

# Ethnic Studies and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A New Approach to the “Bamboo Ceiling”

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Rabbani, J. (2023). Ethnic studies and diversity, equity, and inclusion: A new approach to the “bamboo ceiling.” *Currents*, 3(1).

## 2020: The Year of Racial Social Justice

Since 2020, both ethnic studies and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)<sup>1</sup> programs reaffirmed their value in society: movements toward racial social justice increased as direct responses to police violence and other forms of racial violence and hate. Organizations, institutions, and governments reacted with various measures to combat systemic racism in both the classroom and workforce while promoting practices rooted in equity and inclusion. It seems that many of today’s social justice issues that exist within society (e.g., representation, access, etc.) are the same issues that were being challenged in the mid-twentieth century (Patton et al., 2019).

As student movements from the mid-to-latter half of the twentieth century demanded fair and equal practices from their institutions of higher learning, universities were slow to meet their demands around

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1. Numerous names and acronyms exist but, for the sake of clarity, given its relative ubiquity to other iterations rather than insistence, diversity, equity, and inclusion will be used for this paper.

affirmative action policies until the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (Poussaint, 1974). At that point, institutions were scrambling to meet their diversity goals, not wanting to appear to be last in areas of inclusion (Patton et al., 2019). Much in the same way that universities prolonged their response to student demands around inclusion until the assassination of MLK Jr., it was not until the death of George Floyd that institutions in 2020 across America expedited the implementation of various modes of thinking toward a more equitable society. Connecting these perspectives of difference—and their benefits—from one structure of society to another can provide solutions to dismantling stereotypes and reducing discrimination across all structures of society.

In 2020, Assembly Bill No. 1460 was passed in California, requiring ethnic studies be added to the core curriculum for all incoming students in the California State University system, which went into effect in 2021 (California Legislative Information, 2020).<sup>2</sup> And, after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, parallel with the rising violence toward people of Asian descent during the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the mass murder of Asian women in Atlanta in March 2021, DEI programs dramatically increased across America (Jan, T., 2021).

Data from Glassdoor seems to confirm this demand: October 2020 saw an all-time high (+54% since the pandemic) of DEI openings across companies, months after the murder of George Floyd (Stansell & Zhao, 2020). Job seekers also placed more emphasis on DEI programs at prospective companies during the same period (Stansell & Zhao, 2020). And DEI consultants reported an uptick in business during 2020, explaining how underqualified or uninformed many managers and leaders are around many DEI issues (Read, 2021). Data scarcely shows the connection between DEI openings relative to those “qualified” to lead such programs,<sup>3</sup> and this is an opportunity for ethnic studies practitioners to start to incorporate DEI workplace issues

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2. AB-101 made ethnic studies a graduation requirement for high school students.

3. There does not appear to be an agreed-upon set of qualifications for DEI leaders in each industry, so measuring the variables that deem an individual qualified can be extensive.

into their curricula as a way to cultivate a new generation of qualified DEI experts.

The connection between ethnic studies in educational settings and DEI programs in business settings is rarely examined by researchers in a singular space,<sup>4</sup> even though researchers and practitioners, separately in both spaces, have studied the effectiveness and limitations of each discipline (Milner, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Patton et al., 2019; Calabrese & Tan, 2020; Onyeador et al., 2021). Exploring this unprecedented connection is relevant for a few reasons: to demonstrate that each centers difference as a way to create equity; to exchange best practices and approaches with the other (i.e., what each can teach the other); prepare future DEI and ethnic studies leaders by sharing perspectives of each discipline and their commonalities (e.g., teaching students the effects of the bamboo ceiling); and how the tools to measure and implement impact can be shared in both environments (e.g., institutional or third-party survey systems).

The aforementioned social-cultural movements during the mid-to-latter half of the twentieth century promoted a push toward a more representative democracy via integrationist policies. Those who were once excluded from nation-building demanded to not just be included but to be part of the process; those in power devised new methods of integration via representation while at the same time creating concurrent strategies to preserve their power (Ferguson, 2012). This paper, therefore, will focus not on the historical shifts of power in the context of representational politics (Perkins, 2016) nor on the erosion of affirmative action policies (Butler, 1996) or the shifting definitions of “minority” (JanMohamed & Lloyd, 1987) but, rather, on a new paradigm for practitioners in either ethnic studies or DEI programs, focusing on an unexplored link of centering difference.

The term *difference* is guided by Dei and Abdi’s *integrative anti-racist* pedagogical approach that centers race within anti-racist dialogues and

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4. This paper appears to be the first connecting ethnic studies and DEI programs to address the effects of the “bamboo ceiling.”

settings, while at the same time trying to understand those other characteristics of social difference (i.e., orientation, gender, race/ethnicity) (Dei & Abdi, 1997). Ethnic studies in this paper refers to the study of the histories, cultures, and social-cultural issues as they relate to various people and communities who have been marginalized or disenfranchised by government and/or civic society (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). DEI programs refer to those frameworks provided by workplaces that attempt to fairly include the participation of all people, but especially those from underrepresented/marginalized groups (Zeynep et. al., 2022). Although ethnic studies and DEI programs seem to have distinct views on successful outcomes for their audiences, both center an understanding of difference in their approach, working to create equitable outcomes for all peoples in society, but especially those from historically disenfranchised communities.

## **A Natural Link: Centering Difference**

Strategies around how to better serve underrepresented students and/or employees seem to have many approaches that overlap with each other (Dee & Penner, 2017; Fuentes et al., 2021; Kayingo, 2022; Lori et al., 2018). Ethnic studies re-centers the histories and experiences of underrepresented people and can provide guidance around the structural issues that contribute to the lack of diversity among leadership positions. While DEI programs can help identify unconscious biases that prevent underrepresented people from leadership positions, it can offer, for example, opportunities for networking and mentoring among peers (Lee, 2019; Hsieh & Nguyen, 2020). From these perspectives, ethnic studies and DEI programs seem to have a natural link because each centers difference as a way to understand and create equitable outcomes.

To highlight the need of using ethnic studies and DEI perspectives in both spaces, the “bamboo ceiling” is a relevant if not a timely example. Connecting the model minority myth to the bamboo ceiling can prepare future leaders in the DEI space, not to mention general leadership, around the cultural impacts (Kong et al., 2022) that

inform the constructs of how stereotypes relate to work style (Tu & Okazaki, 2021), but it also demonstrates to students how stereotypes influence workplace outcomes since students will eventually enter the workforce.

## **Workplace Outcomes, Classroom Origins: The Effects of the Bamboo Ceiling**

Borrowing from the “glass ceiling” concept that is used to explain the invisible barrier that prevents upward mobility of women (Manzi & Heilman, 2021) and other underrepresented groups (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023) in the workforce, the “bamboo ceiling” is a term that explores the invisible barriers that limits people from Asian backgrounds from attaining leadership positions in companies and industries across America (Hyun, 2004). The effects of the bamboo ceiling are tied to the model-minority myth (Xie, 2022), which stipulates that Asian Americans are academically high achievers who obey without resistance (Wing, 2007). The model-minority myth was constructed and reinforced through a number of articles (Petersen, 1966; US News and World Report, 1966) in the mid-twentieth century by White authors (Walker & Anders, 2022).

Even if the construct is based upon the gaze of Whites and assumptions around meritocracy, the model-minority myth still does not shield Asian Americans from the deleterious outcomes of racism and discrimination (Yu, 2020; Walker & Anders, 2022; Johnson & Sy, 2016). Examinations of positive stereotyping<sup>5</sup> of Asian Americans (Zhou & Lee, 2017), in general, and the bamboo ceiling, in particular, have been explored (He et al., 2019). Positive stereotypes produce negative outcomes around representation in leadership, and this can be observed in outcomes like the bamboo ceiling and the model-minority myth (Thompson et al., 2016).

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5. When a stereotype does not match an occupational stereotype (e.g., beliefs around certain types of people should be in certain types of jobs) then these demographic groups will be less likely represented in those occupations (Heilman, 1983 [[AU: add to references]]; He et al., 2019).

Put another way, the effects and outcomes of the bamboo ceiling are related to the model-minority myth because individuals are stereotyped in specific ways that are precisely connected to being overlooked for promotions into managerial or executive positions (Sy et al., 2010; Chia, 2020; Lu et al., 2022). Research examining the effects of the bamboo ceiling in the workplace provide a glimpse into these structural inequities and outcomes: among the 500 S&P companies, 6% are of Asian descent (this number is diminished when segmenting by South and East Asian [Zweigenhaft, 2020]), with most identifying as male (Agovino, 2021).

The supposition behind the disparity between South and East Asian representation<sup>6</sup> in these positions are cultural: South Asian cultures are explicit with debate (Sen, 2005) versus East Asian cultural tendencies to favor discreetness rooted within a strict social hierarchy (Kang et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2020). And, when coupled with the Western construct of executive assertiveness, East Asians are more likely to be overlooked, which seems to be connected to part of the model-minority myth that suggests that they are passive and quiet, traits not associated with the Western constructs of leadership (Lee, 2015; Lu et al., 2020).

Building on this cultural nuance between South and East Asian communication styles, a similar effect around explicit participation in classrooms can be observed. Poor performance by East Asian students in social courses occur because these types of classes usually require explicit, vocal participation for credit versus quantitative courses (Currier, 2022; Xie, 2022). Similarly, positions of leadership in the West value traits of assertiveness, the same traits needed for participation in various social courses in which East Asian students seem to perform poorly (Lu et al., 2020). And this is one example for which ethnic studies courses need to provide culturally sensitive environments that can lead to positive academic outcomes, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds (Milner, 2010), such as those from Asian backgrounds.

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6. This distinction continues to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the label "Asian American" (Yamashita, 2022).

Students resonate more when lessons reflect their histories and the perspectives of their cultures (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). When students from especially marginalized communities take ethnic studies courses, they are likely to have higher GPAs, higher rates of attendance, and increased likelihood to take more college prep courses, and, generally, will likely engage more broadly during their high school careers (Dee & Penner, 2017); they also have a higher chance of graduating high school (Bonilla et al., 2021). Coupling these outcomes with tailored, localized curriculum development with faculty and staff contributes to student success (Dee & Penner, 2017; Addy et al., 2021). How teachers delivered their lesson—and how their pedagogies were developed—also influenced positive educational outcomes for their students (Dee & Penner, 2017). The holistic development and delivery of curriculum is an opportunity for DEI programs to better serve their employees, especially those from Asian backgrounds.

Often, in workspaces, Asians and Asian Americans are overlooked because of a pervasive assumption of many DEI programs predicated on the Black-White binary of racial issues;<sup>7</sup> or there is focus on invisibility, immigration status, perceived language barriers, and obedience (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Sue et al., 2007); or, from the perspective of the National Science Foundation (NSF), Asians are not a minority (Iporac, 2020), despite being the lowest recipients of NSF grants, another indication that counters the model-minority myth of academic excellence (Chen et al., 2022). The invisibility that results from not being a minority means that their actual needs are being overlooked, even though Asians and Asian Americans connect general and racial/ethnic bullying to their experienced, everyday racism in the workplace (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Being both a minority and immigrants (Zhou & Lee, 2017), Asian Americans (like Latinxs) endure both direct and indirect racisms and microaggressions and confront stereotypes around being a “perpetual foreigner” (Kiang et al., 2022; Sanchez, 2008).

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7. Asians are racialized through the interactions of the Black-White binary (Kim, 1999), and this triangulation of race can be observed in classrooms via the model-minority myth (Xu & Lee, 2013).

How stereotypes operate in the workforce is one issue that DEI programs work to resolve. Adopting the perspectives and methods of ethnic studies can provide guidance for DEI practitioners as they develop initiatives. The anti-racist perspective programmed into ethnic studies suggests that the discipline is equipped to dissect and mitigate the effects of the model minority and the bamboo ceiling by connecting how stereotypes are constructed (Fish & Syed, 2020) while providing cultural explanations around behavior (Kang et al., 2017; Berdahl & Min, 2012).

## **Merging Ethnic Studies and DEI Perspectives**

Centering difference in the workforce or classroom can also have positive effects that cascade onto other discriminatory actions based on different demographic factors. For example, workplace stereotypes are not only rooted in racist histories but they also help shape constructs around gender and class stereotypes (Embrick & Henricks, 2015), topics DEI programs engage in. Regardless of whether classroom or workforce equity<sup>8</sup> is salient because it addresses the specific needs of an individual or group and tailors resources as a result (Berman & Paradies, 2010). Because equity seeks to provide resources for people to “succeed” in their environments, not everyone will need the same resources, if at all (Schufeldt, 2021).

Given the shared perspectives of equitable outcomes via centering difference, coupled with the findings on the impact of ethnic studies and workplace discriminatory outcomes, here are some working recommendations for both DEI and ethnic studies practitioners who wish to establish connections with the other (Konrad et al., 2016):

- To ensure that DEI initiatives work beyond language (Patton et al., 2019), establish common goals between the classroom and workforce.

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8. Diversity, however, will work toward proper representation of all groups but not necessarily focus on if the opportunities are fair (Hoffman et al., 2016).



This is an opportunity to cultivate future leadership and life outcomes in either space. Using workplace examples in the classroom will likely further assist with this development of future leadership in both spaces.

- Practitioners of ethnic studies, as with DEI professionals, should collaborate with colleagues at other institutions to understand localized challenges, solutions, and best practices (Kayingo et al., 2022).
- Both DEI professionals and ethnic studies practitioners should actively meet to develop strategies for creating equitable, localized programs and curricula. Include students/employees via feedback from surveys, active participation, and/or a liaison. Open, free access of materials should be widely available to all groups via their institutions to ensure equitable outcomes (Fuentes et al., 2021).
- If the organization or classroom has a microminority, then practitioners should understand which local resources (e.g., professional, institutional, and departmental sources, social networks, etc.) are available to assist them with serving various unique groups (Onyeador et al., 2021; Arellanes & Hendricks, 2022).

Research into the effectiveness of using data in one space and its application in another, albeit a shared and similar but nevertheless distinct one, should continue to develop so to better understand how the goals, perspectives, and needs of ethnic studies and DEI programs can learn, grow, and collaborate with each other. Determining how DEI qualifications for leaders are defined and how effective DEI programs are over time will likely provide guidance around academic outcomes, profitability, and reducing discriminatory outcomes. Further investigation is needed to understand how ethnic studies programs and DEI initiatives can mitigate the bamboo ceiling.

## **Conclusion**

Diversity is shown to have many advantages (Gompers & Kovvali, 2018; Tsusaka et al., 2019; Bravo, 2020; Dixon-Fyle et. al, 2020; Losavio, 2020; Daniel et al., 2022; Schachle & Coley, 2022; Oliver & Wong,

2003), not to mention more profitable outcomes (Herring, 2009; Gonzalez & Denisi, 2009). Research in areas that seek to create equitable and inclusive environments already exist (Dee & Penner, 2017; Konrad et al., 2016; Kirkland & Bohnet, 2017; Blair, 2020; Pedulla, 2020; Creary et al., 2021), but the connection between ethnic studies and DEI programs, where both share similar goals toward equity while centering difference, has not yet been explored until this paper. New, innovative methods, or current ones used in unique ways, should continue to develop as a way to make a stronger connection between ethnic studies and DEI initiatives (Daly & Shah, 2022; Norris & Sawyer, 2016).

If ethnic studies provide explanations around the origins of race as a result of centering difference, and DEI programs address how professional inequities develop because of difference, then this is precisely why each need to be connected, studied, and shared so to better establish the causes and effects around discrimination that can originate in the classroom, evolving in the workforce. Continued analysis of their unexplored connection can become a powerful tool to potentially resolve discriminatory outcomes, from participation in the classroom to promotions into leadership.

## **Bio**

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9. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of J. D. Power.

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