

## The Real DEI Issue

Terry L. Howard  
Fang Yang  
Staci A. Kenn0  
Mithu Bhattacharya  
Raisa Moborrod  
Gregory W. Ulferts

University of Detroit Mercy

### ABSTRACT

It is essential to recognize the value of differences while understanding human nature. For Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), the individual is the operating force for navigating the interaction of such dynamics as race, culture, and social environment. Every person is shaped by factors that influence the individual's ethics, values, and morals. The fundamental core of DEI is that everyone is not equal. This research work investigates the intricate nature of DEI. Using real-world case studies to explore global perspectives, the authors demonstrate how DEI initiatives can impact perceptions and cultivate more inclusive environments. The goal is to explore the equality fundamental to DEI while understanding the intricacy of achieving equal representation in different societal contexts.

Key Words: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, DEI



## THE REAL DEI ISSUE

One unavoidable aspect of human nature is the inclination to dread and exclude the *other*, which stems from the evolutionary value of recognizing that people with different tribal characteristics represent a possible threat. As society has evolved, this has resulted in significant stratification of groups along socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, and religious lines. However, the collective survival of a society is often contingent upon recognizing the value of diversity, as a space where diversity is celebrated contributes to the betterment of all. Thus, in relation to *diversity, equity, and inclusion* (DEI), the human element of dreading the *other* is the driving force for navigating the interplay of social environment, race, and culture. The very essence of DEI lies in acknowledging that individuals are not homogenous; rather, every person is formed by a myriad of factors that influence their ethics, values, and morals (Read, 2021). While attempts to arrive at a standard definition that encompasses the essence of DEI, these definitions also resonate differently for each person.

This research work presents an exploration of the multifaceted nature of DEI. It examines the fluid nature of definitions for the term and the reciprocal relationship between DEI and the individual. The paper begins with a discussion on the variability in DEI perceptions across individuals, emphasizing the role of social environment, race, and culture in how they are shaped. The paper then explores how the integral components of *diversity, equity, and inclusion* are not universally desired, evaluating how and why DEI efforts are often met with social and political resistance. By examining the impact of DEI on individual ethics, values, and morals, an attempt is made to understand the connections between DEI and the core of human identity. Using real-world case studies as examples, the work attempts to illustrate how DEI initiatives have reshaped perceptions and fostered more inclusive environments.

Challenges in the courageous conversations necessary to address DEI are also analyzed, emphasizing the need for authentic, truth-driven dialogues. Positioned with a global perspective, the work contrasts DEI in Mexico, Asia, and the USA, highlighting how the diverse cultural and social dynamics influence its definition and implementation. The goal of this work is to argue for the equality inherent in DEI and analyze the notion of "everyone's piece of the pie," acknowledging the complexity of achieving equal representation in diverse societal contexts. Through a thorough analysis, the work intends to contribute to a nuanced understanding of DEI, its transformative potential, and the need for continued dialogue to create a more informed and inclusive future for all.

## UNDERSTANDING DEI: A FLUID CONCEPT

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), a term only recently included in the discourse regarding discrimination and equity, has its roots in the notions of social justice, progress, and equality. Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw (2018) addressed the need in her discussion of intersectionality, or the ways various elements of one's identity interconnect as driving forces on their ability to thrive in society. Getting to the heart of what DEI means, however, is a difficult undertaking influenced by individual perspectives. Exploring the fluid nature of DEI requires recognizing its definitions as dynamic constructs evolving based on the interplay of social environment, race, and culture.

## DEI DEFINITIONS AND VARIABILITY ACROSS INDIVIDUALS

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is, at its most fundamental level, a framework that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, particularly those who have historically been underrepresented based on identity or disability (Grubbs, 2023). While this definition casts a broad net, it serves as a guide for implementing principles that foster equitable and harmonious societies. However, even the definitions of concepts embedded in an understanding of DEI are inherently fluid as they are subject to diverse perspectives and the lived encounters of individuals.

The concept of diversity, for example, includes differences that move far beyond physical factors such as age, race, and gender. Other factors such as socioeconomic status, religion, and cognitive diversity are invisible, yet they are equally important when shaping an individual's life experience (Alfonseca, 2023). As such, what constitutes diversity for one person can differ from another because their understanding is influenced by unique life experiences and cultural contexts (Friedman, 2023). Such variability challenges the notion of a singular, universally accepted definition of diversity, revealing how the conversation surrounding DEI requires a nuanced and inclusive understanding.

Equity, within the context of the DEI framework, involves the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges (Minow, 2021). Again, the definition of this term is inherently subjective due to the impossibility of defining *fairness*. What is deemed equitable varies based on individual perspectives shaped by socioeconomic status, historical context, and personal aspirations. An individual facing systemic barriers may see equity through a lens highlighting the need to dismantle those barriers, while another who benefits from existing structures may see equity as maintaining the status quo (Arya & Rathore, 2019). Either case is valid in the context that improvements in one condition may result in loss of privilege to the other.

Inclusion, the third pillar of DEI, is similarly subjective and influenced by factors such as personality, cultural background, and personal preferences (Alfonseca, 2023). Inclusion may mean active participation and collaboration in collective endeavors and simultaneously hold meaning that encompasses individual spaces that honor autonomy and uniqueness. This again illustrates how the concept is individualized and difficult to define.

The fluidity of DEI definitions requires a departure from prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approaches. It necessitates an appreciation for the diversity within diversity itself. By recognizing and embracing variability in conceptualization and prioritizing DEI principles, it can be used as a truly inclusive and responsive framework (Greene, 2021). DEI is a tapestry of intricately woven threads representing individual experiences, perceptions, and aspirations that highlight the importance of adaptability and empathy in society.

## EXAMINING HOW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT SHAPES DEI PERSPECTIVES

The difficulty of pinning down an exact definition for DEI makes it evident that one's social environment shapes their perspectives on its three core principles. Family, community, and broader societal structures, along with the dynamic interplay between the three, contribute to the lens through which individuals perceive and engage with diversity, equity, and inclusion (Grubbs, 2023). However, different values associated with the core principles of DEI has led to

two different perspectives about the value, goals, and purpose of DEI initiatives. Both of these perspectives must be explored to understand how they intersect in the context of DEI, as analyzing the tension between these two perspectives can provide insight into the nature of the conflict between pro-DEI and anti-DEI perspectives.

### **The Pro DEI Perspective**

The pro-DEI perspective holds that promoting the values of diversity, education, and inclusivity at an early age is the best way to teach children about tolerance and the value of difference (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). From early childhood through adulthood, family perspectives are the most influential factors shaping individual worldviews. Within the familial context, early experiences and one's upbringing provides the foundation for everyone's understanding of DEI (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). Families that foster open dialogue, celebrate differences, and instill values of fairness contribute to an individual's possession of a positive DEI framework. Conversely, families that perpetuate exclusivity or harbor biases are likely to imprint a skewed perspective upon their members that hinders a full embracing of the principles of DEI (Kaltmeier et al., 2019).

As individuals are influenced by families during their early years, so too are they continually influenced by the systems within their communities. Community dynamics that actively promote inclusivity and value the contributions of diverse members nurture individuals with a broad understanding of and value the importance of diversity (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). Similarly, those communities that uphold discriminatory practices, devalue differences, and lack awareness of diverse needs contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes that hinder DEI progress.

At the societal level, systemic structures and cultural norms also shape DEI perceptions. Societies that work actively to address historical inequities, implement inclusive policies, and celebrate diversity contribute to DEI by ensuring support and value for the principles as they define them (Leef et al., 2021). Conversely, societies that marginalize certain groups or perpetuate discriminatory practices can create barriers to achieving true diversity, equity, and inclusion, even considering the diversity in the terms themselves.

Because the pro-DEI perspective holds that societal and community influences impact attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, pro-DEI advocates promote teaching these values in social institutions, such as schools and the workplace, as instilling these values with these institutional environments increases their social acceptance throughout the community (Leef et al., 2021). Aside from the ethical and social correctness of *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* (according to the pro-DEI perspective), the value of the institutional implementation of DEI initiatives is that they ultimately strengthen their respective institutions. Schools, for instance, can provide a more relevant and appropriate education that accurately reflects the experiences of diverse students. Corporations can benefit from diverse perspectives that enhance innovation and allow the company to better understand the needs of diverse customers. Healthcare institutions will be more effective when providing culturally competent care. Thus, each of these perceived benefits are why DEI initiatives are often championed at the institutional level.

While pro-DEI advocates often position *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* as ethical values, one does not necessarily need to accept this ethical connotation when promoting DEI initiatives. Rather, DEI initiatives can be supported solely by their tangible benefits, such as an increase in productivity, innovation, and/or a greater return-on-investment (ROI). The research literature is filled with articles supporting the values of DEI from a solely strategic perspective, such as

arguing that a diverse workforce is more likely to generate innovative ideas when compared with a non-diverse workforce. For instance, a healthcare provider that is seen as diverse, culturally attentive, and inclusive toward all patients will generate a competitive advantage over a provider that lacks these qualities.

As such, pro-DEI initiatives are often founded upon one of the following reasons: (1) diversity, equity, and inclusivity are socially responsible values that organizations are ethically compelled to observe; (2) diversity, equity, and inclusivity enhance the organization's capacity to operate and/or innovate, which often yields tangible business incentives such as greater productivity. However, although pro-DEI advocates often cite both the ethical and business value of the DEI framework, not all DEI advocates value these incentives in equal measure. For instance, those who are more ideologically motivated in their support for DEI initiatives might argue that diversity, equity, and/or inclusivity are paramount values that must be observed even if it is not in the organization's strategic interest to do so. This position holds that an organization's responsibility to social justice is paramount, particularly if the DEI initiative is intended to address previous injustice. Conversely, many organizations may support DEI initiatives for their strategic value alone, recognizing that a diverse workforce is more likely to generate innovative ideas when compared with a non-diverse workforce. These organizations may be more willing to rescind their support for DEI initiatives if they are no longer perceived as strategically favorable. Microsoft, for instance, recently disbanded its DEI department after deeming that diversity initiatives were "no longer business critical" (Burton, 2024, para. 1). Thus, even though organizational support for DEI is normative and common in the modern era, not all organizations support DEI initiatives for the same reasons or to the same degree.

### **The Anti-DEI Perspective**

Because the DEI framework has been increasingly supported by both federal policy and corporate practice throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has also become politically controversial (Lister et al., 2024). Some anti-DEI sentiment is undoubtedly motivated by racism, misogyny, and white supremacy, as each of these ideological motivations are inherently exclusive, elitist, and/or inequitable (Lister et al., 2024). Thus, they inherently conflict with the fundamental components of DEI due to their lack of diversity, equitability, and inclusiveness. From this perspective, there is no middle ground with support for DEI initiatives, as the fundamental concepts of *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusivity* are anathema to those that hold racist, misogynistic, or other hateful ideologies.

However, it would also be disingenuous to identify all objections to DEI policies or initiatives as an extension of hateful rhetoric, as this simplifies other objections that people and institutions may have toward DEI initiatives. Like the pro-DEI perspective, anti-DEI perspectives can also be thematically coded into the two main categories of (1) ideological objections, and (2) practical objections. The main ideological objection to the DEI framework is that it is also a Marxist framework, essentially promoting values associated with socialism and/or communism (Lister et al., 2024). This association stems from the promotion of *equity* as a core component of DEI. The Constitution of the United States, for instance, promotes the concept of social *equality* via the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, which identifies that all citizens have a right to equal protection under the law (Minow, 2021)). However, social equity is not the same as social equality, as *equity* refers to similar outcomes, while *equality* refers to similar opportunities (Minow, 2021). Thus, one of the concerns with the promotion of *equity* as a core component of DEI is that it also promotes a socialist mentality that places more importance on equal outcomes than equal opportunities.

Practical objections to DEI initiatives often stem from different perceptions regarding the inherent value of diversity and inclusivity. Although DEI is widely supported in the organizational business literature, much of the literature fails to address specific criticisms of DEI that might be considered politically incorrect or inconvenient. For instance, DEI advocates generally position *diversity* as an inherently ethical value, so any resistance to diversity is categorized as unethical (Leef et al., 2021). However, there are numerous theoretical scenarios that might emerge within an organization where DEI policies can come into question, depending on the specific extent of the policy.

For instance, advocates of DEI promote that all cultures should be equally respected, as promoting the values of one culture (such as Western culture) over another culture is inherently oppressive. Thus, many institutions will naturally promote tolerance and cultural awareness to facilitate an institutional culture that supports a diverse workforce. However, this is often the extent of consideration given to DEI initiatives when implementing policies associated with DEI. As such, many organizations will often mandate the need to respect the personal and religious beliefs of others, as the pro-DEI perspective identifies that tolerance and cultural awareness are paramount when promoting an inclusive work environment. Nevertheless, what appears to be missing from this conversation is how to navigate cultural differences that are fundamentally unacceptable across cultures. The DEI framework assumes that everyone can peacefully coexist once they become familiar with one another's cultural differences and preferences, but it does not provide guidance on what to do when the cultural differences are unresolvable.

As an example, age of consent laws differ around the globe, which essentially makes the appropriate age of consent culturally relative within the DEI framework. If a company hires a 45-year-old individual from this culture, and they eventually get married to a 16-year-old bride, would it be appropriate for them to bring their spouse to company events? This would still be legal in many US states, so legality would not be an issue. How should the organization respond if others start to complain that the relationship makes them uncomfortable? Should the employee who complains be disciplined for being intolerant? What if the employee is a victim of a previous abusive relationship and is emotionally triggered by this type of relationship?

This type of cultural conflict would involve different perceptions regarding the appropriate age of consent, which is culturally relative even within the United States. Mormon cultures, for instance, often promote youthful marriages, with some sects promoting polygamy. Should these be culturally accepted values under the DEI framework? If they should not be accepted, what element of the DEI framework justifies this exclusion? In other words, who decides which values to include if there are conflicting sets of values that are not mutually agreeable?

Other scenarios could involve an employee who refuses to work under a supervisor of a different gender due to religious reasons, or an employee who is intolerant toward LGBTQ+ individuals because they were raised in a culture that legally bans LGBTQ+ relationships. The employee who refuses to work under a supervisor of a different gender could be guilty of gender bias and discrimination, but at the same time, they may also be simply observing their religious doctrine. The DEI framework does not provide clear ethical answers to these questions, as when these issues are discussed in the literature, they are mostly discussed within the context of what would be legally appropriate. However, what is legally appropriate is not always ethically appropriate.

These are the practical questions that often accompany the anti-DEI perspective. Aside from those who hold openly racist or misogynist views, many who are wary about DEI initiatives

are concerned about the practical implementation of DEI. These concerns are often shaped by how one perceives the intersectional elements of race, gender, and sexuality, as shaped by their own cultural worldview and experience.

## **THE IMPACT OF RACE ON DEI PERCEPTIONS**

Race is not a biological reality but rather a social construct (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). As a product of society, the view of race is a force influencing the lens through which individuals perceive and engage with DEI. The encounters of racial minorities, which tend to be defined by historical injustices and systemic barriers, influence their outlook on DEI principles. These varied perspectives make discourse about DEI exceptionally complex (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Individuals from racial minority groups may extend the concepts of DEI beyond a mere acknowledgment of differences into the broader struggle for equal representation. They may see DEI as a necessary component of efforts to dismantle systemic racism and address microaggressions present in their daily interactions (Marijolic, 2023). The lens of race reveals the historical context through which disparities have been created, revealing the need for intentional efforts to rectify historical wrongs. Conversely, those from majority racial groups must acknowledge privilege, dismantle ingrained biases, and actively participate in creating equitable environments even when those efforts run contrary to their personal interests (Read, 2021). To authentically engage with DEI, these individuals must confront uncomfortable truths and foster a collective responsibility for rectifying both historical and contemporary imbalances.

## **CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON ETHICS, VALUES, AND MORALS IN DEI**

Cultural backgrounds are exceptionally powerful influences on how individuals interpret and navigate the concepts underpinning DEI. Cultural values, traditions, and norms shape individual ethical frameworks, values, and morals, adding layers of complexity to any attempt at DEI discourse (University of Edinburgh, 2022). Cultural influences are particularly evident in how individuals conceptualize what is and is not considered ethical behavior. Different cultures emphasize different ethical principles, from the individualistic pursuit of personal success to the collective well-being of communities (Steinbach, 2023). These cultural differences shape individuals' approaches toward DEI and the point to which they prioritize inclusivity and equity.

Cultures have their own value systems that further contribute to understanding and implementing DEI principles. Cultures prioritizing collectivism, such as various Asian cultures, may promote teamwork, harmony and conditions that foster inclusivity. Individualistic cultures, found in the West, champion personal agency and accountability (White House, 2021). These differences influence DEI approaches, with some valuing collective prosperity and others personal responsibility.

The concept of morality, which is often deeply rooted in cultural contexts, adds another layer to the discourse. Cultures with rich histories of inclusivity and acceptance often view DEI as the extension of their moral duty (Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2023). Conversely, cultures with long histories of exclusionary practices see DEI initiatives intended to rectify historical wrongs as misaligned and punitive. Those driving for change see DEI as a social justice imperative, while others may resist DEI as a threat to their way of life. Understanding

cultural influences is necessary to cultivate a DEI framework that resonates with diverse communities.

## **THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP: DEI'S IMPACT ON HUMAN FACTORS**

DEI as a concept cannot be imposed on society as a mandate for addressing past and present inequality. Instead, reciprocal factors must be considered (Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2023). DEI influences humanity as much as humanity influences the foundational concepts of DEI.

### **DEI as a Two-Way Street**

The relationship between DEI and human factors is inherently reciprocal. Each influence and shapes the other in a dynamic interplay involving a continuous exchange (Read, 2021). As much as DEI influences individuals, the understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion is shaped and reshaped by interactions over time. First, it is essential to recognize the effects of inclusion and examine the assumption that every person desire inclusion similarly. While DEI initiatives champion inclusivity as a universal good, the reality is that individuals possess varying preferences for inclusion, influenced by their personalities, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories (Newkirk, 2019). Inclusion requires active participation, collaboration, and contribution within societal frameworks for some. Others, however, find value in creating spaces that honor individual autonomy and uniqueness. Flexible and adaptable DEI approaches that respect diverse perspectives on participation acknowledge that the pursuit of inclusion must be tailored to individual needs (Marijolic, 2023).

Analyzing DEI's influence on individual ethics, values, and morals also reveals the reciprocal nature of the relationship. DEI initiatives are transformative agents, challenging preconceived notions, and broadening ethical frameworks. Simultaneously, individuals arrive in the DEI space with their existing ethical beliefs and values (Steinbach, 2023). This shapes the trajectory and impact of DEI initiatives with reciprocity emphasizing the vibrant nature of ongoing dialogue and adaptation to accommodate evolving individual perspectives.

### **Unpacking the Effects of Inclusion: Does Everyone Want to Be Included?**

The principle of inclusion stands as a cornerstone of the work of DEI. However, a critical question must be addressed: Does everyone want to be included, and if so, does everyone want to be included similarly? Assuming the universal nature and understanding of the desire for inclusion negates the value of the person and, in many cases, efforts to create diversity and equity for all.

While DEI initiatives advocate for inclusivity as an unequivocal good, individual preferences for inclusion lie somewhere on the spectrum. For some, inclusion means active participation, collaboration, and contribution within a collective framework that values their input. They find value in a communal approach where shared experiences and collective efforts foster a view of belonging. At the other limit of the spectrum are those seeking spaces that respect individual autonomy and uniqueness (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). They find value and inclusion in environments celebrating personal expression without requiring collective engagement. Both perspectives are valuable, and both shape an understanding of successful DEI.

Recognizing and respecting the diversity of inclusion preferences is necessary to craft successful and effective DEI strategies (Alfonseca, 2023). A one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion excludes those who prefer a more autonomous experience. Thus, the challenge lies in creating environments and initiatives that allow for varied inclinations, ensuring that the pursuit of inclusion aligns with individual needs.

### **Analyzing DEI's Influence on Individual Ethics, Values, and Morals**

DEI initiatives can shape individual ethics, values, and morals in ways that underscore the reciprocal relationship between DEI principles and human factors. Exposure to varied perspectives, experiences, and cultures facilitated through DEI efforts provides a catalyst that challenges and broadens the understanding of what is considered ethical, valuable, or moral (Camp et al., 2022). Within the environment of DEI, ethics evolve from a set of principles to a lived experience. DEI initiatives encourage exposure to varied perspectives that dismantle preconceived notions and foster environments where individuals address ethical questions in a multicultural context. This creates a shift in ethical frameworks that contributes to ongoing dialogue about fairness, justice, and ethical treatment of diverse individuals.

Along with ethics, values inherent in various cultures also intersect with DEI, influencing individual moral compasses. Cultural norms that prioritize inclusivity and acceptance instill values aligned with the moral imperative to embrace diversity, and DEI initiatives are conduits that reinforce these values (Crenshaw, 2018). A sense of shared morality and acknowledgment of the intrinsic worth of every individual emerges in such situations. Conversely, existing ethical beliefs, values, and morals are brought into the DEI space, influencing the trajectory and impact of DEI initiatives. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between DEI principles and individual convictions emphasizes the need for ongoing dialogue as DEI continues to shape individual perspectives within diverse and inclusive societies.

### **Case Studies: How DEI Initiatives Have Altered Perceptions**

Examining real-world case studies can provide insights into the reciprocal relationship between DEI principles and human factors. They provide a way to understand how DEI initiatives have influenced individuals and been shaped by the perspectives and experiences of those it seeks to empower. For example, DEI programs have changed employee perceptions of diversity and equity within workplace settings. Using targeted training, exposure to diverse leadership, and implementing inclusive policies, organizations have driven shifts in ethical frameworks, values, and morals held by their employees (Friedman, 2023). These changes produced increased awareness of biases, greater empathy towards colleagues from diverse backgrounds, and a heightened commitment to creating inclusive work environments.

Similarly, higher educational institutions implementing DEI programs have experienced transformative impacts on student attitudes and behaviors (Economist, 2023). Exposure to diverse curricula, inclusive teaching practices, and initiatives promoting cross-cultural understanding have driven changes in ethical frameworks adopted by students. These changes have produced increased cultural competency, a heightened appreciation for diversity, and a commitment to social justice issues (University of Edinburgh, 2022). These case studies demonstrate the adaptability and responsiveness of DEI initiatives, underscoring the conclusion

that DEI is not a static set of principles but rather a dynamic and evolving force that changes in response to individual experiences.

## **BREAKING THE CIRCLE: CHALLENGES IN DEI CONVERSATIONS**

Because of the two conflicting perspectives regarding the value of DEI, conversations about DEI are uncomfortable at best and combative at worst. These types of discourse require courage to confront systemic issues and those residing deep within the participants themselves. By understanding the challenges inherent in conversations about DEI, it is possible, however, to overcome barriers and improve the outcomes they achieve.

### **The Need for Nuanced Conversations about DEI**

Amidst the pursuit of DEI, the need for nuanced conversations that transcend the limitations of standardized definitions emerges. Recognizing that the foundational terms of DEI are fluid is the first step to understanding how and why conversations about the framework must be adaptable and flexible enough to encompass various contexts (McKinsey & Company, 2022). While DEI principles intend to create inclusive environments, the complexity of human factors requires a deep, context-informed dialogue—standard definitions. However, essential starting points must capture DEI's diverse and evolving nature. Nuanced conversations, then, are essential to navigating the intricacies of individual experiences, cultural nuances, and the constantly changing social landscape (Grubbs, 2023). Because different individuals interpret and prioritize DEI differently, it is vital that those seeking change craft strategies that resonate authentically and create organic conversations with which participants identify.

A nuanced approach to DEI conversations necessitates acknowledgment that the definition of inclusion is not uniform, whether within the framework of a society, a subgroup, or sometimes even an individual. People possess diverse preferences for inclusion that are influenced by cultural backgrounds, personal histories, unique identities, and even immediate circumstances (Grubbs, 2023). By fostering conversations regarding these intricacies, organizations, and communities can tailor their DEI initiatives to align with diverse individuals' specific needs and aspirations.

The fluidity of language itself can contribute to the challenges involved in conversations concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion (Greene, 2021), as the meanings of DEI can differ across different languages and sociocultural contexts. Nuanced conversations investigate these linguistic subtleties, safeguarding that the language utilized does not create a barrier but rather a bridge that advances mutual understanding (Friedman, 2023). Embracing conversations about DEI invites diverse voices to the table, allowing participants to feel heard and valued. Such conversations also encourage ongoing self-reflection, recognizing that effective DEI strategies require adaptability and openness to evolving perspectives (Alfonseca, 2023). Engaging in courageous conversations removes rigid definition constraints, and more authentic, inclusive, and responsive approaches to DEI are possible.

### **Addressing the Circularity Issue: Can We Break the Mold?**

Circularity is a recurrent loop where standard definitions and discussions fail to create new ground. A pervasive challenge within DEI conversations is the circularity issue because of

the shifting nature of defining core terms. For instance, one might promote the value of diversity by highlighting how diversity promotes inclusivity. They might then promote inclusivity as the best way to achieve a diverse outcome. However, within this circular reasoning, the core benefits of diversity or inclusivity may never be adequately communicated. This cycle stems from a reluctance of participants to explore uncomfortable territory, hindering genuine progress in the pursuit of inclusivity.

Standard definitions perpetuate circular conversations by providing a limited framework that fails to adapt to the active nature of DEI. For example, any position that might be viewed as non-inclusive might be framed as racist, misogynistic, or bigoted, resulting in a lack of authentic conversation regarding the core point of contention. As such, paradigm shifts that encourage a departure from preconceived notions are necessary, as is the willingness to engage in uncomfortable dialogues (Rosencranz et al., 2021). Such efforts require participants to acknowledge that DEI is not a static concept but a dynamic force requiring continued questioning, exploration, and adaptation.

Breaking the circularity issue also involves actively challenging assumptions and embracing uncomfortable truths. It requires the creation of environments where individuals are empowered to express dissenting opinions, ask difficult questions, and share unpopular perspectives without fear of repercussion (Grubbs, 2023). This shift from circularity to expansive, multidimensional conversations promotes an authentic exploration of DEI that acknowledges diversity within diversity.

Breaking the mold of preconceived notions and instilling value for DEI requires an ongoing commitment to education and awareness by individuals and the communities in which they live. Cultivating a culture of constant learning creates space in which individuals can safely challenge their biases, question established norms, and actively contribute to reshaping the discourse around DEI (Wong, 2019). This is an uncomfortable yet necessary space; genuine growth and transformation can occur through discomfort. Addressing the circularity issue in DEI conversations requires a collective embrace of discomfort, an openness to diverse perspectives, and a commitment to uncovering the root causes of systemic issues. This approach creates the path for more profound, positive, and transformative dialogues that drive diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives from circular discourse toward meaningful, sustainable change.

## **THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: CONTRASTING DEI IN MEXICO AND THE USA**

Understanding the fluidity of definitions and the need for courageous conversations provides a theoretical approach to DEI that is, in practical application, more difficult to understand. Individuals, again blinded by their situations and the circumstances in which they approach DEI, often need to understand that different perspectives exist and are as valid as their own (Leef et al., 2021). Consequently, it is interesting to examine the concept of DEI from the perspective of different cultures with very different social dynamics - the United States, Asia, and Mexico - and how those social and cultural dynamics influence the understanding and application of the DEI framework.

### **Understanding the Cultural and Social Dynamics in Mexico**

Exploring the cultural and social dynamics in Mexico provides the opportunity for valuable lessons in DEI application that transcend geographical boundaries. Such an examination

can foster a more inclusive and informed approach to DEI that holds space for cultural differences and norms (Verdía Varela et al., 2020). Because it is a nation made up of several different indigenous and colonial cultures, Mexico's diverse cultural landscape demonstrates an example for embracing cultural richness as part of DEI strategies.

Mexico's cultural tapestry is composed of diverse traditions, languages, and histories, illustrating the depth of diversity that can exist even within a single nation. Embracing this complexity is a cornerstone for DEI initiatives emphasizing how cultural inclusivity goes beyond a mere acknowledgment of differences. In Mexico, celebrating the unique contributions that diverse cultural backgrounds have brought to the collective national identity informs DEI discourse and confrontation of uncomfortable circumstances and truths about existing inequities (Verdía Varela et al., 2020).

Mexico's cultural and social dynamics, including the complex relationship between government and indigenous communities, underscore the interconnectedness of communities and the importance of collective well-being. In Mexican culture, familial and communal ties take precedence over all else, highlighting the significance of environments that prioritize the community's prosperity (Verdía Varela et al., 2020). While individual success is valued, it is second to the needs of one's community. This collective orientation emphasizes the importance of considering the impact on the broader community when implementing DEI strategies.

The concept of "convivencia" is central to Mexican culture. This concept refers to harmonious coexistence, often in communities that live closely together. In Mexico, convivencia must be included as a guiding principle for DEI efforts (Verdía Varela et al., 2020). Creating spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can coexist harmoniously, sharing and appreciating each other's culture must be a central tenet of any successful approach. By embracing cultural diversity and promoting convivencia, DEI initiatives in Mexico can cultivate a more inclusive, harmonious, and culturally rich future for all.

The DEI movement in Mexico faces the formidable challenge of contending with prevailing social inequalities, encompassing economic disparities, uneven access to education and healthcare, and issues of corruption. These challenges form a focal point of Agenda 2030 as outlined by UNESCO (2015), signaling a pivotal shift in cultural and social dynamics concerning these disparities. The pathways linking public policy and the 2030 Agenda are being delineated. Education emerges as a critical component essential for instigating the necessary transformations amidst the intricate systemic and historical factors entrenched within Mexican society (De la Cruz Flores et al., 2023).

The existing communal and cultural structures in Mexico, including the concept of convivencia, contrast the structures across the United States (Verdía Varela et al., 2020). In examining DEI challenges and solutions in the USA, one must recognize the vast number of individual and cultural identities that characterize American society. Unlike Mexico's more homogenous cultural landscape, America has been seen as a melting pot of ethnicities, races, religions, and backgrounds. This presents both unique opportunities and distinct challenges for DEI initiatives.

### **Contrasting DEI Challenges and Solutions in the USA**

The United States, like many nations built on colonization and imperial expansion, has significantly diminished the impact of indigenous culture on contemporary American society. Consequently, a considerable challenge arises from the historical backdrop of the United States,

characterized by a legacy of systemic racism and inequality (Leef et al., 2021). Acknowledging the influence of this historical backdrop is essential for creating practical DEI efforts, as it requires the inclusion of efforts to address deep-seated, systemic disparities. From redlining practices to disparities in training opportunities, confronting historical injustices perpetuated by American society is a fundamental step toward fostering accurate equity.

The extensive geographic and demographic diversity of the United States poses challenges for DEI initiatives, particularly concerning regional differences. Successful strategies in DEI must be adaptable to the distinct needs and perspectives found in different states, diverse urban and rural environments, and various cultural contexts (Marijolic, 2023). Addressing these differences mandates a tailored approach rather than a one-size-fits-all model, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges faced by diverse American communities. What proves successful in the Pacific Northwest may not resonate in the deep South. Nonetheless, both areas require DEI initiatives that advance the conditions for marginalized populations in their communities.

Despite its challenges, the diversity of the United States also serves as a source of innovative solutions to DEI issues that can be models for other societies. The dynamic interplay of cultures, perspectives, and experiences offers endless opportunities to implement creative DEI strategies, including solutions recognizing and celebrating the multiplicity of identities. Unsuccessful attempts at DEI strategies in one area may be tailor-made for another community, allowing for the exchange of ideas and attitudes within the United States and outside of the country (Leef et al., 2021). In navigating the tapestry of identities within the United States, DEI solutions must be intersectional. By recognizing this complexity and tailoring solutions to its unique dynamics, DEI initiatives in the United States can result in a more equitable and inclusive society that embraces its multifaceted identities.

### **Lessons Learned: Bridging the Gap Between Diverse Societies**

Mexican and American cultures are distinct, and their societies exhibit significant differences, offering separate foundations for understanding how DEI initiatives can be tailored to diverse needs. The exploration of these distinct cultures, each with unique historical and social systems, imparts valuable lessons on bridging gaps and promoting a connected global community. One central theme of these lessons is the recognition of common humanity amidst diversity.

In the cultural landscapes of the United States and Mexico, both societies must embrace the richness of their cultural diversity among their populations. While the specifics of cultural practices differ, the underlying thread of shared human experiences and aspirations binds these societies together. Lessons from Mexico underscore the importance of celebrating cultural richness and togetherness, while insights from America emphasize the need to navigate a wider variety of identities informed by historical injustices. The convergence of these lessons exists at a nexus where the human desire for recognition, respect, and inclusion is clarified.

### **Implications for Global DEI Initiatives**

The lessons provided when exploring the cultural and social dynamics in Mexico and the United States demonstrate significant implications for global DEI initiatives. Recognizing cultural richness as a cornerstone of inclusivity resonates globally, underscoring the importance

of tailoring DEI strategies to celebrate unique identities within each society, no matter where they are located (Arya & Rathore, 2019). Cultural, historical, and social contexts vary globally, demanding DEI strategies that are adaptable and responsive to specific challenges and opportunities. However, fundamentally, the outcomes and goals of those initiatives are constant. Lessons from Mexico and the United States demonstrate the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all approaches and the necessity for DEI initiatives prioritizing flexibility and cultural sensitivity.

While universal, the reciprocal relationship between DEI principles and individual perspectives also emphasizes the importance of localized solutions. DEI must not be seen as a collection of static principles imposed on societies but rather as a dynamic force shaped by the individuals it intends to empower (Gil et al., 2018). Such reciprocity indicates that successful global DEI initiatives must engage with and learn from the communities they aim to impact.

The emphasis on dialogue as a transformative tool has implications for local and global DEI initiatives. Encouraging open, authentic conversations is a universal imperative, creating space for diverse voices to be heard and fostering mutual understanding across borders and geographic boundaries (Alfonseca, 2023). As societies engage in complex dialogue, they will contribute to a global awareness of shared experiences and foster a sense of interconnectedness and collective responsibility for a more inclusive and equitable world.

The implications for global DEI initiatives lie in acknowledging cultural richness within and between nations, the necessity of a context-aware approach, the importance of localized solutions, and the transformative power of courageous conversations (Beeman, 2021). By embracing these ideas, global DEI initiatives can create a more interconnected, respectful, and inclusive world reflective of the diversity in the global human experience.

## **THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIA**

Research from Global North shows that firms emphasizing high DEI experience elevated levels of creativity and productivity (Ely & Thomas, 2001). The positive relationship between DEI and organization performance extends to various sectors including federal agencies (Choi & Rainey, 2010). People from opposite backgrounds, encompassing various ethnicities, cultures, religions, languages, and genders, contribute distinct perspectives compared to a homogenous group of employees. While South Asia is widely recognized for its diversity, any DEI discourse and initiatives in the region would be incomplete without addressing the caste dimension. South Asia is a vast region encompassing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives.

Contrary to Western belief, the caste system, which originated in the Hindu religion, is not restricted to India or Indians but has stratified most other countries in South Asia. The caste structure is a sociocultural and economic hierarchy that is extensive in South Asia as well as in the large South Asian diaspora around the world. Birth determines an individual's caste and is unchangeable and, as such, is inherently non-inclusive. Discrimination centered on caste is nearly universal in South Asia as well as in countries that have substantial South Asian populations, including Australia, the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

Globalization has made many organizations multicultural, and managers must broaden their views and understanding of workplace discrimination founded on caste. Issues of caste-based bias and discrimination are creating headlines globally. Leaders must recognize and prevent such discrimination to maintain a productive and healthy work culture. The issue notably

echoed in several recent United States' incidents. Soundararajan (2022) wrote a landmark report on the caste system in the United States, which created much controversy and helped bring caste-based discrimination regulation to the university campus. Several multinational corporations, like Alphabet, Amazon, Dell, Apple, and X, have recognized caste-based discrimination within their policies, and over 20 U.S. academic institutions have also incorporated caste as a protected cluster in their policies, alongside gender, race, religion, and others (Bapuji et al., 2023). Companies can clearly state in their worker conduct policies that discrimination based on the caste system will not be allowed and implement protocols that address occurrences of caste discrimination.

## **THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN EAST ASIA**

The cultural and social dynamics in East Asia, encompassing countries like China, South Korea, Japan, and others, are rich and complex, shaped by a unique blend of traditional values, historical legacies, and modern influences. Philosophical and religious traditions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism, have deeply influenced the culture, ethics, and social structures in East Asian societies. As a result, DEI in East Asia often intertwines with traditional values and norms, presenting a distinct approach to inclusion and diversity that differs from Western models. In China and other East Asian countries, Confucianism, with its emphasis on social harmony and tolerance of differences, aligns well with the goals of DEI and can be incorporated to support DEI attempts. Confucianism values social harmony, which can be interpreted as the presence of constructive, harmonious relationships amongst diverse groups. This perspective encourages accepting diversity to achieve a neutral and cohesive society (Berthel, 2017). The Confucian belief of *Ren*, which stands for humaneness or benevolence, promotes understanding and compassion towards others. This principle supports inclusivity by encouraging people to acknowledge and respect differences in culture, background, and perspective (Lai, 2018). Confucianism advocates for ethical leadership and the welfare of all members of society. This can be adapted to modern governance and organizational practices to ensure fair treatment, opportunity, and representation for all individuals, thereby promoting equity (Keung Ip, 2011)

Nevertheless, Confucianism's approach to DEI in East Asia is complex and evolving. While Confucian philosophy provides a valuable framework that can support some aspects of DEI, it may also present challenges in addressing modern DEI issues in their full complexity. For example, traditional social structures, significantly shaped by Confucianism, Buddhism, and other philosophies, often prioritize collective harmony and hierarchical relationships. This concept can lead to conflicts with modern DEI principles, which advocate for individual rights and equality (Fung, 2008). As a result, successfully incorporating Confucian and other various traditional values into an organization's DEI efforts requires a present-day reinterpretation of these values to ensure they are relevant and appropriate for the needs and complexities of diverse societies in modern East Asia.

It is also imperative to note that in recent years, the swift and strong economic development in East Asia has impacted cultural and social life and has presented a unique situation where it simultaneously supports and undermines these dynamics. While East Asian nations have rich historical roots, with civilizations dating back thousands of years, these countries are also defined by their recent economic growth, which is characterized by significant

advancements in technology, strong global trade connections, and robust investment in infrastructure and human capital. Economic prosperity has led to the overall improvement of society and provided resources for preserving and promoting traditional cultures. However, rapid financial growth has led to unbalanced distributions of wealth, with opportunities concentrated in certain sections of the population. This is widening the gap between different socio-economic groups, making it challenging to achieve equity. As industries and corporations grow, there has been a tendency to favor certain groups over others based on factors like gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, undermining efforts towards inclusion and diversity. Moreover, East Asia's economic growth has resulted in significant environmental sustainability issues, as pollution, climate change, and resource depletion disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged communities. Additionally, in the pursuit of economic growth, traditional cultures, and languages, especially of minority groups, have been overlooked or undervalued, leading to a loss of cultural diversity.

To foster an equitable and inclusive society, it is crucial for DEI advocates to educate the public about the various issues that arise from economic growth. By informing and engaging the public, DEI advocates can cultivate a broader comprehension of the necessity to affect a balance between economic development and the achievement of DEI objectives. This approach involves educating people about how economic growth can be aligned with the principles of DEI. DEI advocates ought to urge both government and non-government entities to implement policies and reforms to ensure the fair distribution of economic resources, as well as ensure equal opportunities in employment and education. The goal of these initiatives is to provide a wide collection of benefits to diverse groups within society. Finally, concerning environmental sustainability challenges, DEI strategies will be more effective when they incorporate an environmental perspective and explicitly recognize, and address issues related to environmental sustainability.

East Asia's intricate cultural and social dynamics are shaped by a blend of traditional values, historical legacies, and modern influences. Philosophical and religious traditions influence cultural ethics and social structures, presenting both opportunities and tests for DEI efforts. To promote a more equitable and inclusive society, DEI advocates need to address the challenges arising from economic growth and advocate for fair resource distribution, equal opportunities, and environmental sustainability. Education about these issues is crucial, aiming to balance economic development with DEI objectives and urging policy reforms for broad societal benefits.

## THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION UNDER DEI

Under DEI initiatives, religion is welcomed in a protective environment for various faiths and belief systems. In recent years, a major sign of progress for Muslim Americans was a shift in organizations' willingness to accommodate religious priorities without compromising an individual's career trajectory. Some Muslims have been able to pray their five daily prayers on time, adjust their work schedule during the month of Ramadan, and/or able to take the day off for Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha without it affecting the perception of their performance at work. The recent Palestinian conflict has heightened awareness among many Muslims that the concept of DEI does not genuinely apply to them. Instead, it is viewed as a superficial notion that is meant to placate them with half-hearted considerations of the Islamic faith.

Muslim Americans have come to this realization primarily because of the corporate perspective on the Palestinian conflict. Back in early 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, many organizations across industries did not hesitate to echo their support for Ukraine. They believed in Ukraine's right to defend itself against Russia's attempt to occupy Ukraine for several years. Palestinians are in the exact same position as Ukrainians, yet organizations shy away from speaking up for Palestine, citing that it is "too political" or that Israel has "the right to defend itself" as the occupier. This double standard is not a new phenomenon for Muslim Americans or for any demographic that has been historically underrepresented, highlighting how one of the challenges with unilateral support for other cultures is that these cultures will often conflict with one another. In this instance, it was simply unexpected for corporate organizations to be so obvious in their prejudice against Muslims—within their organizations and those in Palestine.

Some may argue that Muslim workers are not being hurt or impacted by their companies' lack of community support for Palestinians in the center of the conflict. However, in addition to being newly aware of the double standard that still applies to them, Muslim Americans are now being fired for voicing their support for Palestine. For instance, many, like New Jersey's Sidra Tariq, have been terminated or disciplined for voicing pro-Palestinian support. Tariq, a junior accountant at a tax firm, had taken PTO to participate in a global strike for a Gaza ceasefire and was fired through text the same exact day. The cause for termination was never explicitly stated by the employer (Calavia-Robertson, 2023). Tariq is just one of many who are being terminated or disciplined for practicing their faith and defending their community.

This treatment of Muslims in the workforce is not exclusive to average employees or Americans. Soccer players like Youcef Atal (Algerian player for OGC Nice) and Anwar El Ghazi (former Moroccan-Dutch player for Mainz) have both been disciplined for publicly supporting Palestinians in Gaza. Atal received a suspension by the French court with a \$49,000 fine (Guardian, 2023), while El Ghazi's contract was terminated after he doubled down on his support for Palestine (Woodyatt et al, 2024).

As such, the question regarding the true dynamic of the relationship between DEI and religious beliefs remains unanswered. If there is supposed to be a reciprocal relationship between DEI and an individual but an individual's religion is disregarded, does that not indicate that DEI is disregarding the individual? Or does it lead to a different issue on the authenticity and genuineness of organizations and their DEI policies? Here, the questions that echo the anti-DEI perspective begin to emerge due to the impossibility of being inclusive toward all perspectives despite *inclusivity* being a core component of DEI. Taking into consideration the efforts that were made for Muslim Americans in the work setting and the issues of DEI that arose due to the

Palestinian conflict, DEI regarding religion is an afterthought. It is taken into consideration only when necessary and not as a priority.

## **TALKING TRUTH: A CALL FOR AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS**

### **The Importance of Authenticity in DEI Discourse**

Many individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities, are keen on identifying a need for more commitment and dedication to causes that advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. Centuries of discrimination and marginalization have demonstrated a lack of authenticity that not only perpetuated but reinforced a lack of equity in their communities (Minow, 2021). In DEI's evolving global landscape, authenticity is a foundational element of meaningful discourse. Authenticity in DEI discourse involves genuine, open, and courageous conversations that address historical and systemic inequalities, acknowledge the complexities inherent in promoting inclusivity, and honor the experiences of those whose lives have been adversely affected by a lack of equity and inclusion existing in the systems that impact their lives (Crenshaw, 2018).

Authenticity is challenging for some because it involves significantly embracing vulnerability. Authenticity requires individuals to share their lived experiences, challenges, and triumphs, both positive and negative, and to hear those of the individuals they are engaged with (Alfonseca, 2023). Those who are committed to being authentic recognize that uncovering their biases, prejudices, and preferences is as important to change as embracing new approaches to supporting those whose voices have long been silenced in social discourse. Authenticity fosters an environment where diverse voices are heard and valued for the perspectives they contribute and the knowledge they bring (Grubbs, 2023). Openness creates space for authentic narratives of the oppressors and those oppressed, facilitating a deeper identification of the perspectives contributing to the fabric of DEI.

Most importantly, authenticity demands a departure from performative gestures that have historically been provided to create the appearance of equality and social justice. Genuine commitment to DEI requires tangible, sustained efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and promote equitable opportunities alongside recognition that those involved in the work may have been complicit in their construction and sustained presence (Grubbs, 2023). Authentic discourse challenges organizations and individuals to move beyond the superficial and engage in substantive actions addressing the root sources of inequality.

Authenticity builds trust; without trust, making progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion is necessary. Authentic conversations build up trust among individuals and communities, starting collaborative problem-solving and collective action (Grubbs, 2023). Trust fosters inclusive environments where individuals are safe to express themselves and contribute to advancing DEI initiatives, regardless of their past behaviors or future aspirations. In a place of trust, the desire for change is valued over the transgressions of the past.

### **Encouraging Open Dialogues about Values, Ethics, and Morals**

Every genuinely inclusive and equitable society embraces the moral imperative to encourage open dialogue about values, ethics, and morals. Such conversations invite individuals to explore and understand the intricacies of their beliefs, principles, and moral compasses in a

diverse and dynamic world (The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2023). They are provided with a non-judgmental space to express those elements of their identity openly, address misconceptions, and create a new program of shared values that is more equitable and respectful of the diversity present in humanity.

Encouraging open dialogue about values requires the creation of spaces where individuals feel empowered to express their unique perspectives without fear of being judged or retribution (Crenshaw, 2018). This necessitates a departure from prescriptive norms and embraces the diverse values individuals bring to the table, even when those values conflict with others in the group. By fostering an environment that encourages authenticity, DEI efforts address the complexities of individual values and promote cultures of respect for diverse ethical frameworks.

Additionally, ethical dialogues within the DEI framework challenge preconceived notions and foster critical thinking. Discussions about what is considered right or wrong within different cultural and social contexts can promote a shared understanding where individuals gain a deeper appreciation for the diverse ethical landscapes present in their communities (Camp et al., 2022). This process broadens perspectives while laying a foundation for ethical considerations transcending cultural boundaries.

Finally, open conversations about morals rooted in DEI initiatives contribute to developing mutual values and forming inclusive societies (Camp et al., 2022). As individual participants explore the moral dimensions of their beliefs, they may find discomfort but will also collectively identify common ground and fundamental principles that promote unity and understanding. These efforts create a shared moral compass that guides the creation of social policies, practices, and behaviors within DEI's framework.

### **Navigating the Challenges of Uncomfortable Conversations**

Central to the advancement of DEI initiatives is the imperative to navigate challenges inherent in uncomfortable conversations. Simply initiating the conversations is insufficient; instead, participants must be committed to remaining in the discourse through discomfort until positive progress is made (Greene, 2021). Uncomfortable conversations are integral when dismantling ingrained biases, fostering understanding, and effecting meaningful change within the DEI landscape.

Confronting biases and prejudices is problematic personally, making it a significant obstacle in the courageous discourse required to implement DEI strategies. Uncomfortable conversations require a willingness to acknowledge and address personal biases, even when they are long-held and deeply ingrained (Grubbs, 2023). Self-awareness and the willingness to address and change the ugly facets of one's history are crucial to fostering an inclusive mindset and challenging discriminatory attitudes.

Along with introspection, navigating uncomfortable conversations requires a responsibility to actively listen to the lived experiences and perspectives of others (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). It involves creating a space where individuals express their perspectives openly without fear of being judged, knowing that their expressions are being heard by those who may be uncomfortable by their roles in discriminating, excluding, or otherwise marginalizing specific populations. Active engagement fosters empathy and understanding, establishing an environment where diverse voices are heard and valued.

Discomfort also arises from confronting systemic issues that contribute to inequality. Courageous conversations in DEI's framework involve addressing past and ordinary structures that preserve discrimination despite the benefits received from those structures (McKinsey & Company, 2022). In DEI discussions, power imbalances can influence the ease with which individuals engage in uncomfortable conversations. Overcoming this discomfort involves recognizing the power dynamics that have created and sustained such privilege (Steinbach, 2023). Both individuals and organizations must question established norms, policies, and practices and actively work toward dismantling systemic barriers. Efforts must ensure that all voices are given equal weight and consideration.

### **Case Studies: Successful DEI Dialogues in Various Contexts**

Examining nations facing DEI issues is also helpful in examining successful DEI dialogues across diverse contexts. This can uncover valuable insights into strategies that can foster understanding and drive meaningful change on a more local level. The following case studies highlight the transformative power of authentic conversations in addressing unique challenges and promoting inclusivity.

Implementing structured conversations to address unconscious prejudice has been a practical methodology for successful DEI workplace initiatives. Organizations that provide a structure for open conversations about biases have encouraged employees to reflect on their perspectives and engage in constructive discussions with peers, leaders, and others (Ferraro et al., 2023). This approach has been shown to increase awareness and create space for tangible actions, such as revised hiring practices and mentorship programs that address bias within those organizations.

Inclusive curriculum design has been a successful driver of DEI initiatives in educational settings. The impact of incorporating diverse perspectives into educational materials has been seen in increased dialogues that challenge stereotypes and broaden students' tolerance of diverse cultures (Steinbach, 2023). An inclusive curriculum creates environments where all students feel empowered to engage in meaningful conversations about diversity from a young age, laying the foundation for a more inclusive society.

### **DEI AND THE DESIRE FOR EQUALITY: UNPACKING THE NOTION OF "EVERYONE'S PIECE OF THE PIE"**

Inherent in the notion of DEI is the understanding that everyone deserves equitable opportunities to live lives free of bias and pursue their notion of success (Crenshaw, 2018). This idea of "everyone's piece of the pie" does not mean that efforts must be made to dole out resources equally but that each person must be given the opportunity to use the same resources to pursue success. Thus, the desire for equality and success are embedded in the foundation of DEI initiatives.

### **DEI as a Quest for Equal Opportunities**

DEI represents a collective quest for equal opportunities. These efforts transcend individual identities and strive to balance the opportunities available to all, representing equity rather than equality. At its core, DEI envisions a world where every individual, regardless of

their background, has equitable access to opportunities, resources, and experiences that address not only their current state of being but also historical inequities that may have created disadvantages (Camp et al., 2022).

The quest for equitable opportunities begins by dismantling systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality. DEI initiatives involve identifying and rectifying policies and practices that have historically and disproportionately disadvantaged certain groups. Through this process, DEI fosters environments where every person has an equitable chance to succeed unencumbered by historical injustices or discriminatory structures.

DEI, as a quest for equitable opportunities, requires a proactive approach to inclusivity that goes beyond mere representation. DEI focuses on creating environments that actively support individuals' diverse needs and aspirations and lift those who might not have had the same opportunities afforded to others (Alfonseca, 2023). This means acknowledging the existence of diversity and actively fostering an inclusive culture that values and leverages differences.

The quest for equitable opportunities also recognizes the intersectionality of identities. Successful DEI initiatives address the compounding effects of discrimination and disadvantage individuals face due to the intersection of their various identities, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic background (Alfonseca, 2023). Acknowledging and addressing these intersections allows DEI initiatives to create solutions addressing individuals' unique challenges with intersecting identities.

### **Analyzing the Desire for Fair Representation in Different Societal Contexts**

The desire for fair representation drives DEI but understanding and explanation of the term vary across different societal contexts. In workplaces, the quest for fair representation often involves creating diverse and inclusive environments that reflect the demographics of the communities in which companies operate (Economist, 2023). Organizations that acknowledge the importance of having a workforce representing the diversity of their customer base foster creativity, innovation, and a meaningful understanding of diverse perspectives. However, achieving fair representation in the workplace often involves dismantling barriers to entry, providing equal opportunities for advancement, and fostering cultures of inclusion beyond tokenism (Friedman, 2023).

In educational settings, the desire for fair representation manifests in curricula that accurately depict the contributions and experiences of diverse communities. The selection of materials created by authors from diverse backgrounds is a first step, but recognizing the historical omissions and biases in educational materials is also necessary (Grubbs, 2023). Schools implementing DEI practices must also strive for inclusivity in teaching methods, meaning that teachers' practices represent behaviors and norms present in the cultural groups of their students. Fair representation empowers students who see themselves reflected in their learning environment and fosters a perception of belonging that transcends cultural and societal differences.

### **Examining Potential Conflicts in the Pursuit of Equal Shares**

As societies provide equal shares in the auspices of DEI, it is fundamental to examine potential conflicts critically. The quest for equal shares is inherently transformative as it challenges existing power dynamics and questions entrenched norms. One significant conflict

lies in the redistribution of resources and opportunities. Shifting toward equal shares challenges established hierarchies, prompting resistance from those accustomed to privilege who worry about the diminished power that may come from such redistribution (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). Addressing such discomfort requires creating a collective understanding that equitable distribution benefits society by fostering innovation and collective prosperity. Communicating the societal benefits of equal shares can reduce resistance and encourage support for transformative DEI initiatives.

Another potential conflict arises from the fear of loss or displacement experienced by individuals or groups that have traditionally held privileged positions (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). These individuals and groups will perceive DEI efforts as threats to their status. By fostering inclusive narratives that emphasize collaboration and mutual benefit, it is feasible to reduce this fear and help those in positions of privilege recognize the need for change. Highlighting the collective experience rather than the diminished individual contributions alleviates fears and encourages allyship.

Interestingly, conflicts may arise even within marginalized groups as they understand their intersecting identities and the outcomes to be achieved from DEI initiatives (Kaltmeier et al., 2019). Equal shares require acknowledging the diversity within marginalized communities and addressing intra-group disparities in ways that may feel inequitable at the time. Intersectional approaches must recognize and prioritize the unique challenges encountered by individuals with multiple marginalized identities to foster accurate equity.

### **Strategies for Balancing DEI Aspirations with Practical Realities**

Balancing the aspirations of DEI with practical realities is a challenge requiring strategic approaches. Practical considerations, resource limitations, and contextual factors necessitate a thoughtful and adaptable approach to DEI strategies (Alfonseca, 2023). One way to approach strategy creation involves setting realistic, incremental goals. Transformative change takes time, and organizations and communities must recognize that change will not happen overnight (Greene, 2021). They should establish achievable milestones contributing to long-term DEI objectives and break larger aspirations into manageable steps. This makes progress measurable, supporting feelings of accomplishment and sustained momentum.

Prioritizing inclusivity in decision-making processes is another effective strategy for successful DEI initiatives. Incorporating diverse voices and perspectives at every level ensures that DEI considerations are part of the decision-making rather than an added feature (Grubbs, 2023). This enhances the value of decisions and fosters inclusivity cultures surpassing token representation. Balancing DEI goals with practical realities also requires a dedication to ongoing education and awareness (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). Providing training and resources that build cultural competency helps bridge the gap between aspirations and achievement, empowering individuals to navigate the complexities of DEI.

Leveraging partnerships and collaborations can also amplify the impact of DEI initiatives. By linking forces with external organizations, communities can access additional resources, share best practices, and benefit from diverse perspectives that advance their DEI efforts (Leef et al., 2021). Collaborative work expands the reach and influence of DEI initiatives, creating a network of support that provides greater leverage over individual limitations.

## CONCLUSION

DEI is not a destination, but an ongoing journey. From recognizing the inherent differences in individuals to identifying one's role in discrimination and bias, the need for DEI initiatives evolves with the ever-changing landscape of societal and cultural dynamics. The quest for fair representation, examination of potential conflicts, and strategies for balancing aspirations with practical realities are all essential elements of any successful DEI initiative. DEI is not a fixed approach or a one-time attempt but an ongoing procedure of learning, self-reflection, and change.

DEI is a multifaceted concept with roots in social justice, progress, and equality. The interconnectedness of human factors - social environment, race, culture, values, ethics, and morals – with DEI is central to the theme. Understanding that standard definitions fail to encapsulate the experiences of all individuals emphasizes the need for a personalized, context-aware approach in DEI initiatives. Rich cultural diversity, the power of authentic dialogue, and recognition of common humanity inform the interconnectedness that composes the fabric of DEI. The principle of inclusion, a cornerstone of DEI, raises critical questions about universal desires for inclusion and the need for diverse perspectives in creating equitable environments. The case studies provide insights into the reciprocal relationships between DEI principles and human factors, demonstrating how targeted initiatives can shift ethical frameworks and values. However, it is the application of DEI in practice that is complex, requiring courageous conversations and an understanding of these constantly evolving human factors.

DEI is not a mandate to be imposed on society; rather it involves reciprocal factors, with humanity influencing DEI principles as much as DEI influences humanity. Efforts towards a more learned and inclusive future require collective action. Individuals, organizations, and communities must embrace the lessons presented, leverage the strategies outlined, and champion the values of authenticity, inclusivity, and continuous learning if true diversity, equity, and inclusion remain to be achieved for all people. This call to action invites individuals and organizations to shape a future where DEI is an integral part of the societal ethos and to generate a future where every individual, regardless of their background, has an equal opportunity to thrive.

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