

White Male Allies in STEM Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Faculty Service

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I describe findings from a hermeneutic phenomenological study of white male engagement in DEI faculty service. I frame the phenomenon of interest using the DEI Institutional Activism Framework, and questions of structure and agency through Strong Structuration Theory. Two major findings are reported here. First, that DEI service is disincentivized by contradictory institutional structures that devalue engagement. Second, that individual faculty agentically engage in DEI service because of relational connections to students, but also to women they know personally (daughters, wives, friends, colleagues). These preliminary findings are based on semi-structured interviews with four STEM faculty.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, structure, agency

Women faculty of all races and male faculty of color are more likely to engage in STEM diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives than white men (Jimenez et al., 2019; National Science Foundation, 2019).¹ This disproportionate engagement highlights how underrepresented faculty bear the burden of DEI service in STEM. This burden of equity service silos gender-based DEI initiatives, prevents critical mass from forming, and stifles progress in STEM departments where white men still compose a majority of tenure-line faculty (Jauchen, 2023). White men could contribute to equity progress in STEM fields and relieve some of the burden of DEI service that men of color and women currently bear. The research question in this study was identified through a review of gender-based work in other institutional spaces and centers on the experiences of faculty who have historically not been involved in gender-based DEI service: white non-Latino men. The goal of the study is to understand how individual agency and institutional structures impact white non-Latino male engagement in gender-based DEI service. I hope to understand how current structures are impacting white male engagement in equity work and how individual white men can agentically contest those structures. I focus on one major research question:

What can we understand about structure and agency in DEI service through the lived experiences of white men?

Theoretical Framework

Service is “the catchall name for everything that is neither teaching, research, nor scholarship” which is still generally relevant for promotion, tenure, or evaluation (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995, p. 22). DEI service is service faculty perform to encourage historically excluded students to enter, persist, and succeed in STEM fields. I have previously argued that DEI faculty service (the phenomenon of interest) is a form of institutional activism and can be

¹ The word “white,” when not understood to be complex, socially constructed, and changing over time, can homogenize all people who are perceived to be white into a singular, hegemonic group. Other aspects of identity (gender, sexuality, class, education, and nationality) impact how white identities are experienced and performed (Crenshaw, 1995). Similarly, I use the phrase “people of color” to refer to people who are not white or who are perceived to be non-white. This phrase was originally embraced as a phrase of collective solidarity for oppressed groups, but it too can essentialize and homogenize a large, diverse group of people. I intend it to be a descriptor of a small part of a multiple, changing identity that is impacted by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression.

framed through the DEI Institutional Activism Framework (Jauchen, 2023). When engaging in DEI service, faculty develop a collective identity which includes: (1) Cognitive definitions regarding the environment, aims, and means of the engagement; (2) a network of relationships between individuals engaged; and (3) emotional investment in feeling a part of the engaged group (Jauchen, 2022, 2023; Melucci, 1996, p. 71). This framework was instrumental in developing the interview protocol for the study.

Questions of structure and agency are framed through Stones' Theory of Strong Structuration (2005). Based in Giddens' Structuration theory, strong structuration asserts that all social interaction is made up of moments where agency and structure are intertwined, what Giddens called the "duality of structure." Under this duality, social interactions are a result of external structures, internally held structures, and human agency. For this study, I focused on components of agency that included critical distance, motivations, hierarchy of purpose, horizon of action, and creativity. To analyze structure, I focused on "conjuncturally-specific structures" which are internal structures based in the immediate context of action and on the agent's position within that context (Stones, 2005, p. 85). These internal structures are "memory traces" within agents that help agents understand how things are supposed to be done. In this context, it is helpful to think of these conjuncturally-specific structures as participant understandings of "the way faculty are supposed to act" or "things faculty are supposed to do." These include position-practices (interdependencies, rights, and obligations), asymmetries of power, and social conditions (Cohen, 1989; Stones, 2005, p. 122).

Methods

Through a critical, intersectional, Western feminist lens, I utilize a structural-hermeneutic design based on Strong Structuration theory (Stones, 2005). Van Manen's (2016) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology guided me throughout. I pursue understanding of structure and agency in DEI service through agent conduct analysis and agent context analysis. In agent conduct analysis, I intentionally orient myself to the agent's knowledgeability, turning away (bridling away) from structures and toward the agent's understanding of the space and their hermeneutic interpretation of the actions available to them. In context analysis, I intentionally orient myself to conjuncturally-specific structures.

Through purposeful selection, I recruited seven white, non-Latino men who held PhDs in a STEM discipline, were employed full-time as faculty at primarily white institutions, and who self-described as being involved in DEI service. Because I am interested in the hermeneutic meaning that white men attach to their own DEI service, self-selection is appropriate as it foregrounds the men's perceptions of their commitment to DEI. I intentionally obscured most information about the participants (discipline, institution type, rank) to protect participant confidentiality. I interviewed men who worked at small regional public schools, large public schools, and small private schools. Four STEM disciplines were represented. I report findings from the first four participants only (some analysis is ongoing).

Each faculty participated in three 90-minute interviews following Seidman's (2019) phenomenological interview protocol. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded according to the Structuration framework. Once that coding was complete, I engaged in phenomenological reflection, rereading the coded sections, asking "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the aspect of agency/structure?" and "What is the main significance of this passage as related to agency/structure and DEI service?" These reflections were then organized into broad themes, of which I present two here.

Findings

Contradictory Structures: DEI Service as Everyone's Work and No One's Work

While every participant said their university and departments wanted to support students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, they also told me that they understood DEI service was not highly valued in promotion and tenure. Faculty felt free to engage in DEI service but also didn't consider DEI service a formal part of their jobs. For example, Daniel, who had earlier argued that DEI service was primarily faculty responsibility, also knew that he would face little negative feedback if he avoided DEI work completely:

Most faculty are on board with diversifying our university and our fields. But I'm not getting any pressure from the department or from the university more broadly to do these sorts of things. I have been told many times, especially pre-tenure, that things like this are not a formal part of our expectations for you. You have specific things you need to do, like research. And if you need to say, "Sorry student, I can't do this for you," that's okay. So, I have been told that and I hopefully have internalized it. I could decide to ignore these issues completely. I'm not really gaining a whole lot by doing extra stuff on the diversity and equity inclusion front.²

Similarly, John said that his university supported DEI service, but only cared about research during promotion and tenure evaluations:

While institutions claim that they care about teaching, at tenure time they're only evaluating the research as long as you're not awful at the teaching, which is a mixed message, I would say, right? So, on paper, they'll tell you it's teaching, research, and service, right? But I think the people evaluating the tenure case in the end are looking at research the most.

While participants knew their DEI efforts counted broadly as service, they understood service to be undervalued by the university reward structure. In fact, participants were warned not to spend too much time on DEI service because it could impact research productivity.

These contradictions impacted the support universities provided participants. Participants told me that they had not been trained to engage productively in DEI service. Here's Josh speaking about how his graduate school training provided no information about DEI service.

Outside of my certificate, I have no formal training in what to do. I took a bunch of STEM classes. They didn't really talk about any of this. So, it's really great to be able to go into Research Gate and enter in a few words and get like a view of literature.

Similarly, Grant developed some of his understanding of DEI through his own personal reading.

I mean, I mostly set up training at the different places where I worked. I was the one who was instituting those sorts of things. And they're really difficult because most people think they're just blow off: "What am I gonna learn from this?" I think all my theoretical learning and training and understanding about this happened when I was in graduate school. I read widely. I would read business books. I would read Dale Carnegies, *How to Win Friends, influence people*. I did a lot of this stuff.

When university training was offered, it was not STEM specific (as with Josh above), or not practical. John expressed frustration because he attended DEI training to better understand race

² All quotes are phenomenological anecdotes (van Manen, 2016). Anecdotes are edited versions of participant quotes. In addition to extraneous words being omitted (um, and, like), participant stories were edited for clarity and space, but remain true to the themes identified by the phenomenological analysis.

and gender and those trainings morphed into conversations about how “people learn differently” that were not practical for his class size.

On paper, I feel like the intention of some of these trainings was to discuss race and gender, but then they turn into this general, “Oh, well, the point is people learn differently.” So, I attended one that was focused on how to assess student thinking. So, you give a student an exam and they don't put the right thing on the piece of paper, and you don't give them any points. But did you really understand what they were thinking? And ideally, I'd sit down with the student and say, “Explain to me what you're thinking here” but I can't do that for 300 students. So that bothered me a little bit that we're learning these ideas and trying to think about these things, which was great. But at the same time, is this really practical?

These contradictions in structures – that discursively the university voiced support for DEI initiatives, while functionally not providing resources is an indication of structural inequity.

Agency Amid the Chaos: Navigating Contradictions

In spite of these contradictory structures, participants cultivated a commitment to DEI service. While all participants described their engagement to the belief that DEI service was “the right thing to do,” they also were motivated to engage in DEI service by relational commitments they held toward their students and/or toward women they knew personally (wives, daughters, friends, colleagues). For example, Daniel described a deeply held ethical commitment to know students as individuals and to communicate their inherent value as humans:

I talked about this once with a woman who had worked with college students for a long time. She said that students would tell her all the time that “I just don't know if anyone at this university cares about me for myself and not me for my ability to do X, Y, or Z.” That really struck me. I try to communicate to students that their performance in my class is not a make-or-break moment for who you are as a person or for your worth. Their value to the university community is not just about their ability to do well in specific classes. It's not at all about what they're able to do or not do, or what they're able to contribute or not contribute. And I see that belief as very much in opposition to a lot of things in the academy.

Josh was motivated to pursue grant funding for a DEI initiative because of his relational commitment as a dad to two daughters:

So, I remember thinking, my youngest daughter was expressing interest in going into video game design or something like that. And I remember thinking like, “This grant wouldn't impact her life specifically, but what kind of environment would I want her to be in, or how could she be best supported?” Then I had this real desire to do that for our students: think of them like they are someone's daughters. Someone else feels this way about their daughter. I can care about them too.

These relational connections motivated participants to agentically engage in DEI service, even in the midst of contradictory messages from the university. In addition, participants told me they learned a lot about women as a result of these relationships. Here is Josh:

I was talking to a fellow soccer dad. We played sports growing up, so we've been coached. We know about the culture and how it works, at least on the men's side. I learned very quickly the way we were coached as kids does not work at all on young girls' teams. Everyone that coaches girls every day understands this phenomenon either going in or right away. They don't question it. They just treat these groups a little bit differently. Still trying to promote the same skills. Both groups are equally good skill

wise. But then it's weird when you get to an academic setting, it's not really as accepted. It's like if you say something like that, the response is "We'll just treat everyone equally and kinda move on." I don't really understand that now, looking back on it. And Grant, despite having committed a lot of time to understanding race and gender, told me that he learned so much when he met his partner, a Black woman.

When I met my partner and I got to know her girls and I started raising her girls, I learned so much more about women of color, about all those extra things that I never had to think about growing up. And I was very sympathetic to it, but I mean, it was just like little dumb things. Like we'd be in a grocery store, and she'd be at the counter, and then I'd walk up and afterwards she said, "Did you notice the way the cashier's whole demeanor changed when you walked up to the counter? That's white versus black." But it's hard for people to really appreciate if they haven't experienced it.

Discussion

Universities have established a system that disincentivizes faculty from participating in DEI service while also discursively positioning diversity as a common good. DEI work is structured as an optional, individual pursuit. Individual faculty can engage, but it is not in their interest to do so. In fact, it is explicitly against their interest as an individual, working in a system that disincentivizes DEI service. This establishes a structure under which faculty are encouraged to engage in either/or thinking about their time – that they can do DEI work *or* work on their research. Since the tenure clock is ticking, the research part of this is considered urgent with DEI goals falling to the wayside. But faculty rarely make decisions based purely on university reward structure. Faculty weave together a sense of who they are, what they "should do," through their hermeneutic interpretations of their DEI engagement. In spite of little support from universities, men relied on personal relationships with women to develop understanding of DEI service and to motivate their engagement. This weaving is an agentic practice itself, of course. But it also creates new structures that guide future action, resist harmful university contradictions, and support students who have historically been marginalized. This early study raises many more questions about white male DEI engagement, but also supports so much of the research based on the experiences of marginalized faculty.

Positionality

I am a white, queer, cisgender woman (BS/MS Mathematics), currently teaching mathematics at George Mason University, a public, four-year university. I am part of a community of STEM faculty engaged in DEI service. I study DEI service through the lens of institutional activism, hoping to understand who is involved in DEI work in STEM, who is not involved, and how universities can strategically increase faculty engagement in DEI while retaining, valuing, and centering the work that underrepresented faculty have been doing.

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