

EDI as a Punchline

rashné limki

With the movement for Black lives claiming renewed visibility in the United States in the summer of 2020, and advancing momentum globally, people and organizations have been forced to reckon with the ongoing history of racial injustice in their midst. There has since been a flurry of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives across private and public organizations, including universities, intended to address racial inequalities within them.

A fundamental challenge to and for EDI work is that minoritized groups⁹⁵ – in other words, those who are the primary “objects” of diversity work – hardly believe that diversity policies and practices actually work. In general, there is little faith or trust amongst minoritized people that anything “EDI” related can or will have any meaningful impact on their personal and professional

lives. This claim is based on both, my experience and my research.

In fact, we might go as far as to say that, in the past few years especially, EDI has become a bit of a punchline. And, in my opinion, rightly so. This is because diversity work is largely perceived, and often undertaken, as a means of embellishing reality; of saying the “right” words and showing the “right” images, with much less consideration given to actually examining and undoing the structures and operations of an organization that perpetuate minoritization.

The mistrust and, often antagonism, from minoritized people towards diversity work stems from this notion of what Sara Ahmed calls “official diversity”. Ahmed’s proposition is quite simple but significant. Through her research she shows how diversity work in organizations is less

about addressing how people are minoritized and marginalized by the operations of the organizations, and more about saying and showing the right things. She writes:

“[official diversity] becomes about “saying the right things,” such that the official speech creates a cultural requirement about what can and cannot be said. ... To value diversity [becomes] to make diversity the right way to speak”⁹⁶.

Official diversity thus signals what activities organizations are willing to invest resources into and what they are less willing and able to commit to. For example, a university may choose to distribute glossy brochures with visual and discursive representations of diversity, rather than providing staff with the additional time and financial resources needed to build a more inclusive classroom.



More crucially, bearing witness to the constant repetition of official diversity is a big part of the lived experience of minoritized people in organizations, leading to a deep-rooted mistrust of the intent of and the possibilities for diversity work. And it underscores the fundamental tension between “diversity work” and the desire for social and reparative justice.

As Black feminist philosopher and American civil rights activist, Angela Davis, notes diversity work most often has very little understanding and interest in justice. Rather, as Davis notes, ‘I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity...is a strategy designed to ensure that the institution functions in the same way it functioned before... It’s a difference that doesn’t make a difference’⁹⁷. It is imperative, then, for organizations to be attentive to this mistrust when undertaking diversity work. For the possibility for meaningful change is contingent upon recognising the ongoing misapprehensions and failures of EDI work.

Centring the mistrust and failures of EDI work, would require us to ask new, and uncomfortable, questions. For example: Does the organization possess the competence and literacy to understand the experiences of minoritized people and the reasons for their marginalization in institutions? Do minoritized people perceive their colleagues, managers, peers, etc. as having the requisite competence and literacy on issues of racial minoritization?

In other words, are organizations “fit-for-purpose” with respect to the welfare and

well-being of minoritized people? Research on this subject often demonstrates that the answer to both questions is a resounding “no”⁹⁸. Moreover, decades of EDI praxis demonstrate that the possibility of a tangible – i.e. substantive, structural – shift in this circumstance, is remote. And, until then, organizations risk reproducing harm in the guise of EDI. This needn’t mean, however, that the project of EDI is a lost cause. Perhaps, for EDI to be more than a punchline, its meaning and activity need to be wrested back from organizational purview.