how to act, dress, and communicate within the workplace (Jones & Robinson, 2021). In other words, Whiteness is so pervasive that it doesn't necessarily attach itself to White people but rather, adapts to a form of idealized norms, practices, and investments that constitute a White racialized ideal (Hunter et al., 2010). Furthermore, Whiteness is relational, meaning that it is sustained through othering processes (Toyosaki, 2016). Those who do not fit within the somatic norm are viewed as othered and thus compared with the norm of Whiteness.

The processes by which organizations prioritize ways of being and acting reflect the difficulties diversity workers may have when enacting change. Because of the pervasiveness of

Whiteness within the organization, DEI initiatives can function like an elastic rubber band (Ahmed, 2017). This elasticity relates to how DEI initiatives momentarily change the organization but due to the pervasiveness of Whiteness, the organizations revert to previous statuses (Ahmed, 2017). Diversity workers may try to change the organization through policies and initiatives but find these initiatives difficult to embed within the organization because organizations are historically built around Whiteness (Ahmed, 2012). If initiatives and policies are established that prioritize different ways of acting, being, and identifying, a holistic shift must occur within the organization. This type of shift is difficult to enact for both paid and informal diversity workers.

Furthermore, combatting masculine rationalist discourses is a challenge that diversity workers encounter when conducting their work. Diversity work is emotionally laden and covers emotional topics (Healy, 2015), constituting emotional work⁶. Historically, organizations prioritize specific emotional performances, particularly rational discourses and performances (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Rational discourses relate to the privilege of masculine discourses that function through Whiteness (Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Puwar, 2004).

Additionally, performing expected rational emotions can be more burdensome for non-dominant group members. For example, Mirchandani (2003) discusses how Black employees are disciplined to perform rational emotions reinforcing the performance of Whiteness. Further, Durr and Harvey Wingfield (2011) discuss the pertinence of Whiteness in organizations through Black women professionals' experiences in having to perform emotions in particular ways to integrate

⁶ I use the term emotional work instead of emotional labor due to the nature of informal diversity work. Emotional labor is defined as displaying emotion that is in some way defined and controlled by management for the benefit of commerce (Miller et al., 2007). Diversity workers engage in emotional work which is emotion that is part of the job itself (Miller et al., 2007). I argue that parts of informal diversity work are emotional work due to the emotionally laden topics covered and focused on.

into their predominately White workplaces. Both exemplars listed relate to diversity work, considering that emotions are socially reinforced and managed in organizations through observed feelings rules (Riforgiate & Sepulveda, 2021). Overall, privileging rational, unemotional, masculine discourses at work may make discussing emotional topics more difficult for employees who experience microaggressions at work, as well as diversity workers.

Engaging in emotional work, especially when that emotional work is tethered to negative experiences, can lead to burnout (Miller et al., 2017) and has negative health consequences for employees (Riforgiate et al., 2022). Burnout is defined as, “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (Maslach & Jackson 1981, p. 99). Research on Whiteness within organizations indicates that those who do not fit within certain organizational norms and values are viewed as outsiders (Puwar, 2004), which makes DEI efforts emotional work. Additionally, these outsiders often conduct invisible labor to fit within the hegemonic structures of Whiteness (Durr & Harvey Wingfield, 2011). Diversity workers also may provide support to those who do not feel safe or secure, layering on additional emotional work, while contributing to burnout and stress, especially when performing sympathy and sadness for others (Miller et al., 2017). The invisible emotional work that diversity workers conduct ultimately benefits the organization by making employees with non-dominant identities feel safer and secure.

The Business Case for Diversity

Organizations communicate their dedication to diversity in numerous ways that directly influence diversity work and workers. Organizations typically communicate their dedication to diversity through two lenses: the non-instrumental lens (focus on diversity as a value of itself), and the instrumental lens (focus on benefits to organizational performance) (Georgeac & Rattan,

2023). Political models of social relations influence the non-instrumental lens; this includes philosophies of equality based on material and financial redistribution, cultural recognition, and collective justice (Swan & Fox, 2010). For example, instead of focusing on the financial gains of DEI, organizations may embed DEI initiatives because they care about their employee's health and well-being (O'Leary & Weathington, 2006). However, research indicates that the instrumental, or business case, is more prevalent among organizations (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). The business case for diversity advocates that a more diverse workforce will increase organizational effectiveness (Steimel, 2021). The DEI business case relies on how inclusive and diverse environments foster creativity and increase business margins (David & Bagher, 2010; Kulik & Roberson, 2008). However, when organizations focus primarily on capitalistic enterprises, employee experience can be downplayed and/or pushed into the background (Perriton, 2009). Diversity within this ideology is treated as a commodity or instrument, something to control to achieve financial success.

Ultimately, the business case for diversity creates challenges for diversity workers due to the tension these workers experience between organizational wants and needs that do not always align with their own social justice approach to change (Ahmed, 2012; Kahn, 2013; Mease, 2016). Organizational requirements such as profitability, productivity, recruitment, and retention, (i.e., the business case) can interfere with diversity worker's wants for social responsibility which focuses more on valuing inclusivity, privilege, and social justice (Kahn 2013). This challenge may be even more pronounced among informal diversity workers because they contribute their time and resources based on their own social justice beliefs.

Because the business case reiterates the importance of communicating the value of diversity, diversity through this lens involves image management (Ahmed, 2012). For example,

Williams and Wade-Golden (2013) discuss how diversity workers can often serve as the “symbolic face” of institutional diversity efforts. Often, a symbolic face is deemed “diverse” to showcase institutional values of DEI initiatives (Swan, 2010). Thus, when organizations communicate their dedication to diversity, visible demographic diversity is frequently the predominant focus for conceptualizing diversity and difference (O’Leary & Weathington, 2006). When organizations focus only on visible diversity, characteristics deemed diverse create a site to mark diversification (Ahmed, 2017). When organizational conceptualizations of diversity rely on hiring those who look different, Whiteness is reinforced; diversity becomes something “added to organizations, like color, then it confirms the Whiteness of what is already in place” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 33).

Diversity work and workers can also operate as a site for diversity through the embodiment of the diversity worker (Ahmed, 2012; Wilson, 2013). Frequently, diversity work is added to the organization and becomes another additive of DEI initiatives that are not actually making any monumental change (Ahmed, 2017). Employees labeled as diversity workers become sites for diversity by being a means to an end instead of holistically enacting change (Ahmed, 2012). Instead of embracing diversity and inclusivity, organizations often take the easier route by continuing the momentum of Whiteness and normativity by using diversity workers to communicate a commitment to diversity instead of making deep changes to challenge dominant norms (Ahmed, 2012).

Symbolically Hiring Employees with Non-Dominant Identities

An important component of the business case for diversity is simplistic hiring procedures that focus on adding employees that are deemed “diverse” into organizations’ makeup (Hans et al., 2012; Perriton, 2009). However, achieving organizational diversity and inclusivity is more

complex than adding people of color and women to the organization (Bendl & Hoffman, 2015). Reshaping organizations that have historically reinforced Whiteness (Puwar, 2004), heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2012; McDonald, 2017), performances of masculinity (Blithe, 2015), and the ideal worker norm⁷ (Drago, 2007) into places wherein all identities and performances are accepted is more complicated than simply hiring employees with non-dominant identities (Nash, 2019). The focus on hiring procedures reinforces the business case for diversity by sustaining the ideology that people who look different generate different and unique ideas that aid the organization (Ahmed, 2006).

Puwar (2004) describes the diversification of organizations through hiring more racialized bodies as an “obsession” with problematic essentialism claims. When organizational structures and processes reproduce diversity dimensions, this reproduction contributes to essentialism and group identity constructions, resulting in problematic inclusion and exclusion in organizations (Bendell, et al., 2008). When organizations hire employees with visible non-dominant identities, there is an expectation that employees with these non-dominant identities are homogenous (Gatrell & Swan, 2008; Puwar, 2004). Problems arise when essentialist ideologies are reproduced through the idea that identities are fixed and static; thus, diversity is seen as a property belonging to individuals or groups (Gatrell & Swan, 2008; McDonald, 2015; Puwar, 2004).

Fixed-identity labels of organizational diverse hiring discourses like “women,” “minority,” and “diverse” become naturalized through the repetition and reiteration of such requirements (Bendl et al., 2009). When organizations label someone through diverse measures,

⁷ The ideal worker norm is the belief that an employee should have a complete commitment towards work with no other outside commitments (Drago, 2007)

that identity becomes fixed, and along with that fixed identity comes normalizing regimes (Puwar, 2004). Thus, when organizations claim to want to hire more minorities or more women, they create fixed identities and enact a perceived notion of how one within that identity category should act (McDonald, 2017).

Those With Non-Dominant Identities Are Treated as Organizational Outsiders

When organizations hire or focus on those who are deemed diverse, individuals with non-dominant identities suffer consequences for embodying this difference (Ahmed, 2012, 2017; Puwar, 2004). When organizations cater to a somatic norm, those who do not represent this norm often feel like space invaders (Puwar, 2004). Individuals not fitting the somatic norm are often deemed exotic or different, which can produce inequality rather than equality DEI (Gatrell & Swan, 2008). When deemed different within this context, individuals are believed to have exotic identity and are expected to bring about different ways of thinking, doing, and feeling (Gatrell & Swan, 2008).

Furthermore, when Whiteness is pervasive within the organizational makeup, those who have visible non-dominant identities are hyper-surveilled (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004). People of color in White organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else's home (Ahmed, 2012). Because organizations are historically built around the somatic norm (Acker, 2006), those with White identities are made invisible because White characteristics are deemed normal and taken for granted. To make Whiteness invisible means that those who deviate from that norm are deemed hyper-visible (Ahmed, 2012). Bodies that are deemed non-normative because they stray from the hegemonic White masculine ideal, are increasingly surveilled, and are required to perform extra work to fit within the organization (Ahmed, 2017).

Diversity Workers

The reinforcement of Whiteness and masculinity within organizations means that achieving DEI measures is both complex and nuanced (Bendl et al., 2009). Organizations focusing on DEI may hire paid diversity workers or urge their own employees to volunteer to help make their organization more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. However, due to systemic inequalities and organizational norms that prioritize Whiteness, paid and informal diversity workers have difficulty embedding DEI initiatives into their organizations (Ahmed, 2012). This section highlights research on paid diversity workers and the challenges that come along with this line of work. Next, I also briefly discuss research relating to how diversity workers overcome challenges before discussing informal diversity workers.

Those who focus on cultivating diverse organizational spaces and inclusive cultures are often referred to as diversity workers (Ahmed, 2012; 2016; Gatrell & Swan, 2008), diversity practitioners (Kahn, 2013), organizational consultants (Mease, 2016), or chief diversity officers (Ruiz-Mesa, 2022; Wilson, 2013). According to Gatrell and Swan (2008), paid diversity workers are hired full-time to focus on equality and diversity. Kahn (2013) defines diversity workers as specialists called upon by organizations or institutions to define diversity and create training courses. However, my dissertation extends this definition of diversity workers to acknowledge individuals who may or may not be getting paid to introduce equitable and inclusive measures, policies, rituals, and customs into the workplace.

Those not hired or paid to do diversity work may still feel a burden to perform DEI work because of their identities. Ahmed and Swan (2006) explain that those who embody diversity through their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., may be expected to be caretakers of diversity within their organization. Wilson (2013) echoes this claim, noting that chief diversity officers explain that they have had to deal with diversity “all my life” (p. 440).

Diversity workers also deal with the stress of implementing change on both individual and organizational levels. Mease (2016) interviewed 19 paid diversity workers to understand how they discursively dealt with the tensions aligned with their work. Mease (2016) explained that diversity workers described that to change the organization, they would also have to change individual employee's perceptions of DEI. However, tensions arose because many diversity workers critiqued diversity work that focused solely on individual behavior (Mease, 2016). Focusing only on individual behavior reinforces individualistic ideologies that negate holistic organizational change. Ultimately, Mease (2016) contends that to overcome tensions, diversity workers should view tensions as part of their work and embrace them, rather than seeing tensions as challenges.

Diversity workers also deal with challenges leading and influencing DEI initiatives. Wilson (2013) interviewed seven chief diversity officers in various institutions to assess their educational impact on DEI initiatives. Chief diversity officers experienced the challenge of people's ambivalence about DEI initiatives (Wilson, 2013). Wilson (2013) reports that chief diversity officers do not have any individual influence and instead need to partner with leadership as a major ally for their organizational initiatives to be taken seriously.

Another challenge diversity workers experience is bureaucratic procedures (Wilson, 2013). Bureaucratic procedures, such as following the chain of command, waiting for policies to be initiated, communicating through superiors, and implementing steps to enact change, are examples of how bureaucratic procedures are embedded within organizations. When diversity workers have to navigate extensive organizational bureaucracy, policy implementation is significantly slowed down. Bureaucratic procedures fulfill norms and expectations of how change should be implemented according to organizational policies (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015).

Bureaucratic procedures also reinforce traditional hierarchal structures as a way of enacting change, which hinders diversity workers trying to implement grassroots level change.

Bureaucratic procedures may not be the best route for diversity workers to enact change (Wilson, 2013), but at times, procedures may offer the only possible avenue for change.

Ahmed (2012; 2017) further describes the struggles diversity workers experience by highlighting her personal experience as a diversity worker and interviewing diversity workers within academic institutions. Ahmed (2012; 2017) identifies how diversity workers often experience institutional walls when promoting positive change, thus persistence is vital. Further, Ahmed (2012) discusses how diversity work involves communication to promote diversity and inclusivity within a historically an environment the prioritizes Whiteness.

Another barrier to diversity work occurs when organizations perform, rather than act on, DEI initiatives (Ahmed, 2007; 2012; 2017). When an organization or institution creates a DEI committee or appoints diversity workers, this gesture can function as an organizational performance. By hiring diversity workers, institutions may view the hiring process as if it magically produces DEI initiatives (Ahmed, 2012; 2017). Once hired, diversity workers experience numerous organizational walls when embedding DEI initiatives therefore the act of hiring diversity workers is not enough to transform an organization. Furthermore, documentation of DEI policies can also function as a performance (Ahmed, 2007). The existence of the policy itself is not the same as following the policy and creating change, which turns stagnant policies into a form of non-action (Ahmed, 2007). Therefore, implementing DEI policy and hiring diversity workers function as performative acts instead of truly enacting holistic change.

Another important component of my research is to consider how diversity workers overcome challenges. Ruiz-Mesa (2022) calls researchers to consider how diversity workers'

communication can be used to create DEI change within organizations. Ruiz-Mesa (2022) describes three communicative acts that diversity workers on college campuses use to accomplish the goal of enacting DEI initiatives. These communicative acts include 1) informing and persuading campus leaders through personal stories, 2) collecting qualitative and quantitative data, and 3) highlighting student narratives. Diversity workers frame issues and build empathy for students with non-dominant identities by employing communication approaches relevant to the target audience. This dissertation considers many types of organizations, including educational institutions, to respond to Ruiz-Mesa's (2022) call and extend diversity research.

This current study contributes to organizational communication research to uncover the lived experiences of informal diversity workers regarding challenges they experience and how they overcome them. It is essential to understand how paid and informal diversity workers overlap and differ in their challenges to develop actionable solutions. Therefore, my study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1a: What are the communicative challenges that informal diversity workers face when implementing DEI into organizations?

RQ1b: How do informal diversity workers combat challenges when implementing DEI into organizations?

Leadership Within DEI

Diversity workers who experience challenges promoting DEI benefit from the support of leadership (Wilson, 2013). Therefore, this study also explores how leadership can aid diversity workers in overcoming diversity work challenges. Below, I detail leadership research pertaining to DEI. I begin by conceptualizing leadership within my study, then I discuss leadership research on organizational inclusive climates and methods for enacting change.

Leadership

A leader is someone who has influence and is accepted by followers (Alberto, 2016). Alberto (2016) argues that anyone who has followers, such as CEOs, mid-level managers, lower-tier managers or group leaders, are leaders. Leaders of all types significantly influence their followers and are essential stakeholders in making organizations more inclusive, diverse, and equitable (Randel et al., 2018).

There are numerous ways leaders can aid informal diversity workers by using their power in the organization. First, when leaders model the importance of DEI related policies and procedures these initiatives have a higher chance of being embedded in the organization (Perry et al., 2021). Leaders are also influential when they embed and embrace organizational DEI training (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Key-Roberts et al., 2020; Lindsey et al., 2020; McGuire & Bagher, 2010; Roberson et al., 2009). Additionally, different leadership styles communicate either a more or less inclusive climate to followers (Randel et al., 2018).

Inclusive climates are essential for informal diversity workers since a critical component of DEI initiatives is cultivating an environment where everyone feels safe and secure (Kahn, 2013). To create sustainable change with DEI initiatives, an inclusive climate is paramount (McGuire & Bagher, 2010). Boekhorst (2015) defines “climate of inclusion” as one that “engenders a sense of belongingness and uniqueness, provides the comfort needed for employees to apply their individual differences to work processes, strategies, and tasks” (p. 242). Similarly, Nishii (2013) describes an inclusive climate as one in which organizational members feel recognized for having a unique identity, are integrated into the organization, and are valued for their contributions to the team. Inclusive climates create a feeling of belonging within

organizational members, especially organizational members who do not fit within the somatic norm (Nishii, 2013).

When leadership prioritizes DEI initiatives, this action cultivates an inclusive climate (Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2009; Wilson, 2013) and embeds DEI values within the organization (Boekhorst, 2015; Key-Roberts et al., 2020). Leaders who communicate an inclusive climate do so by supporting group members, ensuring justice and equity are part of each member's experience, and by providing opportunities for shared decision making on issues (Randel et al., 2018). Embedding DEI initiatives means that DEI work is not solely based on the responsibility of those who are assigned diversity work (Ahmed, 2012). Therefore, a true inclusive climate involves the recognition that promoting DEI initiatives is a shared responsibility of all organizational members (McGuire & Bagher, 2010).

DEI training has also been shown to positively impact an organization's climate (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). For DEI training within organizational contexts to work, leaders need to engrain what was learned from training within the organization (Roberson et al., 2009). Roberson et al. (2009) explain that employees are more likely to use their skills and knowledge from DEI training when supervisors and peers provide positive consequences for enacting training. In other words, it is important for leaders to provide positive reinforcement to employees who take DEI training seriously by integrating this information in the workplace (McGuire & Bagher, 2010; Roberson et al., 2009).

When leaders communicate their support of DEI initiatives, the implementation of these initiatives is positively impacted (Boekhorst, 2015). In Key-Roberts et al.'s (2020) organizational climate model, leaders are central in promoting inclusive behaviors and policy implementation through modeling behaviors and communicating in ways that reinforce the importance of DEI

implementation (Key-Roberts et al., 2020). Further, Randel et al.'s (2018) model of inclusive leadership and belongingness reiterates that leader behaviors and communication facilitates belongingness. Leaders must also interact with employees in ways that go beyond mere bias and discrimination avoidance to promote DEI (Wasserman et al., 2008). Wasserman et al. (2008) found that instead of silencing resistance to DEI, leaders needed to engage with resistance to support the vision of an inclusive workplace.

Leaders can also make employees feel like part of an organization's culture by engaging in group-oriented communication styles, such as involving members in decision-making processes and ensuring their perspectives are incorporated (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). When employees are included in decision making, they are also more open to new organizational policies and procedures (Ramos & Mercedes, 2020). Involving group members in shared decision-making processes fosters a climate of inclusion wherein all employees, especially those with non-dominant identities, feel heard (Mor Barak et al., 2021).

Considering the importance of leaders in DEI implementation and the difficulty diversity workers have in implementing DEI initiatives, it is important to understand how leaders can aid diversity workers in creating and sustaining meaningful change. Therefore, I ask:

RQ2: How can organizational leaders communicate support and advocate for informal diversity workers?

Chapter Three: Qualitative Methodology Prioritizing Informal Diversity Workers Voices

In seeking to understand challenges informal diversity workers encounter, how they overcome those challenges, and ways that leaders can assist in this work, interviews were the best way to address these questions. Healy (2015) explains that “it is important to ground the politics of diversity in the reality of societal effects of inequalities in contemporary everyday life” (p. 16). Interviews allowed me to better understand the participant’s point of view through guided questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Qualitative interviews produce insights “that are uniquely related to group interaction” and allow the researcher to probe responses (Tracy, 2020, p. 190). Further, interviews allow for insights through interpersonal conversations to further expand knowledge topics related to a participant’s experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Importantly, interviews can provide a deep sense of participants’ realities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to fully comprehend the challenges they face in their informal work.

Prior to this dissertation, I completed a qualitative interview pilot study. For the pilot, I created an interview schedule, secured IRB study approval, and collected five interviews with diversity workers (four non-paid, one paid) from a variety of institutions and organizations. The pilot study focused on interviewing both paid and informal diversity workers about the difficulties they encounter in their work and how they overcome these difficulties.

This dissertation extended the pilot study, while significantly adjusting the interview schedule to probe more deeply into proposed research questions. While the pilot study solely focused on the challenges diversity workers experienced and how they overcome these challenges, this dissertation also analyzes the role leadership has on DEI initiatives on diversity work. Specifically, I added new interview questions to understand how participants think

organizational leaders can communicate their support of informal diversity workers and use communication strategies to implement positive change.

Following, my methods section first introduces my researcher positionality statement and how I conceptualize identity within my dissertation. Then, I discuss my recruitment protocol and how I connected with participants. After, I describe participant information, including demographics and different types of diversity work. Finally, I provide a step-by-step outline of how I analyzed my data and conducted member checking.

Researcher Positionality and Ethics

As a White, cisgender, queer, middle-class, able-bodied, neurodivergent, Ph.D. student, parts of my identity contribute to hegemonic oppression within organizations. In contrast, hegemonic organizational constraints impact other parts of my identity. My positionality influences my ontological and epistemological assumptions pertaining to conducting research (Holmes, 2020). How I understand and analyze my data is influenced by my sociological static identities listed above and my subjective experiences. Throughout this section, I address tensions I experienced while conducting this research due to my privileged, dominant, and historically marginalized non-dominant identities.

I have always been passionate about social justice. During my academic career, my research has continuously focused on racial, gender, and social justice. With that said, I hold numerous privileged identities that allow me to pick and choose to conduct this type of research. My identity as a White person with the privilege to attend a Ph.D. program means that I am able to conduct research I am passionate about. I recognize that I operate and conduct this research *because I am passionate* about it, not because it is something I must do for my survival.

Furthermore, I speak from the perspective of an ally, not as someone who has experienced systemic racism or microaggressions within their organization. Speaking from the context of an ally means that I may potentially reinforce inequalities (Sumerau et al., 2021) by reproducing my own Whiteness through bolstering my allyship instead of focusing on those with non-dominant identities and their experiences. Furthermore, being an ally means focusing on systemic inequalities rather than simply providing interpersonal comfort and support (Schwalbe et al., 2020). My intention with this dissertation, particularly in the context of critical reflexivity, is to reduce systemic inequalities. Overall, conducting research as an ally means I will never fully understand and comprehend how diversity workers, especially those with non-dominant identities, feel.

Because I am White, a preconception I brought to the project relates to the reproduction of Whiteness. During the initial process of this study, I did not consider that some diversity workers needed to conduct this type of work for their survival instead of as a voluntary passion-based project. It was not until my dissertation committee members brought up the term “volunteer diversity workers” as a concern that I realized the problematic nature of this terminology. Diversity workers with multiple non-dominant identities, especially diversity workers of color, conducted diversity work for different reasons that I had not previously considered due to my privileged racial position. This preconception reinforces my identity as a privileged White woman because, as my data shows, White women who conduct informal diversity work do so because they are passionate about it, not because they feel like they have no other option.

My identity also means that I have never encountered racism and therefore do not know what it feels like to be discriminated against for my race. Interviewees who experienced racism

may have felt uncomfortable disclosing these experiences due to my positionality and privilege in society; this discomfort may be especially heightened if participants experienced racism at the hands of someone who is White. While I could provide support through comforting words and acknowledgment, I am unable to share these same experiences.

Additionally, I identify as a cis-gendered queer woman. This identification means that systemically, I have identities that are historically marginalized. Most of my participants identified as cis-women and shared some examples of how they encountered microaggressions related to their gender or encountered walls relating to their gender identity. I identified with my participants during these conversations due to our shared experiences. In this aspect, I am considered an insider within my participant pool.

My queer identity also related to other participants within my participant pool. For example, during interviews, I felt connected to those who self-identified as queer or bisexual. During these discussions, if I felt comfortable, I disclosed my own sexual identity as a way to connect with my participants and reciprocate their disclosure. I acknowledge that my comfortability to in disclosing my identity is a point of privilege, and my participants disclosed their identity not necessarily because they felt comfortable but because they may have felt like they needed to disclose given the research context of this research.

Another key component that influenced my research was my ability to understand participants' perspectives as informal diversity workers. Because I am conducting work that could be considered diversity work, I can be considered an insider. While I have never been involved with organizational committees that conduct diversity work, I have participated in anti-racist training, conducted informal diversity work in my classrooms, and engaged in diversity work in this dissertation. Throughout my interviews, I connected with my participants on our

shared values for social justice and desire to see a tangible change in their organization and the world. Sharing these values with participants means I have some understanding of their perspectives. I know what it feels like to engage in diversity work in a system that inherently privileges dominant ways of being, acting, and identifying.

Because of my positionality, I constantly engaged in reflexivity prior, during, and after interviews (Bell, 2014). To ensure that I was considering my interviewee's comfort, I took the following steps to make sure my interviewees trusted me and felt sincere orientation towards this research. First, I used Tracy's (2020) Big Eight Tent criteria for conducting quality qualitative research to ensure that I was conducting ethical research. From these criteria, I practiced ethical research through the criterion of "sincerity" or practicing genuine and vulnerable research (Tracy, 2020, p. 272).

When a qualitative researcher is sincere, they embody two practices: self-reflexivity and transparency. Self-reflexivity includes using first-person language in analytic write-ups and showing "how claims are developed" (Tracy, 2020, p. 273) to reduce any personal biases within data analysis. The second practice is through transparency, which includes being honest and open about how the research transpired (Tracy, 2020). Transparency means that as a researcher, I needed to be self-critical and honest with my participants, my research, and the presentation of my findings. Additionally, through conducting member checks I was able to be transparent with my findings to ensure the claims that developed from analysis were truthful to my participants' experiences.

In addition, I recognized that my interviewees may perceive power dynamics between us, potentially causing discomfort or hesitancy in answering questions. Guided by Bell (2014), I did my best to be cognizant and mindful of power dynamics between myself and my participants

prior, during, and after the interview. I reassured my participants that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. I also recognized power dynamics by actively listening and attending more to the interviewee's needs rather than my own research agenda (Anderson & Jack, 1997). For example, there were times when interviewees were emotional when describing painful experiences, during these times I assured them that we did not have to continue talking about this topic and offered them time to reorient themselves. Another ethical consideration of my study related to the way I communicated about my participants' identities; in the next section I describe my reasoning for using my chosen participant identity terms.

Critically Reflecting on my Conceptualization of Identity

During my study, I struggled with how best to conceptualize my participants' identities. I did not want to limit any of my participants to singular identity categories, despite knowing that qualitative reporting of participant information requires these categories to make sense of the data. During my writing process, I had numerous conversations with committee members over the wording I used to describe participants.

More specifically, I did not want to reproduce Whiteness in my study, and yet, the way language is used means that Whiteness is always the center. Thus, whichever terminology I used to describe participants' identities reinforced Whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995). I grappled with using terms such as "dominant," "non-dominant," "White identifying," "non-White identifying," and "historically marginalized" to describe participants. All these terms reproduce Whiteness to some degree. Regardless of what word I chose to describe participants who are not White, I still reinforced Whiteness through identifying them as such. This language choice is something I struggled with because as a White person conducting work that focuses on reducing and eliminating Whiteness within organizations, I felt a substantial tension considering

my lack of choices to describe participants. It took me months to decide which type of signifier to use for participants and the terms I decided on, “dominant,” “non-dominant,” and “White-identifying,”⁸ are not completely satisfying. I choose these terms because other articles that influenced my work use the terms “dominant” and “non-dominant” to describe their participants (Ruiz-Mesa, 2021; Mudambi, et al., 2022; Mudambi et al., 2022).

I conceptualized identity in two ways, through sociological demographic questions asked during my interviews. I also conceptualized participant’s identity based on identities they deemed important enough to share with me. My conceptualization of participants’ identities stems from conversations with committee members, my own personal reflexivity, and past coursework on identity.

I included identity signifiers that relate to how my participant identities are conceptualized as dominant and non-dominant. For example, I discuss how a participant is queer and a person of color and thus, has a non-dominant identity. There are a few participants who are White-identifying while having other non-dominant identities relating to their sexual identity or gender identity. Within this context I classify them as White-identifying non-dominant identities. I grappled with these terms because of the simplistic nature relating to stating that someone has dominant or non-dominant identities. However, I use non-dominant and White-identifying dominant in addition to describing identity signifiers to acknowledge the implications of what it means to have a dominant or non-dominant identity, especially in relation to this study. I also needed to use terms to group members who do hold multiple similar identities to describe the

⁸ I use the term “White-identifying” because there is one participant who is of Hispanic origin but identifies as White. Because of this one participant, I describe participants who are White as “White-identifying” to include all of my participants who are both White and White-identifying. Therefore, I use the terms “White-identifying” to describe all participants who are racially White to remain as inclusive as possible through my language choice.

systemic implications of what it means to hold a dominant or non-dominant identity within the organizational context, especially relating to DEI.

I also capitalize racial terms such as White, Black, Latinx, etc. to highlight how race is a historically constructed concept (Appiah, 2020). Thus, I treat racial terms as proper nouns, recognizing that referring to a participant as a Black woman means that she belongs to a community with a specific historical context. In addition, capitalizing racial terms also coincides with APA standards (American Psychological Association, 2022). Overall, I made linguistic choices related to identity, not completely knowing if the choices I made were correct while understanding that if I justify my reasoning for my terminology, I hope not to reproduce problematic terminology. I still do not know if there is a correct way to describe identity that isn't simplistic or reproducing a problematic binary between White and non-White.

Recruitment

Recruitment occurred through various outlets such as snowball sampling and social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). Snowball sampling began by identifying participants who fit within a study's criteria and asking them if they have connections to similar participants (Tracy, 2020). Snowball sampling is a useful tool with participant pools that are hard to locate, such as informal diversity workers. However, snowball sampling can also be restrictive because it limits participant diversity based on social connections and referrals (Tracy, 2020).

Therefore, accessing participants from social media outlets and networking allowed me to interview diversity workers from a multitude of sources to ensure a diverse participant pool (Tracy, 2020). Social media provides a useful tool for individuals to share ideas and sources, so finding specific hubs that may relate to diversity work was an important recruiting resource. I added myself to diversity worker volunteer pages on LinkedIn and posted my recruitment

message. This outreach included pages such as the “EDIN Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Network.” Posting my recruitment message on other social media websites including Facebook and Instagram provided me with a variety of contacts and contact referrals across different organizations. Guided by Tracy’s (2020) recommendations, I chose different recruitment strategies to prevent the participant sample from skewing by diversifying participant organizations and experiences.

I engaged in recruiting three separate times for this study. My first recruitment for my pilot study occurred through posting a recruitment message in Spring of 2020 on the “COMMNotes” listserv and snowball sampling from my current contacts. At that point, I interviewed five participants based on this recruitment strategy, four of whom conducted informal diversity work and are included in my dissertation. The second recruitment strategy occurred in September of 2022 and consisted of snowball sampling and posting recruitment messages on social media groups focusing on DEI. In addition, in June of 2022, I participated in an anti-racist pedagogy training and recruited several informal diversity workers from this workshop. From my second recruitment efforts, I interviewed 10 participants for a total of 14 informal diversity worker participants.

My final recruitment strategy occurred in November of 2022 and focused on recruiting participants with non-dominant identities. Because of my shift to focus on participants with non-dominant identities, I revised my IRB application to adjust my recruitment message to state that I was looking for participants who hold non-dominant identities (Appendix A). I focused on gathering participants with non-dominant identities because my initial data reflected different experiences based on identity. This third recruitment strategy was designed to ensure that I would have a more diverse participant pool. During my final recruitment, I conducted snowball

sampling, asking my connections to reach out to people they knew with non-dominant identities who conducted informal diversity work. My recruitment message was posted on social media websites such as Facebook and Instagram. My final recruitment strategy yielded three additional participants for a total of 17 overall study participants.

Participants

This study includes interviews from 17 informal diversity workers across 16 different organizations in eight U.S. states (see Appendix B). The mean age of the participants was 35.75 years old, with an age range of 24 to 58 years and a median age of 33.5. Eligible participants needed to be at least 18 years old, a current employee, engaging in informal diversity work, and a U.S. resident. Additionally, to ensure that participants understood the complexities of diversity work, they had to have been conducting informal diversity work for at least six months. Participants included individuals who volunteered their time or services for their workplace organizations through a DEI committee or by individually conducting diversity in the organization. Participants described their DEI work as including aiding their institution or organization in creating inclusive policies, mentoring peers or students of color, cultivating inclusive organizational environments, creating inclusive messages, providing knowledge, or helping with hiring and recruitment measures.

Because informal diversity workers are less prevalent than paid diversity workers, fewer interviews were required to reach saturation (Tracy, 2020). Saturation occurred when the same answers were repeated, and I found no new themes (Guest et al., 2006; Tracy, 2020). After the tenth interview, I started to notice similar patterns within the data, but continued interviewing until I reached 17 participants to ensure that I had reached saturation.

Demographics

During my information gathering process, I created an Excel file describing participants' demographics, including their age, race, gender, location, job title, other important identity factors, type of diversity work they conducted, challenges they faced doing this work, and any paramount quotes. This excel file allowed me to visually see my participants' complex identity characteristics to ensure that I was gathering a diverse array of participants. Overall, participants included two cis-men, thirteen cis-women, and two non-binary individuals. Participants reported working at a variety of organizations including academic institutions, marketing agencies, financial organizations, technology-based organizations, high schools, nonprofit health organizations, and advertising and copy-editing agencies.

The organizations in which participants worked varied in size and spanned from as few as 30 employees to as large as 15,000 employees. Participants provided self-identified racial demographics including White (8), Middle Eastern (1), Biracial (1), South Asian (2), Chinese (1), and Hispanic (1). Other pertinent identities that participants disclosed included veteran (1), LGBTQIA+ (4), having a disability (1), parent of a LGBTQIA+ child (1), immigrant (3), and neurodivergent (2). This list provides some identity characteristics but is not comprehensive of all identifiable factors that influenced participants' diversity work. It is likely that participants have other identity characteristics and lived experiences that impact their work.

Types of Diversity Work

Participants engaged in diversity work ranging from two years to “for as long as they can remember” (Meera). Six participants mentioned the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 when discussing why they got into diversity work. The remaining 11 participants have been doing this work for five or more years. There was a difference in participants' identities between those who had been conducting diversity work for multiple years or decades compared to those who started

in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter Movement. Every participant who started conducting diversity work around 2020 self-identified as White.

The type of diversity work participants engaged in was eclectic but is divided into two categories: individual diversity work or diversity work within or through the organization. Many of these participants (13) engaged in diversity committees at one point in their careers or are currently involved in diversity committees. Committee duties typically ranged from raising community awareness of DEI issues, offering spaces for knowledge building for non-dominant groups, creating initiatives, and communicating with leadership to make DEI related changes. While many participants engaged in diversity committees, others participated in more individual and grassroots diversity work outside of organizational parameters.

Participants who were not satisfied with how their organizations handle DEI initiatives participated in individual diversity work. Individualized diversity work included mentoring peers or students of color in their organizations or creating non-organizational affiliate groups (such as caucuses). Individual work in this context was a result of the failure of participant's organization to create systemic change, resulting in participants engaging in their own form of diversity work. These types of grassroots diversity efforts stem from individualized work and were only identified by participants who worked in academic institutions. For example, Lelah described herself as a "watchdog," meaning she mentors students and faculty of color while also calling out microaggressions or racist behavior from her colleagues. Another example is Patricia, who participates in her organization's DEI caucus and conducts individual diversity work, and her efforts to create and distribute an inclusive hiring packet to every department at her university for review. While this hiring initiative took three years to implement on the university level, because of Patricia's grassroots efforts, many departments adopted her inclusive hiring packet without the

organization's implementation. Participants who engaged in individual diversity work found and made communities without the help of organizational committees; by doing so, these participants felt as if they were not constrained by norms or rules within traditional organizational DEI committees.

Lastly, one outlier participant, Alex, engaged in diversity work mediating race or gender issues within classrooms. Alex discussed how he traveled from classroom to classroom to teach students how to properly mediate tense identity-based conflicts. Alex's work stemmed from his university's need for someone to help mediate a previous student conflict.

Conducting Interviews & Data Analysis

After gaining IRB approval, I began recruiting as described above. I interviewed 17 participants from September 15th, 2022, to November 22nd, 2022. Interviews ranged from 43 minutes to 87 minutes with an average of 64 minutes.

Before the scheduled interview, I provided participants with the study consent form to read and review (Appendix C). Then, at the beginning of each interview, I read the consent form out loud to participants to highlight specific components, confirm that they understood their confidentiality, and reassure participants they did not have to engage in questions they were uncomfortable answering. I then confirmed participant qualifications by asking them if the participant measures for my study matched their own experiences (i.e., age, engaged in informal diversity work, etc.).

I used a semi-structured interview schedule to identify informal diversity worker experiences and remain flexible in addressing participants stories narratives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014). This interview schedule also provided me with the flexibility to include on the spot probing questions for clarification or to dive further into a topic (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014). The

interview schedule and probing questions were adapted from my pilot study interview questions based on earlier interviews (Appendix D)

Interview questions were carefully worded to ensure I addressed each of my three research questions. My first research question asks about the challenges informal diversity workers experience. I include specific questions such as: “What common challenges do you face as an informal diversity worker?” and “Can you give me an example of a common challenge?” I also include questions on how policies are implemented in their organizations and if they think the organization process is the best way to institute these policies.

My second research question asked participants how they were able to overcome challenges in DEI work. I asked participants “How do you overcome these challenges?” I also highlight the positives of informal diversity work by asking participants to describe moments that their DEI work was beneficial to their organization.

My third research question asked about how leaders could aid informal diversity workers. To answer this question, I include questions such as: “In what ways do you feel supported by your organization’s leadership?” “What have you seen leaders do that helps with DEI?” “What have you seen leaders do that does NOT help with DEI?” I highlight participants experiences of times when leadership was helpful and when leadership disrupted DEI initiatives to gather exemplars on what leaders should and should not do to aid DEI initiatives.

Throughout my interviewing process, I wrote interview notes. Writing notes during each interview allowed me to circle back to important information and think through vital connections, emotions, and initial reactions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014). I returned to my interview notes while writing memos and thinking through themes.

I conducted online interviews due to the cost and time effectiveness for participants who were not geographically close (Tracy, 2020). Conducting online interviews also allowed me to diversify and expand my recruitment pool because I was not limited by physical location (Tracy, 2020). Online interviews were recorded using a Teams videoconferencing software.

Transcriptions

I started interview transcription using the automatically generated texts created by Microsoft Teams. Then, I went over the transcripts to clean them up by deleting names and any other identifiable information. Additionally, I fixed any major grammatical errors. Then, to ensure that all the information in the transcripts was correct, I re-listened to each interview while looking at the transcripts, making the necessary corrections. While going over my interviews, I listened and noted when there were pauses, sighs, or any other key nonverbal signs that may provide important data for the analysis. Listening to, looking for, and noting these important nonverbal cues allowed me to identify emotional reactions to the questions asked (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). My transcriptions resulted in 271 double-spaced, typewritten interview pages and 57 pages of hand-written and typed analytical memos recorded during and after each interview. After transcribing all my interviews, I started my analysis.

Analysis

I analyzed the interview data using an iterative thematic analysis approach (Tracy, 2020). Tracy's (2020) thematic analysis procedures and Lindlof and Taylor's (2014) overview on qualitative research guided my analysis. Specifically, my analysis included several steps: 1) getting familiar with the data, 2) recognizing and brainstorming themes, 3) creating a color-coded directory of themes, 4) coding data based on themes, 5) writing analytic memos, and 6) engaging in member checks.

While the fifth step focused on writing analytic memos, I found myself writing memos, notes, and commentaries throughout the entire interviewing and data analysis procedure. Because writing analytical memos was intertwined with data analysis, instead of separating this step into one section, I will describe my process on analytical memos throughout each applicable step of my data analysis.

Overall, I gathered 57 total pages of analytical memos and interview notes. Keeping a journal full of memos and interview notes encouraged reflexivity and helped me to avoid preconceived notions about my data (Charmaz, 2014). Writing data memos gave me space to compare the interview data, codes, and themes (Charmaz, 2014). Overall, memo writing allowed me to relate to the data and to discover patterns of themes within the data.

Getting Familiar with the Data

The process of getting familiar with my data occurred throughout my interviewing process, memo writing, and once I finished my interviews. I immersed myself in my data by writing notes and memos throughout interviews and after interviews had concluded. This allowed me to start my data analysis beginning with my first interview by creating interview notes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014, p. 244). More specifically, my data immersion process consisted of reading and listening to my data, talking about my data with people, and reflecting on my findings (Tracy, 2020).

By listening to and transcribing interviews, I immersed myself in the data by reliving my interview and thinking through nuanced connections that were not available to me during the interview. After transcribing the interviews, I re-read each interview, and read slowly and deeply to find any further information that was clouded by the transcription process. Reading through all

my interviews helped account for the details and nuances of the respondents' answers (Miner & Jayaratne, 2014).

While reading and re-reading my data, I discussed my findings and insights with others. Taking on Tracy's (2020) suggestion to "talk with others about my data" (p. 214), I met with my advisor weekly to discuss my interviews and data. Additionally, I talked with my peers, committee members, and friends about my research and compelling trends. As a result, I gathered newfound insights which generated new ways of thinking through my data findings.

Reflecting on my findings mainly occurred through writing memos and notes. Memo writing encouraged me to process my thoughts cohesively and make connections among all my interviews (Charmaz, 2014). My memos and notes forced me to mull over conceptual matters and consider the reasons for patterns I was noticing in the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014, p. 244). Thinking through interview notes and memos while also revisiting influential moments from each interview allowed me to immerse myself in the data more analytically and reflectively. I also wrote memos weekly or every other week on common themes I noticed in interviews. These weekly or bi-weekly memos also included making lists of data that surprised and perplexed me (Tracy, 2020). After I finished interviewing, I went back through my written interview notes and memos in more detail to identify themes. Once I became familiar with my data, I then started conceptualizing my themes.

Identifying and Refining Themes

Theme identification occurred through different avenues, such as talking about my data, concept mapping, and writing memos. The process of identifying and refining themes was not a linear process (Tracy, 2020). While conducting interviews, I was already recognizing and thinking about patterns within the data. During weekly meetings with my advisor, we discussed

initial findings and refined ideas based on connections between interview data and existing research. I also met with other committee members to discuss current themes and gather advice insights on the data patterns. Much of this process revolved around discussing data with committee members and peer mentors (Tracy, 2020).

After finishing my interviews, I created a concept map to visualize common patterns in my data. Concept mapping is a “visual or graphic representation of concepts and propositions that attempt to convey an understanding or relationship among different concepts” (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009, p. 70). My concept map consisted of post-it notes on my window with smaller post-it notes to draw lines and arrows to visualize connections between the larger post-it notes. While creating my concept map, I also added post-it notes of multiple participants relaying a subtopic or central theme so I could quickly access and identify these interviews if needed. While creating my themes, my living room became a “large canvas” for my materials (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014, p. 259). Using a concept map allowed me to visually see the themes and patterns I had been talking about and identifying for months to understand how themes tangibly related to each other (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009) (See Appendix E).

My concept map focused on significant themes represented by the data, along with subtopics and subthemes. For example, major initial themes I mapped included culture, identity, training, and language. I put these significant themes in the center of my window and had smaller or different colored post-it notes surrounding these major themes. Subtopic examples for culture focused on how DEI initiatives and policies moved within the organization and included hierarchy, status quo, individualism, authority, quick fixes, and public relations. The identity subtopic centered around how identity was communicated within interviews with related subtopics of neoliberalism, selfishness, selflessness, centering identity, and decentering identity.

Training subtopics focused on key areas where participants discussed a need for DEI training in their organization and consisted of carving out space, changing behavior, changing attitude, comfortability, and transparency. Lastly, language related to the terms and lack of terms used to describe DEI work, with subtopics such as ambiguity, success, interpersonal communication, and difficulty.

During concept mapping and discussing potential themes, I continued to write memos about insights I gathered from this process. These memos were usually “messy” in that I would think of a connection while I was deep in my data and quickly jot down the connection or theme. Ultimately, writing memos allowed me to stop and analyze my ideas about potential codes in any way that occurred to me during my analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). While I was conceptualizing my themes, I also started creating a theme codebook.

Creating a Color-Coded Theme Codebook

Much like stages one and two were intertwined, stages two and three were also loosely conducted in tandem with each other. While identifying and refining themes, I worked on creating a theme codebook. Prior to finalizing my codebook, I created a comprehensive list of themes using my concept map, notes, and memos to keep track of all potential themes identified in the data.

My codebook consisted of 12 distinct themes relating to participants’ feelings, experiences, and organizational communication trends present in the data (Appendix F). I noted themes that spoke to participants’ experiences without generalizing the data (Tracy, 2020). Themes were organized using color codes, meaning that “Theme A” was highlighted in red in my data, “Theme B” was highlighted in blue, etcetera. Examples of themes such as “institutional support,” “bad leadership,” and “where training is needed” represent straightforward themes

pertinent to the second research question focusing on pragmatic and action-based leadership solutions to incorporate DEI initiatives. Whereas theoretical aspects such as “centering identity,” “decentering identity,” “imposter syndrome,” and “emotional work” were related to my first research question regarding challenges and participants’ feelings about this emotionally laden work. After solidifying my codebook, I printed out all my interviews and started coding.

Coding Data Based on Themes

My coding process occurred on paper with colored markers and posted notes. I highlighted themes on paper while also writing down additional notes in my transcription margins. After I finished coding one interview on paper, I copied and pasted each code into separate word documents. Quotations for all 12 codes were catalogued and separated into different word documents on my computer. I found this double coding process helpful in making connections between quotations and thinking through each code as it appeared in each interview.

While I was coding the different themes, I wrote more refined analytical memos that reflected participants’ experiences and related directly to my research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Some analytic memos I created during my coding process were a bit more “messy.” Because I color-coded my themes on paper, I often wrote down connections and thoughts in my notebook and alongside the interviews. These analytical memos were more like “asides,” which are “usually inserted in parentheses or brackets in the interview transcript” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014, p. 244). I also wrote down commentaries in my interview transcripts, which are more elaborate reflections on a specific event or issue, contained in a separate paragraph with parentheses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014). These analytical memos were more targeted, focusing on each interview, the themes I found while coding, and the prevalence of each code within the interview. I also typed out analytical memos while coding, which were much more detailed to

organize interpretations of my findings. These write-ups were so well detailed that parts of these write-ups are featured in my final dissertation analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2014). After I analyzed my data, I confirmed my findings with some participants through member checking.

Member Checking

It is important to verify study findings with participants to make sure I accurately represented their experiences (Tracy, 2020). This process is called member checking. I engaged in member checking in two ways. First, I talked with participants and asked clarifying questions throughout the interview (Thomas, 2017). Second, I reached out to participants while analyzing my data to gain additional information on key findings (Tracy, 2020). Asking participants clarifying questions throughout the interview and summarizing my own perception of what participants experienced helped to ensure that I accurately conveyed key features of participants' realities (Thomas, 2017). Specifically, I met with three participants after completing my interviews and developing the study themes. These member checking sessions lasted from 29 to 45 minutes. I also sent out my findings to two other participants via email.

These exchanges were quick and participants either stated that they agreed with everything that was shared with them or explained how their experiences were a bit different. For example, when meeting with Patricia to discuss findings, she confirmed and reiterated that she does not feel that she is listened to or taken seriously as a diversity worker. She then provided an additional example relating to her time as a diversity worker when she wasn't taken seriously which aided and supported my thematic analysis.

Whereas my email exchanges with Jasmine were short and simple. I emailed her a long paragraph explaining the themes I found and asked her if the information represented her experiences. She emailed me back stating that the themes related to her experiences as an

informal diversity worker. She then added information on how organizations can better aid diversity workers based on her own experiences and struggles. The themes discussed during member checking and other confirmed themes are presented in the next chapter where I detail my findings.

Chapter Four: Informal Diversity Workers and the Challenges They Experience, How They Overcome These Challenges, and How Leadership Can Help

This chapter discusses analysis findings detailing the unique experiences of informal diversity workers. The first research question, *What are the communicative challenges that informal diversity workers face when implementing DEI into organizations?* includes challenges described by participants that inherently limited their ability to foster tangible DEI change within the organization. Next, I address the question, *How do informal diversity workers combat challenges when implementing DEI into organizations?* I then detail how informal diversity workers worked to overcome challenges through self-preservation and building community. The final section answers the research question, *How can organizational leaders communicate support and advocate for informal diversity workers?* Drawing on participants' experiences and insights, I discuss how informal diversity workers felt that leaders could aid DEI work by prioritizing DEI initiatives and collaborating with diversity workers.

My first research question (RQ1a) asks, *What are the communicative challenges that informal diversity workers face when implementing DEI into organizations?* As I detail below, four challenges presented obstacles for informal diversity workers in creating holistic and systemic positive organizational change. The first challenge involved the ambiguous nature of defining success in DEI work. Secondly, participants shared how they were challenged by definitions of diversity and the reinforcement of Whiteness. Third, informal diversity workers described the challenge of not being taken seriously by their organizational members and leaders. Finally, informal diversity workers noted emotional burnout and exhaustion that diversity work entails.

Theme One: Ambiguity Surrounding Success

One of the primary obstacles to implementing DEI change involved participants' difficulty in defining organizational success as it related to their informal diversity work. Diversity workers lacked a clear vision and the linguistic tools to define what DEI success would look like, which reduced their ability to create and recognize change. This first theme is divided up into four main subthemes: ambiguous definitions of success, invisible finish lines and missing targets, leader uncertainty, and lacking ideas for change enactment. Each of these subthemes is discussed in detail below.

Ambiguous Definition of Success

Informal diversity workers who participated in this study had a hard time conceptualizing success in DEI work, which negatively impacted DEI initiatives and goals. Participants often had difficulty answering the question, "How do you define success in terms of DEI work?" For example, when I asked Patricia, who conducted DEI work through mentoring peers and engaged in multiple organizational caucuses, she struggled to answer. With hesitancy and long pauses, Patricia answered, "I don't know how to measure that... That's hard... That's not a good answer." Patricia was unable to conjure an answer for how to "measure" success. Patricia looked down after she answered this question, indicating that she might have felt embarrassed by her inability to produce a "good answer."

Similarly, Renee, who serves on multiple diversity committees in a large research university, had difficulty answering the question "What does success look like to you?" Renee took a few moments to answer this question and eventually stated, "OK, what do I consider success? Umm... I mean... I don't know I mean, this always gets into like, is it even possible to be successful. I don't know, that's like a really hard question."

Patricia's and Renee's struggle to explain DEI success, along with their hesitation in answering, illuminated the difficulty in conceptualizing organizational success within DEI work. Participants' inability to communicate what constituted success or if success was "even possible" emphasized the monumental challenge of not having a clear goal to measure progress. While informal diversity workers wanted to know what it meant to be successful in this line of work, they often did not have a clear conceptualization of what success meant. This difficulty defining organizational DEI success created a challenge in developing a collective understanding of DEI work. DEI advancement is further complicated by how informal diversity workers felt like they're unable to achieve holistic success in their line of work.

Invisible Finish Lines and Missing Targets

Success was also difficult for informal diversity workers to conceptualize because there was not a clear end point where success could be fully achieved. Participants described that DEI advancements occurred through constant improvement and iterations as organizational members and diversity issues changed. Participants struggled with envisioning an organizational end goal for DEI work wherein their diversity work was completed. For example, Jessica, a member of a DEI committee in a finance company, discussed the lack of a "finish line" in diversity work. Jessica noted that success is difficult to grasp because it is like a "double-edged sword of there's never gonna be success versus success is growth." Jessica recognized the negative consequences of not having a clear finish line for success, while also acknowledging that this aspect was also positive because it allowed for continuous DEI achievement. Jessica explained that DEI organizational success meant growth, which revealed that success was never fully achieved, and more could always be done for DEI initiatives.

Finley, who served on a DEI committee in a large university, also had a difficult time seeing an end point marking success. With long pauses, Finley stated, “Yeah...Umm... I think... Hmm... that’s really interesting because I don’t know... I feel like it’s hard to be successful in DEI work because there’s always something you’re missing.” When there was always something missing, organizational success was not completely achievable. Participants struggled with visualizing DEI end goals due to the lack of a “finish line,” viewing success as “growth,” and something always “missing.” If it is not possible to recognize end goals in DEI work, what are diversity workers working towards? Due to the difficulties in defining organizational success, participants discussed needing their leader’s help and support in conceptualizing success.

Leader Uncertainty

Participants looked to leaders to set parameters around DEI success and were frustrated when they were unable to understand leader or organizational definitions for success. Importantly, participants mentioned that some of this challenge was because leaders needed to first conceptualize their own definitions of DEI success. Additionally, participants perceived a lack of leader involvement in providing metrics for DEI work. For example, Molly, a member of a DEI committee, discussed how she struggled to understand what DEI success looked like and detailed her frustration with the lack of leaders’ guidance and support. Molly, stated, “I don’t think they [organizational leadership] have a measurement of success. Yeah, I don’t think they even have an idea of like what a successful DEI committee really looks like.” Informal diversity workers like Molly wanted more leader guidance to aid them in clearly understanding DEI success goals. Molly expected leadership to be more involved in her DEI committee and felt frustrated by the lack of guidance she received.

Similarly, Olivia communicated her anger at leadership's lack of guidance and assumptions that a group of employees would solve the "problem" of DEI. She shared,

So, I think they are, leadership, just kind of was like here... let's try this [DEI committee] maybe like let's check this box and maybe these people will figure out what we need to do and very much felt like we were solving a problem for them.

Olivia also noted, "We needed higher leadership to tell us kind of what they were looking for."

Olivia's leadership did not provide any clear guidance on the goals this committee should aim to achieve.

Olivia's description of "check this box" relates to how diversity work can function as performative instead of enacting change (Ahmed, 2012, 2017). If a DEI committee is created simply to "check this box" and communicate that an organization recognizes DEI, then leadership may take little responsibility for change with DEI committees. Regardless of if leaders are uncertain of DEI goals or know goals and don't share them, informal diversity workers experience DEI goal ambiguity as a challenge. Participants, such as Olivia, perceived the lack of guidance from leaders as a lack of DEI prioritization. Since leadership cultivated Olivia's DEI committee and failed to provide guidance, they communicated that only cared about the performative aspects of DEI committees rather than enacting DEI change.

Lacking Ideas for Change Enactment

How informal diversity workers conceptualized organizational success in their line of work impacted the ways they enacted change. When diversity workers lacked a clear consensus in defining success, they struggled to understand the best modes of creating organizational DEI change in their organization. For example, Alex, who conducted diversity work through meditation and serving on a DEI committee, described his annoyance at the procedures he had to go through to get a policy enacted. When I asked Alex if he thought these procedures were the

best way to create change and sustain organizational success, Alex was a bit taken aback, having never considered alternatives. Alex shared,

Um, I guess, for what it's worth, I think it kind of has to be this way. I mean part of me would like to have sort of a more idealistic answer uh and say that we should have like more revolutionary change. And if something's not working, we should just tear it down. Um. But you know, I haven't really seen that be successful.

Louisa, a member on a DEI committee, supported and extended Alex's point by discussing her difficulty in knowing the correct way to enact change. Louisa outlined the bureaucratic steps needed to enact change and ultimately enable success in her DEI work. When I asked her if she thought these steps were the right way to enact change, Louisa hesitated and commented, "No one knows the right answer to that... I don't know." Louisa's response indicated ambivalence and uncertainty, while noting that she was not alone in her sentiment ("No one knows").

Alex and Louisa indicated they felt stuck in organizational processes. Because bureaucracy is normalized within their organizations, Alex and Louisa were unable to envision other ways to cultivate change and realize success for DEI initiatives. Further, Alex's comment that "revolutionary change" that was needed, yet Alex hadn't "really seen that be successful" also makes alternative solutions to bureaucracy problematic when the alternatives are not successful either. This reality is concerning when considering the goals that are needed for organization to enact DEI initiatives.

Overall, the first theme of ambiguity surrounding success occurred because participants had a difficult time explaining what success meant (ambiguous definition of success), experienced unstated or unclear end goals (invisible finish lines and missing targets), encountered leader uncertainty explaining or defining the work (leader uncertainty), and could not explain what change should look like (lacking ideas for change enactment). This ambiguity obscured what DEI work should entail and how to measure success, making the work frustrating

and at times feel performative. Another significant challenge that diversity workers encountered was the reproduction of Whiteness in their conceptualizations of diversity.

Theme Two: Definitions of Diversity and Identity

Informal diversity workers' approach to defining and conceptualizing diversity influenced DEI initiatives within organizations. Following, I describe limits that White-identifying informal diversity workers experienced and how those limits caused them to define diversity strictly through a racial lens. These racial definitions of diversity reinforced both visible diversity and Whiteness which hindered DEI efforts and created an additional challenge. In this theme, I describe how White-identifying diversity workers defined diversity based on the macro discourse of Black Lives Matter (BLM), which inherently reinforced the importance of visible racial diversity and perpetuated a binary of either "Black" or "White." Through language use and racial signifiers, White-identifying participants also labeled their peers, coworkers, and leaders with non-dominant identities, by using racial signifiers making the connection that those who are deemed different function as ambassadors of diversity. Lastly, I describe how participants defined who was not diverse and how these definitions reproduced Whiteness.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter Movement was a social movement that influenced how White-identifying participants defined diversity. Six White-identifying participants specifically brought up the Black Lives Matter Movement as their reason for participating in informal diversity work. The BLM and George Floyd⁹ were both discussed as a factor related to participants' DEI work, typically answering the question, "What led you to get into this line of work?"

⁹ George Floyd is an African American man who was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis in May of 2020

White-identifying participants used BLM as a reason for why they started their informal diversity work. These participants also connected their diversity work to family, friends, and peers with non-dominant identities, which granted them connections to difference. Furthermore, this section serves as a framework for understanding the other two sub-themes: ambassadors of diversity and lack of diversity, which illustrate how White-identifying informal diversity workers were influenced by the BLM discourse in their conceptualizations of diversity. I specifically focus on the same participants who discuss BLM for the other two subthemes to illustrate how this social movement allowed these participants to focus on visible diversity, which created a Black or White binary when conceptualizing diversity and race.

Six White-identifying participants used BLM as a dominant discourse, which created a Black or White binary. For example, Jessica answered the question, “What led you into diversity work?” by explaining,

In college when I played basketball and hearing a lot about their [people of color] experiences and especially ‘cause I mean I was in college during George Floyd. That was, that was part of my experience and I had, uh, women on my team who were Black and were really impacted by that.

BLM, a major social movement, influenced Jessica to conduct informal diversity work. Because she relied on the BLM to understand systemic racial inequality, Jessica defined diversity based around race. Further, in only focusing on her teammates who identify as Black, Jessica reinforced a Black or White binary. Jessica’s use of racial signifiers (“women on my team who were Black”) indicated an assumption that people with a similar race to George Floyd would be significantly impacted by his murder. Furthermore, by identifying her teammates as Black, Jessica connected herself to difference, allowing her to feel personally connected to systemic inequality thus, providing justification for her informal diversity work.

Similar to Jessica, Molly, who was responsible for the creation of her company’s diversity committee, described how George Floyd influenced her decision to start diversity work.

Molly shared, “Yeah so frankly, like this [her creation of her DEI committee] happened in [the] 2020 pandemic, George Floyd, we were really like it... It made us look internally at our organization very closely.” The murder of George Floyd also influenced Molly to discuss DEI issues with her organization’s leadership. Prior to George Floyd’s murder, she had not considered or cared about the lack of diversity within her company. Sebastian, a member on a DEI committee, was influenced by George Floyd’s murder as motivation to engage in DEI work. Sebastian explained,

Our council has a group chat that we post things in and this summer, I looked back over the George Floyd um killing and then protests and police brutality after that, and um yeah there was some anger going on and I think that does motivate us to want to do more.

Sebastian highlighted how George Floyd’s murder and the social movements (“protests”) were a necessary impetus to “motivate us to want to do more,” which signaled his privileged positionality of having a choice to act to get work done within his DEI committee. Sebastian also conflated police brutality with George Floyd, which indicated that police brutality against people of color may have been experienced as a new phenomenon to Sebastian.

In my data, there was a connection between a person’s White/non-White identity and their understanding of diversity. Those with non-dominant identities did not bring up the BLM because they have always been aware of DEI issues, and they explained how they experienced DEI issues daily. For example, when Meera and Lelah (both women of color) were asked what led them into diversity work, their answers reflected a connection between their informal diversity work and their non-dominant identities. For example, Meera stated, “Umm I think I’ve always just done it (diversity work) probably for my own survival since I was a kid.”

On the other hand, White-identifying participants were less likely to conduct informal diversity work based on their own positionalities. Thus, White-identifying participants relied on dominant discourses about racial inequality to understand their informal diversity work and

conceptualizations of diversity. These participants only recently realized the epidemic of systemic racism and oppression in the United States, allowing them to make the choice to care about systemic inequality and highlighting their own privileged positionality.

More specifically, Jessica, Molly, and Sebastian all mentioned George Floyd in association with the BLM movement, reflecting a lack of intersectionality in their understandings of systemic inequality. The murder of Breonna Taylor¹⁰ was just as tragic and oppressive and occurred around the same time as George Floyd. Yet, participants only mentioned George Floyd, illuminating how race supersedes other power structures. When only focusing on George Floyd as the main figure of the BLM movement, gender was erased, and Black men were at the forefront of understanding racial disparity in the United States. The heightened importance of George Floyd's murder and glossing over intersectional identity characteristics has implications for informal diversity workers who are engaging in DEI work.

Because BLM focuses on racial inequality and systemic racism, it makes sense that the six participants who used this movement as a framework for understanding their diversity work also used BLM to understand diversity. Conceptualizing diversity in relation to BLM meant there was greater importance placed on racial diversity; specifically, participants use terms such as “Black identifying” and “non-White” to describe their peers. Highlighting racial discourses related to BLM meant that participants reinforced a Black or White binary to understand difference, which created a challenge for informal diversity workers from both White and non-White identities. Next, I nuance this challenge further by discussing definitions of diversity and identity in reference to being an ambassador for diversity.

Ambassadors of Diversity

¹⁰ Breonna Taylor was murdered by police officers in March of 2020.

As described above White-identifying participants used racial signifiers to describe peers and/or coworkers, which allowed them to place a responsibility on those with visible non-dominant identities to serve as ambassadors of diversity. For example, Marge, who served on a DEI committee, discussed her friendship with a student who provided her insights about race. Marge stated, “I have one student who’s a teacher and he’s a Black man and he’s really great to talk to.” Marge alluded that her student’s race makes him a source of knowledge about racial issues and allows him to teach her about diversity. Marge’s use of her student’s race relates to Sumerau et al.’s (2021) discussion on allyship coinciding with White people befriending people of color and thinking that is enough to combat systemic racism. However, Marge’s comment lacked consideration about how sensitive conversations about race may impact her student’s wellbeing.

Similarly, Sonja, who was on a diversity committee in a large organization, described her CEO as a “Black man,” and correlated his race with interest in DEI issues. Sonja commented:

And the CEO himself has, we were encouraged and allowed and supported him to organize like a companywide walk out and kneel and he like, made a statement and it was all, you know, in support of like everybody reacting to the murder of George Floyd. And it was like, he was really like, he is, you know, as I said, like, he is a Black man and he was like, ready to make a statement about that to his employees.

Sonja believed hiring a Black CEO helped with DEI initiatives, stating “And I think that [hiring her CEO] really helped.” Sonja correlated accomplishing DEI initiatives with hiring a Black CEO. Due to the CEO’s Black racial identity, Sonja’s statements may put added pressure on her CEO to prioritize DEI initiatives. Although the CEO created opportunities for employees to engage in discourses about racial injustice, by focusing on his identity he became an ambassador of diversity.

Discussions of hiring procedures were another way participants put the responsibility on those with non-dominant identities to operate as ambassadors of diversity. For example, Olivia, a member on a DEI committee, described the ideal candidate for a paid DEI officer noting, “hopefully it’s someone, maybe a non-White person.” In this statement, Olivia created a binary between White and non-White, indicating that White is not “diverse,” which centers White-identifying employees as the norm. Further, Olivia reinforced that employees who are not White should operate as ambassadors of diversity due to their visible differences.

Sebastian’s responses also highlighted the challenge of placing the burden for being an ambassador of DEI efforts on non-White employees. Sebastian described his company’s hiring initiatives which focused on people of color by stating: “I’d argue that the ambassadors, being primarily diversity and inclusion efforts, would probably seek out people of color to talk about the company and talk about trying to get a job in the investment field.” Enacting DEI work through targeted hiring set up people of color to operate as ambassadors of DEI initiatives. White participants operationalized DEI initiatives to focus only on visible diversity.

When participants discussed hiring initiatives, racial signifiers were often used to describe the type of people who should or should not be hired. Similar to Ahmed’s findings (2021) these racial signifiers functioned as a neoliberal tactic for those who have visible non-dominant identities to be ambassadors for diversity. Next, I discuss how participants visibly conceptualize diversity by discussing how White employees lack diversity.

Lack of Diversity

In this section, I describe White-identifying diversity worker’s conceptualizations of non-diversity and how this reproduces Whiteness. The production of centering and reproducing Whiteness created a challenge for informal diversity workers in truly fostering DEI initiatives.

White-identifying participants described White employees as lacking diversity. For example, Olivia described “Yeah. So, we had a little team, our internal team, and to be honest, our team was fairly White. I think we had a couple people maybe identified as like not-White but it was majority White.” While Olivia was justified in describing the problematic nature of the lack of diversity in DEI committees, using only White as a signifier to describe diversity constitutes a definition of diversity as only White/non-White, neglecting other diversity characteristics. Similar to Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) findings, Olivia’s description of her diversity committee reinforced Whiteness as the race that every other race was held up against. Instead of using Whiteness as a comparative tool, Olivia could approach diversity as intersecting characteristics to acknowledge both visible and non-visible identities (Griffin, 2019).

Sebastian also reinforced Whiteness. Sebastian described a lack of diversity as a huge problem for his company, specifically in the hiring protocols. Sebastian stated, “We [his organization] have hired two team members in the past months, both of which were White males.” Sebastian emphasized “White males” in a frustrated tone, indicating it was a problem for his company to hire the racialized and gendered ideal worker. Sebastian’s communication reinforced an ideology that those who are White do not have any stigmatized non-dominant identities, an attitude that establishes Whiteness as the norm. Sebastian left out numerous other components of identity, both visible and non-visible, and failed to consider the complexities of diversity.

Unlike Sebastian and Olivia who centered Whiteness in describing others, Alex focused on his own identity as a White man and how he lacked diversity. When I asked Alex how his identity influenced his diversity work, he reproduced Whiteness with his answer. Alex described his DEI committee, and his identity in relation to that committee, when he stated, “Sometimes I

feel like the token White guy on the committee, because it's usually not a lot of other White people." Alex's comments described how he is the "token White guy" and reinforced a stereotype DEI that committees *should* only consist of people with non-dominant identities in this case not White. This statement also reinforced the idea that those who look different should operate as ambassadors of diversity. When put in juxtaposition with Sebastian's and Olivia's statements, Alex's comments revealed a tension in understanding who should be on DEI committees. Alex's comment that "despite his identity" puts the responsibility on those who with visible non-dominant identities to conduct diversity work. While it is important for diversity committee members to have a variety of different backgrounds, identities and experiences, Alex's framing reinforced his Whiteness as the norm by commenting that he is unusual ("token White guy") due to his dominant identity. Alex used his own identity as a White man to reflect diversity measures that are only related to race.

Overall, White-identifying participants reinforced White identities as salient and relevant as they explained their informal diversity work. The definitions of diversity and the subtle discussions that highlight the importance of race reiterated visible diversity in White-identifying participants' line of work. Participants' language has implications for employees with invisible stigmatized identities who are also part of dominant groups (i.e., a trans White woman or a White neurodivergent man). Throughout the interview, White-identifying participants did not associate White individuals with non-dominant or stigmatized identities. While being White grants numerous privileges, the framing of race as "non-White" reinforced a binary that further emphasized Whiteness as the norm. Because Whiteness remained invisible to dominant group members (White-identifying informal diversity workers) participants' language choices indicated the luxury of never having to apply race to themselves. Diversity conceptualizations must be

expanded past those deemed White and non-White, or White and Black, creating a challenge for informal diversity workers to recognize the intersectionality in definitions of diversity.

Additionally, despite the problem of focusing on race as an indicator of diversity, it is important to understand that diversity includes more than what we can see. It is not that racial diversity is unimportant. Historically and contextually, racial difference has and continues to be one of the most prevalent structural inequalities in the United States (Gatrell & Swan, 2010). Rather, limiting diversity to visible diversity reinforces Whiteness within the organizational structure and hinders diversity work.

To conclude, my data indicated that White-identifying informal diversity workers relied on visible diversity of race as an indicator for defining diversity which reproduced Whiteness as a Black or White binary. Additionally, White-identifying participants relied on dominant discourses such as BLM and George Floyd's murder to motivate and understand their own informal diversity work which reproduced Whiteness and centered visible diversity. The second subtheme described how White-identifying participants used racial signifiers to describe their peers and/or coworkers as ambassadors of diversity which reinforced a racial binary and put the onus of DEI initiatives on those who look "different." The final subtheme described how White-identifying diversity workers reproduced Whiteness through their language of what constituted a lack of diversity. Overall, White-identifying participants' definitions of diversity resulted in a reproduction of Whiteness as a Black or White binary which created a challenge to advance DEI efforts and initiatives.

Theme Three: Not Being Taken Seriously

Throughout participant interviews, informal diversity workers noted that their organizations did not take them or their work seriously, resulting in challenges for participants to

enact meaningful DEI change. This theme details challenges relating to “fluffy work,” or work that seemed to have a low impact such as voluntary awareness campaigns and events. Informal diversity workers also lacked communication channels between their leadership and human resources that made it difficult to be taken seriously. Further, participants described how they were unable to foster change by themselves due to their informal DEI position, and often relied on other employees to champion initiatives. Lastly, if informal diversity workers were able to enact an initiative, then it often resulted in many employees not taking the initiative seriously.

Fluffy Work

Participants described fluffy work as having a minimal impact for change such as serving on diversity committees or employee resource groups. Fluffy work included tasks participants felt were expected from organizational leadership and administration and occurred within the confines of the organization. Because fluffy work related primarily to events that were not mandatory for all employees, despite the amount of labor put into DEI events, participants were frustrated with the low employee attendance which led to feeling burnout.

Fluffy work was described as work that didn’t lead to tangible revolutionary change. Instead, fluffy work focused on raising DEI awareness through hosting voluntary employee events. Meera, who conducted diversity work through an employee resource group at her tech company, described her negative experiences,

It always just felt like we were doing kind of fluffy events like panels for pride month or a Black History Month. And like that’s a lot of labor those put on Black folks and like queer folks, but it did never feel like radical change labor. It wasn’t like we really need to like do XYZ.

Meera’s disappointment stemmed from her work not being taken seriously and that she could not enact the type of “radical change” to make a larger DEI difference in her organization. Fluffy work instead focused on heightening individual awareness. Meera’s statement also illuminated

how fluffy work was unevenly burdensome for those with non-dominant identities, which sometimes resulted in emotional burnout.

Olivia's informal diversity work was also individually focused. Olivia described her diversity committee as "kind of like an after-school club" and discussed how it catered to individualistic change. Olivia's diversity work included a raising awareness campaign through creating posts for her company's newsletter. Olivia also discussed certain non-dominant holidays or celebrations that she promoted to help her organizational members learn about. To use Olivia's diversity work required employees to voluntarily take time out of their day to read and learn about Olivia's posts. When I asked Olivia if she thought a lot of people read her newsletter she hesitated, "well... I'm not sure... maybe."

Similar to Olivia, Molly's informal diversity work catered to individualistic notions of change. Molly hosted a Cinco De Mayo party and a showing of the Netflix documentary *13th*. Molly reiterated how these events are optional to employees by comparing these events to a "club." Molly explained,

What kinds of things do we need from the team we've done in the past, like basically kind of like a club, but instead we say we're gonna be watching, like the, I think it's called the *13th*, was one of the movies we watched on the 13th Amendment. And we're gonna have a beer club discussion around that. It's optional to attend, but we're doing it so and we'll come up with like a list of questions.

Showing the documentary *13th* was after work hours; to attend, employees had to take extra time out of their schedules to watch this documentary. Just like Olivia's newsletters Molly's viewing party and Cinco De Mayo party functioned as opt-in events for employees to raise awareness and lacked the element of "radical change" to create lasting DEI cultural shifts. Despite not holistically changing the organization, both these types of diversity work still required extra labor for Olivia and Molly. When an organization makes DEI events optional and hosts events outside of company time, those actions communicate that DEI work is optional and unimportant.

Both Molly and Olivia described their diversity work as being extra-curricular through “being an after-school thing” or a “club.” DEI events functioning as extra-curriculars sends the message that caring about and implementing DEI optional. Furthermore, Olivia and Molly’s language to describe their own committees illuminated how they may not take their own work seriously.

Due to their lack of radical change, book clubs also functioned as fluffy work. Alex, Patricia, and Marge’s diversity work consisted of reading DEI related books and meeting with peers. Marge described her small university diversity committee as “a book club.” Marge was frustrated with her diversity committee and wished they did more tangible work. Marge explained her dissatisfaction,

And we never did anything. We would have these meetings once a month, but we never, never went anywhere. We read *White fragility*. That was it was more like a book club. We read some different books that was all.

Marge’s statement reiterated Meera’s statements on “lack of radical change labor.” Reading books reflected the individualistic and non-radical side to fluffy work. Because Marge’s DEI committee was the only people reading the books, the knowledge understood from these books is limited only to those who cared enough to educate themselves DEI. Thus, book clubs put the responsibility on those who cared about DEI issues instead of engaging in holistic organizational “radical change labor.”

Fluffy work related to how DEI events, meetings, or campaigns were not mandatory for employees. Participants felt tension because they did not want to force their peers to join DEI committees yet, they discussed the importance of their peer’s engagement with diversity work. For example, Jessica, a recruiter at a financial firm, explained the importance of DEI for her job but did not think it was necessary to require all recruiters in her organization to join her DEI committee. Jessica’s trepidation around making her voluntary DEI committee mandatory, despite

acknowledging the importance of DEI initiatives, provided a great example of this tension.

Jessica shared,

And when my boss told me about our DEI Council and my immediate reaction was, like, why am I not on it? And I was like, honestly, why are all the recruiters not on it? Because essentially, in my personal opinion, you cannot separate recruiting and diversity and inclusion...So I was like I'm gonna ask all recruiters, like, if they wanna be a part of it because, I mean, don't wanna force anybody into something.

Despite the connection recruiting has to diversity and inclusion, Jessica felt tension making her DEI committee mandatory for all recruiters. Jessica's statements reinforced an individualistic imperative considering those in power (recruiters) can opt in to care about DEI initiatives. When recruiters volunteer on DEI committees, it communicates those in power care about DEI. The voluntary nature of DEI committees within this context communicated that DEI was not holistically prioritized within the organization.

The tension Jessica experienced in not wanting to force recruiters to join her DEI committee relates to Uma's example of how their organization's DEI certificate "doesn't really mean anything." Uma, who conducted diversity work by mentoring students and peers of color, described how a colleague in their DEI committee created a step-by-step online DEI certificate program for their organization. However, Uma's DEI committee struggled to make this certificate mandatory for employees. Therefore, this DEI certificate functioned only as a "feather in your cap" due to it "not really meaning anything" within the larger scope of the organization.

Uma explained,

Someone else the team put together a DEI certificate program full of a big, long list of all kinds of different activities that one could voluntarily, you know, choose to do. And then, if you document doing these different kinds of activities you get you kind of earn points that get credited towards certificate essentially, and there's like different thresholds you can reach, depending on how many points you get. And so it doesn't really mean anything. It's just kind of like a feather in your cap that you have this DEI certificate that shows that you care about these issues, and you want to be inclusive towards your students stuff like that.

If this certificate does not mean anything or is not mandatory for employees, it communicates that caring and learning about DEI is a choice. Uma's organization failed to acknowledge the importance of making this certificate mandatory or "mean something" for employees. Similar to previous participants, Uma's organization put the onus on those who care about DEI to learn about DEI instead of having it be a collective organizational requirement.

Uma and Jessica's examples illuminated tension between having DEI initiatives mandatory for employees or keeping these initiatives voluntary. DEI committees siloed DEI by creating an environment that only those who care about DEI should be doing the heavy lifting of trying to change the organization.

Fluffy work focused on changing an individual's attitudes and minds, instead of changing the organization itself. When people volunteered their time to learn about DEI instead of DEI training being mandatory for all employees, problems arose. Participants may have been changing the minds of those who opt-in; however, those who opt-in were also more likely already passionate about DEI work. Furthermore, fluffy work is not the type of change that fixes organizations holistically. Fluffy work enables individualistic attitude towards DEI initiatives that resolves any organizational onus for caring about these issues and instead focuses on individual labor both from diversity workers and employees who care about these issues. The next section discusses how the lack of productive organizational communication channels for diversity workers involvement.

Diversity Worker's Lack of Communication Channels

Diversity workers perceived that they were not being taken seriously due to the lack of communication channels they had with their leadership and human resources (HR). When leadership and HR communicated with diversity workers, this revolved around disciplinary

efforts. HR's lack of communication to Sonja's DEI committee indicated to her that HR had different goals. Throughout our interview, Sonja continuously brought up her frustration with HR. Although Sonja's DEI committee had members from HR, she stated that these HR representatives only participated in meetings to shut ideas down. Sonja framed her relationship with HR personnel by stating,

And like I hate to turn to HR. So, figuring out those boundaries has been hard and getting HR to clarify with us, you know, like HR hasn't done a great job of that. It seems like a lot of their responses are very, like vague and canned, and like corporate speak. And that's frustrating when you're trying to talk about vulnerable and tense human spaces.

According to Sonja, there were differences in communication expectations and goals between Sonja and HR, which resulted in Sonja having negative feelings towards HR. While Sonja's diversity committee relied on HR to pass initiatives and make positive changes, the lack of communication she received from these representatives created confusion and frustration for Sonja. Human resource's vague answers meant that Sonja's felt her diversity committee was not taken seriously enough to get complete answers was treated as a corporate nuisance.

HR's reluctance to share information with informal diversity workers functioned as a challenge. Sebastian reiterated Sonja's concerns by describing how his HR team lacked transparency with his DEI committee when sharing organizational demographics. Sebastian explained,

HR also won't release demographic information or we don't have the ability to do like exit interviews for like "why did you leave?" Our team isn't given much help from HR... they just won't give us any information for us to set specific goals like when I say we want to increase the diversity dimensions we don't have a way that we can actually say we're actually making progress on that.

Sebastian's frustration occurred because he perceived that HR chose to not share informations or resources with his committee, which created a barrier for his committee to know if they were actively creating positive change. Sebastian's statement also reiterated organizational constraints

and how certain organizational procedures, such as not being able to conduct exit interviews or share demographic information can limit DEI initiatives.

Both Sebastian and Sonja's examples created an "us versus them" perception due to the differing goals and communication. Further, Uma described what it means to have an "us versus them" dynamic, "An us versus them creates a way of thinking that relates to this sort of pity, this sort of, you know, separation between us and them, this sort of me and them, that kind of behavior doesn't help." Uma's experienced a separation between diversity committees and HR representatives. Uma described the "us versus them" mentality as a "pity" that HR does not view DEI problems as HR problems and allows DEI initiatives to become siloed.

Olivia also commented about the lack of communication between her committee and leadership. Leadership failed to communicate with Olivia and her diversity committee, which eliminated Olivia's ability to be involved when hiring a DEI officer. Olivia described her surprise,

There was policy, though I wasn't involved in those conversations, I think eventually there were conversations I was left out of and that led to the hiring of our DEI officer. Umm. But again, I wasn't involved in those.

Olivia's statement reinforced her concern that leadership did not have for her DEI committee due to their lack of communication and transparency with her or her DEI committee. Missing out of DEI conversations signaled to Olivia and her committee members that they were not important enough to be considered. Because Olivia and her DEI committee were not involved in making policy or hiring a DEI officer, she was not able to enact tangible change.

Overall, the lack of sharing information with informal diversity workers sent a message that informal diversity workers were not important enough to communicate with. This lack of communication meant that diversity workers were omitted from these conversations and felt that

they were not taken seriously. Because diversity workers were not involved in conversations, they were unable to make organizational changes.

To Pass DEI Initiatives, Someone Else Needs to Bring It Up

Participants' viewpoints or initiative ideas were not taken seriously unless leadership reiterated their ideas. According to Wilson (2013), employees higher in the organizational chart have more power to pass DEI initiatives. Informal diversity workers in this study struggled to pass initiatives because it typically took leadership or a higher titled employee to implement initiatives.

Sebastian explained how his organization prioritized traditional hierarchical structures, which negatively influenced how his committee passed initiatives. Sebastian stated, "even though we can have grassroots efforts that push initiatives up, it still has to abide within the standards set or it has to be blessed off on people that are in councils above us." Sebastian communicated that he and his committee were not able to enact change due to bureaucratic constraints. Ultimately, Sebastian felt it took a higher up employee to approve proposed initiatives.

Patricia also felt she lacked respect and authority in her organization to pass DEI initiatives, despite conducting diversity work for nearly a decade. Patricia angrily explained a situation where she wasn't being listened to:

I continuously brought up emotional training for faculty up to administration and even went all the way up to the Provost and during the Provost meeting an administrator states how they learned all about emotional training for faculty at a seminar and how this is something we should look into... everyone in the meeting agreed on what a great idea that was. I was appalled. Clearly I wasn't being listened to or heard.

While emotional training protocols were implemented, Patricia had nothing to do with this change being enacted. Patricia's experience reinforced how informal diversity workers were not being heard or taken seriously. Due to Patricia's title as an informal diversity worker, her voice

or ideas were not valued in her organization. Ultimately, informal diversity workers felt that they were not respected enough to be listened to and needed to rely on leaders to pass initiatives for them. However, some informal diversity workers who incorporated DEI initiatives faced negative implications.

Passing Initiatives Without Leadership “Lacked Any Teeth”

Informal diversity workers described their grassroots efforts to pass initiatives within their organization and the negative implications of “lacking any teeth.” While leadership “blessed off” participants’ initiatives, this caused organizational members to dismiss the importance of the initiatives and ultimately not take the initiatives seriously. This next section illuminates two participant’s experiences trying to embed DEI initiatives and the struggles they experienced because they lacked legitimate organizational power.

Dana, who conducted individual diversity work at a small university, described passing a DEI initiative through grassroots efforts instead of HR or higher leadership. Dana explained,

We developed a proposal that we submitted to the Provost about things that we thought should be instituted in hiring. And so she approved that, but then it seemed like, it was approved, and they were supposed to do it, but there’s nobody checking up on it, because it wasn’t from HR. And so there weren’t really any teeth to it.

Dana’s position as an informal diversity worker lacked the organizational authority to embed this initiative within the organization. Without support from HR or her leadership, other areas within the organization did not take this initiative seriously. Wilson (2013) explains that leadership support is crucial because DEI initiatives are a political issue that employees may not care about if they are not directly impacted. Therefore, initiatives require leadership support to embed initiatives within the organization.

Patricia echoed Dana’s statement by describing how her inclusive interviewing technique that she tried institute in her organization “did not have any teeth to it” because of her grassroots

efforts. Patricia tried to embed her inclusive interviewing protocol by asking each department in her organization to operate within her created handbook guideline. Patricia explained, “We were just asking people to kind of voluntarily do it and some departments absolutely did. Other departments didn’t.” Patricia highlighted the difficulties in grassroots initiatives and that without leadership support, employees were not required to implement initiatives, making them voluntary. Overall, the third theme of not being taken seriously occurred because participants were assigned work that did not create radical change (fluffy work), lacked proficient communication within between HR (lack of communication channels), were hindered by traditional bureaucratic change making systems (someone else needs to bring it up), and were unable to embed their initiatives within their organization through grassroots efforts (lacked any teeth). Not being taken seriously by organizational members made it difficult for diversity workers to enact tangible change within their organization.

Theme Four: Double Edge Sword of Passion

Informal diversity workers described how they were passionate about social justice issues and that was a core reason for engaging in diversity work. This section first focuses on the emotional toll that comes with being passionate about DEI type of work and how this differs based on participant’s positionalities. Then, I discuss the emotional work related to listening to other’s stories. Lastly, participants discussed the struggles of putting in copious amounts of effort and not seeing any progress.

Commitment

Informal diversity workers were committed to this work because of their passion and/or because of their non-dominant identity. Sebastian described the conundrum of diversity work

and how the burden of diversity work is either put on those who care about DEI work (passionate) or need to conduct DEI work (because of their identity). Sebastian described,

The majority of diversity work at least I've been exposed to is above and beyond and on top of other work commitments, and so I feel like it naturally puts a lot of onus on people who are either passionate about it or directly impacted by it.

Sebastian illuminated a critical component in diversity work: there are two types of diversity workers those who conduct this work because they are passionate about it and those who do it because they must. While those who conduct diversity work because they have to were also passionate about the work there was a different type of passion because they were directly impacted by their work. Sebastian discussed the commitment to diversity work because it was on top of other work commitments, thus those who conducted this work did so because they genuinely cared about it.

Commitment functioned as a way for diversity workers to show their passion for their work and participants did the work without any incentives. Renee stated, "You know, people really are just doing it because they're committed to the work." Renee's interview reinforced that because there are no capitalistic benefits to diversity work, to conduct this line of work one must have a commitment to social justice.

Finley echoed Renee's commitment to diversity work by discussing the amount of care that goes into their diversity work. Finley is White-identifying but has multiple non-dominant identities related to their gender identity and neurodivergence; because of these identities, there was a significant emotional tie to their line of work. Finley stated, "there is a lot of care that goes into it and a lot of time and effort to make sure that we're [Finley and other diversity workers on their committee] doing the work correctly and with care." Finley discussed their passion from the lens of care and how that care equated to time and effort being put into diversity work. Finley

later stated how important their identity is to their diversity work and how they focus on DEI initiatives related to their own experiences. Therefore, Finley's diversity work was both a means for passion and survival. Because Finley holds non-dominant identities, they understood what it felt like not to be welcomed and accepted into the organization. The next section details how participants experienced burnout due to the amount of care that they put into their diversity work.

Emotional exhaustion

Diversity workers often discussed feeling exhausted and emotionally burned out. Burnout occurs when employees face chronic exposure to stressors at work and thus experience slow progressive loss of energy, involvement, and work efficacy (Powers & Myers, 2022). For example, Louisa described the emotional toll on her and her diversity workers. Louisa stated, "Like we're just so burnt out and exhausted." Louisa described the difficulty in engaging in diversity work because she is running on "empty" due to being overworked.

Burnout and emotional exhaustion were also different based on the participant's identities (Mirchandani, 2003). Participants with non-dominant identities described a different type of exhaustion related to experiencing systemic and interpersonal oppression in their organization compiled on top of not seeing change despite putting in the effort. Participants also ran the risk of burnout due to constantly pushing up against organizational constraints and not seeing any change.

Those with multiple non-dominant identities discussed the emotional exhaustion they endured when conducting diversity work. Participants with non-dominant identities constantly engaged in work that exposed them to institutional racism and oppression. When I asked Jasmine, a biracial lesbian who conducts diversity work by mentoring peer's and serving on

committees, what the biggest challenge was when conducting diversity work, she described how her diversity work negatively impacted her identity, explaining,

You are actively engaging and work that harms your specific identities, right? It's like I cannot do DEI work as a Black lesbian without coming across Black centered racism and homophobia, right? It's like that is a part of the DEI work. And so, it's like you actively, it almost is like, you're gaslighting yourself of actively making the choice.

Jasmine framed this specific challenge of coming up against institutional oppression as if it was tethered to diversity work, meaning she saw it as an expectation for those with non-dominant identities to have to “gaslight themselves.” Jasmine’s discussion of “making the choice to “gaslight yourself” relates to the emotional burden of doing this work, choosing or the illusion of choosing, to conduct diversity work despite the trauma one will endure.

While Jasmine discussed the holistic difficulties of conducting diversity work, Uma, a South Asian queer nonbinary individual, described the interpersonal difficulties of conducting diversity work. Uma described the hurt they felt when dealing with interpersonal microaggressions and what it felt like to be the only person of color in a room as isolating. Uma stated,

One thing that really makes a culture not feel inclusive are microaggressions, or somehow you are the only person of your race or sexuality or gender identity in a room. You know you're the only one. And those experiences, even in a professional setting, limited professional settings, can be quite isolating.

Uma described negative feelings they encountered when combatting Whiteness within their organization’s space. Conducting diversity work, especially in a space that is already not inclusive, meant that Uma had to go up against walls that specifically attack Uma’s own identity and sense of self. As Puwar (2004) explains, Uma is a space invader. Uma’s discussion of feeling “isolation” was unique to my participants with non-dominant identities. Uma’s experiences related to a more interpersonal side of diversity work while also highlighting why diversity work is needed.

Similar to Uma, Meera, a South Asian woman who identifies as queer, discussed the difficulties she endured within her organization as the core reason she engages in her diversity work. Meera stated that she “had to work so much harder to just exist and make myself able to succeed in the workplace... I had to join resource groups to develop my own confidence and exist.” Meera’s statements reiterated how those with non-dominant identities have a much more difficult time within their organizations and thus, need to conduct diversity work for their own survival. Meera’s emotional exhaustion was related to a lack of confidence being in a space that does not cater to her identity. Meera needed resources (her employee resource group) to exist because her organization did not make those with non-dominant identities feel safe. The next section discusses the emotional exhaustion that diversity workers report when they listen to stories about peers’ mistreatments in the organization.

Listening to Others. Another form of emotional exhaustion that diversity workers dealt with related to listening to traumatic experiences from peers and coworkers. Participants often described the difficulties of listening to racism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of micro aggressions and oppression that happened to their coworkers. For example, Louisa shared an emotional experience when thinking about a negative experience a friend of hers dealt with in the workplace. Louisa stated,

So anyway, one of my best friends I work with is Black and ... (*tears up*) Umm.... She’s been my work best friend for many, many years. But we’re like, very close and. Uh. (*long pause – crying*) There is just... Bad things that have happened there is upsetting, still is”

Louisa became so emotional talking about her friend’s experiences that she started tearing up. Louisa carried this emotional secondhand trauma as someone who was passionate about diversity work and had a connection with individuals who experienced racism. Being an ally and caring about social justice meant that participants heard stories of injustice occurring, especially

experiences of friends, which was difficult to deal with emotionally. Louisa's distinct emotional response related to burnout and feelings of emotional exhaustion.

Similar to Louisa, Lelah discussed concrete examples of how her diversity work was emotionally exhausting. Lelah shared an emotional experience during our interview when talking about one of her student's experiences. Lelah's diversity work revolved around listening to her students of color and their negative experiences within their institution. Lelah stated,

But what I do is the students of color stop in my office and they know that if a student tells me that they've experience like a micro aggression. And my students know this will upset me and I'll go around to everyone and tell them.

Lelah's diversity work revolved around helping students of color by being a space safe to discuss microaggressions at the institutional level. Lelah also discussed the difficulty in this line of work by describing how she "cried for hours and hours" with an Iranian student who become "internationally displaced due to the Taliban in 2021." Lelah explained the dire situation of her student stating, "I was thinking how I'm going to keep my student alive."

While Louisa's and Lelah's examples illuminated the difficulties of engaging in diversity work, Patricia's statements reflected exactly why diversity workers experienced emotional exhaustion and burnout. Patricia discussed the difficulties of her diversity work which included talking with her coworkers and being there for those who experienced systemic oppression and microaggressions. Patricia stated,

I spend a lot more time one-on-one with people who are experiencing the effects of our spaces, not being equitable and not being supportive and that's the harder work and it's emotionally difficult and even harder to talk about.

Patricia reiterated the emotional work that came with being an informal diversity worker and hearing people's negative experiences. Patricia acknowledged that it was hard for her to listen to these stories and yet, she continued to do so to provide support, indicating that it was a part of her diversity work. Patricia engaged in other forms of diversity work yet, listening to these

experiences was the most difficult type of diversity work. Another characteristic of diversity work that was emotionally exhausting was when diversity workers are unable to make tangible change despite putting in copious amounts of effort.

Putting Effort in and not Seeing Anything in Return. Because diversity workers cared about the work that they did, when they put in work with no results this was as Patricia stated, “exhausting.” One important factor in participant’s emotional exhaustion stemmed from knowing their leadership or administration held all the power and there was nothing diversity workers could do to enact change without the help of their leadership. When asking Louisa about how her organization enacted change, she discussed the difficulties stating, “it’s just hard because at the end of the day, the people with the power and money get their way. And so, it’s hard to go against that sometimes and I just get frustrated.” Louisa was upset about how her organization enacted change and how that limited her abilities as a diversity worker. Louisa illuminated her positionality by uncovering the power imbalances within her organizational structure and how she was powerless to enact initiatives.

Dana’s statements related to Louisa’s because she was also powerless due to her position in the organization. Dana discussed the difficulties of her diversity work because she constantly felt “beaten down.” Dana stated, “I feel like every time we pop our heads up, we get beaten down... it’s exhausting.” Dana further stated how her exhaustion stemmed from her administration consistently devaluing her work or ideas. Dana’s violent metaphor of getting “beaten down” meant that those with power, who had the control to reject Dana’s initiatives, were not accepting her ideas or initiatives. “Beaten down” constituted the difficulty of this line of work and how it felt like physically getting “beaten down.” Furthermore, the language of “beaten down” signified the moving of one’s body down the organizational ladder to a lower rung with

less influence. Thus, this served as a reminder that she was not able to make decisions or bring up initiatives.

Both Louisa and Dana's experiences speak to Patricia's discussion of doing work that felt devalued and the emotional devastation that came along with that. By constantly pushing up against walls, and especially walls deeply embedded throughout the higher echelons of the organization, diversity workers often felt like their hard work was not valued. Patricia stated,

When that work that I put so much time and effort into is consistently devalued or not valued it doesn't make it less important. But I think it can be demoralizing and I think ultimately lead to that kind of burnout.

As Patricia explained, when diversity workers cared about their work and didn't see that same care within their leadership, this often led to burnout. Patricia cared about her work and struggled to continue to have confidence in her work when it felt like it was not important to her leadership.

Overall, because diversity workers cared about their work, they were more susceptible to experiencing burnout and emotional exhaustion. Diversity workers had a lot of passion for their work (commitment) which could lead to burnout (emotional exhaustion) especially when part of their job related to listening to others' stories (listening to others). Additionally, because of the organizational walls that diversity workers experienced, the amount of labor they put in contributed to burnout when no positive change occurred from their efforts (putting in effort and not seeing anything in return). All the subthemes described in this section related to the negative consequences of caring in diversity work.

How Diversity Workers Overcame Challenges

Informal diversity workers overcame the challenges listed above using a multitude of communicative strategies. This section explores how participants overcame these challenges relating to my research question (RQ1b), *How do informal diversity workers combat challenges when implementing DEI into organizations?* Informal diversity workers overcame challenges through self-preservation therefore protecting themselves by leaving the organization, engaging in self-care techniques, or accepting that the challenges they experienced were part of their diversity work. Informal diversity workers also prioritized having a community of like-minded people to aid them in their challenges.

Self-Preservation

A significant theme on how informal diversity workers overcame challenges was self-preservation. Diversity workers left DEI committees that were not satisfying or left the organization itself. However, when informal diversity workers stayed within bureaucratic organizational systems, they focused on themselves and their own well-being as a form of self-care. Participants also related to previous wins or times they initiated positive change to sustain hope.

Moving Outside the System

Moving outside of the system was one way diversity workers enacted self-preservation. After trying to enact change and getting no results, moving outside the system was typically a last resort for informal diversity workers. Moving outside the system included either leaving the organization entirely, leaving diversity work committees, or engaging in work that negates typical bureaucratic procedures. Diversity workers framed moving outside the system to prioritize their own agency which was cathartic and fulfilling for them.

After engaging in unhelpful DEI committees, Patricia was frustrated and left her DEI committee, opting instead to join a caucus system. Patricia joined both the women and disability caucus offered at her organization. Caucuses, as Patricia defined them, “are identity-based coalitions that work outside the organization’s traditional bureaucratic systems.” Patricia loved engaging in her caucus system and noted that sometimes the way to beat the system is to enact change outside of it. Patricia stated,

But that ability to move outside the systems was really empowering and gratifying. And so I really started to enjoy... the diversity work at that point in a way that I don’t know that I did before cause I felt it was important. It was helping people, but you felt very constrained, and this was a more open approach.

Patricia found enjoyment and hope in moving outside the traditional hierarchical systems that typically impeded her informal diversity work by moving into a caucus system. What is important to note here is how Patricia stated, “I really started to enjoy the diversity work.” This implies that prior to the caucus system, Patricia did not engage in diversity work she enjoyed. Enjoyment seemed to co-align with enacting and believing in the work that diversity workers were engaged in. Patricia finally started to believe her work was making a difference and thus, felt joy from her diversity work.

Similar to Patricia, Lelah also grew tired of participating in her organization’s DEI committee and left her committee. Lelah used to sit on a diversity committee and did not enjoy her experience because she felt that these committees never did anything. Lelah instead conducted individual diversity work by focusing on mentoring her students and being a “watch dog” for interpersonal micro aggressions in her organization. Lelah commented about her time on a diversity committee by stating,

But let me tell you that I served on DEI committee for two years and this year I told my Dean that, you know, I’m gonna kill myself. I needed to be put somewhere else because I can’t take it anymore.

When I asked Lelah why she felt this way about diversity committees, she stated that it was because DEI committees “don’t do anything,” Lelah had an emotional reaction to being on a diversity committee which indicated a lack of enjoyment operating within the organization’s hierarchal system. Whereas after, Lelah reported that she conducted diversity work that she was passionate about by focusing on work that was individual to her and her students, peers, and coworkers. Ultimately, because Lelah felt that her DEI committee “wasn’t doing anything” to enact change she had to engage individualized diversity work. Lelah stated during our interview “find the diversity work that you’re passionate about, I found mine.” From both Patricia and Lelah’s descriptions, a core part of diversity work related to making tangible change. If diversity workers felt like they could not make change in their current situation, they found a way to get out of that situation.

However, some diversity workers were not able to find ways to conduct diversity work that produced tangible change within their organization. Both Uma and Meera discussed the emotional exhaustion of being women of color within predominately White institutions and how this made conducting informal diversity work increasingly difficult. Uma and Meera described their time conducting diversity work and felt so burned out and frustrated with the lack of change that they decided to leave the organization entirely. However, both Uma and Meera described leaving the organization as a positive, stating they were much happier in their new roles and organizations. Uma stated, “The fact that I have left my previous institution is a win for me because no matter how much I wanted to make sure that I thrived in the organization, the organization was not doing its part.”

To Uma, being at their previous organization and conducting diversity work for over 10 years was enough time for them to know that leaving was the only option if they wanted to

prioritize their own wellbeing. Uma described their leaving as a selfish act because they stopped prioritizing the organization and instead focused on their own well-being and mental health. Uma framed leaving their organization as a selfish act indicates how prioritizing oneself can be made out to feel like a negative act, especially for those who are used to deprioritizing themselves and focusing on others.

Meera echoed Uma's sentiments and reiterated the importance of identity in conducting diversity work within an organization that did not prioritize DEI. It was previously discussed how Meera stated she needed to conduct diversity work to simply survive in her institution. However, this diversity work was becoming too much as Meera states, "Yeah, I largely left my previous organization and the tech field in general because of all the unpaid DEI work I was constantly doing." Meera discussed how she was constantly having to engage in DEI work because of her non-dominant identity and that it came to a point where it was too much work for her to be conducting so much unpaid labor. To Meera, the only way to keep her healthy was to leave her previous organization. However, diversity workers also engaged in healthy behaviors while staying in their organizations through self-care. The next section describes how diversity workers who stay in their organizations maintained healthy mindsets by prioritizing themselves through self-care techniques.

Diversity Workers Conducting Self-Care

Another option for self-preservation was engaging in self-care. Self-care related to behaviors diversity workers conducted that prioritize their mental and physical health. Participants described self-care as taking time for themselves to recharge after conducting diversity work. Participants discussed the importance of taking care of themselves when conducting this type of work that had numerous challenges.

When I asked Finley how they overcame the challenges of diversity work, they immediately discussed the importance of taking care of themselves. Finley stated, “I think it’s a lot of self-care a lot of making sure that happens.” Jasmine also reiterated the importance of self-care by stating that she “really just try to take care of myself.” Both Finley and Jasmine illuminated the importance of taking care of themselves when conducting diversity work. Finley also reinforced the importance of prioritizing self-care by “making sure that happens,” as if the nature of diversity work required those conducting this work to take care of themselves.

Participants also discussed self-care as it related to other components of their work and life. When I asked Louisa how she overcame challenges she discussed her role as a working mom and how it was difficult to find time for herself. Louisa stated, “It’s just really hard. Again, as a full-time working mom, really for anyone.” Ultimately, Louisa described the importance of “taking care of yourself and having time for yourself.”

Taking care of oneself also related to engaging in productive diversity work. Molly discussed how important it was to take care of herself while conducting diversity work because she couldn’t “do sustainable work” without “providing a space for myself.” Molly’s experience reiterated the importance of self-preservation to overcome challenges so as not to run the risk of emotional burnout.

Participants tried to take care of themselves and described that diversity work required extra self-care. The way that participants described self-care as a priority made it sound as if self-care was tethered to diversity work. One could not conduct informal diversity work without also conducting self-care to maintain a healthy mindset. Notions of self-care also reflected organizational constraints. Ultimately, diversity workers needed to take care of themselves because their organizations did not take care of them. Similar to the way self-care functioned as a

tool for self-preservation, diversity workers also focused on the positives of their line of work to continue engaging in diversity work.

Focusing on the Positives

Participants discussed the need for hope and to believe they could make positive changes conducting their diversity work. As Sebastian stated, “I’m not the type of person who would be involved in something that didn’t think could create any actual change.” While holistic and radical changes within the organization were seldom experienced by my participants, participants relied on previous times when they were able to enact change as a motivator to continue doing informal diversity work. Remembering past events where they enacted positive change gave participants hope that they could continue to enact tangible organizational change.

One way that participants focused on the positives of their work was by appreciating the smaller wins or changes that they were able to enact. Diversity workers used their implication of small positive changes as a tool to overcome the numerous challenges they experienced. Uma stated, “I also take happiness in all the small successes, I see them as incremental improvement instead of getting discouraged.” Patricia echoed Uma’s comments by stating that she knew that she could actually make positive change. Patricia discussed,

And I guess you know the small wins, we do get small as they may be...Can feel like big victories sometimes so that can help remembering those things and trying to focus on while we were able to do this so maybe we’ll be able to do the next thing. That can be that can be really helpful.

Lelah also focused on the small changes that she could individually make to enact change. Lelah stated, “I am not a radical person, you don’t get a movement out of me but instead I focus on the people the students I can help.” When describing how Lelah overcame challenges, she discussed how she was patient. Lelah, who conducts diversity work on an individual level, described her diversity work as gradual.

Uma's, Patricia's and Lelah's comments related to the importance of staying motivated in informal diversity work and how they all used small successes as a way to continue moving forward. All three participants embodied a mindset that change, even if it was small, was better than no change. The context in which diversity work occurs means that these small wins, as Patricia stated, can feel bigger than they are due to the difficult nature of enacting change. Patricia and Uma also used these small wins as a framework to consider that change could occur within the next initiative they bring up to their leadership.

However, Uma cautioned that these small wins could be used to stop engaging in diversity work. Uma explained that smaller wins could be viewed as way to get discouraged in their diversity work. The fact that most diversity workers focused on smaller changes is an indication that grander changes may seldom occur. Thus, focusing on the smaller changes instead of being discouraged over the lack of larger changes, created a framework to continue having hope.

Lastly, when I asked Louisa how she overcame diversity work challenges she stated, "I actually have a lot of tangible things which makes me feel good about doing this line of work." Knowing that Louisa made "tangible change" allowed her to exude positive feelings about diversity work despite challenges enacting change. Louisa described tangible changes when she changed policy or implemented trainings for diversity work. Instead of Lelah, Patricia, and Uma, who focused on the smaller changes, Louisa was able to enact change on a holistic institutional level. It begs the question of whether Louisa would still "feel good" if her changes were not as "tangible." Having tangible change, no matter how small or big allowed diversity workers to get excited about the work they were doing. Having positive feelings about their work allowed

diversity workers to endure challenges. Building a community of allies and support networks also provided diversity workers a way to combat challenges in their line of work.

Relying on a Sense of Community

Being surrounded by like-minded people to unload their burdens gave diversity workers a way to combat the emotional burnout that came with doing this type of work. Building community also gave diversity workers a sense of camaraderie in knowing that they were not alone in their passion and work. Uma described the positive feeling of when they met other people who were also conducting diversity work in their university. At their past university, Uma discussed feelings of isolation therefore, finding a sense of community provided them with a lot of relief. Uma stated,

I was certainly not the only one in my institution doing this work, but as soon as I found out that what others were doing, it made me feel better. And I think this sense of community, the sense of sharing this work, sharing this context is it makes the work easier.

Uma found that having a community to share the burden of the emotional toll of this work was one way to overcome challenges. Furthermore, because this work often felt isolating due to the systemic oppression diversity workers experienced in their organization, sharing the work allowed Uma to feel less alone.

Similar to Uma's statement about having a community and finding people who were similar in values, Lelah discussed how her community made her feel less alone in this type of work. Lelah described the feeling of having people who are "my town" and having a town is a "space of allyship." Lelah stated, "And there is this term that somebody was saying that you are my town. So there is their town and our town and our town is the space of allyship. And there's not just me. There are many of us." Lelah's description of allies relates to finding people who felt like home and gave the same comforts of being at home. This is important to Lelah since she

migrated to the United States 10 years ago and still struggles to feel like an insider within this culture. Lelah further described the importance of her town and what it meant to her by discussing a time when she and her friend cried together over a student who had been displaced due to her home country's civil war. Lelah stated, "and I have this friend, ohh my goodness, she's my town and so she was one of those people who was crying with me." Lelah used the term "my town" to reference those she felt safe around and those who shared the same values as her. Sharing experiences, passions, and values allowed Lelah to identify with her friend through the fact that they both cried over the same student's situation.

Just like Lelah, Sonja also described her diversity work as a community experience, one in which she was able to forge real friendship. Sonja stated,

I think externally like the twice a month meetings they really do fill me back up even if it's for a short period of time it's just nice to listen to the other people in my group about what they're working on or what they've succeeded on or laugh together just like even mourn and be in grief together. That's a real cup filler. I've been developing some nice new friendships that work because of these things.

Sonja's description reiterated the importance of community as being a space to unload and share the burdens of doing diversity work. Describing these meetings as a "cup filler" indicated that Sonja's cup may be empty prior to these meetings due to the challenges of diversity work. Sonja recharged from these meetings, knowing that she is not alone. Furthermore, Sonja, just like Lelah, described the importance of friendship during this process and how both participants forged friendships over sharing values as an important step for them to have that community.

Acceptance in the Things They Can't Change

The final theme on how diversity workers overcame challenges relates to diversity workers justifying and accepting the challenges that they face. While explaining the different types of diversity work that Alex does in his organization, he discussed a DEI certificate program. However, Alex mentioned that this certificate did not amount to anything at the

organizational level. Alex's tone during this discussion was not one of frustration, but rather one of neutral understanding. Alex accepted the fact that the certificate doesn't mean anything on an institutional level and stated,

One of the things we're working on is making that matter more, somehow tying that to performance assessments, or like a raise, or you know something to make it a more meaningful thing to try to incentivize people to do it more. But it is nice to have an easy [program] it's almost like a you know, connected dots thing that you don't have to think too hard.

Alex did not dwell on the situation that he and his colleagues were still working to get this certificate to matter more to the institution. Alex instead remained positive about the certificate focusing on the good things that the certificate brought to his organization. Alex also accepted another challenge relating to coworker's ambivalence towards DEI initiatives. Although Alex had to encourage others via incentivization to complete a DEI certificate. Rather, Alex understood that not everyone was going to care about the same social issues that he cares about.

While Alex justified why his DEI certificate didn't "mean anything," Sebastian accepted the organizational constraints that came along with trying to conduct DEI work. Sebastian discussed the process of gaining approval from his committee's leadership and what would happen if his leadership did not give his committee approval. There was a sense of defeat in Sebastian's tone and words when describing this acceptance. Sebastian stated, "If it's not approved at that time or we couldn't get that approval um, then, we have to drop it if we couldn't get that approval." Sebastian accepted the fact that sometimes the initiatives that his committee wanted to enact were not going to get approved and instead focused on the positives by moving on to other ideas to enact change. Sebastian also rationalized and acknowledged that there was only so much that he could do in his position as an informal diversity worker. Sebastian and his committee were powerless and at the mercy of his leadership to gain approval for DEI initiatives.

Sebastian did not seem to have any negative feelings of anger or frustration but rather was accepting to be surrounded by defeat.

Similar to Sebastian's acceptance of his organization's hierarchal structure, Molly also accepted why her DEI committee did not receive any funding. Molly discussed how organizational constraints due to the current recession impacted funding for her DEI committee. During our interview, Molly stood up for her leadership and their decision to eliminate funding to her DEI committee. Molly stated, "We originally had funding for our meetings but since we're moving into a recession we were our committee was the first to receive a cut in all of our funding, which I totally get." Instead of having a critical opinion of her organization, Molly understood and accepted her leadership's decision. Despite not being supported economically, Molly's justification allowed her to continue to feel supported by her leadership. The acceptance of her DEI committee's depletion of funds also communicated that both Molly and her leadership did not prioritize DEI initiatives. When the first amount of funding to get cut relates to DEI initiatives, this sends a message that these initiatives are not taken seriously.

Informal diversity workers have a unique positionality in that they understand their organization on a level that allows them to see first-hand the implications enacted of initiatives being passed or denied. They understand the walls that are embedded in the organization's structures hinder change. A way that diversity workers overcome organizational constraints was to accept and justify these challenges.

Because of the numerous organizational walls that came with conducting diversity work, participants in this study utilized a variety of tools to overcome challenges that allowed them to continue conducting their diversity work. Diversity workers engaged in self-preservation techniques to protect themselves from the harm of diversity work through leaving their

organizations or DEI committees to conduct more individual diversity work (moving outside the system), engaged in techniques that prioritized their mental health (self-care), or highlighted the positive change that they were able to enact through their work (focusing on the positives). Participants also relied on connecting with other diversity workers or peers who had similar values in social justice (community). Lastly, participants recognized that the challenges they were up against were part of their work (acceptance). The strategies that informal diversity workers utilized allowed them to confront the challenges they experienced and continue conducting diversity work.

How Leadership Can Aid Diversity Workers

Leadership can use their power to aid informal diversity workers and further DEI initiatives. This final section answers the research question, (RQ2) *How can organizational leaders communicate support and advocate for informal diversity workers?* This section reiterates diversity workers feedback on where organizational improvement is needed and how leadership can aid with this improvement. There are two main themes in this section. First, leadership can prioritize DEI work through embedding DEI initiatives, trainings, policies, and hiring practices into the institution. Prioritizing DEI work also includes leadership providing resources to diversity committees. The second theme relates to leaders collaborating with diversity workers. Participants stressed the need for a leader's collaboration through various methods such as communication pipelines and being a mouthpiece for informal diversity workers.

Prioritization of DEI work

Leaders can prioritize DEI in a variety of ways. One way is by making DEI work embedded in the institution, through constant communication and consistent training. Ensuring informal diversity workers have the funds and resources to get their work done is another way that DEI work can become prioritized. Prioritization of DEI initiatives means that leaders help create policies and maintain those policies using their authority (Chueng et al., 2018). Participants also stressed the need for a diverse organization through hiring procedures.

Embedded in the Organization

Creating successful DEI initiatives in an organization that reinforces Whiteness means that this type of work needs to be consistent and constant. DEI initiatives should not be siloed as a distinctive part of an organization's makeup but rather, embedded in the everyday mechanics

of the organization. DEI initiatives should be embedded in every organizational decision-making process. Embedding DEI in the organization also includes DEI trainings being consistently offered instead of a one-time meeting.

Leadership can ensure DEI initiatives are embedded in the organization through their communication. Consistently communicating about DEI means that leaders are centering DEI initiatives in their decision-making processes instead of simply talking about DEI initiatives for an hour once a week. As Jasmine stated,

I think in a perfect world we are constantly ensuring that we're engaging in conversations [about DEI] with folks like throughout a hierarchical system, and it becomes more of like constant group communication. And so it's more of like you are actively engaged in that every single day.

Jasmine understands that there is a need to change the communicative patterns by consistently communicating about DEI initiatives daily. Jasmine's "perfect world" scenario indicated that this type of communicative behavior is not necessarily expected from her leadership. Jasmine's framing her leadership's communicative patterns about DEI as a "perfect world" scenario illuminates the difficulty in communicatively embedding DEI initiatives in the organization. However, Jasmine's statements created a framework for how to embed DEI initiatives within the organization's hierarchy. For DEI initiatives to become embedded within the institution there needs to be change throughout all hierarchical channels.

While Jasmine described a scenario for how leadership can embed DEI initiatives, Jessica discussed her positive feelings towards her leadership, who already prioritized DEI. Jessica described her leader's constant communication about DEI to showcase the importance of DEI initiatives. During our interview, I asked Jessica if she could think of examples of how her organization did not value DEI. Jessica struggled to find an answer to my question and stated, "I don't know that I can think of a specific time where they didn't value it [DEI] because truly it is a consistent conversation. Like all the time." As an employee, Jessica's reiterated how leadership

communicated their care for DEI initiatives. Jessica believed that DEI was prioritized within the organization's makeup through continuously bringing up DEI initiatives and having DEI at the forefront of the organization's decision-making process.

However, both Jasmine and Jessica's beliefs about how their organization prioritized DEI may stem from their identity. Jessica is White-identifying whereas Jasmine is biracial and identifies as Queer. Jessica's statements of how she felt her organization prioritized DEI come from the standpoint of someone who has dominant identities and thus, efforts of DEI prioritization are lower for her to feel like DEI is embedded in the organization. Jessica's feelings about her organization prioritizing DEI may be influenced due to her White identity fitting part of the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004). Whereas Jasmine felt like there was still is a lot of work that needed to be done for her organization to prioritize and embed DEI. In other words, leaders may need to communicate their prioritization in more ways for Jasmine and others like her to feel like an insider within her organization. The next section details another way that leadership can prioritize DEI initiative relating to consistent trainings.

Training. Numerous participants described how their organization needed DEI training in a variety of areas. There was no clear consensus on the specific types of DEI training which means that the training needed depended on the organizational needs. This next section discusses the importance of catering DEI training to organizational needs. Also covered in this theme is the importance of consistent and constant DEI trainings to prioritize DEI initiatives within the organization.

Participants have different needs for training because training should be tailored around a particular organization (as Louisa discussed in her interview). Louisa's statements were reiterated by Renee who stated, "I think we need more training that is super specific for people in

specific roles.” For example, Jasmine discussed what training is needed in her organization which related to her middle leadership’s communication. Jasmine stated, “I think training is most needed in middle leadership because often times, communication gets muddled between the lower and higher hierarchical organizational structure.”

Jasmine’s comments reiterated Louisa and Renee’s comments about the importance of structuring training around current problems of the organization. Having training that caters to certain roles reinforced the importance of having training oriented towards organizational needs. Renee’s discussion on having “super specific” training related to the need for different conceptualizations of training. Instead of having an entire organization go through the same DEI training, training should be unique based on employee’s position in the organization.

When considering how to embed DEI initiatives within organizations, DEI training needs to be consistent. Participants described how DEI initiatives could feel like “check this box” (Olivia). To check a box is to indicate that something is complete. “Check this box” relates to how typically, trainings are thought to be completed in a certain time frame and to have a clear end goal (McGuire & Bagher, 2010). “Check this box” can also function as performative (Ahmed, 2012), allowing organizations to satisfy the need of DEI training by performing a one-time DEI training. However, DEI training cannot and should not be a “check this box” effort because this type of training will never be complete. Proper DEI training is continuous through engraining and learning about how to best address issues relating to organizational needs. Alex reinforced the need for a different conceptualization of traditional training by stating,

And so I think what we really need is a shift in the perception of what that what DEI training means, and that it needs to be seen as kind of an ongoing process rather than a product that you’re gonna get at the end of the day.

Louisa also echoed Alex’s statement, “This is not like a Wednesday morning workshop like this is should be ongoing continual work and you know, like coming back to these different things.”

Alex and Louisa commented on the need to shift perceptions of training as well as conceptualization about length of DEI training. DEI training needs to be an ongoing process, reflected by current issues and topics that need to be addressed. Alex and Louisa's comments also related to the conceptualizations of success in DEI work. Trainings and completion of training alluded to finishing DEI initiatives, as if taking one training meant that the organization would suddenly be more equipped to handle all DEI related issues. There is a need to understand that within DEI, success does not have a finish line but rather is an ongoing process. Having consistent trainings showcases a nuanced understanding that success is not simply "check this box" but rather critically thinking and learning about issues through consistent training.

Having consistent trainings that are catered to the organization's needs is crucial for successful DEI implementation and prioritization. Participants' different discussions on training means that diversity workers are structuring DEI training around their own organizational needs. Therefore, prior to conducting DEI training, it is important that leadership first and foremost listen to informal diversity workers about what they believe is missing and needed for training procedures. Furthermore, embedding DEI into the organization results in operationalizations of success and training as everchanging and ongoing instead of having a clear finish line. As previously discussed, participants understood that success in diversity work was challenging because achieving DEI initiatives is a never-ending task. Because success is never ending, organizational DEI training needs to be continuous. Another key way that leadership can prioritize DEI initiatives is by granting resources to DEI committees and diversity workers.

Resources. Providing resources communicates that leadership takes DEI initiatives seriously. Providing resources tangibly aids DEI initiatives by reducing the amount of challenges that diversity workers experience. During interviews, participants discussed two important

resources: time to conduct diversity work and funding towards DEI initiatives. By providing time to diversity workers during the workday to meet and plan, diversity workers can experience less burnout since they do not have to put in extra hours on top of their normal work hours. Whereas, providing funding for DEI initiatives means that diversity workers can put some of their plans into action without having to go through lofty bureaucratic procedures.

Time. Having time during the workday is a main resource that diversity workers need to create sustainable organizational change. When discussing how Finley’s leadership can aid their diversity work, Finley stated, “Yeah I think it’s just making time for diversity work.” Finley looked to their leadership to aid their diversity work by using their power to grant them time during the workday to conduct this type of work. Whereas Dana highlights this sentiment by commenting on how leadership could aid her diversity work, “I would say by giving us [diversity workers] time within the workday.” Both Dana and Finley described the need for more time to conduct informal diversity work and how this could easily be accomplished by leadership providing more time during the workday.

Unlike Finley and Dana who describe the need for more time, Alex described how he felt his leadership prioritized DEI by providing time to discuss DEI initiatives during meetings. Alex had a positive relationship with his leadership due to his belief that his leadership supported DEI initiatives. Alex’s stated, “And then the associate Dean, the manager for each department, has been supportive in the sense of like carving out some time [for DEI] during weekly department meetings.” Time in this aspect can be seen as putting in time to communicatively discuss DEI initiatives within work meetings. While carving out time during each weekly meeting is not enough to truly embed DEI initiatives (as previously discussed) what is important to note is the perception of care that Alex had of his leadership. Alex believed that his leadership was

supportive due to his leadership carving out time to communicate about DEI initiatives and issues.

If leadership wants to enact tangible change in their organization and wants to genuinely aid diversity workers, one way to do this is by prioritizing DEI enough to advocate for company dollars to be spent on enacting DEI initiatives and policies. Providing time during the workday allows for less burden to be on diversity workers and advocates for a more equitable way to conduct diversity work. Participants illuminated an important sentiment to this type of work by offering time for employees to be more engaged in their diversity work since it is one less commitment outside of work hours. Leadership can also use company dollars to aid diversity workers by providing funding to DEI initiatives.

Funding. Participants talked about how leadership can aid them through providing funds in two concrete ways. First, funding includes providing money directly to DEI committees without having a committee to go through lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Second, funding can look like hiring a DEI director to aid informal diversity workers and guide them on the change they can achieve within the organizational structure.

Funding is important because it allows diversity workers to use funds to create more tangible and meaningful change that is not raising awareness “fluffy work.” Renee described her need for funding by stating, “Just to highlight again the importance of funding and the need for funding.” Renee works in a university and this funding would go towards creating scholarships for students with non-dominant identities to aid them in their schoolwork. Renee’s need for funding would also go towards creating surveys and studies to better understand the complexities of DEI initiatives within their university, as well as to also hire an outside consultant. The way

Renee's DEI committee would use funding reinforced how funding could be used to activate tangible change for historically marginalized populations as well as the organization itself.

While Renee stated the importance of getting funding, Uma discussed what it would look like when leadership trusts diversity workers enough to give them funding. Uma was able to get funding from their organization's leadership and stated, "We were given one thousand dollars for our committee to hire speakers for trainings or organize gatherings." Uma further stated that by giving their DEI committee money, the committee felt their work was prioritized and that leadership genuinely cared about making the workplace more inclusive and equitable. These funds were also being used to create tangible change that wasn't centered on "fluffy work," indicating that when diversity workers spend money, they focus on ways to tangibly aid DEI initiatives.

Another way that funding can help prioritize DEI initiatives is through the hiring of a DEI director that can dedicate all their time to cultivating policies and initiatives. As Olivia comments, "We [her organization] hired a paid DEI director which I think really shows progress." The hiring of a DEI director reiterated the importance that funding could have on moving DEI initiatives forward. By Olivia's organization hiring a DEI director, they communicated their prioritization of embedding DEI initiatives within the workplace. During our interview, Olivia consistently commented about having a DEI officer as a tangible vehicle for positive organizational change. Olivia's comments on the positives of hiring a DEI officer also related to expertise. Olivia commented on how she felt that a hired diversity worker knows more about DEI than she does as an informal diversity worker. Olivia's statements indicated that having someone with expertise also meant they knew more about how to cultivate change within

the organization, reinforcing the binary between unpaid and paid labor as a means for proficiency.

Louisa reinforced Olivia's comments on the importance of hiring a DEI director. Louisa discussed how although hiring a DEI director was something she advocated for, ultimately, it was her leadership who made the decision to hire a DEI director. Louisa stated, "Some positive things have happened. For example, one of them being we did hire a DEI director" Louisa also viewed the hiring of a DEI director as tangible change within the organizational structure. Given her statement that "things have happened," Louisa understood that by hiring a DEI director her organization was enacting positive change.

Overall, participants believed that hiring a DEI director aided in moving DEI initiatives forward. Perhaps this had to do with the fact that they felt their own power was not taken as seriously given their informal title. Thus, having a paid position communicates expertise on that topic and therefore, participants believed that having a DEI director was moving DEI initiatives forward in their organizations. Similar to hiring a DEI director or using funding to aid in DEI initiatives, passing policies within the organization is another tangible way that leadership can aid diversity workers.

Policies. Passing policies and initiatives are an extremely important part of DEI work that can help create tangible change (Gentle-Genitty, et al., 2021). Policies can help normalize and change the workplace culture by creating guides on how to handle certain organizational issues. By having policies in place, especially when leadership advocates for policies (Boekerst, 2015), tangible change can occur within the organization.

Dana highlighted how passing policies changed an organization's culture by normalizing certain practices and procedures. Dana stated,

It was super helpful having that initiative in the handbook because then people knew what to expect for maternal leave. It became a norm that when a woman gets pregnant, she will leave for a semester for maternal leave.

Prior to this policy being put in place, Dana discussed how women with children would receive a lot of hostility from coworkers for taking time off. With a policy put in place, Dana and others no longer received hostility from other coworkers when they took maternal leave because it was already expected for these women to take off work. Dana's example illuminated the power policy had in changing organizational norms.

While Dana acknowledged how policies positively influence organizational culture, Louisa commented on the importance leadership has on passing policies. Louisa discussed the importance of passing policies within DEI work and how leadership played a pivotal role in passing of these policies. Louisa stated,

I think the top cause to me at the top is where we have our decision makers. And so again, the more people empower that, understand or share these views, the easier it is to get these things done and again make them policy.

Louisa recognized how important it was for leadership to share similar values as diversity workers since these leaders, or "those on the top" hold all the power to make decisions. Louisa's comments reinforced how integral it was to DEI initiatives that leadership cared about social justice. Louisa's comments stated that without leadership enacting or believing in an initiative, a policy would not come into effect.

While Louisa acknowledged the power that leadership had in cultivating policies, Uma described characteristics of "good leadership" relating to policy making. Uma discussed how a good leader is someone who cultivated tangible change through the enactment of policy. Uma stated, "So I think a good leadership is a leadership that depends on evidence based, you know that that implements evidence-based policies instead of avoiding the problems." Uma's comment about good leadership meant that they felt that DEI was prioritized through passing policies that

were based on evidence. Passing policies should be based on scholarly backed information that demonstrates how a problem can be solved. Both Louisa and Uma explained that passing policies meant that leadership took things seriously enough to make a concrete actionable based initiative.

Jasmine echoed Uma's statements on "good leadership" when she described a time that she felt supported by her leadership. Jasmine discussed a time when her leadership passed a policy that made her feel like she was heard and supported. Jasmine stated, "I definitely felt supported like we were obviously heard right because we saw the tangible action through that policy being created." Feeling heard can constitute feeling like your diversity work is being prioritized. When diversity work is prioritized, tangible action is made. One way to make tangible action is through the passing of policies that are based around one's organizational needs. Listening to diversity workers and their needs is how leaders should enact policy that demonstrates their prioritization of DEI. Lastly, the final theme on how leadership can prioritize DEI is through their hiring practices.

Hiring. Participants mentioned a variety of organizational hiring practices to promote DEI. Reflecting organizational needs was also important for hiring. Rather than having a broad particular set goal or agenda within hiring standards, leadership should understand what the needs and values are within the organization and hire based around these prospects. For example, Finley stated the importance of hiring individuals that match organizational values. Finley discussed,

So I think evaluating our hiring practices and then how we're not just looking for someone to be the face of our organization who, like holds marginalized identities, but instead looking for someone who has the values of our organization.

Finley discussed how their organization hired someone who held a visible non-dominant identity, but the new employee contributed to harming others through the resistance to gender-

affirming pronouns and naming. Because Finley holds a non-dominant gender identity, the words of this new hire negatively impacted them. Therefore, hiring someone who is going to be respectful of gender pronouns, which aligns with the organization's values, is something that is important to Finley because they are directly impacted by a lack of gender-affirming communication. Overall, Finley's statements on hiring are complex illuminating the negative implications when organizations focus only on hiring those with visible, non-dominant identities rather than those who "have the values of the organization," meaning they will treat other employees with respect.

However, unlike Finley, Louisa wanted to focus more on hiring people of color. Louisa stated, "I think we [her organization] could do a better job of hiring BIPOC staff, and I think there is a need for that. I think representation matters." According to Louisa, there is a need to hire employees with non-dominant identities within her organization. Louisa mentioned how her organization lacked representational visible diversity; therefore, diversity was an important factor within her own hiring practices. Louisa stated that "representation matters" and aligned that representation with BIPOC staff, indicating that perhaps representation matters relative to visible identities. Louisa's comments reinforced ideologies of visible diversity that, on the surface, combat the somatic norm, as well as Whiteness within organizations, but still may have implications for those who are hired based on their non-dominant identities.

While Louisa focused on visual diversity as a means for hiring, Olivia focused on hiring people who are deemed different. Olivia stated, "But finding people who aren't the same carbon copy of employees I already have at the company is super important." Olivia's perspective on hiring revolved around a different type of diversity than Louisa described. For Olivia, diversity related to those who "stretch out" the organization. Those who contribute and "stretch out" the

organization are those who are not like individuals who already work at the company. This type of thinking about hiring reiterates Molly's comments on biases within the hiring process. Molly stated, "It's important to recognize your bias during hiring and not just hire someone who is exactly like you." Molly, Olivia, and Jessica all echoed the importance of expanding the organization to have a more diverse population but did not specify any particular identity factors. The next section discusses how leadership needs to collaborate with diversity workers to aid them in DEI initiatives.

Collaboration

Collaboration means that leadership is involved in DEI initiatives and DEI committees. Wilson (2013) argued for the importance of leadership's involvement in DEI initiatives to bolster the positive impact within the organization. Collaboration can include the leadership engaging in open communication with diversity workers, attending DEI meetings when asked, and using their power to enact meaningful change.

On a broader scale, participants mentioned the need for leadership collaboration and support. For example, Jessica mentioned that her leadership was not involved in her DEI committee and that she how she would have appreciated leadership using a more hands-on approach. Whereas Olivia discussed that her leadership did not provide guidance, resulting insignificant challenges for their committee. Therefore, it makes sense that other diversity workers highlighted the need for collaboration between themselves and their leadership.

To extend Jessica's and Olivia's statements, Uma described the negative results when leadership lacks involvement with diversity workers and DEI initiatives. Uma commented, "It shouldn't be an us versus them kind of thing... it needs to be a community wide effort." In this scenario, "us" becomes those who care and "them" becomes those who do not care. An "us

versus them” dynamic can have negative implications for those who do care, especially when those who do care are more likely to be negatively impacted by the lack of DEI initiatives. Uma also stated how problematic this feeling of “us versus them” can be for DEI initiatives because it creates a divide that allows leadership to not care or contribute to DEI initiatives. Thus, Uma continued to describe how an “us versus them” dynamic can cultivate a problematic narrative wherein leadership, instead of aiding these initiatives, feels “pity for us [DEI workers].” However, when leadership collaborates with diversity workers, the “us versus them” dynamic can be alleviated because both sides are contributing to these efforts and collectively working towards a shared DEI goal or initiative.

Similar to Uma describing the need for a community wide effort, Renee emphasized the need for leaders to collaborate with diversity workers. When I asked how leadership could aid Renee’s efforts, she noted the importance of collaboration. Renee stated, “Yeah, I mean, I think like it’s the collaborative like co-creation piece that’s important right?” Renee’s statements included the concept of “co-creation,” meaning that leadership would aid in creating DEI initiatives and policies instead of simply signing off on them. Including leadership in the creation of DEI initiatives and policy ensures that they can better understand the impact and importance. When leadership is involved in creating DEI initiatives, these initiatives hold more power at the organizational level.

Open Pipeline of Communication

The diversity workers identified an important way that leadership can aid their work is through an open pipeline of communication. Creating an open pipeline of communication between leadership and diversity workers or committees means that leaders are available to help diversity workers and make them feel heard. Marge discussed how her Dean listened to her and

took the time to talk through her concerns, explaining, “My Dean will always listen to my concerns which is a good feeling.” Patricia echoed this statement, “Even if they can’t do anything, I know that my leadership will listen to me and make me feel heard.” Even if leadership doesn’t instigate holistic change, they can be an ally to informal diversity workers by listening to their concerns. Marge and Patricia’s statements resonated with the importance of humane interactions between diversity workers and leadership. Feeling heard is important to diversity workers who may feel like space invaders within their organization.

The communication with diversity workers indicated that leadership cares about DEI initiatives and wants to contribute. Uma discussed that her leadership treats faculty “really well” by “creating a channel of communication.” Uma stated, “They told faculty if you have a problem, come to me.” Uma’s connection between good treatment and open communication is indicative of the benefits of when diversity workers feel supported. Whereas Lelah viewed these statements by her leadership as accurate since she can talk to him about the interpersonal issues her students are experiencing. Lelah stated, “I’m able to go to the Dean and tell him when of student of mine has experienced micro aggressions.”

There are two important components to participants discussed relating to open communication within leadership. The first revolves around comfortability. Lelah’s and Uma’s experiences highlighted the importance of leadership support. While leaders can easily state that they are available to discuss problems, the fact that they are engaging diversity workers in conversation validates their comfortability in talking about problems with leadership.

The second component relates to the presence of an open pipeline of communication directly from diversity workers to leadership. The ability to for diversity workers to approach leadership reduces the amount of communication problems in between middle and upper

management. According to Jasmine, training is the most needed for middle leadership because messages to the upper leadership can be mixed and misinterpreted. Jasmine stated,

Ooh, I think in my head training is most needed in the in like the middle leadership, right, because I think in my organization, I tell things to my supervisor and my supervisor tells the director, right. So, it's like that middle management piece is where I think a lot of things can be lacking.

This problem can be solved by leaders collaborating more with DEI efforts and initiatives and communicating more directly with diversity workers.

Operating as a Mouthpiece

Another key component of collaboration involves leadership communicating DEI initiatives to the entire organization by sending out messages and reinforcing diversity workers' needs. This communication is essential as informal diversity workers are often not taken seriously and are unable to get policies and initiatives passed. When leadership repackages a message initiated by diversity workers, it carries more leverage to organizational members (Wilson, 2013). In other words, due to their privilege and power in the organization, leadership needs to "stick their neck out a little" (Uma) to help DEI initiatives.

One of the participants, Dana, stated, "And so we kept telling him [her leadership], okay, you say that you support this, we need you to say that out loud, so everybody can hear it." The recognition of the effect of leaders supporting an initiative "out loud" reinforced the amount of power leaders had when it came to passing initiatives. Dana highlighted an important reason for leadership's reiteration of messages; without their support, initiatives are not taken as seriously. This support for DEI initiatives is the difference between an initiative passing and failing.

Similarly, Patricia commented on the positive impact that this type of message repackaging had on her DEI initiative. As Patricia stated, "One thing that that did make a difference and has made a difference is when administration will like repackage and send the

same message that we've been trying to message.” Patricia reinforced Dana’s comment about the importance of leaders communicating their support for an initiative. Patricia’s statements reflected the power leadership has on communicating the importance of DEI initiatives and policies.

Overall, leaders can use their power in the organization to cultivate an environment wherein DEI initiatives are prioritized, and diversity workers are respected. By prioritizing DEI initiatives, communication patterns become interwoven within the organization (embedding DEI initiatives) and training becomes consistent instead of a one-time initiative (training). Leaders also need to provide resources to diversity workers to aid them in their initiatives (resources, funding, and time). Participants also described the importance of passing policies to normalize DEI initiatives (policies) and to focus on hiring procedures to expand employee demographics (hiring). Leaders need to work with diversity workers by regularly communicating with them (open pipeline of communication) and using their power to advocate for DEI initiatives (operating as a mouthpiece).

Chapter Five: Implications of Findings

Overall, this study focused on the challenges informal diversity workers experience, how they overcome these challenges, and how leadership can aid informal diversity workers. The primary findings for research question 1a, *What are the communicative challenges that informal diversity workers face when implementing DEI into organizations?* relate to informal diversity workers difficulty in defining success and enacting change (ambiguity surrounding success), how White-identifying participants conceptualization of diversity reproduces Whiteness (definitions of diversity), the difficulty informal diversity workers have being taken seriously by their organization (not being taken seriously), and how the passion informal diversity workers have for their work can cause emotional exhaustion (double edge sword of passion). Informal diversity workers were able to overcome these challenges through a variety of alternatives.

The findings for research question 1b, *How do informal diversity workers combat challenges when implementing DEI into organizations?* found that participants did so by leaving the organization or DEI committee, engaging in self-care or focusing on the positives of their work informal diversity workers protected themselves from challenges (self-preservation), informal diversity workers also found like-minded peers to lessen the burden of their work (community), and accepted the challenges as part of their job (acceptance).

Leadership plays a pivotal role in aiding informal diversity workers and DEI initiatives. Research 2 asked, *How can organizational leaders communicate support and advocate for informal diversity workers?* Findings indicated that leaders need to embed DEI initiatives in the organization through training, resources, policies and hiring (prioritization of DEI work) and communicatively collaborate with diversity workers on DEI initiatives (collaboration).

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications for diversity workers and DEI initiatives. This chapter first describes theoretical implications of the study which were most tightly coupled to RQ1a and RQ1b. Then, practical implications stemming from RQ2 are reiterated and expanded using research related to leadership, diversity workers, and DEI initiatives.

Theoretical Implications

I structure my discussion by first presenting research related to research questions 1a and 1b. I explain how my findings expand and confirm current scholarship on diversity workers and DEI. In this discussion, I focus on the problems of diversity work as performative, the tensions diversity workers encounter, emotional work within diversity work, diversity workers as space invaders, and bureaucratic procedures within diversity work.

Diversity Work as Performative Work

An important challenge noted by informal diversity worker participants was the need for holistic change within their organization. This study illuminates that just because an organization has informal diversity committees or workers does not mean that the organization will inherently become more inclusive, equitable, or diverse. My study supports Ahmed's (2012, 2017) findings that diversity committees and diversity workers may serve a performative function instead of providing action-oriented change, resulting in diversity work operating as a site for public relations.

Informal diversity work can also function as a "Band-Aid" to appease onlookers instead of enacting change (Wilson, 2013). As Wilson (2013) explains, "the appointment of a chief diversity officer could be another 'Band-Aid' tactic to appease critics and onlookers" (p. 443). My findings support this claim through Meera's example of her diversity committee putting on

“events like panels for pride month or a Black History Month” instead of engaging in “radical change labor.” Meera’s events communicate her organization’s dedication of DEI through performative events however, her organization negated Meera’s DEI committee to enact any holistic positive change.

Furthermore, when relating “Band-Aid” to my findings, we can see that the diversity workers’ lack of being taken seriously allows organizations to bolster their image while still maintaining Whiteness. Dana’s example on how she tried to get an initiative passed but “no one was checking up on it because the initiative wasn’t from human resources” explains how Dana’s initiative was not taken seriously by her organization. Because of Dana’s position as an informal diversity worker, her initiative functions as a “band-aid” “band-aid” by conducting performative aspects of diversity work instead of embedding DEI initiatives.

Additionally, my study expands understanding of how diversity workers are used as an organizational “Band-aid” when we consider the lack of power informal diversity workers have in their organizations (Wilson, 2013). For example, Sebastian’s DEI committee had to go through numerous bureaucratic procedures to get initiatives passed, as well as Sonja’s DEI committee’s inability to pass initiatives due to HR’s constraints on their work. Even Lelah’s comments on how “committees are useless” reiterates how informal diversity work, especially when conducted through organizational structures negates informal diversity workers power. These connections all emphasize diversity workers functioning as performative instead of action based (Ahmed, 2017). Diversity workers only have enough power as the organization allows them to have, if the organization negates their power, then their function is to serve as a “band aid.”

Treating diversity work as a “Band-Aid” is further problematic because informal diversity workers are conducting free labor for the organization. Meera stated during our interview that “we are conducting free labor that ultimately benefits the organization.” Because informal diversity workers are not getting paid for diversity work or are expected to do diversity work simply because of their non-White identification, organizations are able to take advantage of those who care about social justice issues and use this to bolster their own reputation. Because informal workers are not in paid positions, they lack legitimate organizational power (Zoller & Ban, 2020). The lack of organizational power that diversity workers allows organizations to treat informal diversity work as performative instead of action-based (Ahmed, 2012).

Wilson’s findings also relate to Sara Ahmed’s (2012, 2017) discussion on how diversity work or the appointment of someone to conduct diversity work is not the same as transforming the organization. Ahmed (2012) writes,

Diversity work becomes embodied in the diversity worker: institutions do this work insofar as they employ somebody to do this work. This is how: an institution being willing to appoint someone (to transform the institution) is not the same thing as an institution being willing to be transformed (by someone who is appointed). (p. 94)

As Ahmed stated, diversity work becomes embodied in the diversity worker as that worker becomes a site for DEI initiatives by simply being present. The simple presence of diversity workers or diversity committees allows the organization to state that they have initiated diversity, equity, and inclusion into their organization. My data confirms this challenge, for example Olivia’s leadership appointing a DEI committee and “expecting us [DEI committee] to solve the problem for them [leadership]” despite not involving this committee in decision DEI related decisions means that Olivia’s organization was unwilling to allow her committee to transform the organization.

My findings also relate to Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) comments on how diversity workers can be a means of public relations. Ahmed (2012) stated that diversity workers and diversity itself "can be mobilized as a defense of reputation, perhaps even a defense of Whiteness" (p. 151). Wilson (2013) and Ahmed's (2012, 2017) discussions confirm how diversity workers feel that their work was simply to "check this box" (Olivia) for their organization, that their diversity work lacks any "teeth to it" (Patricia) or isn't "radical change labor" (Meera). When diversity workers and diversity committees are present, there is tangible evidence to suggest that *something* is being done to combat Whiteness even if that something is simply just appointing informal diversity workers.

My study findings reiterate the insidious nature of some organizations' intentions. Organizations with DEI committees and informal diversity workers often believe these inclusions of diversity workers are enough to combat oppressive systems (Ahmed, 2012). Informal diversity workers may be in an even more tenuous position because they are not taken seriously in the organization. This is the very reason why the organization itself has informal diversity workers. By giving informal diversity committees "fluffy work," organizations can state that they care about DEI initiatives without enacting any radical change because informal diversity workers lack any tangible organizational power. The lack of power that informal diversity worker committees have allows organizations to treat these diversity committees as a non-threatening source and continue the momentum of Whiteness.

However, combatting oppressive organizational systems requires that organizational DEI initiatives become embedded within the institution. Yet, as findings indicate, when informal diversity workers are not taken seriously their function is to not enact change but rather to communicate an organization's pseudo care for DEI. We can relate the terms "checking this

box,” “lacking any teeth,” “non-radical change labor,” and “fluffy work” to the same problem of organizations using diversity workers to bolster their reputation without combatting Whiteness within the organization. The next section details the tensions informal diversity workers entail during their line of work.

Tensions

Mease (2016) and Kahn (2013) described tensions that paid diversity workers encounter when organizational wants and needs clash with diversity workers’ social justice approach to enacting change. Findings indicated that informal diversity workers who serve on committees, working underneath leadership and administrative efforts, dealt with similar tensions.

Participants in committees often wanted to enact specific changes but were unable to do so because these changes did not align with organizational wants. For example, informal diversity workers wanted to engage in more radical change but were unable to do so due to organizational wants. Sonja commented on how her human resources representatives acted against her DEI committee’s radical change efforts. Sonja stated,

And it seems like they're [HR] often sort of stepping in when they like, hear too many rumors or hear somebody is getting too fired up or heard somebody said something about a union. And then they're like coming in with fire hoses, and that it just feels like they're only there to sort of slap our wrists when we've crossed the line.

Human resources represented organizational wants and often would “slap their wrists” when Sonja’s DEI committee was trying to enact any radical change labor such as creating “a union.”

Tensions were also indicative of the need for better communication among informal diversity workers, organizational leaders, and human resources. The lack of information human resource departments provided diversity committees reinforced tensions between the projects that diversity committees wanted to achieve but could be based on organizational constraints. Sebastian’s comments on how his human resources team did not provide demographic

information to his DEI committee. This is a great example of how Sebastian's DEI committee was unable to enact change due to the organizational constraint of human resources not communicating demographic information to his DEI committee.

However, tensions between organizational wants and needs and informal diversity workers' passions depended on the type of diversity work participants conduct. Diversity workers who conducted individualistic work were not as tethered to organizational wants and needs and, thus, did not experience these tensions that Kahn (2013) and Mease (2016) explain in their studies. Therefore, depending on the type of diversity work one conducts, they may encounter different tensions. Operating outside of an organization's system means that some diversity workers do not encounter the same tensions between capitalistic agendas and social justice motives that Mease (2016) and Kahn (2013) describe. Informal diversity workers are less tethered to organizational wants and can move outside of organizational systems due to this work being unpaid. Because informal diversity workers are not being directly paid for their work, they have less allegiance to their organizations (we see this in how they overcome challenges with the subtheme leaving the system). For example, Lelah left her DEI committee and now conducts diversity work by acting as a 'watch dog' who "shames people for communicating micro aggressions" is indicative on how by operating outside of any organizational DEI committee she is able to conduct diversity work on her own terms. Lelah also discussed how she operates on "smaller more individual changes" relating to how Lelah's diversity work is initiatives grassroots change. Another example stems from Patricia's diversity work through a caucus system and how she negates any bureaucratic change systems through her direct communication patterns. Patricia stated, "it's really gratifying to be able to move outside the system to enact change" Informal diversity workers have obligations similar to paid diversity workers, but their paid work is not

evaluated for their efforts. Therefore, we see individual diversity workers conducting work that they personally care about rather than conceding to organizational wants. More attention needs to focus on differing tensions between diversity workers, depending on the types of work that they conduct.

Mease's (2016) discussion on tensions and how diversity workers overcome tensions relate to acceptance within diversity work. Mease (2016) argued that diversity workers should embrace the tensions they encounter by stating, "tensions resulting from these mergers should be maintained as productive points that foster possibilities for change" (p. 78). Diversity workers understand that the challenges they encounter are part of conducting diversity work and learning to accept organizational constraints. For example, instead of becoming upset about the inability to embed a DEI training certificate into his organization, Alex decides to accept this challenge as part of his work. Alex stated, "even though we couldn't get this mandatory it's still cool because it's a connect the dots experience." Alex's statements here reinforce Mease's (2016) suggestion that these tensions can serve as productive points to ensure that diversity workers are able to overcome challenges and not lose their morale. Thus, acceptance can also be understood as a tactic informal diversity workers used to embrace the inherent tensions within this line of work (Mease, 2016).

Bureaucracy

When change is initiated from informal diversity workers, the changes often must go through multiple chains of command, resulting in little to no power in the hands of informal diversity workers. Despite this problem, when diversity workers did enact change, they did so through bureaucratic measures as the only way to legitimize change. For example, Sebastian complained about the lofty steps that his DEI committee had to take to get an initiative passed

but yet, accepts that this is how his DEI committee enacted change. Sebastian statements relate to Meisenbach et al. (2008) discussion on the normalization of bureaucracy, “The concept of and practice of bureaucracy has become so familiar in Western and industrialized workers that these workers do not question it. Instead, workers unconsciously yield to authoritative structures because they understand bureaucracy to be static and rigid” (Meisenbach et al., 2008, p. 9). Informal diversity workers both understand they cannot enact change without going through bureaucratic communication channels and accept that fact.

Furthermore, findings illuminated that informal diversity workers are so used to bureaucratic procedures as a means for change that they cannot comprehend other options. Alex and Louisa stated how they didn’t think their hierarchal bureaucratic measures were the right way to enact DEI initiatives, yet they don’t believe or know any other ways of productively enacting change within his organization. Alex acknowledges that the bureaucratic steps his organization takes to enact change may not be the best route but states “it kind of has to be this way.” Therefore, despite a lack of belief in these systems, informal diversity workers relied on these bureaucratic systems to enact change. Bureaucratic ways of enacting change are so ingrained in an organization’s culture that informal diversity workers are not able to pragmatically overcome this challenge. Thus, some informal diversity workers must work within a damaged system to implement change as their only hope.

However, some informal diversity workers in my study overcame the challenges of bureaucratic red tape by moving out of the organization’s system. Participants’ ability to move past organizational constraints reiterated Wilson’s (2013) argument that bureaucratic measures within diversity work should be eliminated to ensure productive change. Findings from my study relate to Wilson’s (2013) argument by informal diversity workers moving outside of

organizational systems in order to distance themselves from problematic bureaucratic procedures. For example, Patricia joined a caucus system where there were no bureaucratic procedures, rather, caucus members directly communicated with leaders on topics that needed reform, whereas Lelah conducted work outside of diversity committees, focusing on mentoring students and peers of color. There needs to be more attention paid to diversity workers that are not embedded in organizational structures and their methods of enacting change on a grassroots level. Implications for this type of grassroots initiative can cause a ripple effect within the organization that leads to grander change through policies or initiatives (Hill et al., 2023).

Emotional Work

This study's findings also reiterated and expanded our understanding of emotional work. Emotional work in paid jobs focuses on the difference between emotions embedded in certain jobs and the expectations and norms surrounding these jobs (Mirchandani, 2003). Informal diversity workers conduct unpaid emotional work within the organization of their paid job in the public sphere. Informal diversity workers are at a unique standpoint in their workplaces since they perform paid duties but are not paid for specifically conducting informal diversity work. Informal diversity workers positionality expands our understandings of emotional work past capitalistic notions of work constituting paid labor and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of emotional work in the public sphere. Definitions of emotional work are specifically tethered to one's paid job (Miller et al., 2007). Thus, when we consider the emotional work that informal diversity workers engage in, we can understand how emotional work expands to unpaid labor.

Informal diversity workers conducted unpaid emotional work for their organizations as a part of their diversity work. For example, Patricia and Lelah discussed how part of their diversity

work constitutes listening to other's stories about how they have been mistreated in their organization. This type of labor is considered emotional work, but definitions of how emotional work is a type of work that is paid negates informal diversity workers positionality and experiences (Miller et al., 2007). Because informal diversity workers conduct this emotional work unpaid, they expand current definitions of emotional work to include unpaid labor within the workplace.

We can also understand emotional work as more complex than simply engaging with emotions at work, understanding the work as raced and gendered, dependent on one's identity (Mirchandani, 2003). A relationship exists between a person's gender, race, emotional work, and occupation (Mirchandani, 2003). Thus, identity is a factor when considering the type of work in which diversity workers engage. As discussed in the findings, diversity workers with non-dominant identities described the difficulties in combatting organizational racism and microaggressions when engaging in this type of work. For example, Jasmine described how she felt like engaging in her diversity work is like "gaslighting yourself" due to the exposure of microaggressions and racism she deals with in her job as a diversity worker. The type of emotional work that Jasmine engages in is different from those who do not have non-dominant identities due to exposure to these oppressions does not directly impact their identity. There is a need for scholarship to attend more closely to how one's identity functions within emotional work and how intersectionality impacts diversity work. Next, I apply Puwar's (2004) notion of how those who don't embody the somatic norm are treated as outsiders to informal diversity workers.

Treated as Outsiders

Puwar (2004) contended that those who embody difference are viewed as space invaders within organizations. Puwar (2004) states that to be a space invader is to be in a space, but not quite belonging to it. Ahmed (2012) relates to Puwar's (2004) space invaders by describing how organizational spaces already fit certain bodies, and those who do not fit feel uncomfortable. Informal diversity workers with non-dominant identities conduct this work because as Meera stated, they "need to survive" within an organization that does not cater to them. Thus, we can understand that diversity workers with non-dominant identities conduct diversity work as an act of survival and resistance against the feeling of being space invaders. In this aspect, informal diversity workers are granting themselves agency by negating the somatic norm and engaging in work that fights against Whiteness within organizations.

However, I contend that we can also understand informal diversity workers who actively try to make an organization more inclusive, diverse, and equitable may also feel like space invaders in their organization. Despite their bodies not being marked as trespassers (Puwar, 2004), their communicative acts of resistance mark them as such. For example, Uma described an "us versus them" dynamic between informal diversity workers and organizational leadership by stating "An us versus them creates a way of thinking that relates to this sort of pity, this sort of, you know, separation between us and them," Diversity workers aim to disband the repetitive acts entrenched within the organization's makeup (Ahmed, 2012) that to defy these norms is to be an outsider (Bendl & Hoffman, 2015).

Diversity workers who constantly work against organizational constraints are treated as outsiders. My study revealed that organizational leaders, and especially human resources representatives, treated diversity workers as nuisances. This treatment was especially apparent in the lack of communicative channels that involved diversity workers The lack of communicative

channels reiterated that the participants were not part of an organization's fabric, but instead outsiders trying to implement organizational changes.

Reproducing Whiteness

While the BLM movement and the death of George Floyd embedded racial inequality into dominant discourses, it cannot and should not be the main discourse diversity workers are referencing to understand diversity. By utilizing BLM as the impetus for understanding DEI, White-identifying diversity workers are reinforcing the Black or White binary that limits understanding other racial, sexual, gender, ability, neurodivergent, and many other identities. This "Black" or "White" binary reduces other forms of difference and racism (Mudambi, 2015) and instead reinforces an essentialism of non-White group experiences. This limitation is problematic because the Black and White binary limits conversations surrounding DEI by eliminating other races and thus reproducing Whiteness (Alcoff, 2006). Furthermore, the Black and White binary means that these DEI efforts are not about White people but rather about Black people. This binary further reproduces Whiteness by erasing White-identifying participants' own identities, deeming them non- "diverse," and thus the norm (Case, 2012). By focusing on people who look different, White-identifying diversity workers also project the responsibility of those with non-dominant identities to operate as "ambassadors of diversity."

To summarize, diversity work can often function as performative instead of action based due to organizational constraints (Ahmed, 2017; Wilson, 2013). Whereas diversity workers who engage in individualistic work do not face the same tensions as those more embedded in organizational structures (Mease, 2016; Kahn, 2014). Informal diversity work expands notions of emotional work (Miller et al., 2007). Diversity workers often function as space invaders (Puwar, 2004) and diversity workers are tethered to bureaucratic measures to enact change.

Practical Implications

This upcoming section focuses on leadership and literature on how leadership can aid diversity workers. Because of the nature of leadership within DEI, this section of my discussion focuses on the practical implications of my dissertation. First, I discuss alternative organizing (Mumby & Putnam, 1993; Nicotera, 2019) and how this reorientation is a holistic way that leadership can aid diversity workers. I then discuss collaboration and its relationship to inclusive climates.

Alternative Organizing

Literature and findings indicated that leadership can ensure that justice, equity, and inclusion are valued in the organization by creating systems prioritizing these values (Randel et al., 2018). When we consider this study's findings, we can see that one fundamental way to aid diversity workers is a holistic reorientation of the organization's communicative patterns. For example, Jasmine mentioned the importance of prioritization of DEI initiatives through consistent communication about DEI initiatives. Solutions to what diversity workers need from leadership revolve around different ways of communicating around and about DEI within the organization's schema.

When considering the literature on combatting Whiteness within organizations, we can consider Putnam and Mumby's (1993) alternative ways of organization as a guideline for how leadership can aid diversity workers. Putnam and Mumby (1993) discussed the problems surrounding traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations that prioritize rational emotions, masculinity, and--inevitably--Whiteness. Traditional organizations contribute to the business case for diversity in that their focus for diversity initiatives is to increase financial outcomes (Nicotera, 2019). This study's finding reflected that diversity workers encountered

numerous communicative challenges and organizational walls when their organizations have this orientation. As previously discussed, the bureaucratic measures that diversity workers engaged in to enact change are one example of these communicative challenges and organizational walls.

To reorient traditional organizations that reinforce Whiteness means there needs to be an alternative type of organization (Nicotera, 2019). Alternative organizations are relationally-oriented and focused on communal, cooperative, and social responsibility (Putnam & Mumby, 1993; Nicotera, 2019). The changes that diversity workers needed from diversity workers revolve around engaging in DEI from a socially responsible way of organizing by embedding it in the organization. Findings from RQ2 directly relate to the combatting of traditional organizations by eliminating bureaucratic procedures through providing direct communication lines and communicative patterns that embed DEI within the organization. Leaders are encouraged to adopt a more relationally-oriented way of enacting change by listening and respecting informal diversity workers.

Alternative ways of organizing relate to the creation of inclusive climates through RQ2's theme of collaboration. Inclusive climates allow for a more community-oriented way of enacting change that dismantles traditional, hierarchal organization (Boekhorst, 2015; Nicotera, 2019). Leadership can cultivate inclusive climates and dismantle hierarchical structures by engaging with employees on decision-making processes (Boekhorst, 2015; McGuire & Bagher, 2010). Furthermore, inclusive climates are created when leadership encourages open communication, especially among employees whose voices may have otherwise been absent (Boekhorst, 2015). Inclusive climates also recognize that promoting diversity and an inclusive culture is a shared responsibility and is not solely one particular employee's responsibility (McGuire & Bagher, 2010). Much of the challenges relating to diversity work relate to an individualistic imperative

that puts the responsibility on those who care about diversity work to engage with DEI initiatives. However, when leadership collaborates with informal diversity workers it lessens the responsibility on informal diversity workers and advocates for a more community wide prioritization of diversity work.

Furthermore, this type of relational-oriented organization also relates to the challenges of emotional work. While this is not something specifically discussed in RQ2, it is an important imperative to describe other positives to alternative ways of organizing. By cultivating an organization wherein traditional rationalist discourses are not prioritized or perceived as the norm, diversity workers and organizational members can express their emotions more openly (Putnam & Mumby, 1994). When operating within an inclusive climate, employees will feel more secure in engaging in their own emotions because they feel safe (Li & Peng, 2022).

Collaboration

As previously discussed, there is a connection between leadership collaborating with diversity workers and cultivating an inclusive organizational climate (Boekhorst, 2015; Key-Roberts et al., 2020; Randel et al., 2018; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Scholars discuss the importance of leaders including their employees in the decision-making process to create an inclusive organizational climate. Randel et al. (2018) stated, “Shared decision making with an emphasis on sharing power, broadening consultation on decisions, and helping decide how work is conducted is also important to creating a sense of belongingness” (p. 193). This type of communication supports the evidence for the need for collaboration. Participants in this study discussed the need for leadership to be more involved within DEI programs. For example, Renee regarding to how her leadership can aid her in her diversity work, “Yeah, I mean, I think like it’s the collaborative like co-creation piece that’s important right?” Renee illuminated the importance

of leadership collaborating with diversity workers, one way can be by involving informal diversity workers in decision making processes. When leadership collaborates with diversity workers by eliminating communicative channels and sharing in decision-making processes, they can foster an inclusive environment wherein diversity workers feel listened to and heard.

Wilson's (2013) findings also reiterated the importance of leadership's role in embedding diversity work and DEI into the organization. Wilson (2013) discussed the implications of paid diversity workers stating that they have limited ability to enact meaningful change due to their lack of authority. Findings from Wilson's (2013) study indicate that because informal diversity workers have less authority than paid organizational members, they must connect themselves to their leadership to be successful in their goals. Therefore, informal diversity workers must have an open communication pipeline to leadership since they cannot take on leadership roles (Wilson, 2013). An open communication pipeline allows these workers to effectively pursue diversity policy and change without going through much organizational bureaucracy (Wilson, 2013). Diversity workers mention the importance of being directly available to leadership and how this positively impacts their experiences as informal diversity workers. For example, Uma discussed how they felt leadership "cared" because "they told us to come talk to them whenever we had a problem." This open pipeline of communication reiterates Wilson's (2013) study and reinforces the importance of leadership collaboration.

When considering how leadership operates as a mouthpiece for diversity workers and DEI initiatives, we can explore Key-Roberts et al.'s (2020) claims communicative acts reinforce the importance of DEI implementation. When leaders operate as a mouthpiece for DEI initiatives and diversity workers, they are using their organizational power to benefit diversity workers.' "Key-Roberts et al., (2020) stated, "Leaders can promote inclusive behaviors and policy

implementation through communicating and acting in ways that reinforce the importance of DEI implementation” (p. 241). Participants in my study confirmed that initiatives come from leaders who have more authority within the organization. Patricia is a great example of how prior to her organization’s leadership picking up her inclusive interviewing packet, she went from department to department and asked them to use her interview protocol. Once Patricia’s human resources and leadership took notice of her inclusive interviewing protocol, they adapted this protocol to all departments and this protocol became embedded within interviewing procedures at Patricia’s organization. Without Patricia’s leadership recognizing the importance of this interviewing protocol, employees in this organization were not required to adapt their interviewing procedures but rather encouraged by Patricia. The last section discusses the importance of embedding training and policies within the organization and how that can benefit informal diversity workers and DEI initiatives.

Training and Policy Implementation

According to diversity workers, the importance of continuous training is an important recommendation for leadership to prioritize DEI initiatives. This finding correlates with Dobbin & Kalev’s (2016) discussion on effective training. Dobbin and Kalv (2016) discussed the problematics of organizational DEI training that, according to their study, typically lasts an average of two days. This short DEI training did not actually change the practices of employees and executives but rather was seen as remedial rather than developmental (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Hill et al., (2023) recommended that training sessions be conducted over multiple sessions and spanning longer periods of time, as these training courses are more successful at changing attitudes about diversity. This relates to Louisa’s comments on how training “can’t be a one-time Wednesday workshop thing but rather something that is consistently brought up.” Louisa’s

comments reinforce Dobbin & Kalev's (2016) and Hill et al.'s (2023) findings on the importance of consistent training. Because DEI initiatives are consistently changing, it is important for training to be adaptive and consistent to properly prioritize DEI in the organization. Furthermore, leadership support in training is imperative, resulting in more effective experiences (Philips et al., 2016).

Key-Roberts et al. (2020) as well as Boekhorst (2015) discussed the importance of leadership support for policy implementation. This can relate to Sara Ahmed's argument that DEI policy can be used as non-action, and that certain policies are enacted *because* they do not actually change the organization (Ahmed, 2007; 2012; 2017). Ahmed traced policies around to assess whether they enacted positive organizational change. Ahmed's research begs the question of the importance of leadership within policy implementation. Findings from this dissertation as well as other scholars (Key-Roberts et al., 2020; Boekhorst, 2015) relate policy implementation with inclusive climates. Therefore, it is important to understand how climate may impact DEI implementation within DEI policies.

Chapter Six: Limitations, Future Directions & Conclusion

Thus far, I have detailed how informal diversity workers differ from paid diversity workers and warrant further study (Chapters One and Two). My study was designed to look at the challenges that diversity workers face in their line of work and how they overcame these challenges (Chapter Four). My study also examined how leadership can aid diversity workers in the cultivation of more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments (Chapter Four). The limited focus of my study required that I leave out considerations for the line of informal diversity work relating to gender and westernized ideologies. Therefore, although my study analyzed the challenges of diversity workers and how strategies that leadership can use to aid diversity workers, it also brought up additional questions.

One limitation of this dissertation is my participants' demographics. Despite my recruitment aiming to gather a wide array of participants, having more informal diversity workers who identify as having non-dominant identities may shed additional light on the experiences of this population. Future researchers should consider the diversity worker's positionality and focus on diversity workers with multiple, non-dominant identities, specifically how they conduct diversity work and the unique challenges they face due to their identities.

In addition, my participant pool predominately consisted of women, and therefore, lacked gender diversity. Understanding participants' positionalities within informal diversity work also relates to gendering of diversity work. Because most of my participants identify as a women or gender-fluid means informal diversity work type of is gendered. Understanding the reasons why more womxn conduct this type of work is essential and can relate to other types of unpaid labor, such as caring work and domestic labor (England & Folbre, 1999). Understanding these connections can help illuminate gender inequalities within informal diversity work.

Prior to conducting this dissertation, I was unaware of the differing types of informal diversity work. The difference between those who conduct diversity work individually and those who conduct diversity work within an organizational committee is substantial. While I detailed the differences as much as I could throughout this study, more research needs to be done on the differing types of informal diversity work and how they enact organizational change. A focus on how organizational change gets enacted is important because informal diversity workers operate differently and have different goals dependent on their type of diversity work. Thus, more attention needs to be spent on the different types of diversity work to better understand which type is most sustainable and successful in making holistic organizational change.

It is also essential to recognize how macro discourses influence diversity workers' language and how this language influences their work. While I discussed implications for the language of diversity workers stemming from BLM discourse, I was limited in understanding the implications this language had on diversity workers' actual work and DEI initiatives. While there was a clear connection between macro discourses and the White and Black binary, there lacked clear information on how diversity worker's definitions of diversity impacted their DEI goals and initiatives. Therefore, more work needs to be done to understand the implications of macro discourses, such as social movements, how they influence diversity workers' language, and how this language influences these DEI initiatives.

Lastly, Villamil et al., (2023) analyzed DEI initiatives from "the periphery" to critique Westernized perspectives of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Another direction of DEI research could examine these perspectives and analyze how language reproduces certain power dynamics. Future research should examine hegemonic Westernized understandings of DEI and how they impact employees who are not born in the United States.

Vilamil et al. (2023) noted another limitation of this study, as I reproduced hegemonic understandings of DEI through the scholars that are cited as well as the participant pool. While I did interview two diversity workers who migrated to the United States, this small sample is not nearly enough to combat Westernized hegemonic viewpoints on DEI. Furthermore, I don't specify throughout this study that I am looking at American notions of DEI. My lack of this acknowledgement is a limitation in the epistemological underpinnings of my study.

Conclusion

This dissertation articulated my efforts to comprehensively analyze diversity workers' experiences within organizations by looking at the challenges they are up against. Specifically, I attended the ways that diversity workers faced challenges, how they overcame these challenges, and how leadership can support diversity workers. In doing so, I shed light on organizational constraints that make the enacting of DEI initiatives difficult for informal diversity workers. Informal diversity workers deal with a multitude of communicative challenges that make their work difficult. Informal diversity workers offer a unique perspective as organizational insiders conducting unpaid labor for their organization, while lacking the power to holistically change the organization. I also illuminated the ways that diversity workers enacted communicative acts of resilience by overcoming these organizational constraints and challenges. Informal diversity workers can overcome organizational challenges by moving outside the system or finding community with their fellow diversity workers. Lastly, this dissertation highlighted how leadership can and should aid diversity workers in their efforts. Leadership can use their power to embed DEI initiatives within the organization as well as collaborate with DEI workers to enact holistic change.

Prologue

Throughout my dissertation, I use the term individual diversity work to describe how informal diversity workers conduct diversity work outside of organizational systems. While there are differing definitions for neoliberalism, I define neoliberalism from Butler (2013) and Gill (2007) who relate neoliberalism to the ideology of discipline of the self in that the “individual must bear full responsibility for their life” (Gill, 2007, p.160) due to the shift of responsibility from the state on to the individual (Butler, 2013). Neoliberalism reinforces an ideology of individual empowerment and personal responsibility (Butler, 2013; Bay-Cheng, 2015). A neoliberal subject may feel as if they have personal freedom and autonomy yet, their actions have consequences and therefore neoliberalism can be attributed to a “liability waiver: do what you will, but at your own risk” (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 285) Therefore, neoliberal ideologies discipline the individual and redefine forms of civic engagement and reorganize social life to focus on the individual instead of the collective (Alfey, 2022).

One may understand diversity workers’ individualistic ways of enacting change as an example of how structurally, organizations reinforce neoliberal logics onto subjects. Ideologically, neoliberalism promotes individualism and self-help as a logical response to failures that are structural (Alfey, 2022). Therefore, neoliberal ideologies encourage highly individualistic and anti-structural notions of how society functions (Alfey, 2022). Thus, it makes sense for diversity workers to operate individualistically to endorse DEI initiatives instead of questioning structural failures on account of the organization. Because the organization is not “doing their part” as Uma stated in our interview, diversity workers bear the responsibility to conduct unpaid labor and work to make their organizations more inclusive, diverse and equitable. Therefore, I discuss the tensions present between diversity workers’ neoliberal ways of

enacting change and how either reinforces or negates neoliberal structural ideologies within organizations.

Neoliberal ideologies also offer key insights into the business case for diversity.

Neoliberalism offers insights into how diversity in organizations is treated as a tool to publically celebrate diversity through specific visible signifiers yet deterring any systemic support interventions (Lawless, 2021). As Alfey (2022) states,

diversity itself has been appropriated by corporate America to maintain the status quo of capital—deployed as a means to entice an expanding base of consumers without endorsing the fundamental economic and social reorganization of society that would be necessary for racial justice. (p. 1083)

Instead of organizations focusing on righting historical wrongs they instead focus on business margins that are equated with having a “diverse” workforce (O’Leary & Weathington, 2006).

Diversity workers in my study overcome challenges individually which contributed to and did not question neoliberal organizational practices. For example, Molly described how she was unable to do “sustainable work” without first “providing space for myself” by engaging in self-care techniques. While diversity work is emotionally taxing, producing burnout, participants failed to question why this emotional burden is put on them, but instead looked toward themselves to overcome challenges.

My conceptualization of individual diversity work intersects with structural definitions of neoliberalism by negating structural forces and instead focusing on individual responsibility. In this prologue, I describe the tension between organizational structural forces and individualized diversity work and how informal diversity workers either reinforce or push up against neoliberal organizational structures. First, I describe how diversity workers internalize diversity work as something they must individually enact to create change. I then explain how this individual onus of diversity work also relates to how diversity workers overcome challenges. After, I describe

how informal diversity work is inherently grassroots work. I describe how these grassroots initiatives encounter systemic barriers relating to the politicized nature of DEI and rigid organizational hierarchies. Lastly, I discuss how diversity workers reinforce organizational hierarchy by relying on the leader's power within the organization to make changes. Overall, informal diversity workers are trapped in a perpetual cycle of individualistic work that both combats and contributes to organizational structures that hinder their ability to enact change.

The Responsibility Is on The Individual, Not the Organization

The reason why unpaid DEI committees and informal diversity workers exist is because the organization, "is not doing their part" (As Uma stated). While informal diversity workers feel empowered to make changes on their own, only focusing on what an individual can do to change reinforces a neoliberal ideology that neglects organizational responsibility. Throughout my interviews, individual responsibility was most evident in discussions about DEI work as passionate, DEI work connected to one's identity how DEI work is tension filled.

Because there lacks a monetary gain for diversity work, participants described their justification for conducting this work relating to their passion for social justice. Renee commented on how "everyone is doing this [DEI work] because they're passionate about the work." Neoliberalism focuses on one's own responsibility and empowerment (Rottenberg, 2018) thus by focusing on their own passion informal diversity workers negate organizational responsibility for the need of DEI work. Furthermore, the onus is also put on those with non-dominant identities when operating within organizations that prioritize neoliberalism (Alfrey, 2022). Secondly, I relate Mease's (2016) findings of the tensions diversity workers have by focusing on individuals in organizations to the tensions my participants experienced by focusing on individual actions as a modifier for change. Participants in my study focused on individual

actions through having their peers engage in DEI committees or completing certifications to cultivate change. Lastly, diversity workers engaged in self-preservation as a tactic to overcome organizational structures which reinforces neoliberalism. Instead of trying to overcome challenges structurally, diversity workers looked inward to their own actions by leaving the organization or DEI committees, engaging in self-care, and relying on previous times they enacted organizational change. Thus, diversity workers engage in neoliberal acts by “accepting full responsibility for their own wellbeing and self-care” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 1075).

Passion and Neoliberal Subjects

Putting ownership on those who are passionate and care about diversity work is a structural tactic that organizations create to reduce organizational ownership for DEI initiatives. As stated in my findings, informal diversity workers all share a passion for their diversity work and for social justice initiatives. Diversity workers’ passion subsidizes any recognition for the organization’s part in enacting change.

Participants equated informal diversity work with passion, an internal motivational drive, which furthered individual neoliberalism conceptualizations. Passion intersects with research on internal neoliberalism through abiding by the ideals of personal empowerment (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Rottenberg, 2018). Because diversity workers are passionate about DEI, they take accountability for the organization’s diversity work through their own individualistic actions. Rather than critiquing organizational structures that reinforce inequality within organizations (Acker, 2006) informal diversity workers who have this passion opt for individual engagement in DEI work.

The care and passion that diversity workers have for their work means that they are willing to put in unpaid labor to enact DEI initiatives. For example, Sonja mentions how

“everyone who is part of this committee is doing this because they’re passionate about these issues.” Further, Sebastian mentions how “none of us [his DEI committee] would be involved in this work if we didn’t think we could make a change.” When participants frame their passion as the reason they’re conducting this work, their passion supersedes any organizational accountability for enacting DEI initiatives. It is diversity worker’s individual passion that coincides with why they’re conducting this work, instead of critiquing organizational systems that neglect DEI initiatives. The passion for DEI related issues coincides with diversity work being unpaid labor, in which employees volunteer their time. This passion that participants have for their line of work allows organizations to create volunteer-based initiatives that fail to pay their employees for their extra work which inherently benefits the organization (as Lelah discusses).

Identity and Structural Neoliberalism

Furthermore, we can tie how passion puts the onus on the individual to how those who have non-dominant identities are forced to conduct diversity work due to organizational neoliberal ideologies. Alfrey (2022) states how neoliberal differences “celebrates the incorporation of a variety of human attributes disconnected from structures of oppression as the most “meaningful” forms of human variation” (p.1224). We can connect both organizational neoliberalism to the business case by describing how those who are deemed different are believed to bring profit into organizations (Swan & Fox, 2010). However, neoliberal organizations neglect any historical or structural oppression that might occur to employees with non-dominant identities (Alfrey, 2022). The neglectfulness of the organization to recognize structural racism and oppression results in employees with non-dominant identities putting in extra labor to “survive” or “succeed” (Meera and Uma).

Within neoliberal organizations, those who have non-dominant identities conduct this work because they feel like they must for their own “survival” (Meera). When diversity workers with non-dominant identities are placed in organizations that prioritize neoliberalism, they experience firsthand the inequalities within this space (Puwar, 2004). While employees with non-dominant identities may be in a collective organizational space, they may not exactly feel as if they belong in this space (Alfrey, 2022; Puwar, 2004). To belong in a space is to feel safe and secure and to have the same opportunities (Ahmed, 2017). However, those with non-dominant identities in Alfrey’s (2022) study comment on being exposed to microaggressions daily from White men in the workplace.

We connect this literature to Meera’s experience as a woman of color in the tech industry explaining why she engages in diversity work and how she, “had to work so much harder to just exist and make myself able to succeed in the workplace.” Uma reinforces Meera’s statements by commenting, “I have to work twice as hard to get to the same goals because of all the implicit and explicit biases that people nurse and display.” Uma also comments on experiencing microaggressions within their workplace. What we are seeing here is how participants with non-dominant identities must work harder and put in extra work to belong in a space. While they physically belong in these organizations, they share the same spaces as other employees, because of their identities they feel as if they do not fit in their organizations. Because of the inequalities those with non-dominant identities face, they engage in diversity work to “survive” or “succeed” in their workplaces.

These examples signify that those with non-dominant identities in organizations have the onus put on them to conduct informal diversity work due to the neglectfulness of the organization to recognize historical wrongdoing. We can relate this to Ruiz-Mesa (2022) and

their description on what it is like for diversity workers with non-dominant identities to conduct diversity work within White organizations when they state,

This lack of visibility and knowledge gap, at times, forces CDOs [Chief Diversity Officers] to educate their peers by either sharing personal details about their experiences with exclusion or racial microaggressions or sharing the painful experiences of other people of color on campus. (p. 318)

Ruiz-Mesa's (2022) example relates to Meera's and Uma's descriptions by both having to put in extra labor to make their organizations more diverse, equitable and inclusive. Instead of the organization focusing on righting historical wrongs (Weathington & O'Leary, 2006) the onus is on the individual to engage in diversity work such as teaching their peers through difficult personal stories or other forms of work to make the organization more inclusive, diverse and equitable. When operating within a neoliberal organizational structure, we can understand how organizations work to reinforce inequality regimes through these neoliberal ideologies which perpetuate class, gender, and racial inequalities within organizations (Acker, 2006). Overall, neoliberalism functions both on an organizational and individual level so that it is those who are directly impacted by the lack of DEI initiatives or those who are passionate about DEI initiatives that must conduct diversity work.

Tensions in Individualistic DEI work

Participants also described the tension they feel by understanding that DEI issues are important, yet they believe it should be an individual's choice to engage in DEI initiatives. For example, Jessica is a recruiter and describes how she believes it's important that she is aware of DEI issues within hiring because she has the power to influence her workplace. She also mentions how she thought it was important for all recruiters to be on her volunteer DEI committee, yet states how she doesn't "wanna force anyone to do anything they don't want to

do.” Jessica’s perception of not forcing anyone to conduct voluntary work keeps DEI work in the hands of individuals.

Whereas Alex described the tension he faces through his peer’s DEI certificate program and making this mandatory for all employees. Alex stated, “One of the things we’re working on is making that [DEI certificate] matter more like, somehow tying that to uh performance assessments, or like a raise, or you know something to make it a more meaningful thing to try to incentivize people to do it more.” Alex described the tension of adding in extra individual labor without any incentivization, pinpointing how this certificate functions on a neoliberal level to endorse individual action instead of holistic organizational change.

The tension that Alex and Jessica have is over individualistic DEI initiatives. Both Alex and Jessica focus on having individuals conduct labor on behalf of the organization to make the organization more DEI focused. There’s tension with not wanting to force anyone to do DEI work but the fact that there’s even a debate is how structurally neoliberalism works to impact the individual and reduce onus of the organization. The fact that DEI isn’t embedded in the organization is why Alex and Jessica feel these tensions in the first place.

Jessica and Alex’s beliefs about making DEI mandatory for their peers reinforce an individualistic tension that comes with conducting DEI work in a neoliberal organization. Instead of framing participation as an organizational tension or challenge, they instead focus on their peers individually and how their peers have the power to become more engaged in DEI work. Mease (2016) discusses a similar tension in how diversity workers have tensions between emphasizing change at the organizational and individual levels. Often, diversity workers in Mease’s (2016) study focused on individual empowerment as a measurement for success instead of focusing on holistic organizational change despite acknowledging that both modes for needed

for change. We can relate Mease's (2016) findings to informal diversity workers by their belief that by focusing on individual's and their participation in DEI committees or DEI trainings can result in systemic organizational change. There is a connection between Mease's (2016) findings and this dissertation's findings by diversity workers focusing on individual's actions instead of trying to engage in systemic organizational DEI work.

However, what both Alex and Jessica are missing is that it shouldn't be the responsibility of coworkers and employees but rather, a structural change that encourages a collective organizational commitment (Ruiz-Mesa, 2022). Ruiz-Mesa (2022) comments on the importance of embedding DEI into the institutional missions rather than siloing DEI initiatives in the organization. We can understand Alex and Jessica's examples here as a siloing of DEI initiatives through their individualistic imperatives to focus solely on what their peers can do to further DEI. Rather, Alex and Jessica should be focusing on holistic organizational agendas to embed DEI within the workplace.

How Diversity Workers Overcome Challenges

Lastly, we can also understand tension between neoliberal subjects within a neoliberal organization as it relates to how diversity workers overcome challenges. My findings for RQ1b, how diversity workers overcome challenges, all relate to the individualistic ways that diversity workers overcome challenges. All three themes, self-preservation, community, and acceptance focus on what individual actions participants take to reduce the challenges they face imposed by their organization. These themes reinforce individualistic neoliberal ideologies focusing on what the self can do instead of how the organization can aid diversity workers. For example, informal diversity workers focus on their relationships with other informal diversity workers to function as a "cup filler" (Sonja) to aid them in the challenges they face.

Considering that informal diversity workers individualistically overcome challenges, they lack any trust in their organization to aid them in overcoming these challenges. Diversity workers have a neoliberal attitude to overcome their challenges that reinforces self-reliance and personal responsibility (Gill, 2007). What is ironic is that the organization put participants in their position as informal diversity workers, yet the organization lacks any responsibility to aid them in their challenges. We can see this through how leadership lacked any guidance on how to define organizational success for informal diversity workers. For example, Olivia mentions how her leadership “created this committee to solve the problem of DEI” but also adds how they lacked any guidance on how to define success within their organization. We can also see this in Sonja’s example of how HR continuously acted as a hindrance to her committee’s DEI efforts and was there mainly to “bring out the hose when we got too fired up.” The organization is the impetus for diversity workers challenges, yet the organization lacks any resources to aid informal diversity workers to overcome these challenges. This relates to what Uma stated as a reason for why they left their organization “no matter how much I wanted to make sure that I thrived in the organization, the organization was not doing its part.” Or the focus that diversity workers such as Louisa and Finley have on “making time for myself” so they can ensure to engage in self-care activities.

Diversity workers reinforce individualistic neoliberal ideologies which aids the organization in not having to put in work for DEI efforts. Ultimately, how participants overcame challenges reinforces neoliberal ideologies on both individual and structural levels through negating any structural issues by focusing on individualistic ways to solve problems (Alfey, 2022). We can understand the impact that structural neoliberal ideologies have on diversity

workers by looking at how they rationalize their challenges, how they overcome these challenges, and how leadership can help, in ways that reinforce structural neoliberal ideologies.

The Impractical Nature of Grassroots Initiatives

Informal diversity workers try to enact change through grassroots efforts yet are unable to achieve holistic organizational change because of structural challenges such as the politicized nature of DEI, prioritization of Whiteness, and rigid hierarchies. One systemic challenge that diversity workers are up against is the inherent nature of grassroots initiatives being community-oriented meaning that it requires employees to *want* to engage in DEI oriented change. Because organizations function as inequality regimes, they inherently privilege certain identities and performances over others (Acker, 2006). Therefore, when DEI initiatives are introduced into the workplace, they inherently combat norms embedded within the organization that keep dominant identities in power (Swan & Gatrell, 2008). Combatting norms that impact those with organizational power means that grassroots initiatives may not work due to some organizational members not engaging in DEI work (Ruiz-Mesa, 2022; Swan & Gatrell, 2008).

Additionally, informal diversity workers' organizations have a clear chain of command that reinforces a rigid organizational hierarchy (Widhiastuti, 2013). If an employee, such as an informal diversity worker, is not high enough in this organizational hierarchy, they are not listened to or taken seriously among the organization. We see this example with Patricia, whose idea for emotional training wasn't heard by her superiors until someone higher up on the organizational ladder brought up the same issue. Because informal diversity workers enact change through grassroots efforts, they enact change from the bottom up. Therefore, when enacting change within a hierarchal organization, diversity workers grassroots efforts are not taken seriously.

However, despite informal diversity workers grassroots initiatives, when answering the question of “how can leadership aid you in your diversity work” participants reinforced these rigid organizational hierarchies by granting leadership power to enact change. Overall, informal diversity workers recognized that grassroots initiatives lacked holistic organizational change. Therefore, their responses on how leadership can aid their work reflects a reliance on those higher up among the organizational hierarchy to embed DEI initiatives.

Grassroots Work

Because initiatives come from a team of employees who enact change from the bottom up, DEI committees conduct change on a grassroots level. The nature of volunteer DEI committees consists of employees who volunteer their time to work on DEI related issues, meaning that these committees do not involve any leaders from their organizations. An example of grassroots initiatives consists of Meera’s DEI committee putting on a panel for her employees during Black History Month. Informal diversity workers that aren’t on DEI committees enact change through grassroots level by implementing initiatives or disrupting Whiteness through interpersonal interactions. An example of individual grassroots change comes from Lelah, who “shames people” in her organization when they commit microaggressions against her peers or students.

While informal diversity workers were able to take action from a grassroots level, they were rarely able to enact holistic organizational change. For example, Patricia created an inclusive interviewing protocol for her organization and asked every single department to incorporate this protocol into their hiring practices. Patricia stated, “We were just asking people to kind of voluntarily do it and some departments absolutely did. Other departments didn’t.” Patricia’s interviewing protocol required an organizational community wide effort to holistically

enact this initiative (Selzer & Todd, 2018). However, some departments within Patricia's organization did not feel it was necessary to enact this interviewing protocol, resulting in a lack of holistic change. It was not until Patricia's organization's HR department implemented this inclusive interviewing protocol that it was then mandatory for all employees to use Patricia's interviewing procedure.

What makes grassroots change difficult for DEI work and informal diversity workers is that it lacks a mandatory or authoritative way of enacting change (Selzer & Todd, 2018). A grassroots way of enacting change is a community effort. Selzer & Todd (2018) state that "inclusive change can only come to fruition through buy-in from all members of an organization" (p. 285). However, the problem with DEI initiatives and grassroots efforts is the inherent politicized nature of DEI initiatives which makes it difficult to build a community that supports DEI efforts. Further, Ruiz-Mesa (2022) states, "Deciding to hire a CDO (Chief Diversity Officer) will likely bring about new ideas and organizational practices that may cause tensions with community members who feel that their campus is already diverse and inclusive." (p. 311). For example, Finley discussed how they tried to make organizational training mandatory for all employees and the pushback they received from this. Finley stated,

A while where we were advocating for our DEI trainings to be mandatory for all staff and we had a lot of pushback from mostly our white coworkers about why it shouldn't be mandatory for them to train or attend to those trainings.

Ruiz-Mesa's (2022) and Finley's statements can contribute to how Whiteness functions within organizations. Those who hold dominant identities may not want to change organizational norms because the norms put in place inherently benefit them (Swan & Gatrell, 2008). Ultimately, to conduct grassroots work means that all members need to feel this like work is needed (Selzer & Todd, 2018) which can be difficult when dominant group members refuse to engage in DEI initiatives.

Because of the nature of DEI, employees must care about these issues for community led grassroots efforts to work (Robin & Todd, 2018). The structural barriers we see are how the organization as a system prioritizes Whiteness, making DEI grassroots efforts push up against the wall of Whiteness (Ahmed, 2017). When informal diversity workers conduct DEI grassroots efforts, they aim to change these organizational norms which disrupts the status quo and thus, challenges the privilege that these dominant groups have acquired. For example, Louisa discussed how it's difficult to shift people's mindsets, especially those in power. Louisa stated, "It's just hard because it's big and at the end of the day, the people with power and money get their way. And so it's hard to go against that sometimes and it's hard to shift people's mindsets." Historically, those in power tend to be those in dominant groups (Swan & Gatrell, 2008) and thus, it makes sense for Louisa to have a difficult time shifting the mindsets of those within her organization that hold organizational power. Louisa's example here echoes how employees with dominant identities may neglect DEI grassroots led initiatives, operating under the guise that this work is not needed (Wilson, 2013).

We see the tension here between how grassroots led work inherently pushes up against neoliberal ideologies of individualism making connecting as a community difficult. What this tells us about individual neoliberalism is that diversity workers are only able to enact as much power as they're being granted. While informal diversity workers may feel empowered to enact change, it "still needs to be blessed off on the committees above us" as Sebastian stated about his committee's inherent grassroots led initiatives. Ultimately, grassroots initiatives rarely work within the context of DEI work making diversity workers have to rely on higher administration and leadership to aid them in their change – something I will discuss in a later section.

Rigid Hierarchies and Grassroots Work

The normalization of change within hierarchal organizations is another structural barrier that limits participants' ability to conduct grassroots level change (Widhiastuti, 2013). Bureaucratic measures and ways of enacting change are the norm within rigid hierarchal organizations (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015). Because bureaucratic procedures reinforce traditional hierarchal structures as a way of enacting change, this hinders diversity workers trying to implement grassroots level change. Furthermore, rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures are a key factor of how Whiteness is culturally reproduced in organizations (Acker, 2006; Ward, 2008). Therefore, the inability that diversity workers have implementing holistic change through grassroots measures also stems from regulating norms of how organizational change *should* be implemented.

An example of this relates to Sebastian's description of how his DEI committee enacts change. Sebastian stated, "Though we can have grassroot efforts that push initiatives up you can only, it still has to abide within the standards set or it has to be blessed off on people that are in councils above us." While Sebastian's committee is inherently grassroots, the notions of change still have to abide through a normalized set standard that operates within hierarchical bureaucratic measures. The bureaucratic structures put in place limit Sebastian's committee ability to enact change by enforcing a "set standardized" way of enacting change. This normalization is one way that Whiteness culturally gets reproduced within organizations (Ward, 2008). This rigid standardized way of enacting change limits other ways of thinking and doing that typically comes from grassroots level initiatives.

Furthermore, another key component within Sebastian's statement relates to the lack of power his committee has to pass initiatives on their own. Sebastian's sentiments also relate to Dana's example of initiating a proposal through grassroots initiatives but unable to embed her

hiring protocol within the organization because it was from an informal diversity worker and not HR. Dana stated,

And so the Provost approved that, but then it seemed like, it was approved, and they were supposed to do it, but there's nobody checking up on it, because it wasn't from HR...I think if you ask some department chairs, if they knew about that, I wonder if they would even know.

Dana's example reiterates the difficulty informal diversity workers have due to their lack of organizational authority. Within capitalistic organizational structures, unpaid labor is not necessarily always viewed as legitimate labor (Drago, 2007). To have a paid position means that workers have authority over that position and have authority over organizational matters relating to that particular position (Zoller & Ban, 2020). Therefore, when viewing informal diversity worker's position as unpaid workers within the organizational hierarchy, they lack any formal power.

Thus, what we see here is how individualistic neoliberalism tries to push up against structural organizational norms and fails. Diversity workers may feel like they have the power to enact change on an individualistic level, yet because of rigid hierarchies and set bureaucratic standards, they are tethered to organizational norms of enacting change. In addition, Alfey (2022) argues that neoliberalism is tethered to White supremacy due to historical aspects of neoliberalism and the negation of righting historical wrongs within neoliberal structures. Therefore, we can connect neoliberalism to Whiteness within organizations and how neoliberal ways of thinking reinforce Whiteness culture within organizations (Alfey, 2022). Thus, the way that rigid hierarchies work to dismantle grassroots initiatives reinforces Whiteness within organizations which reinforces neoliberal structural ideologies.

Diversity Workers Relying on Leadership

With that said, it is interesting to think that structurally the way that diversity workers are primed to enact change is through grassroots work. Organizations set up informal diversity workers, especially those in committees, to operate on a grassroots level which means that inherently these committees lack any power. Additionally, organizational leadership does not grant these committees or informal diversity workers any legitimate power. We see this through how Sebastian's and Sonja's HR neglect any tangible ideas from their DEI committees' that could foster radical change. Because informal diversity workers lack any power, they rely on leadership to enact holistic change.

All of the ways that leadership can aid informal diversity workers revolve around leadership using their own power and organizational voice to bolster DEI initiatives and informal diversity workers. For example, needing leadership to operate as a mouthpiece for DEI initiatives means that informal diversity workers still lack any communicative power but instead, are looking for leadership to communicate the importance of DEI initiatives. Creating communicative channels also allows clearer communication between informal diversity workers and leadership so leadership can use their power more effectively to aid DEI initiatives. Furthermore, having leadership granting resources to DEI committees also

Therefore, participant's responses to how leadership can aid them in their diversity work reinforced the lack of power informal diversity workers have by reinforcing leadership's power within the organization. According to findings from RQ2, it was the leaders who enacted change, not the informal diversity workers. In other words, informal diversity workers are unable to enact change through grassroots measures and thus reinforce rigid hierarchies by relying on leadership to aid their DEI initiatives.

What this tells us about organizational structures is that when it comes to DEI initiatives, grassroots initiatives do not work for multiple reasons. The first reason is because of Whiteness within organizations functions to question DEI initiatives making it difficult for a community of employees to gather together to create change (Ruiz-Mesa, 2022; Swan & Gatrell, 2008). As Swan & Gatrell (2008) state some members of society, typically straight white men, might be hostile or reluctant for diversity policies considering that this population benefit from current norms and structures (p. 63). Secondly, if an organization already has a rigid hierarchy and bureaucratic measures in place to enact change, this change becomes normalized making grassroots initiatives improbable (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015; Meisenbach et al., 2008; Wilson, 2013). Meisenbach et al. (2008) contributes to these findings by stating, “workers unconsciously yield to authoritative structures because they understand bureaucracy to be static and rigid” (p. 9) Lastly, a rigid hierarchy bolstered by a capitalistic agenda means that unpaid diversity workers lack any legitimate authority in their work. Drago (2007) explains, work that is unpaid typically is not seen as being legitimate labor, thus this explains the difficulties informal diversity workers have when trying to enact change. When DEI initiatives come from informal diversity workers, these initiatives “lack any teeth” and become if anything performative instead of action based due to the lack of power informal diversity workers have within their organization.

Conclusion

Individual and organizational neoliberalism are in tension with each other through the onus being put on the individual to make holistic change, how diversity workers rely on peers to volunteer their time, the push and pull of grassroots initiatives within structural barriers. The organizational structures in place such as individualism, rigid hierarchies, Whiteness, and capitalistic agendas all impact the ability for informal diversity workers to engage in neoliberal

diversity work that systemically changes the organization. Further, how diversity workers overcome challenges also reinforces tensions due to diversity workers bolstering neoliberal ideologies through the way they overcome challenges. Whilst diversity workers reinforce rigid organizational hierarchy by relying on leadership to aid them in passing DEI initiatives.

The intention of this prologue is to analyze how informal diversity workers neoliberal efforts get trapped in systemic organizational barriers which hinder their ability to enact holistic change within the organization. Diversity workers are embedded in an organizational cycle trying to make change but the only way that they can make holistic change is through the organization's systems which are the cause for them needing to enact change in the first place. Overall, informal diversity workers are trapped in a perpetual cycle of neoliberal work that both combats and contributes to organizational structures that hinder their ability to enact change.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Message

Do you conduct diversity work in your organization?
Is this work not part of your job description?
Do you hold a non-dominant identity?



This type of diversity work can include but not limited to:

- Serving on DEI committees
- Aiding your leadership or team members with DEI insights
- Helping to create organizational policies and initiatives
- Mentoring folks who hold non-dominant identities in your organization
- Anything that holistically aids your organization to help cultivate an inclusive space

Will you participate in my study?

I am collecting interviews for my dissertation which focuses on organizational members who conduct unpaid diversity work. Participants must be 18 years of age, English speaking, and have conducted diversity work in your organization for at least 6 months. Interviews typically last 60-75 minutes.



For Inquires Contact: Sierra Kane
Email: srkane@uwm.edu
IRB#: [IRB#21.279-UWM](#)

Appendix B: Participant Demographics

Person	Gender Identity	Racial / Ethnicity	Age	Institution	Geographical Area	Identity factors disclosed that impacted their diversity work
Molly	Woman	White	28	Marketing agency	Milwaukee	n/a
Lelah	Woman	Middle Eastern	40s	Midwestern Medium Size School, Professor of WGS studies	Minnesota	Iranian immigrant, been in the United States for 10 years. Discusses how in Iran she was "white" and now coming here she experiences how others in Iran experienced.
Finley	Non-binary / Trans	White	24	Resident director, higher education	Seattle	Neurodivergent, autistic
Marge	Woman	White	58	Higher education	Minnesota	n/a
Jasmine	Woman	Biracial	24	Higher education	Seattle	Identifies as a lesbian and identifies as fat
Olivia	Woman	White	27	Marketing agency	Chicago	n/a
Sebastian	Man	White	29	Financial organization	Milwaukee	Veteran
Dana	Woman	White	40	Professor	West-California	University has a strong religious background; has faith
Z	Woman	Asian (Chinese)	41	Professor	South - Texas	Migrated from China
Sonja	Woman	White	39	Health care organization	Milwaukee	In a relationship with a trans man
Meera	Woman	South Asian	26	Technology Company	New York	Identifies as queer and is woman of color who grew up in the south
Patricia	Woman	White	39	Professor	Minnesota	Has a disability and mental health disorders (depression and anxiety)
Renee	Woman	White	42	Professor	Chicago	Has a queer child and a queer sister
Jessica	Woman	White	24	Loan Agency	Milwaukee	n/a
Louisa	Woman	Hispanic; White Identifying	44	Highschool teacher	Chicago	Parents are immigrants; sisters are a lesbian
Alex	Man	White	42	Technical college teacher	Milwaukee	n/a
Uma	Non binary / woman	South Asian	40	Associate professor	Utah	Migrated from India

Appendix C: Recruitment Message

My name is Sierra Kane, and I am a doctoral candidate in Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. You are invited to participate in my study exploring informal diversity workers experiences in their organization.

Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

What is the purpose of this study?

This study will involve interviews with up to 50 informal diversity workers. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of people who do diversity work when that work is not specifically part of their job description, and the impact that organizational leadership has on diversity work. Some examples of diversity work include (but are not limited to) cultivating diverse organizational space and inclusive cultures through training procedures, creating organizational policy, contributing to diversity task forces, or generally working with an organization to develop a more inclusive or diverse workplace. Interview topics include information related to your organizational culture and norms, your experiences as an informal diversity worker, how your organizational leadership manages diversity and inclusivity, and common experiences you face within your diversity related work.

To participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age, English speaking, and conduct diversity work that is not specifically part of your job description. You also must have worked in your current organization and have conducted informal diversity work for at least six months.

What will I do?

Interviews should take approximately 60 minutes on Microsoft Teams. I will audio/visually record the interview through Microsoft Teams and camouflage your identity when transcribing our conversation. All audio/video recordings will be stored on my password protected computer for a maximum of one year and will be deleted once they are transcribed. While transcriptions with any identifying factors concealed will be saved on a password protected laptop.

Participation is voluntarily. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point in time. All information collected will be kept confidential.

For questions about the study or if you are interested in participating, please email me at srkane@uwm.edu. If you know anyone else who may be eligible to participate, please share this message with them. Thank you!

Sierra Kane
srkane@uwm.edu.
[IRB#21.279-UWM](#)

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

I first want to better understand a bit more about your organization and work. This will help me understand your role as an informal diversity worker and how organizational culture and norms impact initiatives and your personal experience with this work. To begin, I want to gain a better understanding of your organization.

- What industry are you in?
- How many people work in your organization?
- What department or area of work are you in?
 - What is your job title?
- How would you describe your organization's culture?
 - What do you like about your organization? What do you dislike about organization?
- How do you think your organization defines diversity equity and inclusion?
 - Why do you think this?
 - What are documents or things that people have said or done that lead you to this conclusion?
- How does your organization prioritize diversity equity and inclusion?
 - Can you give me some examples to better understand how this prioritization plays out?

I now want to learn more about your experience as an informal diversity worker. Because our personal identity can influence our work, would you please start by sharing some demographic information:

- Demographics
 - What is your gender identity?
 - What is your age?
 - What is your racial identity?
 - How long have you worked at your organization?
 - How long have you been doing informal diversity work there?
 - Did you engage in diversity work before coming to this organization? If so, for how long and in what capacity?
- What led you to get into diversity work? Will you please share your story with me?
 - How does your identity influence the work that you do?
- How does your industry and type of organization impact your role as a diversity worker?
- Walk me through what a day might look like when you are engaging in diversity work.
- How would you describe your role in terms of diversity work to someone else?
- How many people in your organization do similar informal diversity work?
- Are there formal diversity workers in your organization? For example, are there employees with titles such as diversity equity and inclusion consultants or human resources representatives who are paid to conduct diversity equity and inclusion work?
 - If YES – How does your informal work compare to those with official or paid diversity equity and inclusion titles?

*I now want to understand how **you** define particular terms. We discussed how your organization defines diversity, inclusion and equity. I'd like to hear about how you define these terms.*

- How do **you** differentiate diversity, inclusion, and equity?
- How do your definitions of these terms align and differentiate from your organization's definitions?

I want to ask about how success and positive change are defined in the organization, among organizational members, and by yourself. We'll be focusing more on how DEI initiatives get passed and who makes these decisions.

- What do you consider success in terms of DEI work?
 - How does your organization define success?
 - How does your definition of success differ from your organization's definition of success?
 - Can you share an example of a time when you were successful?
- Can you tell me about a time a DEI initiative got passed in your organization and what that looked like?
 - How was the initiative communicated informally and formally throughout this process?
 - How much say do you have in creating these changes?
 - What have you learned from helping to implement these changes?
 - Based on what you've learned, is there anything you might try to do differently in the future?
- You mentioned ____ for implementing changes. Do you think this is the best way to implement change? Why or why not?
- What are some positive aspects to the non-paid diversity work that you do?
 - Can you tell me about a time you were able to clearly see a positive change in your organization due to your work as a non-paid diversity worker?
 - How were you able to implement this positive change?
 - How was your company's leadership involved in this positive change?

Diversity work has positives but this type of work also comes with many challenges. I'd like to now move our conversation towards the challenges you face as an informal diversity worker.

- First, have you experienced any challenges as an unpaid diversity worker? (Y/N)
 - (IF YES) What common challenges do you face?
 - Can you tell me about a time you experienced one of these challenges?
 - Why do you think you face these challenges?
- How do you overcome these challenges?
- Have you had any experiences where your organization did not seem like it valued diversity equity and inclusion?
 - Can you tell me about a time it was clear that your organization did not value diversity equity and inclusion?
 - Do you have any experiences when your organization did value diversity equity and inclusion?

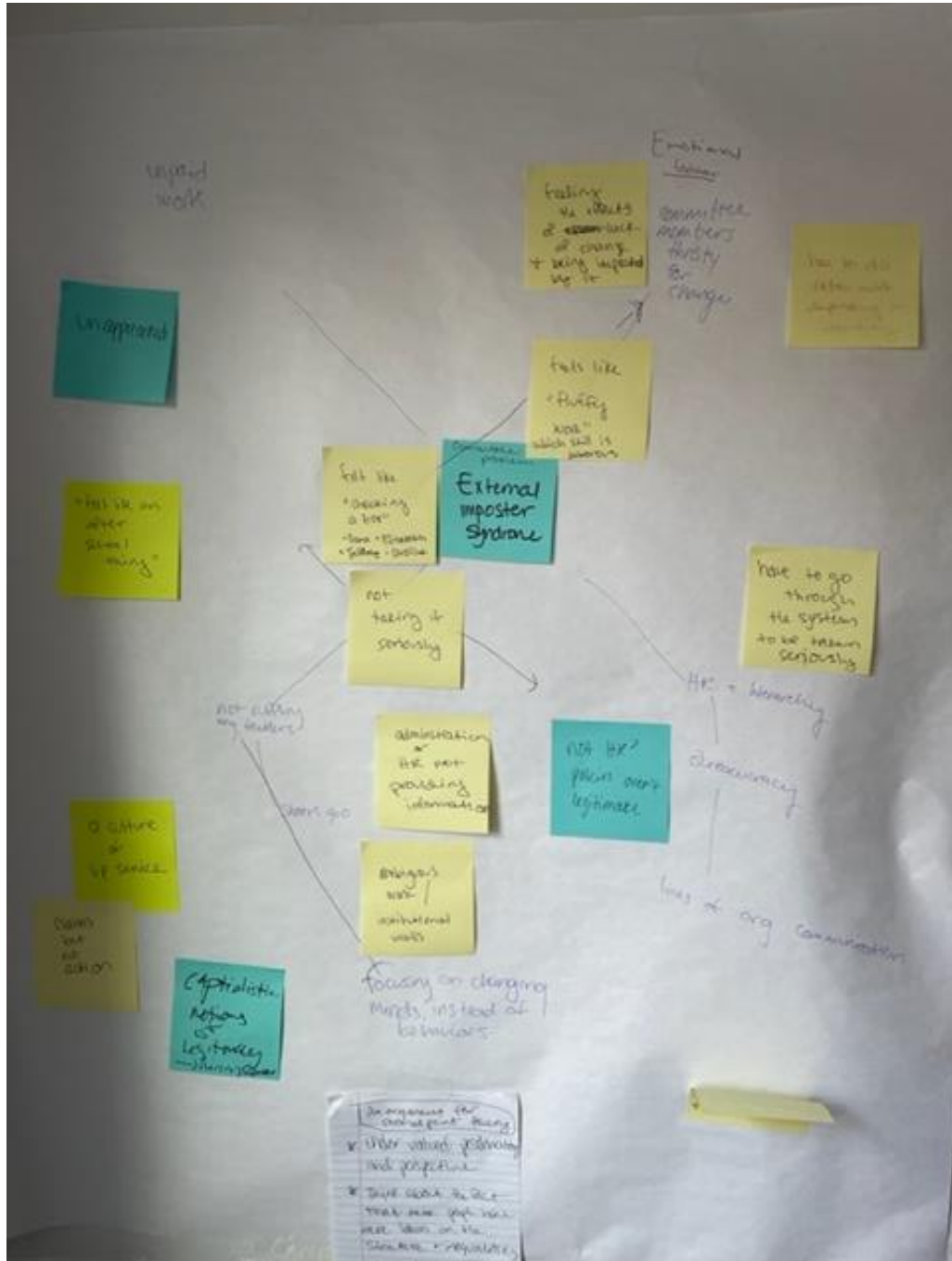
I want to now move on to discussing how you think your organization's leadership can help diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives in your workplace.

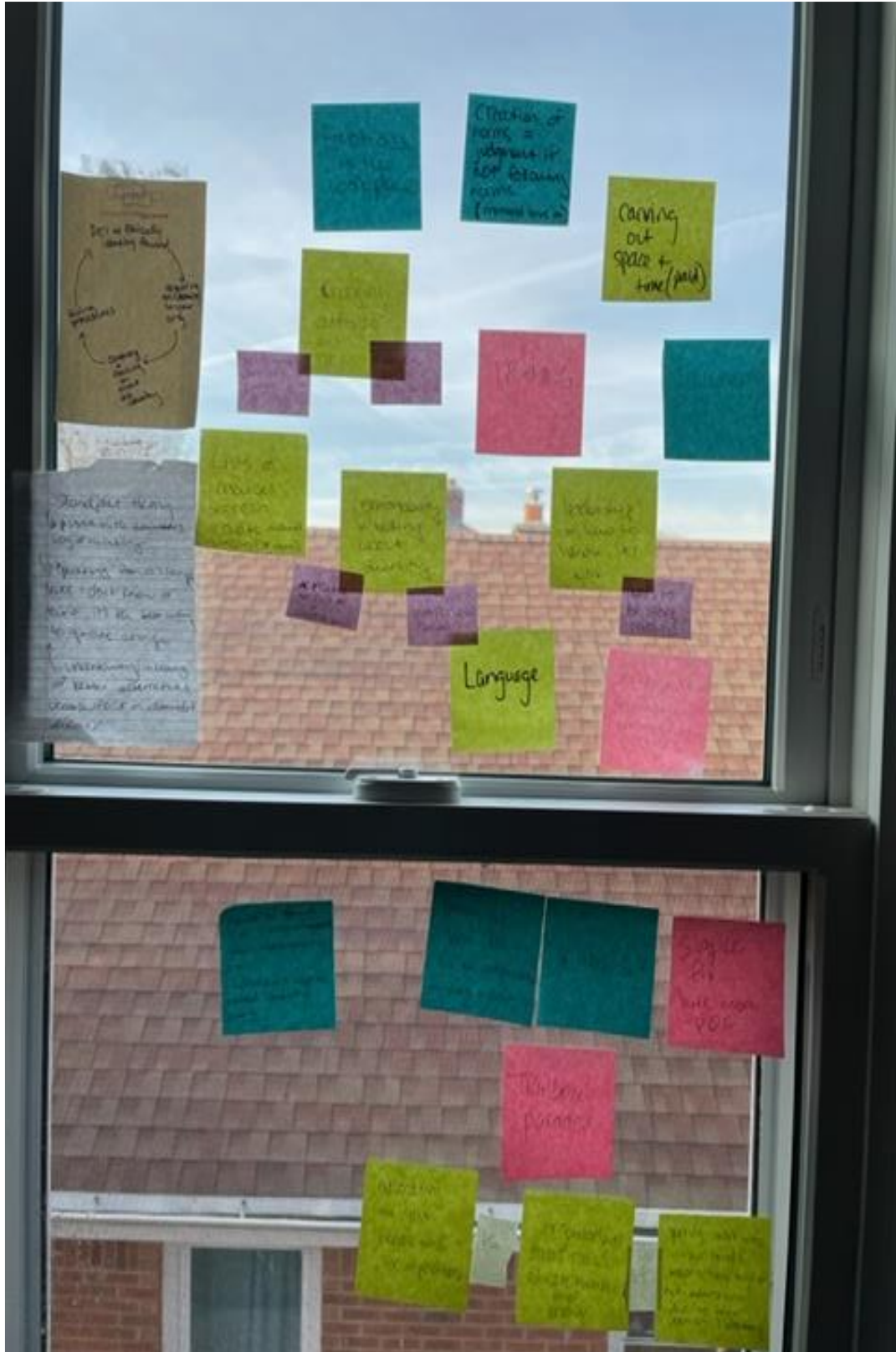
- In what ways do you feel supported by your organization's leadership?
 - Please share some stories that reflect how you feel (or do not feel) supported by your leaderships?
- How do you think organizational leaders can aid your work?
 - What have you seen leaders do that helps with diversity equity and inclusion?
 - What have you seen leaders do that does NOT help with diversity equity and inclusion?
- When thinking about how your organization handles DEI work where do you think training is most needed?
- What do you wish coworkers/leaders knew about the work that you do?
 - What are one or two things that would make doing this work easier?
- Is there any advice for organizations that are starting this kind of work?

Lastly,

- What else would you like to share related to your diversity work that we haven't already covered?

Appendix E: Brainstorming themes





Handwritten notes on a piece of white paper, including the word "Language" and other illegible text.

Creation of space in urban area

Creation of space in urban area

Carving out space + time (paid)

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Language

Appendix F: List of Codes

- **Marginalization of resources** – Needing more time, needing more funds, needing more resources, how diversity workers are marginalized due to lack of resources in order to conduct this work in a productive way
- **Bureaucracy** – present hierarchal systems in DEI work that relate to how informal diversity work occurs; going to channels in order to get initiatives passed through
- **DEI as controversial** – DEI work “ruffles feathers” and therefore gets shot down from administration, this type of work is viewed with inherent political bias attached to it which makes it a controversial topic
- **DEI work as ambiguous** – there are no clear guidelines on how this work should start and what should be done to improve the conditions of the organization; not having a clear-cut idea of what the type of work that they should be doing is; lack of knowledge on how to conduct this work
- **Emotional labor** – this type of work is hard because it does require a lot of emotional labor because these topics are sensitive and are also difficult to conceptualize because they inherently hurt people, this also relates to being just exhausted through having push backs against the institution; being passionate about the work, dedication to the DEI mission (double edged sword)
- **Imposter syndrome** - there is an imposter syndrome that stems from not knowing if they are the right people to do this type of work, not feeling like they are qualified enough to be doing this type of work, not knowing if they have enough knowledge to be doing this type work, relates to capitalism in terms of having someone paid to do this work inherently has more expertise
- **Grassroots work** – this type of work is detached from the institution in the sense that they created this without the help of their institutional leaders, this can include affinity groups, micro communities, mentorship, and working together to help create change
- **Training** – where training is needed problems within how DEI is organized and discussed and where this training should be focused on
- **Interpersonal communication issues** – DEI as being uncomfortable to talk about and therefore people don’t talk about it; a general sense of fearfulness in talking about race; not knowing how to talk about race and don’t want to mess up
- **Lack of institutional support** – instances where DEI workers feel like leadership doesn’t help or puts up institutional walls, instances where participants discuss frustration with leadership or how their institution is handling things; diversity often as PR that is done quickly and then finished
- **Institutional support** – where DEI workers feel as if they are given institutional support from their leadership (such as time, funds, listening to their needs even if they can’t give them their needs)
- **Centering identity** – discussions on how diversity work is related to their own personal identity and own lived experience
- **Decentering identity** – discussions on how diversity work is not related to their own personal identity, meaning that they are centering their work on someone else or something else that is not related to their own personal experiences
- **Organizational communication** → organizational lines of communication that occur within how DEI work is positioned through different lines of communication (might dovetail within bureaucracy and institutional support / lack of institutional support)
- **Elasticity of DEI work** → discussions of how DEI work is dependent on the situation or needs to be more revolved around the situation and context instead of making more blanket terms

Sierra Renee Kane

2930 N 73rd Street, Milwaukee, WI, 53210
(847)-337-6125

[Srkan@uwm.edu](mailto:Srkane@uwm.edu) (School and professional email)

EDUCATION

<i>Doctor of Philosophy, Communication</i>	May 2023
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI	
<i>Master of Arts, Communication</i>	May 2018
Texas State University, San Marcos, TX	
<i>Bachelor of Arts, Communication</i>	July 2016
DePaul University, Chicago, IL	
<i>Study Abroad Excursion</i>	
Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary	Sept. – Dec. 2015

RESEARCH INTERESTS

- DEI Training and Development
- Organizational communication consulting
- Applied research
- LGBTQIA+ advocacy

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Intern, Research Analyst	June 2022 – Currently
<i>National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wide scale research analogs and systematic research• Conducts survey research• Write ups summarizing current research initiatives for shareholders• Creates presentations for shareholders	
Intern, WISE Storytelling Initiative	September 2021-January 2022
<i>ASHOKA Worldwide</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inputted and organized interview research into large database• Transcribed interviews• Created written content for online website• Created infographics displaying trends in research	
Marketing Associate	June 2018- June 2019
<i>Berg Engineering, Arlington Heights, IL</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Created web content for engineering products• Wrote blogs for Berg Engineering• Built up services and products on website	

APPLICATION BASED EXPERIENCE

Instructor, Community Service Learning Project	Fall 2021, Spring 2022
<i>University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Community-Based Learning, Leadership, and Research</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enables service-learning project in Interviewing COMM 300• Trains and teaches students survey methods for project• Provide step by step training to class on how to conduct service project• Facilitates communication between community service members and students	

Consultant, WGSC Conference Support

Spring 2022

Women's and Gender Studies Consortium, UW Madison

- Content creator for a diverse array of instructors and courses
- Developed assignments and creative engagement ideas based on conference presentations

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, Gender Communication, 402

September 2021- Present

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Department of Communication

- Organized and constructed class itinerary
- Created assignments and discussions for class
- Generated thought provoking class activities

Instructor, Interviewing and Interviewers, 300

September 2020 - Present

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Department of Communication

- Organized and constructed class itinerary
- Created assignments and discussions for class
- Leads students in community service learning projects

Instructor, Public Speaking 103

July 2020 – Present

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Department of Communication

- Organized and constructed class itinerary

Graduate Instructional Assistant, Public Speaking 103

August 2019-May 2020

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Department of Communication

- Taught and facilitated labs focusing on implementing public speaking concepts
- Graded and taught informative and persuasive speeches
- Contributed to writing exams

Adjunct Professor, Communication 1310

Sept. – Dec. 2018

Texas State University, Department of Communication

- Generated content on a variety of communication principles
- Solely responsible for teaching content and creating labs
- Conducting and creating class agenda
- Translated information in a comprehensive and creative manner
- Ensured that students from a variety of different learning styles were accommodated – taught and adjusted each class based on their wants and needs

Teaching Assistant, Intercultural Communication 3252

Sept. – May 2018

Texas State University, Department of Communication

- Creating media criticism assignment wherein students watched a film and answered questions how it relates to intercultural communication
- Aided in grading weekly discussion and reflection posts
- Lead discussions on language and culture and post-colonial thought
- Aided in facilitating thought provoking and insightful discussion

Teaching Assistant, Advanced Writing for Public Relations

Jan.-May 2018

Texas State University, Department of Mass Communication

- Graded student papers regarding public relations concepts such as: newsletters, blog posts, crisis management, press release

Graduate Instructional Assistant, Communication 1310

2016-2018

Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas

- Facilitated discussion and labs

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Graduate Research Assistant

2017- 2018

Department of Communication Texas State

- Performed qualitative interviews and field notes
- Generated an open-ended questionnaire for participants
- Provided extensive research on area of study
- Hands on research within the San Antonio and migrant community
- Helped create codebook for 15+ interviews
- Familiarized with IRB process
- Co-authored study, pending publication

PUBLICATIONS

Sobre, M., **Kane, S.**, & Ehmer, E. – (forthcoming) The Double Edge Sword of Empathy, *Journal of Intercultural Communication*.

Riforgiate, S. Gattoni, A., & **Kane, S.** (forthcoming). Graduate Teaching Assistants' Liminality and Post-COVID Educational Legacy, *Covid and Higher Education: Teaching and Learning*.

Eger, Elizabeth K.; Litrenta, Morgan L.; **Kane, Sierra R.**; Senegal, Lacey D.. (forthcoming). "LGBTQ+ Workers." In Isaac West (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies and Communication*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.ORE_COM-01247.R1

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Godager, E. & **Kane, R. S.** (2022) *The Organization as the Bully: Parental Leave Policies*. Discussion panel accepted into the Organizational Communication Interest Group at National Communication Association [Top Panel]

Kane, R. S. & Holt, J. J. (2022) *Connecting Research and Practice: Five Research Based Organizational Training Modules*. Discussion panel accepted in the Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group at the Central States Communication Association.

Kane, R. S. (2022). *The Politics of Caring: A Cultural Analysis of Care Work and Women Migrant Workers in the Film Knives Out*. Paper accepted in the Women's Caucus at the Central States Communication Association.

Riforgiate, S., **Kane, R. S.**, & Coker, M. C. (2022). *Connecting and Re-Connecting the Community and Organizational Collaboration with the University and the Classroom*. Discussion panel accepted in the Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group at the Central States Communication Association.

Kane, R. S. & Eger, E. (2021) *Do Peacekeepers Really Keep the Peace? A Critical Analysis on Peacekeepers and Sexual Assault Allegations in Haiti*. Paper accepted in the Organizational Communication Division at the National Communication Association

Kane, R. S. (2021) *The Privilege of Purity: A Feminist Post Modern Discourse Analysis on The Bachelor's Peter Weber's Fantasy Suite*. Paper accepted to the **Top Paper** of Women's Caucus at the Central States Communication Association, Virtual.

Kane, R. S. (2020). *Masculinity as an Enthymeme of Sexual Consent: A Pentadic Analysis of Critic's Responses to the Film Midsommar*. Paper accepted in the Feminist and Gender Studies Division at the National Communication Association

Sobre, M. & **Kane, R. S.** (2018). *The Double Edge Sword of Empathy*. Paper accepted in the Social Activism and Chane Division at the A National Communication Association.

Kane, S. (2017). *Can Words Kill? An Analysis on Carter v. Massachusetts*. Discussion panel accepted in the Free Speech and Limitations at the Southern States Communication Association.

INVITED LECTURES

The Brand Lab, Milwaukee, WI

Interviewing and personal branding **2022**

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Active Teaching Lab – Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)

Facilitating Student Community-Based Service Learning **2021**

Gender Communication 402 **2020**

Guest Lecturer

Public Speaking **2020**

Guest Larger Lecturer

University of Wisconsin

OPID Spring Conference – The Joys of Teaching and Learning **2021**

Facilitating Student Community-Based Service Learning

SERVICE

Departmental

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Officer Position, President of CGSC **2021- 2022**

Officer Position, Activities Coordinator **2020-2021**

PhD Student Graduate Committee Representative **2020- 2019**

Representative, Graduate Open House **2020**

Judge at Public Speaking 103 Show Case **2020**

PhD Student Representative for GAC Meetings **2019-2020**

Texas State University

Member of Communication Graduate Students Association **2018 & 2017**

Volunteer at “Comm Week” **2018 & 2017**

Communication Discipline

Central States Communication Association Conference **2021**

Panel Chair (Top Panel)

National Conference Paper Reviewer **2021**

NCA Student Section	
Organizational Rhetorical Women’s Association Conference	2020
Panel Chair	
Central States Conference Paper Reviewer	2020
CSCA Student Section	

Institutional

Texas State University	
Judge for forensics at annual UIL regional tournament	2018 & 2017
Judge for forensics at annual Hill Country Classic tournament	2018 & 2017
“Bobcat Break” Volunteer Expedition	2017

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UWM Department of Communication Professional Development Seminars (2022-2023)

- Reviewing process
- The job application process
- Productive conflict in the classroom

UWM Department of Communication Professional Development Seminars (2020-2021)

- The Dissertation Process
- The Publication Process
- Case Studies in Research Ethics: Conducting Qualitative Research
- Diversity and Inclusion in the Classroom

UWM Department of Communication Professional Development Seminars (2019-2020)

- Qualitative analysis on gun violence
- NCA Panel Practice Presentations
- Writing for Publication

WORKSHOPS ATTENDED

- Anti-racist Pedagogy **2022**
- Trauma-Informed Care Workshop **2021**
- #AltAC: From Academy to Industry: Exploring Career Options Beyond the Academy for Communication PhDs, Christine E. Kiesinger & Eric. D Waters. **2021**
- “Feminist Pedagogy: Navigating Towards Just Boundaries” Melinda Brennan, Women and Gender Studies “Brown Bag Sessions,” University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee **2021**
- “Paid My Dues: Creating Milwaukee’s Feminist Music Culture (for Dorothy Dean)” Cheryl Kader **2020**
Women and Gender Studies “Brown Bag” Sessions, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
- Rhetorical Winter Workshop, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign **2020**
Rhetorical methodology course
Dissertation Writing

CERTIFICATIONS AND HONORS

Scholarships & Grants

WGS Florence Healy Scholarship (2022 – 2023) \$2,000.00
Dissertation Completion Grant (2022 – 2023)..... \$1,500.00

Community Service Scholarship (2021 – 2022) \$200.00

Research grant (2020 – 2021) \$600.00

Anti-Racist Pedagogy Certificate Training

St. Cloud University, 2022

Conflict Resolution

Certified Mediator in the state of Texas 2018

Peace Circle Facilitator 2015

Scholastic Recognition

GPA of 3.9, PhD University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 2022

GPA of 3.9, MA Texas State University 2018

GPA of 3.43, BA DePaul University 2016