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Dispatch

Reflections on Advancing Racial Justice in Diversity and Inclusion

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Introduction

In late May 2020, a viral video showed a White police officer kneeling on the neck of the handcuffed George Floyd while he was in the custody of the Minneapolis Police Department, until he lost consciousness and eventually died. The video sparked outrage and a protest movement from a vast multicultural coalition demanding accountability to uphold the value and dignity of Black lives. This spilled beyond the USA and influenced global protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. I found myself, already a diversity, equity and inclusion practitioner, joining Americans of all ages and backgrounds on the streets, and raising my voice against the killing of Floyd. Long-standing demands for accountability and justice were reignited in these protests, and the sense of urgency and specific demands from organizers and activists was even able to capture the attention of corporate America, presenting an opportune, if not unprecedented, moment among diversity, equity and inclusion practitioners and leaders, and enabling Chief Diversity Officers to champion a racial justice mandate, through which to offer a pragmatic and actionable approach while avoiding performative allyship. I concentrate the lens of my inquiry on the experiences of Black Americans in US workplaces, rather than taking a broader view that includes non-Black people of color. Centering the Black experience is crucial because the current conversation on racial justice was prompted by demands for greater accountability for Black lives and futures.

I explore the dynamics of systemic anti-Black racism and performative White allyship in the discourse about the struggle for racial equity from my personal vantage point and professional experiences in advancing equity, inclusion and diversity in large, complex and matrixed organizations in

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government, philanthropy, technology, healthcare and higher education. Throughout my career, I've observed how performative White allyship or "optical allyship" manifests in "bold gestures" decrying racism in the workplace culture, when practices and policies continue to uphold oppressive systems (Yuan, 2020). I've consulted with and coached leaders on developing inclusive work cultures to ensure that publicly-facing diversity statements reflect the reality of employees, clients and other key stakeholders. For many proponents of diversity, inclusion and equity, the litmus test of racial equity is how people from marginalized social identities – especially Black employees – are treated, promoted and compensated in the workplace (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Newkirk, 2019).

Corporations Take a Stand on Racial Equity

Companies from different sectors and industries issued internal and public statements showing support for the Black Lives Matter protests, including, quite predictably, organizations that have been vocal and transparent about their support of racial justice, such as Nike, Ben & Jerry's, and Coca-Cola. However, the array of corporate voices also included organizations that have not previously aired their stance on the rising racial equity movement, such as technology and financial institutions. Statements are only a starting point, and corporations responded to criticism by pledging financial resources to combating racism. Money alone cannot help organizations escape the cynicism expressed by those who have been following the evolution of diversity, equity and inclusion work for many years, seeing only incremental changes. Businesses exist to produce profitability, and "profit-seeking organizations will do whatever is necessary to maximize their profit" (Hillard, 2020).

What will these new investments in diversity work mean for corporate America? Diversity and inclusion is not new to the for-profit sector: companies in the S&P 500 have been investing considerable resources – more than $1 billion a year – to address myriad diversity challenges and opportunities (Newkirk, 2019). The diversity function has traditionally delivered return on investment via quantifiable value proposition, known as the business case for diversity. This business case is buoyed by changing demographics that result in growing numbers of diverse customers and business partners. By 2045, it is estimated that the US population will be majority-minority (Frey, 2018). By 2027, people of color aged 18-29 years old will outnumber Whites in the same age group, essentially transforming the future of the US workforce (Frey, 2018). Competitive forces in a capitalistic system mean that consumers, suppliers, distributors and other stakeholders have choices in how they spend their resources of time and money.

Despite the emphasis on competitive advantage, a clear and straight line toward social equity and racial justice has not been present in many organizations. In more than 10 years of working as an in-house diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practitioner, I've observed that organizations often find it difficult to develop and implement concrete strategies to uphold diversity work. Diversity leaders face fierce resistance within their organizations in their attempts to foreground racial justice in leading change within predominantly White institutions. Conducting diversity work under the auspices of human resources in a multinational corporation, I've observed how recruitment, hiring, retention and promotion practices take center stage in organizational efforts to drive diversity measures. I've seen first-hand the tragedy of high-potential professionals of color who are recruited to join organizations whose cultures are not inclusive or welcoming of diverse identities. In many organizations, efforts to recruit diverse candidates fall short of goals to retain and promote top diverse talent.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue's groundbreaking research on microaggressions has prompted conversations about psychological safety and lived experiences of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant people of color in academia, the workplace and other institutions. Racial microaggressions are "daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 329). Everyday experiences of microaggressions exact an "emotional tax" on Black employees, causing them to feel they have to be "on guard" and diminishing their sense of psychological safety in interacting with superiors and peers (Travis et al., 2016). I've mourned alongside Black and Brown colleagues who suffered the impacts of the emotional tax of being othered at work, causing them to withdraw from taking risks and sharing honest and useful feedback about business operations and organizational culture. In work environments that cannot guarantee psychological safety, employees disengage, tune out, and worse, decide to leave the organization. High rates of voluntary employee turnovers are costly, involving significant administrative, hiring, orientation and onboarding costs, as well as lost productivity (Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

Counter-stories of Solidarity with Racial Justice

Before diving deeper into critical analysis, I offer key lessons from social justice thought leaders who challenge the concept of bystander or optical allyship practiced by those who stand on the sidelines, touting alignment with racial justice movements, but refusing to do the hard work of taking action and measured risks. To dismantle White supremacy and advance social justice, I've found that it's more effective to be a "co-conspirator": someone who is willing to endure the physical and emotional tolls of anti-racist action because they "recognize that they have a personal and collective stake in

taking on the cause of racial injustice" (Iyer, 2018). What does it mean to be a co-conspirator or accomplice in the struggle toward creating workplaces that are committed to racial justice? Leading equity work has allowed me to gain more understanding about the mechanics of Whiteness, and ways to disrupt them. This requires continuous learning, practice, grace and self-compassion. For example, my positionality as an Asian woman doing diversity work in the US offers an invitation to Asian and White colleagues to share their misgivings about how organizations are placing "too much focus" on recruitment and retention of Black, Indigenous and Latino/x employees. Implied in this rhetoric is the fear of exclusion from diversity initiatives that are rooted in dismantling anti-Blackness and anti-indigeneity in workplaces. As a leader advocating for racial equity, I cannot be neutral in my stance to take risks and action to stand with and for those marginalized racial and ethnic identities that are invisible in the workplace. To make meaningful difference and to sustain the momentum toward racial justice, I realized that I must be unapologetic and single-minded in focusing on how Black, Brown, Indigenous and immigrant people of color are kept out of hiring, retention and promotion opportunities. This is a difficult conversation to have with people who have not had a chance to reflectively critique how they benefit from their racial identity

I offer my own personal journey in cultural self-awareness to demonstrate the requisite personal work involved in harnessing ethics and values to lead social justice-oriented work. Relaying counter-narratives that uplift the stories and voices of people from minoritized and marginalized racial and ethnic groups is a methodological and analytical approach centered in critical race theory (CRT), one that confronts systems and hierarchies of racial power (Baszile, 2015; Bell, 1995; Yosso & Solorzano, 2002). I share my lifelong process of decolonization in the context of furthering cultural self-discovery and interrogating one's place in the service of dismantling White supremacy.

As a foreign-born woman of Filipino descent with professional and academic interests in advancing equity and justice, I've focused my work on developing and implementing programs that highlight the values of equity, diversity and inclusion to create and provide opportunities and access for underserved and underrepresented communities. In both academic and professional pursuits, my racialized experiences as an immigrant woman of color provide a critical approach to dynamics and realities that are perpetuated in academic and workplace environments where leadership ranks are predominantly White and male. As a non-Black person of color navigating US racial hierarchies, I am aware of my people's history and legacy of the struggle against colonialism. I acknowledge that the Filipino context of US imperialism and colonization is distinct from the sordid history of chattel slavery in the American South, the land grab and genocide of Indigenous tribes, and exploitation of impoverished immigrant labor.

I acknowledge that I benefit from racial hierarchies supported by White supremacy in a number of ways. In the US, Asians are held up as the model

minority, touting unrealistic standards of economic and academic success among newcomers from Asia in an effort to underline the narrative that meritocracy in the US works as designed (Hsu, 2015). The myth of meritocracy upholds the concept of "US opportunity structure" that is built upon "rugged individualism … hard work and sacrifice… and the conflation of democracy and capitalism" (Gorski, 2011, p. 160). Following this thread, the Asian American model minority myth asserts that racism and classism no longer exist, because recently arrived communities gain educational and economic advantages in an egalitarian society.

While Trump is no longer in office, the poison of othering that was unleashed during his tenure continues to suffocate the sociopolitical climate with racist and xenophobic narratives against Black, Brown, Indigenous and immigrant people of color. In established settler-colonial Asian communities, particularly in the Filipino-American (Fil-Am) community, robust conversations are happening to confront anti-Blackness and complicity with White supremacy. Since the start of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, numerous virtual meetings and webinars have engaged thousands of Fil-Ams from across the US, Canada, the Philippines and beyond. These conversations brought to the fore crucial issues such as the Philippines' colonial past and resulting colonial mentality, colorism, and White worship. Undoubtedly, these are difficult conversations for the community, especially in the context of Filipinos' propensity for avoiding conflict, maintaining group harmony and benefiting from proximity to Whiteness. Filipino-American academics – children of the global diaspora, such as Professors E.J.R. David, Zeus Leonardo, Cheryl Matias, Lily Mendoza, Kevin Nadal, Anthony Ocampo, Leny Strobel, and Allyson Tintiangco Cubales – are leading scholarly inquiries and nurturing activist spaces in an effort to unshackle the colonized Filipino psyche from White supremacy. These scholars are accomplishing this through analyzing the Fil-Am racialization experience through critical race theory, decoloniality and re-indigenization, and critical Whiteness studies, among other liberatory pedagogies. Their collective efforts are planting seeds of hope for the next generation of diasporic – often multiracial and multicultural – Filipino/a/x to grow and nourish into sustainable anti-racist solidarity movements alongside diverse communities of color.

In this context, I share my reflections on the implicit anti-blackness embedded in emphasizing "global" in diversity, equity and inclusion strategies. When a company states that they're enacting a global DEI strategy, it almost always means that they focus primarily on (dis)ability and neurodiversity, gender or sexual orientation, while sidestepping racial and ethnic issues altogether. I also want to note a self-congratulatory element among proponents of global DEI approaches, suggesting perhaps that they've already solved race and ethnic issues, and are now ready to move on to "real" DEI challenges.

I've observed that in emphasizing a global focus, business leaders and DEI practitioners become complicit in minimizing the insidious impacts of racism,

ethnocentrism, exploitation of foreign labor and other systems of inequity in global workplaces. I was once in conversation with a White HR executive who declared her joy about the growing diversity of a particular business unit, led by White US-born male director and associate director. Many of the staff were foreign-born South Asian men who speak the same language (in addition to English, of course). These South Asian engineers always gathered in the cafeteria together to eat lunches brought from home, perhaps one of the few moments during the workday that they felt truly supported by and enveloped in community.

Having grown up in Manila, many of my contemporaries are permanent guest workers in white-collar jobs all over the world. Rarely do they ascend to management ranks, despite educational attainment and work tenure. Diversity is increasingly our reality. The global workforce is increasingly diverse, because the global majority hails from Asian, African, Arab and Latin American and Indigenous origins. However, racial and ethnic power dynamics borne out of centuries of colonization, White supremacy and cultural theft in wealthy nations and in the global South don't miraculously disappear in diversifying workplaces situated in the US, Australia, Dubai (UAE), Brazil, the UK, and everywhere in between. The work of global diversity is conducted most effectively when partnered simultaneously with a lens of inclusion, equity, justice and belonging. Everywhere this work is done, one must not discount racial and ethnic considerations, especially in the presence of power differentials.

Diversity and Critical Race Theory

Capitalism and racism are intertwined in the American story of economic progress and empire building. There is ample documentation of the ravages of colonization on Indigenous people, chattel slavery practiced in the American South, and persistent institutional racism that continues to this day (Anderson, 2017). Despite volumes of supporting evidence to uphold these truths, it is challenging to gain traction – and a willing audience – in corporate environments to lift up narratives of historical and current manifestations of White supremacy, privilege and dominant institutional power. Cultivating a critical perspective to developing and deploying systems-changing actions in advancing racial equity may be bolstered by an intentional approach to how CRT may inform strategies for diversity management. CRT posits that race is a social construct without basis in biology (Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, the mechanisms of race and ethnicity in US society – how racial hierarchies are embedded in institutions and systems – have real impacts on people's everyday lives (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2008; Yosso, 2005). How people move through the world as cultural and racial beings impacts their lived experiences and life outcomes. CRT is an important tool for deconstructing systemic and institutional equity

issues by asking important questions: who has access to opportunities, and why? Who benefits from racial stratification?

In CRT, the concept of interest convergence was introduced by the late Harvard University Professor Derrick Bell. Interest convergence refers to the idea that "significant progress for African Americans is achieved only when the goals of Blacks are consistent with the needs of Whites" (Milner, 2008). An example of interest convergence is the so-called business case for diversity and inclusion, touted as an important lever in managing diversity in the workplace (Butler, 2018). As demographic shifts continue in the US, American consumers with increasing buying power are becoming more diverse. It makes good business sense for a company to invest in hiring and retaining diverse talent who can provide business intelligence on diverse racial and ethnic communities (Bendick et al., 2010). Despite its popularity among diversity practitioners, the business case for diversity has not yielded the desired outcomes for workforce diversity management. Disparities in hiring and retention rates of Black, Brown, Indigenous and immigrant people of color in US corporate workplaces have been the focus of multiple studies and programs, yet gaps continue to persist.

The Chief Diversity Officer: Accountability to Justice

Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in large, matrixed and complex for-profit organizations are typically led by the Chief Diversity Officer, a position that is becoming more integrated in corporate leadership structures. The 1964 Civil Rights Act necessitated the establishment of compliance officer positions during the 1970s and 1980s in highly visible institutions to establish standards of engagement among affirmative action policies and processes in higher education admission and federal hiring practices (Kelly & Dobbin, 1998). Beginning in the 1990s, diversity management transformed from its initial thrust in affirmative action and equal employment opportunity to align with organizational development goals. Chief among these is maximizing worker productivity in the age of globalization, which leverages both a "multidomestic and global approach" to respond accordingly to "economic, social, political, legal and cultural differences across countries" (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007, p. 1884). Recognition of the business community's social and ethical responsibilities to various stakeholders has also helped to cement the value-add of diversity management in the corporate arena (Stewart et al., 2011).

How should the Chief Diversity Officer leverage their position to advance racial justice? I've had the privilege of working for CDOs of color in various work environments, observing how institutional dynamics necessitated the application of different modalities to systems change. Chief among these approaches are multiculturalism and cultural competency, bringing a deluge of training consultants who specialize in unconscious or implicit bias. While

progress in advancing diversity work has been incremental, the Black Lives Matter movement has ignited a sense of urgency for organizations to speed up the pace of change toward anti-racism. After the murder of George Floyd, many organizations are no longer satisfied with applying isolated or "check-the-box" interventions, such as mandatory diversity training on recognizing one's biases. To seize the moment and advance racial equity, diversity practitioners have the opportunity to further galvanize their focus on championing racial justice by mastering the skills and tactics of change management. Research on transformational leadership has illustrated the importance of cultivating one's own values in order to effectively model the way. Diversity leaders must be prepared not only to impact leadership to influence equitable policies, procedures and distribution of resources, but also work on the parallel stream of reinforcing the values of racial justice and equity.

In reviewing job descriptions of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position openings in large, matrixed organizations, the leadership role is responsible for designing and overseeing implementation of diversity and inclusion strategies that include management and leadership development, strategic communications, talent development and employee engagement programs related to performance management, succession, learning and internship programs. Working in global work environments that are focused first and foremost on profitability, Chief Diversity Officers serve as the subject matter expert on organizational efforts related to inclusion, equity and diversity. The function is also responsible for internal communication efforts around inclusion and diversity programs designed for employees and external stakeholders. CDOs champion training tools to support the deployment of the talent programs and processes, where they are ultimately responsible for evaluating best practices to ensure consistency in sharing global knowledge.

Advancing the work of diversity and inclusion in the current social environment requires comfort and familiarity with grounding the conversation in the long-term application of justice and equity, with specific lenses on anti-racism, critique of Whiteness and intersecting systems of oppression. Evaluating how dominant-power dynamics are embedded in procedures and policies in various business processes such as talent management, supplier diversity, and communications can help the organization achieve clarity about change that needs to occur (Ferdman & Deane, 2014). To advance racial equity initiatives, the Chief Diversity Officer must be empowered to model the transformative work necessary for leaders to lean in to their cultural backgrounds and understand the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of identity. In order to highlight the harms caused by the invisibility of Whiteness in workplaces, there is growing urgency for the need to incorporate critical race theory, critical Whiteness studies, critical diversity studies, and antiracist education into organizational development literature and resulting practices in the human resources field (Bohonos, 2019; Swan, 2017). Creating space for meaning-making and

exploring the mechanics of Whiteness on everyday business operations and decision-making mechanisms – how it manifests in decision-making at all levels of the organization – is necessary to develop and implement programs that have direct effects on people's lives. Working at community mental health centers during the Trump presidency, I had the enviable opportunity to develop in-person workshop curricula for our clinical staff, many of whom are young White women in social work and counseling positions. In the large and diverse metro area, many patients come from diverse communities of color, including Indigenous, immigrant, asylee and refugee communities. While it was heartening to know that the clinical staff were interested in learning more about cultural considerations in healing and counseling, what was missing was desire and readiness to engage in cultural self-awareness. I identified this as a development opportunity, because therapists must understand how their cultural lenses impact how they show up as healers. I led discussions that centered around what it means to be White and the unearned benefits of Whiteness. Despite my efforts to model what cultural self-scrutiny looks like – for example, naming my own racial biases – these conversations were difficult and emotionally straining. On more than one occasion, participants cried while sharing authentically from their experiences. It's apparent that this work requires humble inquiries into the impact of power dynamics that dictate how people from diverse identities show up for each other in institutions that uphold racial power and privilege.

Conclusion

In my experience working in various types of work environments, I learned that even mission-driven organizations can develop toxic cultures that are resistant to change and oppressive of marginalized identities, stalling advancement of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Critical to promoting diversity and inclusion in any organization is defining an effective and achievable path forward for Chief Diversity Officers to accomplish impactful work that produces inclusive and racially just practices, grounding diversity and inclusion practices in critical lenses that interrogate how power dynamics perpetuate systems of oppression that permeate institutions. CDOs and diversity practitioners are responsible for fostering a culture and environment where employees are valued for their unique ideas and varied backgrounds, where different perspectives are heard and honored in diverse and inclusive teams that elevate the power of differences to create and nurture inclusive teams working toward shared business goals. Further research into the role of diversity officers is needed to shed light on how organizations can create structures of support to bolster racial equity in organizations that exist primarily to produce and maximize profits.

The historical pace and rate of change in diversity work indicate that the Chief Diversity's Officer's mandate to lead toward racial equity may be

difficult to achieve. In organizations that are invested in protecting the status quo, "lasting change will require constant vigilance" (Newkirk, 2019, p. 215). Research that examines dynamics of change leadership in institutions and systems will uncloak barriers that must be overcome to ensure that the CDO role is empowered to lead meaningful change in the organizational culture to champion racial justice. In order to build racially equitable and just workplace cultures, it's important to approach change through critical lenses that incorporate awareness of anti-Black racism and the "prevailing narrative of racial preeminence" (Newkirk, 2019, p. 217). In addition to developing personal resilience rooted in core values, the diversity leader must have unwavering institutional support and financial resources to withstand ongoing resistance to the work of diversity and inclusion.

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