American Behavioral Scientist
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American Behavioral Scientist 2014 58: 347 originally published online 11 October 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0002764213503333

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://abs.sagepub.com/content/58/2/347

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Article

American Behavioral Scientist
2014, Vol. 58(2) 347–370

DOI: 10.1177/0002764213503333
abs.sagepub.com

Breaking Glass Ceilings, Ignoring Dirty Floors: The Culture and Class Bias of Diversity Management

Ellen Berrey[1]

Abstract

Research on workplace inequality focuses largely on gender and racial disparities at work and contributing factors, while those who study diversity interventions tend to ask how these might be remedied. This article takes a different tack, asking the following: What ideals and cultural assumptions about social progress undergird workplace diversity programs, and with what consequences? Drawing from neoinstitutionalism and workplace ethnography, I examine diversity management in a multinational company based on a year of field research. At this company, diversity programs are for high-status women and people of color. Findings advance the study of workplace inequality and, more generally, the relational study of meaning making in real-life institutional contexts. They show that diversity management programs attempt to minimize gender and racial boundaries by codifying egalitarian ideals in organizational structures, and those definitions can reify class-based hierarchies. The findings also push social scientists to conceptualize inequality and equality as cultural constructs and to consider the biases of scientific measurements of inequality.

Keywords

diversity, workplace ethnography, class inequality

"Chameleons are very good at survival," said Allison Kirkland, the executive vice president and chief information officer of a major *Fortune* 500 company, Starr Corporation, as she strode across the stage.[1] A photograph of a chameleon appeared on the huge screen behind her. "Blending with their surroundings is a defense. But

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imagine if you can, the life of a chameleon, looking so much like its surroundings. It isn't very inspiring." Allison, a poised White woman who wore a dark blazer and her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, was a featured speaker at Starr Corporation's Women Summit. Held in an upscale suburban hotel, the 2-day conference was for the most powerful women who worked in the company's U.S. offices. More than 300 executives, senior managers, and professionals filled the seats in the conference hall. Thick gold and red carpet lay under their feet, and ornate chandeliers hung above their heads.

Allison's talk was about being "The True You" at work. Earlier in the day, another speaker had noted that women represented 30% of Starr's workforce overall and 30% of its workforce at every salary level, up to the most senior executives. Allison reiterated that women had made great progress at the company over the past 15 years but, she lamented, Starr's corporate culture could be constraining. "Have we overachieved at assimilating in the workplace culture? Assimilating may have served us well, but have we gone too far?"

The next slide showed a multihued green Amazon parrot. "Unlike chameleons, the parrot's brilliant color complements—not blends—with their environment. They survive by living in the high treetops. They speak at the complexity of a human 3 year old." She played the sound of a parrot chirping energetically. "Think about you—are you blended, invisible in the workplace, or are you expressing the true essence of yourself?" She flashed to an image of entertainer Bette Midler—"A singing parrot! In fabulous green shoes!" exclaimed Allison. "We can be goofy about the shoes, but quite frankly, I think we've blended into the background." She closed by urging everyone to use the metaphors of chameleons and parrots at meetings and in conversation. "I think our essence is something we can leverage. . . . Let's sit on the highest trees! Stand out and be noticed and be the true you." Such remarks touch on central themes of the Women's Summit: the career success and self-actualization of individual women in high-status positions at Starr. These also are central themes of diversity management at the company writ large, as they extend to high-status employees of color and, under some circumstances, gay and lesbian employees.

Empirical research on workplace inequality focuses largely on gender and racial disparities at work and contributing factors. Meanwhile, those who study diversity management interventions tend to be driven by normative questions about how to remedy disparities. I approach these topics uniquely here, beginning with inductive questions about the cultural norms and assumptions that guide organizational activity. Specifically, how do corporate diversity discourses and practices construct the problem of inequality and its remedies? What notions of social progress do diversity managers uphold as desirable? And how do these cultural conceptions gain authority within the workplace and become consequential? To address these questions, I draw on ethnographic and interview data from a yearlong case study of Starr Corporation's diversity management programs. Building on neoinstitutionalist theory, my relational approach to these phenomena sheds important light on the cultural work, organizational practices, and power dynamics by which managers redefine symbolic boundaries of gender and race on egalitarian terms. One consequence, my findings reveal, is the adoption of a class-biased managerial model—one that denounces gender- and race-based obstacles while reifying broader dynamics of class hierarchy. Indeed, through diversity management initiatives, managers normalize an occupational hierarchy that glorifies executives and deems two thirds of the workforce irrelevant.

The Culture of Corporate Diversity Management

Diversity management consists of personnel policies, offices, programs, and initiatives such as trainings, mission statements, and task forces that personnel professionals characterize as relevant to diversity. It emerged in the mid-1980s in the context of expanding equal opportunity law, heightened concerns among executives about discrimination litigation, and attacks on affirmative action regulations by New Right activists and hostile political officials (Dobbin, 2009; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Personnel experts repurposed affirmative action programs as diversity management and popularized them with new rhetoric about maximizing the performance of women and people of color and reaching consumer markets (Dobbin, 2009). By 1998, 75% of *Fortune* 500 companies reported having a diversity program (Ryan, Hawdon, & Branick, 2002).

Diversity management represents one possible response to the well-documented problem of workplace inequality. A compelling body of empirical scholarship has documented racial and gender disparities within employing organizations, particularly in high-status jobs, and the contributing factors (for a review, see Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Skaggs, 2010). Although White women, women of color, and men of color have made advancements into craft, managerial, and professional jobs since the 1960s, they remain underrepresented (sometimes grossly so) compared to their White male counterparts (Tomaskovic-Devey & Stainback, 2007). Women and people of color tend to be tracked and marginalized in jobs that have lower pay, lower status, and less autonomy. These groups also face "glass ceilings": artificial, discriminatory barriers that prevent their advancement to the highest levels within the organization (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Kanter, 1993). Even when White women and people of color attain those levels, they report that they do not have more informal social power such as the sense of security taken for granted by White and male counterparts (Anderson, 1999), as Allison attested at the Women's Summit.

Organizational Scholarship and the Call for Relational Conceptions

Organizational scholars have recently called for relational analyses of the culture of workplace inequality and the interactive power dynamics that sustain it (Courpasson, Golsorkhi, & Sallaz, 2012; Roscigno, 2011; Vallas & Cummins, 2014). This line of work pulls from a large body of relational theory and scholarship that explains social life in terms of relations that are generated through action and interpretation within real-world constraints (Emirbayer, 1997; Mische, 2011). Relational scholarship examines, as its object of inquiry, a set of processes rather than a static group, place, or program (Vaughan, 1992, 2004). It understands power similarly: as enactments that re-create hierarchies and structural inequalities through relationships, interaction, and meaning making (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009; Roscigno, 2011).

One important way that workplace inequality occurs is through the categorical distinctions that people make (Vallas & Cummins, 2014). People and organizations use these distinctions to judge the value of one category relative to another. Those with higher status can mobilize such distinctions to their advantage, to secure greater resources and opportunities (Tilly, 1999). Categorical distinctions are defined symbolically; they create the sense that some sort of real boundaries exist between the things categorized. These symbolic boundaries sort people into groups of one sort or another and designate them as similar to or unlike other groups (Lamont, 2000; Loveman, 1999).

In the workplace, categorical distinctions and symbolic boundaries are often drawn around types of people according to their social status—gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and so forth—and around types of work such as manual labor, beauty care, or executive decision making. These conceptions are used to distinguish some people as "like us" and some work as worthy (Lamont, 2000). For example, Mexicans are supposedly best suited for "dirty work," while White men are assumed to have the authority necessary to lead. Inequitable conditions within workplaces depend on and heighten symbolic boundaries between men and women, White people and people of color, the old and the young, and so forth (Vallas & Cummins, 2014). These boundaries are inherent to "practices of division" (Wacquant, 1997, p. 229) in the workplace.

Diversity Research and the Call for Relational Conceptions

Diversity management also merits relational analysis. Since its inception, much of the scholarship on diversity management interventions has been motivated by normative questions about how to remedy disparities (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). In an exemplary study, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) show that structures that assign accountability, such as diversity departments and affirmative action plans, are most effective at increasing the representation of women and people of color in management. Case studies identify organizational diversity practices that generate systemic institutional transformation (Sturm, 2006). Other scholarship examines the performance of so-called diverse individuals and teams. The research objective is to pinpoint the group composition, managerial strategies, and other factors that improve performance (Brief, 2008).

Diversity management provides an interesting case for the relational analysis of workplace inequality because, as Vallas and Cummins (2014) observe, its core function is to reduce those activities and relationships that heighten boundaries within employing organizations. It is supposed to minimize practices of division, as Wacquant puts it. A relational analysis of the culture of diversity management begs for an investigation into diversity management discourses and practices in real-life contexts. Insights from two areas of sociological scholarship provide useful guidance for such an investigation: neoinstitutionalism and workplace ethnography.

Neoinstitutionalist research directs us to analyze organizational offices, programs, policies, reports, and the like as symbolic structures (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Meyer

& Rowan, 1977). These structures are "institutional myths," rather than accurate reflections of organizational realities. Their very existence implies that the organization is taking action. Furthermore, individual organizations do not concoct programs entirely on their own. Rather, they mimic other organizations, borrowing from peers and from HR trade industry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

A stream of neoinstitutional research examines diversity management to understand processes of institutionalization and the organizational transformation of law. Scholarship in this vein underscores the functional, pragmatic uses of organizational structures by examining their historic adoption and their transmission across institutional fields. Human resource personnel invented diversity management in the 1980s and 1990s by borrowing from long-standing personnel practices (Dobbin, 2009; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). They refashioned themselves as diversity experts to protect their jobs and expertise. Companies' new diversity rhetoric redefines and dilutes civil rights law in managerial terms (Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001). It adds nonlegal categories such as attitudes and emphasizes profitability and productivity. Employers now present their diversity programs, nondiscrimination policies, and personnel practices as evidence that discrimination has not taken place (Edelman, 1992), and judges treat them as such (Edelman, Krieger, Eliason, Albiston, & Mellema, 2011).

Ethnographic Insights and Relational Conceptions

Workplace ethnography is instructive for a relational analysis of inequality and diversity management as well. It expands the study of diversity management beyond a focus on efficacy or institutionalization processes. It also remedies some shortcomings of neoinstitutionalist analyses of diversity management, which rely on a limited notion of discourse as a justifying rationale and do not examine enactments of diversity management as they unfold in the course of everyday workplace interactions.[2]

Ethnographic research on workplaces attends to the ways that organizational participants engage with organizational culture and formal organizational structures (Morrill & Fine, 1997). Organizational culture suffuses people's everyday workplace experiences (Martin, 2001). It manifests through formal practices such as pay levels, informal activities such as behavioral norms, organizational discourses such as rhetoric, jokes and storytelling, rituals, and values, and topical concerns. People experience and understand organizational culture through interaction and in relation to other people (Hallett, 2010; Hoffman, 2007).

Ethnographic studies of organizational culture foreground the symbolic dimensions of organizations and organizational life by examining people's perceptions, experiences, and behaviors. Through observation of sites such as the factory floor, school administration, and government bureaucracy, ethnographers show how organizations and workplace dynamics are always shaped by interactive processes of meaning making. Research reveals the underlying conflicts between the priorities of employees and management (Gaventa, 1980), the disconnects between the ideals an organization espouses and its practices (Selznick, 1949), and employees' negotiations of the informal control exercised over them (Kunda, 1992).

These ethnographic insights provide important takeaways for the study of corporate diversity management. Diversity management is constituted through ideas, symbols, patterns of behaviors, and other cultural elements. Its meanings depend, in part, on the real-life situations in which people experience it. For example, employers in Denmark and India translate U.S.-centric diversity management practices to adapt them to their local environments (Boxenbaum, 2006; Poster, 2008). Diversity management practices will be characterized by interactive power dynamics among management, employees, and the company as an entity. In turn, processes of meaning making will influence how people understand diversity at work and how they act (or abstain from acting) around diversity issues.

Thus, a relational study of the culture of corporate diversity management calls for an investigation of meaning making in context. From relational scholarship, we see diversity management as a power-inflected effort to minimize inequality and the symbolic boundaries that sustain it. From neoinstitutionalism, we know to examine diversity management initiatives as symbolic institutional forms. From organizational ethnography, we understand that diversity management is locally adapted and interpreted.

Such an approach to diversity management can advance the scholarly understanding of workplace inequality. It reveals the cultural processes by which managers try to minimize symbolic boundaries of gender, race, and other identities. It identifies unspoken assumptions about inequality and equality and tacit understandings of social progress. It shows how these assumptions gain authority and legitimacy. More generally, it pushes the study of culture and power beyond a textual reading of discourse, where much cultural analysis of inequality ends (Wacquant, 1997), to show mechanisms by which discursive meanings becomes consequential.

Case Study

This case study centers on diversity management programming at Starr Corporation, a multinational public company that produces consumer goods. Starr is a very large, bureaucratic, and hierarchically structured organization. At the time of this study, in 2005, it was one of the largest companies in its industry in the world. It had annual net revenues of $35 billion. Headquartered in the United States, Starr employed approximately 100,000 people in more than 80 countries and sold products in 140 countries. Its products are widely available, and its brands are well known.

In 2004, Starr had approximately 50,000 U.S. employees, 36% of whom were women and 26% of whom were people of color. Around this time, in 2005, the overall U.S. labor force was 46% female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007) and 30% people of color (70% non-Hispanic Whites; Population Reference Bureau, 2008). Women and people of color also were represented in the top third of Starr's workforce. Of the company's exempt employees—meaning those who are salaried and not unionized or paid hourly—25% were women and 17% were people of color. Of the company's senior executive team, 22% were women and 7% were people of color. The representation of women in top executive positions at Starr was about the same as the national average of women in top executive positions (Caiazza, Shaw, & Werschkul, 2004) and higher than the average of *Fortune* 500 companies (Catalyst, 2006). I elaborate on these numbers, their uses, and their meanings later on.

Starr executives and managers began a broad diversity program in the early 1990s, as did their counterparts in many other large companies (Kalev et al., 2006). Starr's program includes a diversity management office with a director and four dedicated staff, employee trainings, heritage celebrations, and employee affinity groups. These various programs and initiatives are "identity-conscious" human resource structures because they take into account demographic group identity, in contrast to "identity-blind" structures (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). Since its inception, diversity management programming at Starr has focused on the human resource management of African American, Latino, Asian American, and female employees, particularly the hiring and promotions of managers, professionals, and executives. The company has human resources benefits and an affinity group for gay and lesbian employees, as well.

Starr Corporation represents an extreme case of diversity management. The company has received high marks in trade industry rankings of companies with strong diversity management. Its diversity platform is well developed and extensive. Starr is among those few medium and large private employers—11% nationwide—with offices and staff positions responsible for overseeing diversity management, affirmative action, or equal employment opportunity (Kalev et al., 2006). This aids my field research and analysis because I was able to collect more evidence about the phenomena that interested me and maximize the power of my observations (Stinchcombe, 2005). This case study is not meant to be statistically representative of any other phenomenon but, rather, theoretically meaningful because it allows for logical inferences (Small, 2009).

Analytic Approach, Methods, and Findings

The analytic approach of this study is interpretive and relational. I do not treat diversity as an attribute of empirical reality or a moral directive, but rather critically examine a set of processes I call the organizational push for diversity—or, more precisely, the organizational production, interpretation, and instantiations of diversity. Doing so allows for a deeper understanding of the interplay of organizational practices of meaning making, the mobilization of organizational resources, unequal power dynamics, and social hierarchies.

I conducted fieldwork in Starr Corporation for almost one year between 2005 and 2006, collecting evidence through ethnographic observations, interviews, and analysis of company documents. The locus of my field research was the Global Diversity Management Department, which was within the company's human resources division and physically located in the company's global headquarters office in a Midwestern suburb. There, I followed employee programming and other human resources activities that the company deemed relevant to diversity. The people engaged in these HR activities were upper-level managers and executives, whom I refer to collectively as diversity managers. Most of my observations were of formal organizational events such as meetings.

I conducted a total of 30 semistructured interviews with diversity managers as well as upper-level managers in multicultural marketing, recruiting, and charitable contributions. Of those interviewees, 14 were Black, 11 White, 4 Latino, and 1 Asian. In addition, 18 were female and 12 male. Notably, only 2 of the male interviewees were White, while half the females were White. Two interviewees were openly gay or lesbian. I had some contact with upper-level managers at sites other than the company headquarters and no contact with lower-level or unionized (nonexempt) employees.

My case study of diversity management at Starr is one of three in a larger project on the organizational push for diversity. The other cases for study are housing politics in a city neighborhood and affirmative action at a public university (Berrey, 2013).

Diversity Efforts in a Large Corporation

Diversity managers at Starr try to diminish gender and racial boundaries by socially constructing and pursuing an idealized workplace reality. They present gender and race consciousness and the expression of cultural differences as preferable to homogeneity, conformity, and favoritism for White men. Moreover, they define commonplace practices that might seem, at face value, neutral as in fact unfairly biased against female and racial minority employees. Such alternative conceptions of gender, race, workplace relations, and career development and corollary strategies of action are meant to counter unfair or undesirable workplace conditions. At the same time, diversity managers rely on and reinforce a class hierarchy—a hierarchy defined by job title, responsibilities, authority, and compensation.

As the remainder of this article shows, Starr diversity managers operationalize cultural ideas of diversity and equality through the design, scope, and implementation of diversity initiatives. The article demonstrates how such ideas manifest in the company's public relations rhetoric, its pragmatic descriptions of the workforce, its statistics on gender and racial representation, and its professionalization activities such as the Women's Summit.

Diversity managers engage in this boundary-diminishing work within the context of a well-established institutional order of managerial capitalism (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). The cultural symbols and ideologies and the material practices of diversity management are organized around a corporate logic. Diversity management treats the market position of the firm as the utmost basis of legitimacy. Diversity discourses, initiatives, and activities present top management as the prime authority, and they glorify that authority. The notions and strategies of upward mobility supported through diversity management define people according to their bureaucratic roles in the firm, differentiated by their status within the occupational hierarchy. Likewise, employees who participate in diversity initiatives are encouraged to define their identities in line with the corporation's demands, values and ideology of meritocracy.

The tropes and problem formulations popular in corporate workplaces, too, are pervasive in diversity management. When I asked diversity managers about "challenges" in diversity management, they responded by talking, instead, about "opportunities." They reiterated this same positive, aspirational tone when referring to the ideal at the center of their work: diversity.

Diversity as Ideal and Empirical Description

When people visit Starr Corporation's public web site, they can click through the section on Culture to get to the Diversity page. The text there begins with a Diversity Vision: Starr strives to become the top U.S. company capable of "attracting, developing and retaining the highest caliber talent" and "leveraging that talent" to accomplish "superior business results." Such statements are premised on the aspirational ideal of diversity. At Starr, this ideal appears in the forms of web site content, symbolism and logos, the names of programs and offices, mission statements, executives' speeches and press releases, and employees' everyday talk. One of the employee quotes on the Diversity page says, "We approach diversity with the same energy and drive that we devote to all our corporate beliefs." A company diversity logo depicts different colored hands holding up the planet Earth together.

In such public relations discourse, diversity is an aspirational, normative principle. The company extols the peaceful coexistence, unity, and productive cooperation of heterogeneous groups (see also Berrey, 2013). "Diversity" symbolically amplifies (cf. Roscigno, 2011) such coexistence, idealizing it as a higher end. Furthermore, such discourse indicates that the organization needs to actively facilitate diversity and inclusion. When I asked the executive vice president of global human resources, Tony, a White man nearing retirement, what diversity meant, he told me,

> Embracing all people irrespective of either those direct things such as race, gender, religion, things that you see, and those that you don't see, how they think, how they behave, their culture. So it's just making sure that you're giving everybody an equal opportunity, irrespective of their background or individual styles.

In diversity management at Starr, diversity also is a description of empirical reality. That empirical reality must be defined. The very term diversity is referentially ambiguous while, at once, it is othered—at Starr, it is racialized, gendered, and perhaps associated with sexual orientation and other social status differences. Its precise meanings depend on the social location of the speaker and their objectives, the audiences, and context. Diversity can refer to a mix of people or groups who differ in many unspecified ways, such as Tony's list of somehow analogous differences. It might include ethnicity, nationality, age, educational background, and other attributes as well as personal predilections such as viewpoint and taste (see also Edelman et al., 2001).

Yet, in the design and scope of Starr's organizational programming—beyond the public relations discourse of vision statements—diversity has a narrower definition. It typically means a few minority groups: people of color, women, and (much less consistently) gays and lesbians. The Diversity web page lists the company's 10 employee affinity groups, which include Women in Operations, the Black Sales Group, and the Rainbow Group.

Who Counts and Who Doesn't?

Starr Corporation collects internal data on the racial and gender composition of its workforce and produces reports on these data, and these diversity reports define who matters for diversity management. Produced quarterly and annually, the diversity reports define diversity as high-status women and people of color: those in the top third of the workforce as defined by their pay, benefits, and title. Technically, the data are on employees classified as exempt, meaning that they are administrators, professionals, managers, or executives who received annual salaries greater than $23,600 (in 2005) and were neither unionized nor paid hourly.[3] In 2005, 33% of Starr's U.S. workforce was classified exempt.

Starr's diversity reports show the representation of exempt female and racial minority U.S. employees as well as trends in their hiring, promotions, and annualized turnover. The reports further break down the metrics by corporate function, and they spotlight those functions with highest and lowest outcomes. Figure 1 is an excerpt of Starr's diversity report for the second quarter of 2005. As shown there, 73% of exempt employees in marketing resources were women, which was high in comparison to other company functions, while 25.9% of those in sales were women, at the low end.

Starr's diversity reporting is altogether separate from its reporting on affirmative action, which is required under federal regulations. The diversity reports define gender and race in much the same way as the U.S. federal government has defined them for equal employee opportunity purposes since the 1970s. The metrics duplicate the overriding concern in federal affirmative action programs with the numerical representation of anonymous minorities (Skrentny, 2002). Women and racial minorities are treated as distinct. Individuals are categorized into one of three major racial groups—African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians—and aggregated as "people of color."

Notably, the diversity reports do not track majority groups: men and White people. Furthermore, they do not include the bottom two thirds of the occupational hierarchy—the nonexempt employees who are either unionized (about a third of the workforce) or paid hourly (the remainder of employees). Diversity, in this context, is not the people who drive trucks, pack boxes on the factory floor, or clean bathrooms.

The diversity reports also provide a measure of disparity at the company: the percentage of women or people of color in the most elite banded positions compared to those in all exempt positions. Banded employees—vice presidents, directors, and senior executives—receive stock options as part of their compensation. They are categorized from I to A salary grades, collectively labeled "SG I+." As shown in Figure 1, the function with the greatest disparity in racial minority representation was research and development, with people of color composing 11.7% of the upper management compared to 22.1% of the exempt employees. This measure of disparity captures, quantitatively, the glass ceiling.

Starr's work of tracking internal demographics, especially in such a nuanced and fine-grained way, is considered a corporate "best practice" in the diversity

TRENDS	WOMEN	POC
Representation	↑	↑
Hiring	↑	↑
Promotions	↑	↑
Annualized Turnover	↑	↓

2005 2nd Quarter

Diversity Results, Total Starr U.S. Exempt Population

REPRESENTATION –slight increase for women and people of color

- **Women –** Overall representation increased from 34.1% in 2004 to 34.8% in Q2 2005
- **People of Color –** Overall representation increased from 17.8% in 2004 to 18.0% in Q2 2005

Functions with Highest Representation	Function	Percent
WOMEN	Marketing Resources	73.0%
	Human Resources	63.1%
	Legal	55.9%
POC	Legal	25.4%
	Marketing	24.1%
	Human Resources	22.6%

Functions with Lowest Representation	Function	Percent
WOMEN	Sales	25.9%
	Operations	31.8%
	Support Services	34.5%
POC	Support Services	12.7%
	Sales	13.8%
	Marketing Resources	16.4%

Functions with least Disparity
(Between representation of women at SGI vs. overall exempt representation)

	Function	SG I +	Overall Representation
WOMEN	Marketing	50.2%	54.3%
	Information Systems	30.0%	36.4%
	Support Services	27.3%	34.5%
POC	Human Resources	20.5%	22.6%
	Legal	23.3%	25.4%
	Support Services	9.1%	12.7%

Functions with most Disparity
(Between representation of women at SGI vs. overall exempt representation)

	Function	SG I +	Overall Representation
WOMEN	Research & Development	25.0%	46.4%
	Human Resources	42.9%	63.1%
	Finance	31.1%	50.0%
POC	Research & Development	11.7%	22.1%
	Operations	9.9%	20.0%
	Information Systems	11.7%	21.3%

Figure 1. Excerpt from internal Starr diversity report.

management industry, and Starr managers see it as such.[4] Their core responsibilities include compiling and analyzing the metrics and using them to set program priorities. One of the Diversity Department's most important activities is to produce aggregate reports for the company's senior executives.

The diversity reports symbolically indicate who counts in diversity management. When Starr executives and managers reference the numbers of "diverse" employees at the company, they typically mean exempt women and people of color—as if the exempt workforce *is* the workforce (or, at least the workforce that matters). For example, Starr's publicly available information sometimes misrepresents the workforce this way. In 2005, the company's web site stated, "Out of Starr's employee population in North America, 18% or 1 out of every 5 Starr employees is a person of color." This is incorrect; it is actually a measure of the exempt workforce. The correct figure is closer to 26%.

The diversity reports also establish, symbolically, priorities for action. Company executives and managers reference the metrics to signal concern with numerical representation in the upmost tiers of the company. When the company's CEO, a White middle-aged man known to be fastidious and intimidating, spoke at the Women's Summit, he said, "We're four women out of 14. If you want to know, I think that's not enough. . . . We only have one non-American and also one person of color. We don't have enough."[5]

Diversity managers also use the diversity metrics to guide their work—or at least they indicate that they are doing as much. At their internal meetings, these managers have lengthy discussions about the diversity metrics for their functions. In one meeting, Susan, an African American associate director of HR, explained the demographics of employees who worked in finance: "In terms of our diversity numbers, at the top there are very few women and virtually no people of color." She later went on to say how she was using that information as a basis of an HR strategy, "We broke down the Diversity Report to bands and salary grades to see where our feeder pools were [within the company, for the most senior positions], and there wasn't much there, either. So, we've focused on recruiting experienced women and people of color [from outside the company]."

The diversity reports construct the meaning of workplace inequality by quantifying identity-conscious categories. The quantification of race and gender designates those categories as objective and important (Porter, 1996).[6] The value of those categories is relative, expressed in relation to something else (Espeland & Stevens, 1998, p. 324). The reports mark some valued categories explicitly. The disparity measures set up an obvious comparison between banded and exempt employees, with top management prioritized. Other values communicated through the reports are implicit: exempt employees over nonexempt employees. Other values are altogether absent. The reports do not include categories for men or White people, so they do not compare dominant and nondominant groups.

The reports codify class status as an acceptable measure of social progress and high-status women of color and racial groups as worthy of organizational attention. The measures in the diversity reports are a crucial way that diversity managers formalize egalitarian relations—as symbolic boundaries—and make them part of official organizational practice. With these measures, the reports define inequality as the underrepresentation of high-status members of a minority group. Inequality is the disadvantage experienced by minority group members rather than, say, privilege enjoyed by majority groups.

This same definition of diversity is evident in the design and scope of other diversity initiatives, events, and affinity group activities at Starr. The Women's Summit and other large company diversity conferences are for exempt women and employees of color. The employee affinity groups typically meet and host panels and other events during work hours, when most hourly and unionized workers are not able to attend. Exempt employees are required to attend the company's introductory diversity training, which is a half-day class. Managers told me that nonexempt employees participate in diversity trainings and affinity groups at some plants and field offices, but this is not company policy. In sum, only occasionally, and not consistently, does diversity programming reach nonexempt, nonunionized employees. I consider the possible implications of this exclusion in the discussion. Before then, I show the class bias of the assumptions that undergird a the company's diversity professionalization activites. These activities rest on a managerial model of individual empowerment. According to such a model, managers minimize workplace inequality by providing high-achieving female and racial minority employees with opportunities to develop their personal skills.

A Model of Individual Empowerment for "Promotables"

Exempt women and people of color at Starr who hope to improve their experience at work or further their career can get involved in one of the company's affinity groups. Through an affinity group, they can attend monthly receptions and social mixers, receive email updates with professionalization tips, and attend events such as a Power Breakfast or Lunch-n-Learn with other affinity group members. They also might take on a leadership role in the group as, say, treasurer.

The express objective of the affinity groups is to support women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees. Company leaders point to the affinity groups as the crown jewels of their diversity management platform, describing them as the "drivers of diversity" at Starr. In interviews and at company meetings, diversity managers characterized the affinity groups' goals as providing employees with career coaching and mentoring, a sense of community, and resources for developing their leadership skills. One affinity group leader told me that her group, the Women's Sales Group, helps its members understand, "How do you play the game that's called Starr Corporation?" This emphasis on professional development is not unique to Starr's diversity management programs. The company has extensive resources for employee professional development and is recognized internationally as a great employer for career management.

Many of the affinity group activities center on self-help themes. One workshop organized by the Asian American Employee Group was a 2-day class called Successful Communication. The first day covered obstacles that Asian Americans confront when trying to communicate—their upbringing, religion, values, customs, and stereotypes that they themselves and others may have adopted. On the second day, participants were video- and audio-taped and then analyzed their own performance. According to Greg, a leader of that affinity group, the goal was to help Asian American employees counter popular stereotypes about their abilities:

> I sit in meetings where I know that if I am quiet too long, people will marginalize my role in the meeting. So as a male, as an Asian male . . . sometimes you almost just have to just overcompensate. I kind of walk in and just say, "Hey, you know I'm a player in this room. Let me give my opinion." Otherwise you're pushed aside pretty quickly.

The understood objective of Successful Communication and other similar professionalization activities is to help employees find greater satisfaction in their jobs, make desirable lateral moves, and advance to positions with more power and higher compensation. The activities are supposed to provide employees with tools to better understand themselves and their own limitations in order to grow—themes that Allison raised in her talk at the Women's Summit on chameleons, parrots, and "The True You"—and to better perform.

The Diversity Department also organizes Global Diversity Learning and Growth Seminars, which are specialized professionalization trainings for women and employees of color. Most of the internal seminars are run by an outside firm, and they can vary in cost from no charge to $1,300 to more than $3,000 for ones hosted by other organizations. Both the affinity groups and the functional units help to identify seminar participants and pay some portion of the cost of the seminar.

One especially popular diversity seminar series offered through Starr is called Efficacy. Starr contracts with a consulting firm to run it. Efficacy for Women and Efficacy for Professionals of Color focus centrally on individual empowerment and self-actualization. Donna, an African American woman who was one of the consultants, described Efficacy during her talk at the Women's Summit. Just after Donna began, a White woman from Starr who appeared to be a senior manager, jumped in to praise the seminar: "The most important thing you learn in Efficacy is what holds yourself back. It's a chance to be frank. Different cultures have different learning styles, but those can become an obstacle." The main message, she said, is, "It's not the stimulus, it's the response." Donna agreed: "That's exactly it." She showed a slide with the same statement: "It's not the stimulus, it's the response." Donna explained, "You can decide whether you're going to be reactive or angry" or clear-headed and proactive. "And figure out which way will serve you better." At other meetings and in interviews, diversity managers at Starr praised Efficacy and repeated this saying.

According to Starr diversity managers, workshops organized around self-empowerment themes are popular among so-called diverse employees. The chair of the African-American Group recounted for me what she heard from African American employees about the affinity group events they liked best:

> "Can I go to something where I'm going to learn to make me a better person?" "Can I go to something that's going to help me figure out this big and complex organization, or it's going to let me in on a secret that everybody else knows, on how to be successful, because I must be missing one." I do think African Americans like myself sometimes feel like there's this secret communication going on between everybody else and I'm kind of left out of it, so can I meet with other African Americans to learn, you know, what's going on behind the closed doors and the secret communications that I might not be a part of. It's those types of sessions that will draw the most people.

The Successful Communication workshop, Efficacy seminars, and other professionalization initiatives attempt to counter what Sturm (2001) describes as second-generation employment discrimination, which is distinct from violations of civil rights laws and rules. These trainings focus on exclusion that results from bias in patterns of interaction, norms, networking, and evaluation.

Through these professionalization initiatives, the company supports a managerial model of individual empowerment for exempt women and people of color. In this model, diversity managers facilitate the career success of so-called diverse employees by exposing them to resources, knowledge, tools of self-understanding, and relationships.

The empowerment model is best suited for high-status employees—managers, professionals, and executives. Those who enroll in Successful Communication, Efficacy, and other professionalization seminars are typically at a high salary grade but not in top management. Faith, a White woman who was the manager for diversity and staffing for global supply chain, characterized the individuals she sends to these expensive professional development trainings: "We train an elite group of people, you know, the people who are promotables and people who are high potentials." Likewise, the content of self-help professionalization activities addresses the career concerns of this population.

In general, the diversity managers and executives recognize that diversity management is not simply a matter of women and racial minorities adjusting their attitudes and behaviors. They reiterate the importance of a senior leadership committed to diversity, as is the creed in the trade literature on best practices. Diversity advisors and affinity group leaders regularly complain of midlevel (presumptively White) managers who do not understand or appreciate diversity. During a meeting of diversity managers, Melissa, an African American woman who was the director of global diversity, acknowledged the limits of an individual empowerment approach: "Efficacy emphasizes the theme of effecting positive change and taking control. . . . People may come out of that feeling very empowered, but they still feel they do not get their managers' support." At the end of my study, the Diversity Department announced it was adding new Efficacy seminars—Efficacy for Men and Efficacy for Management and Reinforcement. And the professionalization activities are not solely an individualistic strategy—they are not governed, exactly, by a sink-or-swim philosophy. In addition, the content of those activities commonly recognizes that the corporate workplace can be intolerant or insensitive to people of color, as Allison mentioned at the Women's Summit.

Nonetheless, the company relies heavily on professionalization activities tailored to so-called diverse employees. In so doing, it advances a managerial model that focuses on the self-actualization of the individual rather than, say, the modification of hiring managers' behaviors or legal penalties. These professionalization activities pose the empowerment of individuals, through skill development and savvy know-how, as a critical strategy for overcoming workplace obstacles.

The Downward Trickle and "Upward Spiral" of Diversity at the Top

When I asked diversity managers and executives why they focus on the upper echelons of the exempt workforce, they told me these jobs are the most important but least accessible to women and people of color. They said that focusing on those positions is the best, most efficient allocation of organizational resources. Jack, an African American HR executive who had been the company's director of diversity, explained to me,

> [Exempt positions are] positions of power and influence in the organization and also decision making about hiring, promotion. . . . [Exempt women and people of color] bring a different perspective, which allows what? More woman and color, you would assume, to be hired. It certainly increases retention because woman and people of color at a lower level see there is a possibility. . . . So you create this upward spiral of success.

Likewise, when I asked Faith about who was targeted in diversity management, she explained to me, "When we are strengthening and building the pipeline of our senior leaders, it's really the White collar population [that] is the feeder pool that we are looking at." I asked Faith about blue-collar employees. "The qualifications are different and separate. . . . For the most part, those are folks who do not have advanced degrees and are not looking to move up to be a very senior level person within the organization." Those blue collar workers are, by definition, not promotables.

Regardless of whether Jack's explanations are accurate (the empirical data are mixed) or Faith's assessments of the pipeline are correct (likely true), the comments are revealing about the culture and scope of diversity management. In this model of social progress—of scaling the top of corporate hierarchy—nonexempt workers are not priorities and, at best, are seen as passive beneficiaries of what management does.

From the perspective of Jack, Faith, and other diversity managers at Starr, programming targeted to exempt women and people of color makes sense. Pragmatically, it is within their control; it is relatively easy to reach exempt women and people of color are who excel in their work compared to, say, White men who are not promoting those diverse employees or blue collar workers with high potential. Professionalization resources often are sought out by the very employees that managers hope to retain and promote. Furthermore, professionalization activities for women and people of color are more easily executed than strategies that seek to diminish the power of men or White people. These initiatives do not require diversity managers to contest the power of predominantly White male managers or executives by, for instance, asking those people to relinquish power over hiring decisions.

Discussion: Why Class Bias in Diversity Management Matters

How might class exclusion in diversity management be consequential for nonexempt employees? While I was doing field research, I tried to learn more about nonexempt workers' experiences of diversity management, or lack thereof. I made many efforts through the Diversity Department to reach those employees. Every attempt failed. My simple initial request dumbfounded diversity managers because the lower status workers were so far outside their managerial purview of what was relevant.

There were many bureaucratic obstacles that exemplified (and, surely, exacerbated) the distance between the Diversity Department and nonexempt employees. The department staff members did not oversee nonexempt employees that they could easily refer me to. The associate director of diversity, Darnell, eventually put me in contact with a nonunionized hourly employee. Then I encountered a technological hurdle. With exempt employees, I could easily schedule appointments through the shared calendar system on the company's intranet using the ID, password, email address, cubicle, and desktop computer the company had provided me. But Darnell's reference did not have an online calendar. I played phone tag with that person a number of times—mostly me calling him—and eventually I gave up. Daryl never found a unionized employee for me to interview. He explained to me that such an interview would be difficult to set up, anyway, because of the union rules—who would cover that person's shift or pay for lost time? I gradually realized that I would need to conduct an entirely separate study to understand nonexempt workers.

Because of my limited research access, I can only speculate about the implications of diversity management's class bias for Starr nonexempt female, racial minority, and LGBT employees. From the existing research, we know that diversity management interventions, at their best, can make workplaces more equitable (for reviews, see Kim, Kalev, & Dobbin, 2012; Kulik & Roberson, 2008a, 2008b). They do so by providing instrumental career opportunities and socioemotional support that translate into access to more powerful jobs and greater job satisfaction for employees who are not White or male. Diversity task forces and offices, mentoring programs, and tailored recruitment can bring women and people of color into management (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Kalev et al., 2006). Now, nonexempt Starr employees—regardless of their racial or gender status—are not normally cultivated for management positions; this is an issue of economic inequality that top-down diversity management largely ignores. However, without diversity interventions, nonexempt females and people of color also might have fewer opportunities than their White and male counterparts to make (slightly more realistic) moves up into *nonmanagement exempt* positions or make desirable lateral moves.

It is likely that nonexempt female, racial minority, and LGBT workers miss out on the cognitive and emotional benefits that I observed among my research participants and that have been identified by other researchers (see Kulik & Roberson, 2008a, 2008b). Those benefits include information about the organization, knowledge of other groups, feelings of empowerment, and socialization that exempt employees can gain from trainings, affinity group activities, and mentoring. Without employee affinity groups, a gay White man who drives trucks for the company might miss out on the feelings of community and connectedness that come from building supportive relationships with other LGBT employees. Conversely, he may feel a greater sense of isolation and disconnection from the organization than his White, male, and straight counterparts. Without mentoring programs, a Black female administrative assistant might miss chances to expand her networks to include people unlike herself, who likely have more power within the organization. Without either affinity groups or mentoring, that trucker and the administrative assistant may be more likely to quit the organization, to be dissatisfied, or to remain stuck in the same positions. If we are to believe the claims of diversity management consultants, lower-level workers also may miss out on other benefits of diversity interventions, from decreases in pay disparities to fewer hate incidents.

These speculations, of course, presume that the demonstrated benefits of diversity interventions—such as expanding an individual's networks—would serve the needs of nonexempt underrepresented employees as they do exempt workers.

I heard from the leaders of the affinity groups that their positions as group leaders provide them unique opportunities to develop and display new skill sets and get exposed to people throughout the organization, hence improving their prospects of promotions of desirable career moves. Nonexempt underrepresented employees likely have fewer, if any, such opportunities. Furthermore, Starr's affinity groups provide a channel of communication between upper management and those they supervise. Without consistent access to affinity groups, nonexempt underrepresented employees have even less voice in the organization. As a result, upper management likely knows even less about their distinctive needs and is that much less likely to address those needs.

The class bias of diversity management could have implications for firms and labor markets as well. For instance, such bias might hurt company's economic performance, if findings from cross-sectional research—that a heterogeneous workforce is associated with greater sales revenues and relative profits (Herring, 2009)—hold true in longitudinal studies (Dobbin & Kalev, 2013).

This thought experiment raises deeper questions about structural problems of class inequality and hierarchy. Could diversity management even scale down? For example, would management really want unionized people of color employees to feel a greater sense of efficacy, which might strengthen union solidarity? Would management want to invest resources to help female cafeteria workers to move up the ranks, and, if so, where would they move? These issues extend beyond firms. Like civil rights mandates, corporate diversity management cleaves off class as a status of disadvantage. But both civil rights of nondiscrimination and government-mandated affirmative action have the often-unnoted advantage of applying to an organization's entire workforce. And industry insiders and many observers consider diversity management to be superior to state-regulated interventions and protections. With weak and diminishing state protections for workers and the rise of diversity management, with its façade of helping all employees, we see further retrenchment of a neoliberal order that treats lower-income people as of lesser value, irrelevant, and disposable.

Conclusion

This study of the culture of corporate diversity management shows how diversity management attempts to minimize gender and racial boundaries. Diversity management is, in part, a cultural effort to imagine and advocate for a diverse, inclusive workplace. It defines egalitarian relations at work through symbolic boundaries codified in organizational structures.

Specifically, diversity managers discursively redefine gender, race, social identities, and workplace relations according to a lofty ideal of diversity. They enumerate and track the representation of high-status women and people of color through diversity reports. And they organize professionalization activities that encourage the individual empowerment of so-called diverse employees. In this class-biased managerial model, social progress is equated with scaling the top of the corporate ladder. Diversity management rests on a class-biased conception of social progress and equality, one that prioritizes the experience and upward mobility of high-status employees.

The findings forward the study of workplace inequality and, more generally, the relational study of meaning making in real-life institutional contexts. They provide new insights into four relevant sociological topics. The first of these is the social construction of workplace equality and inequality. Diversity management is premised on notions of inequality and progress. These constructs are defined according to corporate and managerial priorities such as employee performance and logics such as career success. No one at Starr describes diversity management as an antidote to "inequality." Rather, they characterize it as the opening of "opportunities."

Scholars would be well served to conceptualize workplace equality and inequality as not only unfair conditions but also cultural constructs. Organizational scholars should be mindful of pitfalls of unreflexively adopting the terminology, concepts, and measures of diversity managers and consultants. Much existing research focuses on high-level and midlevel employees. Such policy-relevant research is vitally important for addressing the core problem of access to glass ceiling jobs and has immediate relevance beyond academia. However, by duplicating the assumptions of those we study about how to define the problem of workplace inequality and its remedy, we easily duplicate their biases.

Second, this article points to ways that categorical inequalities may be minimized at work to make workplaces more egalitarian. Relational research shows that inequality rests on symbolic boundaries that categorize and degrade nondominant groups. The implication is that greater equality can only be achieved by diminishing those boundaries. So how are symbolic boundaries diminished? Starr Corporation serves as a case of an organizational attempt at boundary minimization. It also represents a *purposeful* effort, in contrast to cross-functional teams and other organizational activities that generate greater gender and racial equality by happenstance (Kalev, 2009).

Diversity management at Starr officially categorizes people by their gender and race to positively value those categories. It turns the often-denied or denigrated boundaries of gender and race into visibly marked ones, denoting them as knowable and important. This seemingly simple categorization is pragmatically complicated and politically contentious. It raises the ire of conservative and libertarian observers, who argue that gender- and race-conscious policies exacerbate problems of inequality by drawing *too much* attention to gender and race categories (Clegg, 2007; Lynch, 1997). Under some circumstances, such as diversity trainings, it can be counterproductive to egalitarian goals (Kalev et al., 2006; Kulik & Roberson, 2008b).

Diversity managers also try to sever—in the words of neoinstitutionalism, to decouple—the popular association between executive and managerial positions and White males, which is another way to minimize unegalitarian boundaries. For example, they redefine performance evaluations, information through networks, and other common workplace practices as potentially unmeritocratic and biased in favor of dominant groups. In turn, they seek to forge new associations between those top-level positions and women and people of color. These managers depict and treat certain women and people of color as capable of upward mobility and leadership. Their activities focus on enabling the careers of women and people of color (rather than, say, minimizing favoritism for men or White people). In sum, this study points to various processes of boundary minimization: the decoupling of the gender and racial categories from job classifications, the imagining of an alternative to the current unequal social order, and the reification of the occupational hierarchy. New institutionalist findings on diversity management can be recast in similar light; for example, managerial practices such as adopting the symbolic categories codified in law and adding new symbolic categories (Edelman et al., 2001) are practices that might diminish (or exacerbate) social boundaries. Future research could identify and explain such organizational strategies.

Third, this article demonstrates the class bias of diversity management. Symbolic boundaries of class and occupation are always important in the Starr's diversity management practices, too, but not as a basis of bias. Diversity management relies on and reinforces a class hierarchy, specifically, an occupational hierarchy. The relative class status of women and people of color within this hierarchy is the measure of equality and progress. Diversity management, as practiced at Starr, normalizes the corporate hierarchy as the basis of upward mobility. It demarcates unionized employees and those hourly employees most disadvantaged to their class status as irrelevant to the goal of workplace equality or as passive beneficiaries. Class bias also is evident in basic definitions of obstacles and relevant organizational structures, such as professionalization seminars. Future research should explore the generalizability and implications of these findings.

Finally, this study builds on relational conceptions of workplace inequality by showing how symbolic dimensions of power are enacted in real-life institutional contexts. Organizational structures symbolically define workplace inequality and equality and can guide people's actions accordingly. Cultural elements—assumptions about social progress, stated ideals of diversity, and symbolically bounded groups defined by race, gender, sexual orientation, and class—are formalized through corporate diversity management interventions. Management relies on symbolic amplification to legitimize those interventions. In turn, interventions such as metrics make abstract notions of diversity concrete—in essence, these practices couple discourse to practice. Through this process, companies can create subtle (and not-so-subtle) pressures for employees to internalize, conform to, and accept diversity management assumptions. Ultimately, the symbolism of organizational initiatives can alter people's interests, beliefs, and behaviors in ways that facilitate certain egalitarian goals.

These insights suggest that relational sociology can be improved through the study of workplace interventions intended to be egalitarian. My research, for instance, suggests that legitimated and manipulative power dynamics may be mobilized to encourage *more* equitable treatment of some employees, contra Roscigno's (2011) observations. Relational sociology also can be improved through firsthand ethnographic observations. As this study reveals, organizational power is legitimated through mundane bureaucratic processes other than rhetorical claims. This complicates scholarly assumptions about coupling and decoupling. Symbolic power is not only or simply asserted through official discourse, the names of offices, or the text of formal policy. It becomes normalized, legitimated, and consequential through the design of bureaucratic structures and people's interactions with those structures.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) declared receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Support for this research was provided by the American Bar Foundation and the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy, University at Buffalo-SUNY.

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for the company and all participants, per my agreement with the company, and I disguise some details easily identified through public sources.
2. For critiques of neoinstitutionalism along these lines, see Hallett and Ventresca (2006) and Stinchcombe (1997).
3. According to the U.S. federal government, an employee who is "FLSA exempt" is not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act's minimum wage and overtime pay. Starr also used the categories of exempt and nonexempt to determine eligibility for benefits such as health care coverage.
4. The quantification of race and gender is not universally applauded. Racial data have a nefarious history as a tool of exploitation (see Hacking, 2005). Some conservative activists, such as the American Civil Rights Institute, consider the collection of racial and gender data to be tantamount to discrimination.
5. Starr managers do not face consequences for low outcomes on the diversity reports; this differs from affirmative action reporting, as the company can face penalties from the federal government if it fails to meet regulatory standards. In interviews, diversity managers repeatedly told me that the company leaders did not hold anyone "accountable" for improving the diversity numbers, although the company publicly claimed as much.
6. For an analysis of the quantification and positive valuation of race in college admissions, see Hirschman, Berrey, and Rose-Greenland (2012).

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