

The Diversity Ideology in the Business World: A New Oppression for a New Age

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Abstract

Diversity has become a common term in the business world. But, what exactly does it mean to be diverse? In this article, I examine the notion of diversity in the business world and explore how, in the wane of progressive programs such as affirmative action and organizational multiculturalism policies diversity has become the post-civil rights mantra of equality in America. Using interview data from upper-level managers in *Fortune* 1000 companies I argue that diversity ideology has enabled many organizations to curtail deeper investigations into the gender and racial inequalities that continue to persist in the workplace. I find that managers tend to exclude race and gender in their definitions of diversity. Further, I find that most managers, even while claiming that their companies were interested in promoting diversity, could not effectively elaborate on their company's diversity policies or practices.

Keywords

affirmative action, diversity, diversity ideology, gender discrimination, multiculturalism, racial discrimination

Introduction

Diversity, n., pl. –ties. 1. The state or fact of being diverse; difference or variety. 2. A point of difference. Diverse, adj. 1. Of a different kind; unlike. 2. Of various kinds; varied.

Random House Webster's Dictionary

‘Diversity’ seems to have become one of the most commonly used words in the USA. Walter B. Michaels, author of *The Trouble with Diversity*, put it most aptly when he claimed that diversity ‘has become virtually a sacred concept in American life today. No one’s really against it; people tend instead to differ only in their degrees of enthusiasm for it and their ingenuity in pursuing it’ (2006: 12). According to Bell and Hartmann (2007), few words generate the uplifting feeling of

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what it means to live in a democratic and free society better than does the term 'diversity'. But, what exactly does it mean to be diverse? Does it mean that we should accept the racial and ethnic differences of others? Or, perhaps diversity refers to class tolerance? Further, does diversity include gender, sexual orientation, age, culture, religion, or any multitude of other differences between people who live in our society? Finally, does diversity mean equality?

My aim in this article is to re-examine the notion of diversity in the business world and to explore how, in the wane of progressive programs such as affirmative action and organizational multiculturalism policies diversity has become the postmodern, post-Obama¹ mantra of equality in America. More specifically, using interview data from upper-level executive managers in *Fortune* 1000 companies I argue that, increasingly, in an age of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2001, 2010 [2003]; Bonilla-Silva and Lewis, 1999; see also Smith, 1995) and gender-blind sexism (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1986) diversity ideology has enabled many organizations to curtail deeper investigations into the gender and racial inequalities that continue to persist in the workplace. Indeed, in their recent 2008 article, Hirsch and Kornrich found that institutional contexts that signify a company's commitment to 'diversity', however symbolic, are less likely to produce claims of discrimination. Thus, organizations are able to effectively evoke diversity as an institutional value (e.g. on their websites, in advertisements or in media) while making no real attempts to ensure that minorities and women get fair and equal treatment in comparison to their white male counterparts. The fact of the matter, as Roosevelt Thomas Jr. (1990) has argued so succinctly, is that diversity without action is nothing more than maintaining the white male status quo.²

I organize this article in the following way. First, I provide a short overview of current research on racial and gender discrimination in the workplace. Next, I introduce the concept of 'diversity ideology', a set of beliefs held by many individuals in US society that women and minorities are not only treated equally in comparison to their white male counterparts, but that institutions such as major US businesses are sincerely invested with creating a racially and gender diverse workplace. I follow up with data that illustrates how corporate managers define diversity and their level of commitment to diversity policies and practices. I find that managers tend to exclude race and gender in their definitions of diversity. Further, I find that most managers, even while claiming that their companies were interested in promoting diversity, could not effectively elaborate on their company's diversity policies or practices.

The Illusion and the Reality

According to many leading conservative and mainstream scholars the USA is already a democratic, meritocratic and diverse society (D'Souza, 1995; Steele, 1988; Thermstrom and Thermstrom, 1997; see also Wood, 2003). These authors argue that in a global world, the USA is a beacon of freedom and equality. It is a society in which the right to work is a fundamental human right guaranteed and protected by its constitution. Moreover, according to such scholars, in a post-Civil Rights world, we are color-blind and gender-blind. Therefore, there is no need for affirmative action programs (Glazer, 1987; McWhorter, 2000), social welfare policies (Murray, 1984), programs developed to create a more equal and fair criminal justice system (Wilbanks, 1987), or diversity policies and practices (Wood, 2003). Further, according to such scholars, women have made tremendous strides in the workplace. For example, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 ensures that women and men receive equal wages in the workplace. Moreover, as some have argued, women are nurturers and their need to spend more time with their family than at the workplace better explains why women are less likely to occupy high-level positions in big business in comparison to their male counterparts (Levin, 1992; Randle, 1999).

The majority of Americans, men and women, whites and minority individuals, hold one or more of these beliefs.³ For example, according to Jennifer Hochschild (1995), the ideology of the American dream – the belief that success can ultimately be attained through hard work – is a central belief of most Americans. Charles Gallagher (2007), in his article ‘White’, noted that most whites not only overestimate the number of blacks who live in the USA, they also overestimate how well blacks, in general, are doing economically, educationally and politically. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001, 2010 [2003]) argues that in a color-blind society such as the USA, most folks – especially whites – adamantly believe that racism has all but disappeared. After all, discrimination is against the law. The majority of Americans also have faith in the criminal justice system; they believe that companies breaking the law would face stiff penalties from the Federal Government and their tarnished public image would cause customers to avoid their products and services, in turn causing such companies to lose money. Research by such notable race scholars as Joe Feagin and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva suggests that many folks believe that since our current social system is a far cry from the days of Jim Crow laws when minorities faced overt racial discrimination on an everyday basis and when women did not have the right to vote, one would be hard pressed to find instances where employers explained to women that their gender was unwelcome in the workplace, or responded to blacks looking for a job, ‘We don’t hire niggers here.’ Hence, as Gallagher (2007) has noted, to most Americans, racism or gender discrimination are problems of the past. And corporate America feeds these mainstream notions regarding race and gender in the USA by advertising themselves as ‘equal opportunity employers’, as fair employers, and more frequently in the past 20 years, as international, global employers that care about diversity. The central image that is portrayed to the American people over and over again is that corporations are working hard to diversify their companies. In fact, in a global system where the majority of potential customers are non-white, companies must be willing to diversify or face possible extinction (Rice and Arekere, 2005).

Mainstream ideas regarding fairness, opportunity, and racial and gender equality in big business confront a dilemma when forced to face the ‘white male solidarity’⁴ that runs the corporate world, setting barriers for minority individuals and women wanting to gain entry into the workplace, denying them promotions and pay raises, and denying them access to the upper levels of management. By ‘white male solidarity’, I am referring to the tight knit bond that white males have developed that enables them to be more effective at creating and maintaining white male privilege in the workplace (see Embrick, 2005; Embrick et al., 2007; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2010 [2003]). Thus white male managers back up white male workers at the lower levels whenever possible and at the upper level company positions, white males have developed practices that exclude minorities and women from being included in their group. Minority individuals and women are kept out of the loop in regard to office politics, discretions, and other inside information that are beneficial for success in the business world.

Studies by Braddock and McPartland (1986), Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991), Fernandez (1999), Royster (2003) and others illustrate that while women and minorities have made some gains in obtaining access into previously white dominated workplaces, many individuals continue to be denied access and opportunity because of the structural or social elements involved in racial discrimination (see also Amott and Matthaei, 1996; Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Reskin and Roos, 1990).

Research by notable authors, such as Sharon Collins (1997) and Anthony Stith (1998), indicate that minority individuals who are able to enjoy the satisfaction of a ‘good job’ are less likely to achieve upward mobility compared to their white male counterparts. When they do get promoted, they are more likely to be placed in very limited and dead-end positions – head of affirmative

action, head of human resources – positions otherwise known as ‘glass ceiling’ positions. These positions garner little prestige and often the managers who occupy these jobs are seen as less than competent. Anthony Stith (1998: 22) describes the concept of the ‘glass ceiling’ as a ‘visual image of people pressing up against a window, getting a tantalizing view of a wonderful world before them, but being denied entry to it’. For those lucky few minority individuals who get access to corporate jobs, researchers Ibarra (1993) and Fernandez (1981) argue that blacks and Latinos are less likely, compared to whites, to obtain mentors who will help them move to the next level. Blacks who make it to the top as upper-level managers or even CEOs of major corporations face new hardships, such as having to maneuver socially, politically, and emotionally in typically all white settings (Davis and Watson, 1982; see also Travis, 1991).

The Diversity Ideology: A New Way to Examine Big Business

How are corporations able to continue excluding women and minorities from managerial, leadership and other positions of power in the workplace? How are many companies able to get away with having an exclusive or almost exclusive white male club at the executive, board, and other positions of power in their businesses? I have suggested elsewhere that a diversity ideology has emerged since the post-civil rights era, giving many organizations an undeniable edge when it comes to maintaining the white male power structure that runs American society (Embrick, 2006). Here, I am not suggesting that women and minority individuals do not occupy positions of power in corporate America (or in other American institutions). Nor am I suggesting that women and minority individuals have not achieved some upward mobility in these organizations since the mid-1900s. I claim that given all of the past achievements and accomplishments of women and minority individuals in the last 40 plus years, we still have quite a way to go before we can claim that we live in an egalitarian society.

Using critical race theory and the notion of color-blind racism as theoretical anchors, I argue that a diversity ideology emerged in the late 1960s that has helped many corporations become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to portray themselves as supporters of racial and gender equality, while simultaneously they make no real substantial changes in their policies and practices to create real changes in the racial and gender composition of their workplaces. Specifically, corporations have systematically and strategically co-opted the notions of diversity that were established by the civil rights movement and helped to perpetuate a diversity ideology that has enabled them to advocate racial and gender equality, yet maintain highly inequitable work environments and an even more inequitable chain of command. Many business executives argue that they are spending huge sums of money, and are working diligently to foster a corporate environment that is largely free of racial and gender discrimination, but I present three reasons below why we should suspect otherwise. First, 40 plus years after the civil rights triumphs many companies continue to have highly segregated workplaces, segregated both racially and by gender (Embrick, 2005; Fernandez, 1981, 1999; Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Royster, 2003; Stith, 1998). Second, the definitions of diversity used by major corporations have become so broad that issues of racial and gender inequalities often become overlooked or completely ignored⁵. Finally, although most senior-level managers and executives claim that their companies have diversity policies and are adamant about their companies’ enthusiasm regarding diversity initiatives and practices, many are unable to adequately explain those policies and practices. The first reason has been well researched by race and gender scholars alike; I provide evidence to support my second and third claims in the sections below. The fact of the matter is that if race and gender issues do not get addressed as a central part of diversity, they do not get resolved.

Consequently, the diversity ideology has allowed many corporate managers to claim they support racial and gender equality, when in truth they do not. Just because there are companies that have relatively large numbers of minority individuals or women working for them does not guarantee they are diverse. Neither does providing women and minority individuals with limited access to and opportunities in the upper managerial positions of a company confirm their commitment to diversity. Nevertheless, because corporations have developed a compelling argument centered on notions of diversity, they are able to convince the public that they are on the forefront of progressiveness. By implementing policies at the lower levels of their businesses, corporations are able to convey an ideology of equality and egalitarianism, even if only at a superficial level. By siding with affirmative action cases, promoting 'best practices', and implementing diversity training programs in their workplaces, corporations are also able to generate an air of sincerity. And, according to Jackman (1994: 65), 'ideologies that are promoted with sincerity are more compelling.' Diversity, then, is used to divest, rather than invest, change into corporate institutions.

Climbing the White Male Ladder

What does the racial and gender make-up of major *Fortune* companies look like, especially at the upper-levels of the corporate hierarchy? Although many US corporations note on their websites that diversity is one of their central priorities, a number of scholars claim corporate elites are mostly white males (Burk, 2005; Domhoff, 2005; Fernandez, 1999; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003). Indeed, according to Fernandez (1999), less than 2 percent of senior corporate positions and less than 6 percent of middle- to upper-level managerial positions in corporate America are held by minority individuals. Further, women only hold 2.6 percent of the top executive positions in the *Fortune* 500.

Not too long ago, *DiversityInc*, a leading business-oriented magazine devoted to issues surrounding diversity, ran an article in its online newsletter announcing that Ronald A. Williams will most likely become the 6th black CEO to run a *Fortune* 500 company. The mention of this news quickly made media headlines. As the news circulated in the business world that another black man was about to join the circle of high-ranked elites, newspapers and magazines such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on the increasing success of blacks in the business world. In an interview with Bruce S. Gordon, 15th president of the NAACP, a *Business Week* reporter (see Johnson, 2005) asked:

There's an unprecedented number of black CEOs in Corporate America. What has allowed them to reach a point where blacks hold such corporate power?

Indeed, there is a notion floating in the business world that we are witnessing the decline of racial discrimination in corporate America. It is true that the number of black male CEOs in the *Fortune* 500 has tripled in the last 13 years, from two in the early 1990s⁶ to six in 2006. However, these numbers are still relatively small, just barely constituting 1 percent of the total population of *Fortune* 500 CEOs, especially when we consider that the number of blacks who have graduated with MBA degrees has slightly increased since 2003 (Aslop, 2006).⁷ Second, minority individuals and women who occupy the top-ranked position of CEO of a company are unlikely to make decisions that threaten the security and privilege of white males, especially considering that whites often comprise the majority of members on a corporation's board (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003). For example, consider Merrill Lynch in the middle to late 2000s. As a Wall Street firm, it was one of the largest and best known *Fortune* 500 companies.⁸ Moreover, Merrill Lynch was also

regarded as one of the better models in the corporate world with respect to racial diversity, winning a number of diversity awards from *Fortune* magazine and placing 44th on *DiversityInc's* 2006 *Top 50 Companies for Diversity* (Merrill Lynch also placed number one in the category *Top 10 Companies for People with Disabilities*, number two in the category *Top 10 Companies for Executive Women*, and number four in the category *Top 10 Companies for Asian Americans*.) Further, in 2007, out of Merrill Lynch's 11 board members, two were African American: Stanley O'Neal who became CEO of the company in April 2002, and Aulana L. Peters, widely known as one of the few African American women to serve on *Fortune* 500 boards. A superficial analysis might suggest that the racial composition of this board was indeed diverse. However, closer examination of the executive members of Merrill Lynch reveals a mostly white male group of people. Indeed, out of the 34 ranking officers, only three were women. Moreover, only one person in that group was African American. More importantly, this particular person happened to be head of public affairs at Merrill Lynch, a position that likely guaranteed that any exposure to the media would have been met by a minority face that represents Merrill Lynch.⁹ Similarly, Bank of America, which purchased Merrill Lynch in 2009, was ranked the 14th most diverse company in 2010 by Diversity, Inc.¹⁰ A cursory look at Bank of America's website reveals that out of the 13 listed senior officers and directors, four are white women (31%) and one is an African American male (less than 8%). Because senior-level and executive managers are the gatekeepers in their companies, the fact that the majority of these positions are held by white men creates additional barriers for women and minority individuals who are less likely to be mentored or given promotion or training opportunities compared to their white male counterparts (Collins, 1997). Of course, Merrill Lynch and Bank of America represent one extreme of a continuum that is comprised mostly of companies which lack racial and gender diversity (see Collins, 1998; Fernandez, 1999).

The Contradictions and Vagueness of Diversity

Just how sincere are managers when it comes to diversity issues in their workplaces? Using recent interview data, I find that managers of major US companies are not interested in creating an equal opportunity workplace for all employees regardless of race or gender. In this article, I limit my analysis to two major findings: first, diversity has become such a broad term that issues of race and gender in the workplace have become minimized or ignored. Second, although all of the managers interviewed claimed that their company cared about diversity in their workplaces, there is little to indicate that there are any actions taking place in their companies to ensure that women and minority individuals are given equal opportunities to succeed, compared to their white male counterparts.

Data and Methods

To explore my ideas regarding diversity in the corporate world, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 middle- to senior-level managers and directors and eight executive- and corporate-level employees in top *Fortune* 1000 companies.¹¹ The interviews were conducted between May 2005 and June 2006 with approximately half of the interviews having been conducted face to face and the other half via phone. Interviews that were conducted face to face took place either in the respondent's work office or in a secluded restaurant corner nearby the respondent's workplace, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. All of the interviews were race-matched. The respondents were 13 women and 27 men. Three of the respondents self-identified themselves as black, two as Latina, one as Asian, and 34 as white. Their ages ranged from early 30s to late 60s, and all but seven of the respondents had earned at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited

university. Out of the seven respondents who did not have a bachelor’s degree, five reported they were close to earning a bachelor’s degree but had never gotten around to finishing their coursework. In all, 38 *Fortune* 1000 companies were represented. Each respondent was asked to sign a consent form agreeing to be interviewed with the interviews tape-recorded. A transcriber was hired to transcribe the tapes verbatim, to include verbal cues and semantics. All names of respondents, as well as the companies they worked for, were then coded to protect their identities.

The Vagueness of Diversity and Minimization of Race and Gender

What exactly does it mean to be diverse? Further, how do managers define diversity? Increasingly, diversity has come to refer to a wide array of categories to include race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion. Moreover, the use of the term diversity has seemingly expanded in the last decade so that more differences are embraced under its umbrella every day.¹² Such broad defining of diversity has led to the decision of many companies, and numerous other organizations, to create support groups that celebrate peoples’ differences in marital status, animal ownership, clothing styles and even pet ownership.¹³

However, as I will illustrate below, with the broadening of the term diversity also comes a minimization or even complete neglect of issues pertaining to racial or gender diversity. By increasing the number of categories of people that fall under the umbrella of diversity, companies are able to effectively escape close examination of racial and gender inequalities that might occur in their workplaces. As long as no one brings it up, it can be ignored.

In my interviews fewer than one-fourth of the respondents clearly mentioned race or gender when defining diversity (see Table 1). The remaining respondents defined diversity in one of three categories: broad and encompassing, reverse discrimination, or completely off-the-wall.

Recognizing Race and Gender

Only eight (20%) respondents explicitly mentioned race or gender when asked for their definition of diversity. However, these managers were pretty clear that diversity, for them, included race and gender categories.¹⁴ Jack, a white general manager for a large consulting business, explained diversity as follows: ‘A broad, just a broad spectrum of people. Typically I associate it with three areas: race, educational background, and economic background.’ More typically, respondents in this category defined diversity in ways that were similar to Stephen’s, an executive vice-president of a large real estate corporation: ‘Ah, I think of it as principally as, ah, diversity with respect to ethnicity and gender.’

It is worth mentioning that 30.7 percent of the respondents who answered in this category were women (compared to men at 14.8%), a finding that is consistent with Johnson and Marini’s (1998) argument that because (white) women tend to associate with minority people (at work, as neighbours,

Table 1. Respondents’ definition of diversity by gender

Gender	Race and Ethnicity	Broadly	Negatively	Off-the-Wall	Total
Male	4 (14.8%)	16 (59.3%)	3 (11.1%)	4 (14.8%)	27 (67.5%)
Female	4 (30.7%)	7 (53.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (15.5%)	13 (32.5%)
Total	8 (20%)	23 (57.5%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (15%)	40 (100%)

N = 40

etc.) more than white men, they are more likely to be sympathetic to their causes. It is also worth mentioning that a number of these respondents worked for companies that were located in politically liberal cities and states, a situation that could explain why some of these interviewees might have been more likely to give more progressive answers.

Broad Diversity

Altogether 23 respondents, or 57.5 percent of the total (59.3% of the men and 53.8% of the women) either defined diversity as cultural or socioeconomic background, or defined it so broadly (often by including a laundry list of categories) that race and gender became secondary issues or even were ignored. More often diversity was defined in terms of individual backgrounds, socioeconomic status, or even different life styles. For example, Brandon, a white service director¹⁵ of a company that specializes in information technologies, defined diversity as: 'Ah, when I hear the word diversity I think about, incorporating multiple life styles, philosophies, belief systems, and having them work together.'

Brandon's definition of diversity does not mention race or gender and the interpretation of what he means by 'multiple life styles, philosophies, and belief systems' is unclear. This is a typical pattern of respondents who fall into this category. Purposely leaving out the word race dilutes the importance that is placed on it and focuses attention on the other areas that are discussed. An example of a more vague form of broadness can be found with the definition given by Lily, a white branch manager of a major business specializing in electronics: 'When I hear diversity, I think it's different types of people working in a working environment.'

Like those of many of the other respondents in this category, Lily's response is short and sweet. Her definition of diversity is left wide open for interpretation. Because Lily believes her company is diverse, it is unlikely she would enforce policies that called for 'real' diversity, even though she admitted that there were not many minority individuals who worked there. There were a few respondents who did mention race or gender (or both), but made sure these notions were well mixed in with a long laundry list of other categories. For instance, Harry, a vice-president of operations for a large company based in New York, interestingly said the following about diversity:

Diversity is huge. It's about status, socioeconomic standing, family background, different cultures and religions, you name it. Yes, it's about ethnicity but it's so much more to it than that. It's about allowing employees to bring their dogs to work with them, or being able to wear flip-flops to work on casual day.

The word ethnicity is mentioned in Harry's definition of diversity. However, its importance is diluted against the seven other categories mentioned, some of which are so outside the typical definition of diversity (e.g. being able to wear flip-flops at work) that Harry could have easily fit into my off-the-wall category.

Diversity as Reverse Discrimination

Three respondents, or 7.5 percent (11.1% of the men and none of the women), defined diversity as reverse discrimination against whites. As mentioned above, it is interesting to note that, though this definition was given by a relatively small portion of the sample, it was gendered: only men defined diversity in this manner. This is understandable given that white men stand to lose a number of privileges (i.e. white privilege and male privilege) should effective measures to create equality in the workplace ever become enforced. Respondents in this category felt diversity meant that some people were getting a free ride and gave answers similar to Frank's, a senior-level manager and pilot for a major airline:

Uhhhh, what I think about that is lowering standards to let people in that aren't willing to, uhmmm, you know, go through the, go through the steps that it has to take or uhmmm, the people that are presently, you know, getting hired or getting promoted uhmmm have to take. OK, I mean if someone got a job and they worked for 10 years and they're up to be promoted and they just happened to be, you know a white man or a white woman and then some other person that's been there four years and says, 'Hey, well I deserve to get promoted', and they don't happen to be white, well, under diversity they oughta get promoted so we can be a more diverse work force, so.'

Frank's answer is clear and to the point. Diversity is defined as lower standards and unfair practices that take jobs and opportunities away from white men. Frank also became very tense and angry when asked this question, as did Joseph, a director of software development for a computer company, who said the following in regard to diversity:

Um, when I was in college, diversity was kind of crammed down our throats and largely when I think of diversity I think of affirmative action, ah, yeah.

When asked to explain how he would envision diversity in the workplace, Joseph replied:

Um, I envision diversity in the workplace as not having a predisposition to hire ah, people based on race, sex, ah, but choosing the person who is best for the job and whether as long as two applicants are qualified for the job or whichever one performs or the interviewer feels will be best for the job and fits the position best and not taking into account any type of race or sex.

Since affirmative action is a heated topic in today's public debate, and often not well received by the gender public, defining diversity as affirmative action (or as reverse discrimination) allows managers to portray (and even justify) diversity as a bad idea or worse, one that further exacerbates discrimination rather than resolves it.

Off-the-Wall Diversity

Finally, seven respondents, or 15 percent (14.8% of the men and 15.5% of the women) defined diversity in terms so different compared to the other respondents that I labeled their comments as 'off-the-wall diversity'. While this is not as common a reply compared to the broad interpretation of diversity, it still indicates that a large portion (in this case close to one-sixth) of the definitions of diversity given by higher-level corporate managers completely neglect racial or gender equality and may reflect the fact that these individuals and/or their companies have little or no interest in pursuing a company agenda that calls for racial and gender equality. One of the oddest replies was given by Ryan, a district manager of a large international corporation who defined diversity more in terms of one's ability to do different job tasks:

not putting all your eggs in one basket, you know just, just having things spread out. It's kinda like laying on your back trying to float on water instead of trying to stand straight up. Uhmmm, the employees having more than one job that they're required to do.

Ryan's explanation of diversity not only ignores the issue of race and gender completely, but also ignores other institutionalized forms of inequalities that occur in the workplace (e.g. ageism, discrimination against gays and lesbians, etc.). In other instances, it was quite clear that the manager being questioned really did not understand what diversity meant. For instance, Brianna, a general

manager of a company specializing in hospitality management, had this to say when asked to give her definition of diversity:

You know, I honestly don't think much about it, ah, I don't know. Nothing comes to mind. If I had to pick out a specific term or whatever it's just that, I don't have a problem with it, it just hasn't occurred to me very much.

Either Brianna honestly could not define diversity in even the simplest manner, or she felt uncomfortable with the topic and did not want to provide her thoughts on it. Similar to the other examples, race and gender were not mentioned.

A Special Look at Minorities' Definitions of Diversity

Although the sample size of my minority respondents is small, it is useful to compare their definitions of diversity to the responses given by white interviewees. One would suspect that managers of color might be more sympathetic to the plight faced by women and minorities, given they have more of an inside understanding of the hardships faced by women and minority individuals on an everyday basis. However, the data illustrates that black managers, for the most part, held similar views as their white counterparts (see Table 2).

Only one (16.7%) of the six minority respondents explicitly included race and gender as a crucial part of diversity. One respondent (16.7%) gave an answer that was off-the-wall. And although none of the minority managers described diversity as reverse discrimination, four (66.6%) gave broad answers that minimized or ignored the importance of racial or gender equality.

Chad, a branch manager in Houston, when asked his definition of diversity, gave an off-the-wall definition not too different from that of Ryan and Heather:

diversity just means you're just diverse just because you're smart enough to figure out that, you know, you need eight totally different types of people to really and truly give you a good think tank. So it's not all redundant. You know, if you really want to really build something, then everyone's gonna come up with different ideas and different perspectives.

Monique, a black senior manager of employee relations at a major airline company, defined diversity as individuality. In doing so, she made sure to broaden the definition widely, thereby minimizing the importance of race and gender in her reply:

I think about, uh hh just accepting individuality and that's my definition of it whether it's race, sex, sexual orientation, uhmmm national origin, or whether it's, you know, one person's from the country, one person's from the city, one person's from a different region, or whether it's age, generational differences, it, to me it's just accepting individuals' different work styles. Uhmmm I have people who are more introverted. I

Table 2. Respondents' definition of diversity by race

Race	Race and Ethnicity	Broadly	Negatively	Off-the-Wall	Total
White	7 (20.6%)	19 (55.9%)	3 (8.8%)	5 (14.7%)	34 (85%)
Minority	1 (16.7%)	4 (66.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (16.7%)	6 (15%)
Total	8 (20%)	23 (57.5%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (15%)	40 (100%)

N = 40

have people who are extroverted and ahhh to me it's just respecting those differences and understanding that they all have some value and not looking negatively upon one just because that's not something that you, yourself may exhibit or subscribe to.

The fact that minority managers have similar definitions of diversity as their white counterparts is not a startling finding. Previous studies have indicated that minority individuals who are promoted to higher levels within the corporate structure tend to have similar political, economic, and social mentalities as white managers (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003). This does not mean that minority managers who have different political and social views from those of their white counterparts will not be successful in the business world. It does, however, imply that given a choice, whites will tend to support minority managers who are of like mind rather than those who threaten their dominant and privileged status in the company.

Diversity Policies and Practices – or Something Else?

My second finding is much more direct and to the point compared to the first finding. It speaks volumes about the insincerities many corporations have with regard to issues of diversity and provides a clear indicator that while some companies may claim they are interested in diversity, the likelihood that any 'real' effort has been made to ensure (or enforce) diversity in the workplace is minimal.

Corporate websites are notorious for publicizing their 'take' on diversity. For example, surfing the Coca-Cola Co. website reveals a section titled 'Meet the faces of Coca-Cola...' in which there are three profile pictures (two non-white males and one white female) that one would suppose represents the diversity at Coca-Cola Co. As one clicks on the profiles, their quotes are highlighted, one of which vividly points out how diverse Coca-Cola is in case we miss it. 'The amount of diversity at the Coca-Cola Company is tremendous.'¹⁶ Needless to say, few companies are willing to admit that they are not interested in diversity. In fact, most companies include a diversity and inclusion mission statement on their internet websites. Fewer still are managers willing to admit that their companies are not diverse, or not interested in diversity. This is one reason why it is so hard to find accurate data on whether or not companies are really interested in diversity or are merely selling a favorable public image. Everybody says that her or his company is diverse. In my interviews with 40 middle- to upper-level and executive-level managers, 75 percent of the respondents answered yes to the question that asked whether or not their company currently had a diversity policy or set of practices in place¹⁷ (76.8% of the women and 74% of the men; see Table 3). Even the few respondents who responded angrily or negatively to the question asking them to define diversity said their company had a diversity policy. Just 15 percent of the respondents replied that they did not know if their company had a diversity policy in place (15.3% of the women and 7.5% of the men). And 10 percent of the respondents said their company did not have a diversity policy (7.9% of the women and 18.5% of the men).

Although the importance of diversity in the workplace is often stressed by company managers and executives, excluding those respondents that claimed their company did not have a diversity policy or set of practices, 70 percent did not know, or could not explain their company's policy or practices to me. To break it down further, of the 75 percent of men and women who answered yes to the question of whether their company had a diversity policy, 60 percent were unable to describe or elaborate upon their company's diversity policies or practices (61.5% of the women and 59.2% of the men).

Table 3. Respondents' knowledge regarding their company's policy on diversity, by gender

Gender	Did Not Know	Ans. No	Ans.Yes-Could Explain	Ans.Yes-Could Not Explain	Total
Male	2 (7.5%)	5 (18.5%)	4 (14.8%)	16 (59.2%)	27 (67.5%)
Female	2 (15.3%)	1 (7.9%)	2 (15.3%)	8 (61.5%)	13 (32.5%)
Total	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	6 (15%)	24 (60%)	40 (100%)

N = 40

One might understand how workers, uninterested in reading company policies or perhaps not yet exposed to diversity workshops, might not be able to elaborate on such policies. However, it is quite alarming when higher-level managers are unable to do so, especially if they are working for companies that claim to be concerned about diversity.

Black and other minority respondents were also often unable to explain or elaborate on their company's diversity policies or practices (approximately 66.7% could not; see Table 4) although all of them insisted that their company had them. As discussed previously, the fact that blacks have similar views as whites on diversity is not unusual. Because ideologies become normative, they are likely to affect, albeit in an indirect way, those they try to subject. As Bonilla-Silva (2006: 152) has argued, 'an ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system in the same way and to the same degree. An ideology is dominant if most members of a social system have to accommodate their views vis-a-vis that ideology.' Thus, in order for the diversity ideology to work, a segment of the minority community must also buy into its language.

In Conclusion: What Does This Mean in Terms of Maintaining White Male Solidarity?

In this article I presented data that questions whether many companies are sincere in terms of their efforts to create and maintain a more equitable and racially and gender diverse environment where it matters, at the upper echelons of the workforce. Moreover, what is clear is that in corporate America, diversity has increasingly been defined and re-defined in such a way that race and gender are often minimized or overlooked.

I illustrated that while many companies may have a few women and minority individuals seated on the board of directors, when taking into account the executive managers, those who run the day-to-day operations of the company, and even the middle- to senior-level managers of a company, the number of women and minority individuals is almost non-existent. Considering these are the gatekeepers for the next generation of upper-level managers, unless there are dramatic changes in the structures (i.e. more practice and less talk) of many companies to address the need to promote and mentor more women and minority individuals, white males will continue to dominate these corporations.

Table 4. Respondents' knowledge regarding their company's policy on diversity, by race

Gender	Did Not Know	Ans. No	Ans.Yes-Could Explain	Ans.Yes-Could Not Explain	Total
White	4 (11.7%)	6 (17.6%)	4 (11.7%)	20 (59%)	34 (85%)
Minority	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	6 (15%)
Total	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	6 (15%)	24 (60%)	40 (100%)

N = 40

Further, I presented two key findings from my data that suggested that many large companies were not as interested in promoting racial and gender equality as they publicly claim. In the first of these findings, I illustrated that managers were excluding, intentionally or otherwise, race and gender from their definitions of diversity. Because race and gender are not discussed, these issues get ignored, leading to policies that do not address the racial and gender discrimination that still occurs in the workplace.

In the second finding, I found that many managers, including executive and HR managers could not effectively elaborate on their company's diversity policies or practices, even while insisting that their company had such plans. This is a clear indication that many companies are not concerned with ensuring equal opportunity in the workplace so much as with being portrayed as equal opportunity employers.

The question we should be asking is not whether corporations are sincere about diversifying their workplaces to create more opportunities for women and minority individuals. We already know the answer to that question. Forty plus years after the civil rights triumphs have not produced any significant changes in terms of who controls big business. A better question to ask is what are the implications of these major corporations maintaining their white male power structure? As more of the *Fortune* 500 and *Fortune* 1000 companies become major transnational players, there is a greater likelihood that the inequalities that women and minorities faced (and continue to face) in the USA will become a problem of global proportions. Already we know that major corporations like Nike and Coca-Cola outsource most, if not all, of their labor overseas. In many instances, the policies and practices, such as the fact that the products are made in sweatshops or by using child laborers, violate various fundamental aspects of human rights. In even the best scenarios, workers overseas are paid a very small fraction of what their labor is worth. Further, for decades, major corporations have been exporting toxins to other, mostly third-world countries. As more corporations outsource their labor overseas and are able to thwart US pollution guidelines, countless more people will face the deleterious effects of not having fresh air to breathe or clean water to drink. And what face are we able to put to these corporate culprits who would deny American workers a living wage and engage in countless violations of human rights, across the globe, in order to increase their bottom line? Finally, the immigration debate in the USA is exploding. I fully anticipate that coupled with the export of human rights violations via outsourcing, immigration policies and practices will also have detrimental effects on both those trying desperately to reach the USA and find employment and those, especially minority men and women, who are already here. Will US corporations attempt to protect the human rights of those immigrating to work in their plants and factories? Will the human rights of racial and ethnic minorities currently working in factories on US soil be compromised? We do not yet know. What we do know is that times have changed. Yet, the faces remain the same.

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Notes

- 1 By 'post-Obama', I refer to the time period after the democratic nomination of President Barack H. Obama to run for the office of President of the USA.
- 2 For more research on how corporations, for example, continue to engage in racial and gender rhetoric see Fernandez (1999).
- 3 For additional data on racial attitudes in the USA see Schuman (1997) or Sniderman and Carmine (1997). For data on gender attitudes in the USA see Blau et al. (2006).

- 4 See Thomas (2006) and Burk (2005) for examples of how white male solidarity keeps women and minorities out of the power structure of big business. See also Embrick et al. (2007) and Embrick (2005).
- 5 According to Bell and Hartmann (2007), most Americans' understandings of diversity are ambiguous, underdeveloped and even contradictory, even as they express positive enthusiasm for the term.
- 6 The two African American CEOs were Richard Parsons (Dime Savings Bank of New York) and Clifton R. Wharton Jr (TIAA-CREF). Further information can be found in the 21 January 2005 issue of *Black Enterprise* magazine.
- 7 According to Aslop (2006), the number of blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans that have graduated with MBA degrees plummeted by 20 percent from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. However, since 2003 there has been an increase of roughly 6 percent.
- 8 Merrill Lynch was ranked 22nd in 2007 and 30th in 2008 in *Fortune* magazine. On 1 January 2009, Merrill Lynch was purchased by Bank of America in what was reputedly one of the biggest talked about events in the business world at the time.
- 9 Such positions are often glass ceiling jobs that do not lead to positions of power in the company (Collins, 1997).
- 10 Bank of America was also ranked number two in the top 10 companies for recruitment and retention, number six in the top 10 companies for Latinos, number four in the top 10 companies for executive women and number nine in the top 10 companies for supplier diversity by Diversity Inc. in 2010.
- 11 By mid- to high-level I am referring to positions within the corporate structure that are responsible for enforcing company policies as well as delegating and overseeing the day-to-day operations in the workplace. Examples of these positions include store, branch, regional, area, and senior managers or directors. By executive level I am referring to the highest-ranked positions within the corporate structure. Examples of these positions include vice-president, president, comptroller, any of the chief executive positions, e.g. CFO (Chief Financial Officer), or any of the corporate board positions.
- 12 Cf. the Society for Human Resource Management's (undated) *Glossary*, (consulted 25 March 2011) at: <http://www.shrm.org/TemplatesTools/Glossaries/HRTerms/Pages/d.aspx>
- 13 According to a 2003 article in *Workforce Management*, the increasing numbers of groups that are covered by diversity initiatives have helped to trivialize racial discrimination in many companies. Some examples of more recently created groups in various organizations such as Microsoft are groups for single parents, people with attention deficit disorder, dog ownership, any number of ethnic, cultural, or national identities, and birth order, among others.
- 14 I should note that just because a respondent identified race and gender as key components in their definitions of diversity, this did not necessarily mean that their company had a diversity policy or set of practices in place; nor did it mean that companies who had diversity policies or practices enforced them.
- 15 The responsibilities of a service director are equivalent to those of a director of sales, or regional/zone manager. Managers who occupy these positions are usually responsible for overseeing a department in a company or a region or zone where the company has a number of branches set up.
- 16 See http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/ourcompany/meet_our_people.html (consulted 15 February 2010).
- 17 A preliminary analysis of a survey additional to this project also indicated that only two of the returned survey questionnaires had answered no to the question asking whether or not their company currently had an official diversity policy or set of practices in place. Altogether 500 surveys were sent out to each of the *Fortune* 500 companies. Thus far, over 70 have been returned for a response rate of 14 percent.

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