

Meritocrats, Wallflowers, and More: Characterizing Obstacles to DEI Engagement

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There is a pressing and continuing need to bolster equity and inclusion for marginalized people in all aspects of American society, including undergraduate STEM education. This paper draws on data from a broader study (Johnson et al., 2022) which collected survey data from postsecondary STEM instructors regarding their attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts and how those views changed as a result of the events of 2020 (e.g., the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide protests in support of racial justice). While many participants reported changes in their views, this report focuses on those who stated that their views were unchanged. In particular, we present profiles of the attitudes of 21 people who were not previously invested in social justice, and did not change their views in 2020. From these data, we identified archetypes of those who hinder DEI efforts in hopes of elucidating their motivations.

Theoretical Perspective

Both the original study (Johnson et al., 2022) and this one are informed by critical race theory (CRT), specifically where this framework intersects with education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT posits that American educational structures are inherently beholden to a “White supremacist master script” (p. 18) under which minoritized students are seen as deficient. In particular, our study reports on the perceived differences in talent, opportunities, and interest in STEM fields among racial groups.

Data Reduction, Collection, and Analysis

Approximately 1300 post-secondary mathematics instructors were originally surveyed (Apkarian et al, 2022), 305 of whom responded to a follow-up survey. Of these respondents, 21 indicated that they had no DEI engagement prior to 2020 or thereafter. For these individuals, we compiled their race, gender, and beliefs on racial differences in STEM. We also captured their free responses which elaborated on their lack of engagement. In the spirit of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), these responses were coded to find themes to their motivations.

Results and Discussion

Of the 21 respondents in our data set, 18 were white men, perhaps suggesting that a privileged position obscures the need for DEI advancements. Five archetypes emerged from analyses of their responses – *opponents* who actively resist DEI efforts, *meritocrats* who believe that STEM is inherently neutral (e.g., Alvarado, 2010; Au, 2013; Liu, 2011), *good apples* who suggest that respect for all is sufficient (Martin, 2003), *wallflowers* who cite higher priorities elsewhere, and *exceptionalists* who posit that DEI engagement is only needed elsewhere. Understanding the motivations behind DEI hesitance is essential in order to overcome them.

Acknowledgements

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Background and Original Study

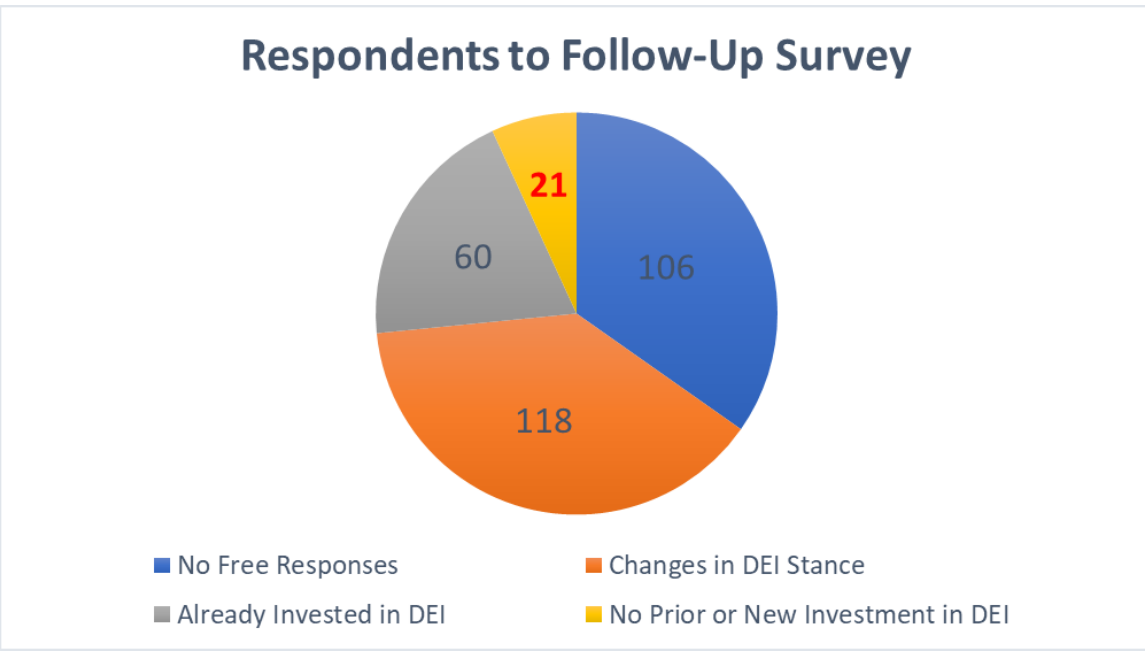
- Data taken from **Evaluating the Uptake of Research-Based Instructional Strategies in Undergraduate Chemistry, Mathematics, & Physics**, an NSF-funded study.
- Approximately 1300 post-secondary math instructors were surveyed
- Respondents asked how events of 2020 affected views and actions with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Apkarian et al., 2022 focused on changes reported by those surveyed.

Framing of Current Study

- Now focused on those who were not previously invested in DEI efforts and indicated no change following 2020.
- Goal was to characterize those who might present resistance to DEI efforts and progress.

Data Reduction

- 305 respondents completed follow-up survey.
- 199 of these provided free responses
- 21 self-reported as having no prior investment in DEI efforts and no changes following 2020



- Demographic information and free responses gathered for this subset of 21 respondents.

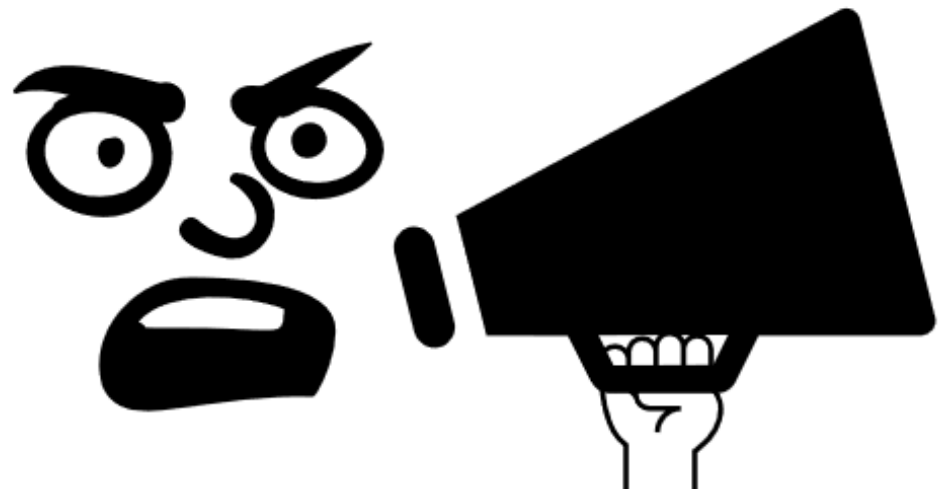
Data Analysis

- Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) performed on free responses to identify reasons given for lack of DEI engagement
- Axial coding revealed five categories with common themes or motivations.
- Categories reframed as character archetypes.

Archetype Detail and Example Responses

Opposition (n = 2)

- Both respondents are white men.
- Neither believes they are personally responsible for DEI.
- Example Responses
 - “It is actually annoying to see how this agenda gets pushed down people’s throats.”*
 - “Affirmative action has gone too far and should be eliminated.”*



Meritocrats (n = 6)

- All men (5 white, 1 Hispanic)
- 4/6 believe that DEI is beneficial to STEM
- Example Responses
 - “Mathematics is inclusive for every race...This has nothing to do with equity issues.”*
 - “Personal equity issues are a bit like...disabilities such as autism or dyslexia or depression...Success is the best cure and so empowering.”*



Good Apples (n = 6)

- All white (5 men, 1 woman)
- All agree that students from different groups have equal aptitudes
- Example Responses
 - “I would just like to teach, treating each person as infinitely precious in the eyes of God.”*
 - “Both before and during 2020, I have tried to maintain a principled, fair, conservative position on diversity.”*
 - “I support diversity and opportunities for all.”*



Wallflowers (n = 5)

- 3/5 believe they have a personal responsibility to DEI engagement
- Example Responses
 - “We are teaching online right now. That is the focus of my teaching.”*
 - “I am not on campus and do not have opportunities to participate in diversity events.”*
 - “My views continue to be the same: less focused on equity and more on the overall unfair treatment of adjunct teachers.”*



Exceptionalists (n = 7)

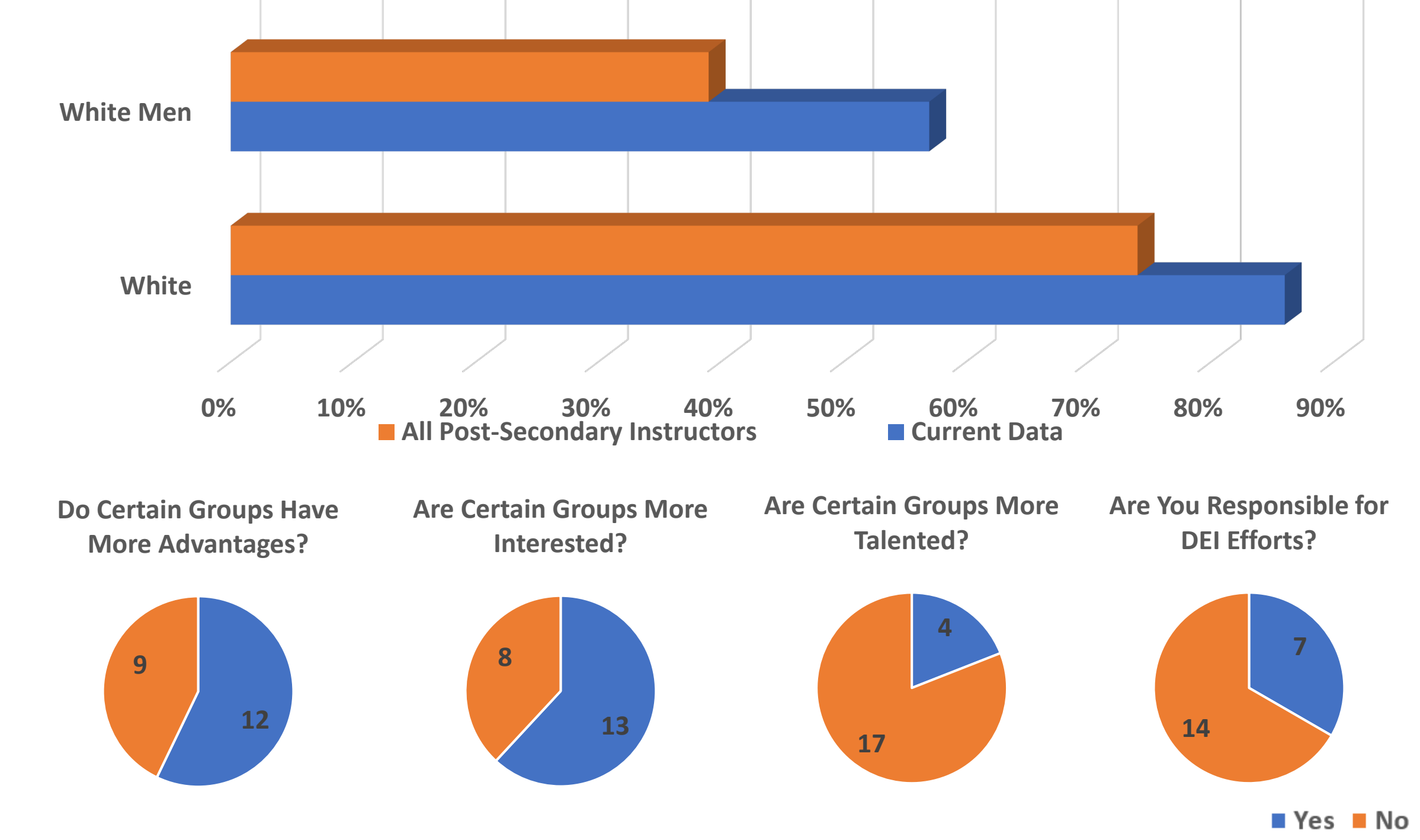
- 6 men, 1 woman
- 6 white, 1 declined to identify their race
- Example Responses
 - “While the return of overt personal racism in recent years is dismaying, I just don’t see it in math and science.”*
 - “There isn’t an issue with [DEI] in any of the department I’ve worked in. I’ve never witnessed such issues in the workplace.”*



Overview of Archetypes

- Opposition
 - DEI efforts are inherently wrong.*
- Meritocrats
 - STEM fields are inherently neutral.*
- Good Apples
 - I’m not a part of the problem.*
- Wallflowers
 - Higher priorities exist elsewhere*
- Exceptionalists
 - The problem may exist, but it doesn’t exist here.*
- Note:** Some respondents classified as multiple archetypes.

Summary of Reduced Data Set



Discussion and Key Takeaways

- Majority of data set is white, perhaps suggesting that privilege conceals the need for DEI advancements.
- In this study, most obstacles to DEI are moderate, as opposed to vehemently opposed to DEI efforts.
- This study corroborates prior research on belief in meritocracy (e.g., Alvarado, 2010; Au, 2013; Liu, 2011).
- Good Ones archetype are consistent with “for all” rhetoric (Martin, 2003).
- Understanding the motivations behind people’s reticence to embrace DEI efforts may facilitate engagement with them.

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