Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

Debunking rhetorical myths about diversity, equity and inclusion in the Trump era

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines and challenges six pervasive myths about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) promulgated by the Trump Administration's policies and actions. We dispel that (1) diversity work is ideology and not science, (2) that DEI violates free speech and incites cancel culture, (3) that DEI is about equality and not equity, (4) that America is postracial, rendering DEI unnecessary, (5) that DEI only serves marginalized racial groups and lastly (6) that DEI and meritocracy cannot coexist.

Design/methodology/approach – In the current article, we aim to provide a selective review of relevant theories and findings that address DEI resistance and backlash (e.g. zero-sum mindsets), some of which offer insights into how we might move DEI forward.

Findings – Across all six myths discussed in this article, we highlight the psychological and sociological processes underlying these beliefs and offer critical perspectives, calling for a move beyond buying into them and toward dismantling them.

Originality/value – We approached this article from the perspective of diversity researchers and educators who have long battled misconceptions and fallacies around what DEI is and is not. In writing this piece, we wanted to provide researchers and practitioners doing the very important work of challenging racism, inequality and bias in society with useful tools to do so.

Keywords Equal opportunity, Anti-DEI, Meritocracy, Zero-sum, Workforce diversity

Paper type Viewpoint

During the 2024 Presidential Campaign, Donald Trump made it explicitly clear that if reelected, he planned to "restore merit-based opportunity" to American institutions and remove "illegal diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA)" from them. So much so that dismantling diversity efforts and legislation became a cornerstone of his reelection campaign (Ng *et al.*, 2025). In service of this promise, one of his first actions was Executive Order 14,173, which effectively eliminated affirmative action and diversity programming from the federal government in favor of relatively vague, seemingly opposite merit-based opportunity programming. What has become clear from the discourse and chaos that have since ensued, however, is that the current administration – and by extension, a number of its supporters – lack a clear understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). For example, this Executive Order seeks to ban all "*illegal* DEI," but this action raises questions like: what qualifies as "*illegal* DEI?" And more importantly, what even is "*legal* DEI?" How do individuals, organizations and institutions engage in the latter while not engaging in the former? The order provides no clarity regarding these distinctions and may not intend to suggest that there are any differences. Nonetheless, stakeholders remain confused about the state of DEI, what constitutes DEI and how to support it.

We do not seek to address the latter of those questions; instead, we aim to elucidate what *is* and *is not* DEI. Currently, the lay understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion is both

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limited and riddled with inaccuracies – among beneficiaries, opponents and even those responsible for managing diversity in organizations (Embrick, 2011; Tatli, 2011). This disconnect raises the question: How is it possible to dismantle – and more importantly, support DEI – if we do not have an adequate understanding of its purposes and aims? The goal of this article is to highlight and dismantle several myths about what DEI is and is not, based on foundational and novel discourse and research in the field. We approach this task as scholars and educators who have a vested interest in ensuring that the public understands the missions, goals and truth of DEI – not the myths that seek to undermine its existence.

What is diversity, equity and inclusion?

As a concept, "diversity, equity, and inclusion" has come to mean many different things to many people. Despite all the politicking and misinformed rhetoric that have shaped how the public views DEI, its foundations and spirit are quite simple. "Diversity," in the simplest terms, means the presence of difference or as it relates to identities, the different perspectives people bring to different contexts and environments (e.g. Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Diversity acknowledges the variance in identities and experiences within a group, organization or society. Relatedly, but distinct from diversity, is the concept of "equity." Equity refers to treatment and processes that are fair, just and equitable (Ruggs and Holmes, 2024; Phillips *et al*., 2022). Lastly, "inclusion" concerns people being able to be their full selves, having access to resources and feeling valued for what they offer the group (Nishii and Leroy, 2022).

We also want to clearly define what we mean by "DEI work." We rely on Plaut (2010) articulation of *diversity science* and Leslie (2019) definition of *diversity initiatives* to inform our understanding of how diversity, equity and inclusion operate in both scholarly and applied settings. A scholarly approach to diversity work examines "how people create, interpret, and maintain group differences among individuals, as well as the psychological and societal consequences of these distinctions" with a consideration that these differences are "created and recreated in the process of everyday social interactions" with people, organizations, institutions and structures (Plaut, 2010, p. 77). As such, researchers rely heavily on psychological and sociological insights to develop theories to understand intergroup processes and test their underlying mechanisms. This scholarship subsequently informs *diversity initiatives*, or "practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantage" and their implementation in organizations and society (Leslie, 2019, p. 538).

"DEI" as an integrated concept does not seek to create hierarchies among groups whereby some are better or more deserving than others. Further, its aim is not to exclude nonmarginalized groups (e.g. White men) from opportunities or resources – quite the opposite, actually! DEI, as is explicated above, advocates for equality for *everyone* with an implicit assumption that it does not come at the expense of any specific group.

Given the definition(s) above, it is hard to conceive of "DEI work" as *illegal*, but the Trump administration has attempted to do exactly that (Speri, 2024). We are unsure how efforts meant to ensure "equality for all" in service of foundational principles like "all men are created equal" could be construed as illegal, but we argue that this perspective is a function of status and group position threat meant to undermine equity restoration and maintenance policies (Iyer, 2022). In the sections that follow, we use research and critical observations to take to task exactly this kind of rhetoric.

Organizing framework

An assumption implicit in our position is that resistance to DEI does not emerge in isolation; rather, it is rooted in psychological backlash toward experienced threats to status and autonomy that manifest as coordinated rhetorical strategies (Brannon *et al*., 2018; Gündemir *et al*., 2024; Nittrouer *et al*., 2025). We outline six myths that can be organized into challenges

to (1) DEI's legitimacy as scientific knowledge, (2) DEI's necessity in contemporary society and (3) DEI's fairness as a practice. Understanding how these myths are used as interconnected rhetorical approaches reveals not only the psychology behind backlash to DEI work, but also the strategic architecture of anti-DEI rhetoric.

The Legitimacy of DEI. We begin by examining two myths that question whether DEI represents legitimate knowledge and practice. The first myth we discuss challenges the notion that DEI work is not grounded in science, framing it instead as ideologically-driven opinions and/or feelings. We begin with this myth to lay the foundation for an evidence-based discussion on the value of DEI and the consequences of anti-DEI rhetoric and legislation. We then discuss a second related myth: that DEI limits our freedom of expression through cancel culture. This myth extends efforts to delegitimize DEI by characterizing it as a threat to the free exchange of ideas and open dialogue. Together, these myths seek to dismiss DEI as illegitimate before even engaging with its substance.

The Necessity of DEI. After attempting to undermine DEI's legitimacy, opponents shift to questioning whether DEI work is even needed. This rhetorical approach operates through denial: denial of inequality's persistence and denial of the need for equity-focused interventions. The third myth we examine is the assertion that DEI is about equality and not equity. Specifically, we highlight the differences between equality and equity and the implications of misunderstanding how DEI relates to these two principles. This conceptual confusion allows opponents to argue that equal treatment alone is sufficient, rendering equity-based approaches unnecessary.

Building on this conceptual rejection of equity, opponents may then deny the empirical reality that makes DEI work necessary. The fourth myth we take up is the claim that DEI is no longer needed because America is postracial. We contend that despite the perceived racial progress following the Obama years, America is indeed in need of DEI efforts and not postracial. By invoking postracial narratives and conflating equality with equity, these myths suggest that DEI addresses problems that no longer exist or that current structures and/or simpler solutions suffice.

The Fairness of DEI. The final and perhaps most emotionally resonant rhetorical approach reframes DEI not as unnecessary, but as actively harmful, particularly to those who have historically held advantage in society (e.g. White people). This rhetorical strategy leverages zero-sum thinking and status threat to portray DEI as fundamentally unfair. The fifth myth we challenge is the idea that DEI initiatives and programs serve only marginalized racial groups – specifically Black people. We reason that this false racial dichotomy not only further marginalizes other ethnic minority groups (e.g. Latinos, East and South Asians) but also misrepresents DEI as a zero-sum competition for resources rather than an inclusive framework that benefits all.

Once this zero-sum framing is established, opponents identify the mechanism by which DEI supposedly causes this unfair harm. The sixth myth is among the most pervasive and one that is largely attributable to the persistent DEI backlash we see today: that DEI and meritocracy cannot coexist. Although these ideas have been taken up elsewhere (Carter, 2026; Konrad *et al*., 2021), we affirm the belief that not only can they coexist, but it is nearly impossible for a meritocracy to exist without DEI.

Taken together, this article challenges several dominant and false perspectives that undermine DEI by revealing how they function as coordinated rhetorical strategies rooted in backlash to psychological threats. Additionally, we aim to provide evidence-based arguments that scholars, teachers and supporters alike can use in the fight against misinformation, red herrings and strawman arguments that divert attention from the genuine value of DEI work in organizations and society. We return to these points in the conclusion of this article.

Myth 1: diversity, equity and inclusion is just ideology, not science

One of the myths we believe is most instrumental to the escalating DEI backlash we see today is that diversity, equity and inclusion are just ideologies, not science. That is, everything

proponents marshal in support of diversity, equity and inclusion is merely an amalgamation of people's feelings and opinions, rather than being grounded in anything legitimate (e.g. Hinton and Lambert, 2022; Smith, 2025). While we don't disagree that ideology has, without question, influenced the development and implementation of diversity programming (see Roberts, 2024), we believe it is both false and reductive to suggest that DEI is not grounded in science.

It is important to note that the beginnings of what we are calling diversity work were indeed ideological. The fact of the matter is that *all* work, to some extent, is influenced by our individual ideologies because we all have experiences and beliefs that affect our judgment and decision-making – regardless of how ardently we adhere to the scientific method (Dupree, 2021; King *et al*., 2018; Pronin, 2007). However, as others have argued elsewhere, the catalyst for the study of diversity was to combat research that ideologically reified White supremacy, purported ethnic minority inferiority and sought to legitimize the subjugation of marginalized individuals (e.g. Guthrie, 1976; Nkomo, 1992; Buchanan *et al*., 2021; Roberts, 2024). Consider, for example, that a review of papers published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* – a top journal in psychology and management – found that in the early and mid-twentieth century, research on both race and gender was often riddled with racist and sexist ideological positions taken as fact and sound science (Colella *et al*., 2017). For example, one paper sought to "determine the median I.Q. of all ages of Negroes to show to what extent the inferiority of negroes is dependent on age" (Arlitt, 1922, p. 378). Others reported that intelligence decreases with the amount of "Indian blood" a person had (Garth, 1927, p. 273) and that "Negroes do not deserve the privilege of a court trial like other people" (Sumner and Shaed, 1945, p. 374). Women were not spared from this type of research – Porteus claimed that gender differences in brain growth explained the "fundamental reason why this is and will remain a man-directed and not a woman-governed world . . . [because women] tend to lack planning capacity . . . [are] easily confused, excitable, obtrusive, suggestable, and simple" (Porteus, 1924, p. 63). Again, at the time these papers were published, their findings were considered relatively mainstream and would not be refuted until decades later (Colella *et al*., 2017).

Thus, in an attempt to more accurately represent *all* groups in social science research, researchers began to interrogate the ideological assumptions and dangerous shortcomings inherent in the theory and methods that shaped how we think about race, gender and other demographic differences (see Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Dupree and Kraus, 2022; King *et al*., 2023; Ray, 2019; Winant, 2000, for a broader discussion). In doing so, scholars have elevated our collective understanding of intergroup relations in organizations and beyond. For example, they have uncovered explicit and implicit bias against marginalized groups (e.g. Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Hebl *et al*., 2002; Jones *et al*., 2017), documented the ways in which structures and procedures themselves marginalize (e.g. Anicich *et al*., 2021; Rucker and Richeson, 2021), suggested solutions to overcome said bias (e.g. Botelho *et al*., 2025; Rivera and Tilcsik, 2019; Ruggs *et al*., 2011), documented employees of color and women's challenges ascending to leadership positions (e.g. Roberts *et al*., 2019), demonstrated the benefits of diverse teams in organizations (e.g. Mannix and Neale, 2005) and the psychological, interpersonal, and structural barriers present for the groups and the best ways to facilitate success for them under oppressive systems (e.g. Ray, 2019; Roberson, 2023), to name just a few of the critical insights from this tradition of work.

The applied side of DEI work faces similar headwinds. Whether it is because research has shown that certain diversity initiatives and programs often do little to improve outcomes for people of color in organizations (e.g. Bezrukova *et al*., 2016; Kalev *et al*., 2006; Portocarrero and Carter, 2022; Roberson, 2019) or simply because people often have negative affective responses to them (e.g. Paluck, 2006), the claim that DEI work is more performative or ideological than rigorous looms larger and larger for organizational practitioners. However, the idea that "diversity initiatives don't work" misstates the current state of research and dismisses the plethora of ways these programs actually do work. For example, while yes, it has been shown that diversity training has little impact on managerial representation of people of

color (Kalev *et al*., 2006), we would argue that increased representation is not necessarily the goal of diversity training – or at least not the primary goal. Put differently, diversity training is an evidence-based tool for reducing bias and is often used to improve attitudes and decrease an individual's reliance on bias in decision-making (Paluck, 2006). In this way, diversity training has actually been shown to be effective when implemented correctly (Berzukova *et al*., 2016; Devine and Ash, 2022). However, expecting it to improve managerial representation for people of color seems like a far-fetched dream.

Diversity training – like other programs implemented in organizations – relies on theory, design, testing, and measurement to ensure that it is actually achieving its intended attitudinal and behavioral goals. Suggesting that these efforts are based on "bad science" or are "elaborate grifts" diminishes all the rigorous scientific work being done to uncover discrimination, document prejudice and provide interventions to make organizations and society more just and equitable.

Myth 2: diversity, equity and inclusion is indoctrination and limits free expression

Building on the first myth that DEI is an ideologically driven opinion rather than science, the second myth extends this claim by portraying DEI as ideological indoctrination that suppresses opposing views, threatens free speech and incites cancel culture. According to this perspective, DEI work stifles open dialogue by creating environments in which individuals fear expressing unpopular views or "saying the wrong thing" (Costa and Azevedo, 2024; Creary, 2025). In academic contexts specifically, critics suggest that DEI work favors "safe spaces" at the cost of learning and scientific progress (Bagus *et al*., 2023). In broader political discourse – particularly among conservative commentators and policymakers – these concerns are often amplified, with DEI portrayed as enforcing ideological conformity and punishing those who challenge "woke ideas." Yet this characterization rests on a misunderstanding of both DEI and the nature of freedom of expression. Properly understood, DEI initiatives aim to broaden participation in scholarly and organizational conversations, creating conditions in which a wider range of perspectives can be voiced, scrutinized and critically engaged (e.g. Edmondson and Roloff, 2008).

Debates about DEI and free speech are often tied to concerns about "cancel culture," commonly used to describe collective efforts to publicly denounce individuals or organizations perceived to have engaged in moral, political or social misconduct (Clark, 2020; Cummings *et al*., 2025; Vogels *et al*., 2021). Conservative politicians and commentators have strategically linked cancel culture to DEI, arguing that DEI initiatives create a censorious "mob mentality" that allegedly suppresses dissenting or alternative viewpoints (Bagus *et al*., 2023; Ng, 2020; Norris, 2023). However, experiences of discomfort in expressing controversial views are not unique to contemporary debates over DEI; individuals across the political spectrum routinely withhold opinions when they perceive their views to be in the minority within a given social context (Masullo and Duchovnay, 2022). As DEI initiatives bring historically marginalized perspectives more centrally into academic and public discourse, the distribution of majority and minority viewpoints within these spaces may shift. Individuals whose perspectives were previously widely accepted may now have to justify them, which might heighten feelings that their freedom of speech is being constrained (Masullo and Duchovnay, 2022; Noëlle-Neumann, 1974). In many cases, however, these perceptions reflect shifting social dynamics and a redistribution of the discomfort inherent in challenging ideas – discomfort that has historically fallen disproportionately on marginalized groups whose perspectives were often dismissed or excluded from scholarly discourse (e.g. Holmes *et al*., 2022; Avery *et al*., 2022).

A related misunderstanding underlying this myth is the assumption that free expression requires all viewpoints to be treated as equally valid. In academic contexts, however, intellectual exchange is structured by standards of evidence, methodological rigor and scholarly critique. Elevating empirically unsupported or discriminatory claims to the status of

equivalent "sides" in the name of free speech undermines the mission of academia and the scientific process itself (Moses, 2021). DEI initiatives, by contrast, aim to expand the range of perspectives considered within scholarly discourse, ensuring that voices historically excluded from knowledge production are meaningfully included. In doing so, DEI strengthens rather than weakens intellectual debate by encouraging more comprehensive and rigorous engagement with complex social realities.

Importantly, the discomfort associated with challenging ideas is not a threat to scientific inquiry but a fundamental feature of it. Mill (1859) argued that meaningful understanding requires engaging seriously with opposing views and confronting the possibility that accepted ideas may be incomplete or incorrect. Similarly, Merton (1938) described science as organized skepticism, in which established assumptions are continually subjected to critical scrutiny. Expanding the range of voices in scholarly discourse – particularly those historically excluded – can strengthen, rather than weaken, the conditions for scientific progress. By questioning prevailing assumptions, DEI initiatives may generate the critical engagement and intellectual friction essential to advancing knowledge.

Notably, claims that DEI suppresses speech have often emerged alongside governmental actions that directly restrict expression. For example, Exec. Order 13950 (2020) prohibited federal contractors from conducting workplace training on topics such as systemic racism or white privilege and established reporting mechanisms for "offensive" diversity training – measures later found unconstitutional. Florida's Individual Freedom Act (2022), commonly referred to as the "Stop WOKE Act," sought to limit classroom discussions of race and gender, but federal courts blocked the legislation on First Amendment grounds. These cases illustrate a striking inversion: while DEI initiatives are frequently accused of policing thought, anti-DEI policies have more explicitly sought to restrict what educators, employees and institutions may say.

Ultimately, the claim that DEI suppresses speech misrepresents the purpose of this work. Rather than restricting expression, DEI seeks to create conditions in which a broader range of voices can participate meaningfully in dialogue. By expanding the range of perspectives heard and taken seriously, DEI fosters more inclusive and intellectually rigorous discourse. The greater threat to free expression often arises not from DEI initiatives themselves but from policies that seek to prohibit discussions of race, gender and inequality under the banner of protecting "free thought." Such measures narrow rather than expand public discourse. When implemented thoughtfully, DEI does not curtail open dialogue; it strengthens the foundations of scholarly inquiry and democratic debate.

Myth 3: diversity, equity and inclusion is about equality, not equity

Another directive signed by President Trump that reinforces diversity myths is Executive Order 14,281, "Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy," which seeks to eliminate disparate-impact liability for employers. Essentially, Trump aims to eliminate protections for employees from protected classes against disparate outcomes resulting from seemingly neutral organizational policies and practices. Furthermore, Trump would like American citizens to have "equality of opportunity, not equal outcomes" (Exec. Order No. 14281, 2025). This position is concerning as there is a long history of inequitable structural processes in organizations that tend to disadvantage marginalized groups. With the elimination of disparate impact liability, organizations will be able to continue using these practices.

Equity is a crucial component of DEI work. While it is important that everyone is treated equally, equity acknowledges that some people have faced barriers and may need support to overcome them. A common example used to illustrate what people mean by "equity" is a cartoon in which three people are watching a sports game from behind a fence. These individuals are of varying heights, and thus, are limited in what they are able to see – one can see nothing as he is completely below the fence, one has an obstructed view as the fence is right in his eyeline and the other can see clearly over the fence and enjoy the game. While everyone

has the same opportunity to see the game, some may need additional support (in this case, milk crates to stand on) in order to actually watch the game. It would be nonsensical to give everyone a crate to stand on (i.e. an *equal* number each), given that one spectator has an unobstructed view, and the shortest spectator may need more than one crate to adequately see. This solution represents an "equality-focused approach" and not an "equity-focused approach." An equity-focused approach would give each spectator what they need to see and enjoy the game, whether that is zero, one, or two crates to stand on. This is why Trump's focus on "equal opportunities" over "equitable outcomes" is deeply flawed. When organizations strive for equity, this may mean that some groups may require additional resources to have the same opportunities for success, compensating for the disadvantages associated with particular social groups. To reiterate previously discussed points: organizations must use identity-conscious practices that ensure historically disadvantaged groups – racial minorities and women, for example – can fairly attain jobs, receive fair wages and have access to advancement within the organization.

In addition, Trump's Executive Order 14,281 states that "disparate-impact liability has hindered businesses from making hiring and other employment decisions based on merit and skill" (Exec. Order No. 14281, 2025). This contention is misguided because individuals with similar merit and skills but different racial or gender statuses often experience different outcomes. For example, a now-classic study found that white-sounding names on resumes received 50% more call-backs than Black-sounding names, even with the same qualifications (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004). These findings speak to a common belief among Black Americans: without equitable protections, they have to work "twice as hard to get half as far" as their White counterparts (DeSante, 2013). Regardless of whether people have the same qualifications or performance, there is still an opportunity for bias to occur based on an individual's social group membership. With Trump giving organizations the freedom to, if they minimize their focus on equity, bias is likely to not only continue to occur but also proliferate in organizations.

In response to the Society of Human Resources (SHRM) – the leading Human Resources professional organization – removing equity from their goals and shifting to focus more on inclusion, researchers argued that dropping the "E" in "DEI" would be detrimental to organizational outcomes for marginalized employees (Ruggs and Holmes, 2024). One major point they make is that while people may feel included, they may not be treated fairly. For example, with pay, women and racial minorities may not know that they are earning less than their peers if the company is not transparent about its pay practices. In addition, companies may appear to have numerical diversity on paper but lack diverse representation across organizational ranks, highlighting that the paths for advancement are not equitable. These are important factors that make "equity" essential to "diversity" and "inclusion."

Eliminating equity safeguards ignores the fact that not everyone faces the same systemic barriers and that organizations are not unbiased entities. Organizations need to have equitable practices and policies if we hope to see a society where, regardless of one's identity, they can reach the same positions, get the same jobs and get fair pay. Equity-focused organizations would ensure that individuals can get both.

Myth 4: we needed diversity, equity, and inclusion in the past, but not anymore! America is postracial

Another prevailing myth is that America is postracial; that is, because of events like President Barack Obama's election, the country has evolved beyond seeing or having meaningful race differences (e.g. Hollinger, 2011). This myth undergirds efforts like Executive Order 14,173 that seek to dismantle DEI efforts and – perhaps more concerningly – the protections afforded marginalized groups under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These policies were created to ensure that, regardless of one's race, color, religion, sex or national origin, they will not be discriminated against in public places or in employment practices and procedures. Donald

Trump's administration claims that since the establishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 "critical and influential institutions of American society . . . have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning, and moral race- and sex-based preferences . . . that can violate the civil-rights laws of this Nation" (Exec. Order No. 14173, 2025). Further, the Trump administration claims that focusing on enhancing identity-based diversity undermines the merit of "hardworking Americans" and reduces their opportunities (Exec. Order No. 14173, 2025). This Executive Order and the larger motivating rhetoric of these efforts reflect a broader belief promoted by Trump and others: that America no longer needs DEI because America is postracial. Despite significant social movements and symbolic milestones, such as the meteoric rise of politicians like Barack Obama and Kamala Harris, racial inequities persist (Bowdler and Harris, 2022). Research from the social sciences suggests that the idea that America is "postracial" is a fallacy used to downplay the role of racism in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Importantly, believing in this fallacy threatens to undermine decades of civil rights progress while simultaneously overlooking the systemic barriers many Americans face presently.

The language used in Executive Order 14,173 relies heavily on colorblind ideology, which is the belief that racial group membership and racial differences should not be considered (Apfelbaum *et al*., 2012; Markus *et al*., 2000; Stevens *et al*., 2008). For example, when Trump claims that DEI efforts are harming "hardworking Americans," he is trying to draw attention to historically advantaged groups, even though DEI efforts were created to improve opportunities for historically marginalized groups (Portocarrero and Carter, 2022). Through his language, Trump suggests that race should not matter and that policies designed to address inequities are unnecessary or even detrimental. While colorblind ideology may appear to minimize group differences, research indicates that it leads to increased racial bias and decreased support for diversity policies compared to a multicultural ideology (Leslie, 2019; Richeson and Nussbaum, 2004). Similarly, meritocratic beliefs often assumed under colorblind ideologies emphasize the fair treatment of all demographic groups. Sociological research has highlighted that meritocratic practices can benefit nonmarginalized groups while being biased against marginalized groups (Castilla, 2008; Castilla and Benard, 2010). In this way, research suggests that colorblindness and meritocracy can be linked to the perpetuation of inequality, especially when left to individuals who prefer to maintain it (Knowles *et al*., 2009). Thus, when leaders use postracial language, they signal that racial disparities can be disregarded, which in reality may exacerbate inequities.

Another reason the belief that America is postracial continues to persist is attributable, in part, to the fact that there has been a lot of racial progress in the United States since the Civil Rights era. While all might agree that the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama marked a pivotal moment in United States history, some believe it marked the end of racial stratification in America (e.g. Tesler and Sears, 2010). For those who believed this narrative, this election showed that in a country drenched in racism, a Black man could win an election to hold the most powerful office in the country. News headlines considered Obama's historic run and win as unprecedented racial progress for the United States (Dyson, 2008). The American press even considered the United States to be entering a postracial era in 2008 (Schorr, 2008). The term "postracial" became widely used to refer to the idea that disadvantage, prejudice, or discrimination based on race no longer existed (Apfelbaum *et al*., 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Bonilla-Silva and Ray, 2009). However, using "postracial" to describe this era was entirely baseless because, although the country had elected the first Black president, racism was and is still alive and well. Simply put, the United States has not yet achieved postracial status. Instead, it is in an era marked by a new way to think about racism that uses a colorblind ideology to cast racial differences and disparities aside (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

To understand why people may be more likely to think that the United States has reached postracial status, we can look to the psychology literature about how people misperceive racial and societal progress. For example, lay people overwhelmingly believe that economic inequality between Black and White Americans has significantly decreased over time;

however, that is not true. Similarly, Black and White workers overestimate the progress in racial representation of executives in organizations (Torrez *et al*., 2024). Broadly, the literature suggests that when people believe social progress is linear and improving over time, they may feel less urgency to continue making efforts to support social causes (Hur and Ruttan, 2023). Thus, if people think that the United States has become postracial, they may be less likely to believe that racism exists and, by extension, less willing to work to improve it. This reality is deeply concerning and underscores the need to continue supporting and implementing diversity, equity and inclusion policies and practices in organizations to enhance the overall experiences of Americans.

Myth 5: diversity, equity and inclusion is only for historically marginalized racial groups

Another persistent and damaging myth about diversity is that it benefits only historically marginalized racial groups, rather than serving all people. In its most extreme form, this misconception reduces diversity to a perceived racial dichotomy, implicitly framing it as benefiting Black people while excluding White individuals (Brown and Jacoby-Senghor, 2022; Earle and Hodson, 2020; Norton and Sommers, 2011; Plaut *et al*., 2011; Unzueta and Binning, 2010). This narrow framing is often compounded by a US.-centric lens that overlooks the identities and experiences of people from other national and cultural backgrounds, leaving many to not only question where they fit, but to more damagingly conclude that diversity efforts do not include them.

At the core of this myth is the question: *Who is DEI really for?* Psychologically and in many organizations, DEI efforts are implicitly or explicitly associated with racial minorities (Plaut *et al*., 2011; Stevens *et al*., 2008; Unzueta and Binning, 2010), reinforcing the perception that White individuals – especially White men – are outside the boundaries of inclusion. Or perhaps more specifically: that White men are excluded from DEI efforts. Unsurprisingly, research indicates that White individuals are generally less likely to endorse diversity initiatives, partly because they feel excluded from them (Plaut *et al*., 2011). This sense of exclusion can lead to resistance and resentment, undermining the goals DEI seeks to achieve (Craig and Richeson, 2014; Dover *et al*., 2016; Iyer, 2022; Jansen *et al*., 2015; Outten *et al*., 2012; Stevens *et al*., 2008; Thomas and Plaut, 2008; Wilkins and Kaiser, 2014).

However, these beliefs highlight a fundamental misunderstanding of what diversity programs are and for whom they exist. While it is common that programs like Affirmative Action and demographic groups like Black people are often what people think about when they consider what DEI is. That view is limiting and reductive. For example, while DEI programs typically target and benefit groups that we often think about like those aforementioned, they also support military personnel both past and present (e.g. Vanderschuere and Birdsall, 2019), people with chronic illnesses (e.g. Beatty and Joffe, 2006), first-generation college students (e.g. Cabrera *et al*., 2013), people from rural communities (e.g. Fischer, 2025), formerly incarcerated individuals (e.g. Griffith and Young, 2017), refugees and immigrants (e.g. Demir *et al*., 2025), caregivers (e.g. Sowa and McCann, 2021) and so many more that we often fail to consider when DEI is on the proverbial chopping block. Consider reactions by some Republican voters when Medicare and other governmental benefits were slashed; they believed that the return to a time before DEI policies and "handouts" as they are often called it would not include the benefits they themselves were receiving – in essence it seems they imagined these cuts would only harm racial minorities (e.g. Ware, 2025).

This pattern is often rooted in a scarcity mindset motivated by zero-sum beliefs. In fact, DEI is not about taking things away from White people to give them to racially marginalized individuals. Instead, it is about redesigning systems – whether in education, the workplace or civic life – to ensure fairness, equity, and opportunity for *everyone*. One example that illustrates both the promise and complexity of such inclusive policies is the GI Bill, passed in 1944 to support returning Second World War veterans. This legislation transformed American society by providing millions of veterans with access to education, home loans and job

training. Importantly, the GI Bill shows that institutions can act affirmatively to address group-level disadvantage without triggering backlash – when the policy is seen as legitimate, inclusive and aimed at collective well-being. However, its impact was not equally shared. Due to systemic racism and segregation, many Black veterans were denied full access to their benefits – a reminder that even well-intentioned policies can reinforce inequality if they fail to account for structural barriers (Olson, 1973). While we often do not discuss the GI Bill as a "diversity initiative," it can easily be argued that it is one: it expanded opportunities broadly for a group that otherwise would not have had access.

While the GI Bill exemplifies the transformative potential of national-level policies, DEI initiatives within organizations can produce similar ripple effects on a smaller scale. Both research and official reports show a compelling organizational business case for DEI: diverse groups bring a range of perspectives, which fosters creativity and innovation, and improves performance (Bell *et al*., 2011; Dixon-Fyle *et al*., 2023; Phillips, 2014; van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007). Take, for example, The PhD Project – an initiative aimed at helping African American, Hispanic American and Native American professionals succeed in business doctoral programs. By supporting historically underrepresented scholars in pursuing academic careers, the PhD Project fosters an intellectual community that reflects a broader spectrum of perspectives and experiences that have been historically limited in the academy (Minefee *et al*., 2018). These benefits are not limited to racial minority scholars; the entire academic community, including White students and faculty, gains from richer classroom dialogue, more critical scholarship and expanded ways of thinking.

In contrast, the recent *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) case highlighted divisions within the broader DEI discourse. Asian American plaintiffs argued that affirmative action unfairly disadvantaged them in college admissions, excluding them from the diversity initiatives that were supposed to expand opportunity. The case ultimately led the US Supreme Court to strike down race-conscious admissions policies in 2023. While the lawsuit was controversial within Asian American communities, it reified a persistent perception that DEI efforts sometimes privilege certain groups over others. In this sense, the belief is not only that White people are excluded, but that other non-Black groups may also feel left out of the diversity conversation.

Research highlights key differences in how racial groups experience prejudice and discrimination. For instance, while discrimination against Black Americans is often rooted in perceived inferiority, Latinos and Asian Americans are frequently subjected to prejudice based on perceived foreignness (Zou and Cheryan, 2017). In a survey of 7,006 US Asians, nearly a third reported being told to "go back to their home country" (Ruiz *et al*., 2023). A particularly striking example is Lee Wong, an Asian American Army veteran and elected official, who responded to the rise in anti-Asian hate by unbuttoning his shirt at a public meeting to reveal scars he sustained while serving in the US military. He did this to challenge the racism that questions the Americanness of people who look like him (Vigdor, 2021). Wong's action was a powerful rejection of the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype – the notion that no matter how long Asian Americans have been in the United States, they are never seen as fully American (Cheryan and Monin, 2005; Devos and Banaji, 2005; Huynh *et al*., 2011; Lee, 2008). At the same time, Wong's story underscores a deeper tension in DEI conversations: that diversity is for some but not others. These examples highlight a broader truth: no demographic group is truly homogenous. Just as racial minority groups encompass a wide range of experiences and challenges, so too does the category "White." A White person may still face systemic barriers and thus benefit from diversity programming – for instance, a White woman in a male-dominated industry, a rural, working-class White student navigating an elite university, or a White immigrant facing cultural and linguistic challenges. When done right, DEI work embraces access and opportunity for all.

This myth also oversimplifies the complexity of various social groups and individual identities. Even among racial minorities, different communities face distinct histories of marginalization and carry unique cultural experiences and needs. Treating "diverse groups" as

a single monolith erases these differences and risks implementing one-size-fits-all solutions that don't truly serve anyone. At the same time, recognizing that *everyone* – including members of the majority group – has an identity that matters can help reduce resistance and foster a broader sense of inclusion (Stevens *et al*., 2008). When people understand that DEI is something *for all of us*, it becomes easier to build coalitions and communities in the service of meaningful change. The idea that White people are excluded from DEI efforts is not only factually inaccurate – it's politically divisive and socially counterproductive. White individuals are not outside of this mission. In fact, they are essential to it.

Myth 6: diversity, equity and inclusion cannot coexist with meritocracy

As is evident in Trump's now infamous series of Executive Orders and the scores of people who support them (e.g. Gonzalez, 2025; Morgenroth and Ryan, 2018; Skrentny, 1997), there is the widespread belief that DEI efforts undermine merit-based practices in organizations and beyond. However, it is important to note that the belief that DEI is unmeritocratic did not originate with President Trump; the foundations of DEI – policies like Affirmative Action – have long been subjected to similar critiques of unfairness and violating meritocratic principles from the Right (e.g. Morgenroth and Ryan, 2018; Skrentny, 1997). Today, however, opponents are expressing their displeasure with diversity, equity and inclusion by coopting the initialism "DEI" and repurposing it to stand for "didn't earn it" or "discrimination, exclusion, and indoctrination" to further discredit beneficiaries and supporters (Bernard-Brind'Amour and Jiwani, 2025; Witherspoon Sr, 2024). That is, they engage in tactics that steer the conversation away from the *need* for DEI programs (i.e. addressing systemic disadvantages that harm marginalized groups) to their perceived victimhood at the hands of marginalized individuals (Berbrier, 1999; van Dijk, 1992). These efforts not only distract from important conversations about DEI, but they also obscure the reality of who is harmed by the false belief that DEI is unmeritocratic. We urge you not to fall for it. Instead, we want readers to understand the psychology behind these beliefs and insights that might help unseat this deeply rooted mythos.

At its core, this myth is rooted in the misperception that DEI policies and practices facilitate two distinct yet related practices: (1) that it lowers the bar institutions and organizations use to evaluate candidates for opportunities and (2) that it allows unqualified, marginalized candidates to get spots over otherwise qualified candidates. While the first author has addressed these two points elsewhere (Carter, 2026), we aim to explore the psychology that underpins these beliefs. To do so, we draw on the psychological literature on zero-sum mindsets and entitlement as well as the sociological literature on opportunity hoarding and social closure processes to examine how and why people come to believe these myths.

First, zero-sum thinking is the powerful belief that one party's gain is another party's loss (Johnson *et al*., 2022). As scholars have argued, this mindset is widespread (Różycka-Tran *et al*., 2015) and often troubles how we think about several situations, like corporate social responsibility (Bhattacharjee *et al*., 2017), negotiations (de Dreu *et al*., 2000) and perhaps most closely related to the topic under investigation here is that government assistance to one group harms another (Bazerman *et al*., 2001). For majority groups, attitudes about DEI are often motivated by the zero-sum belief that if one group is getting access to something, it means another group is having it taken away (Ballinger *et al*., 2024), which is facilitated by concerns about group position and status threat (Bobo, 1999; Craig *et al*., 2018). Take, for example, that work on social dominance orientation and loss aversion has found that White people perceive efforts to improve the position of marginalized groups come at their expense (Eibach and Keegan, 2006). Or that White participants perceive lower levels of anti-Black bias to be associated with increased levels of anti-White bias (Norton and Sommers, 2011). In this example, White respondents exhibit a zero-sum mindset on attitudes – not even material resources! Despite efforts to change the perception – and even in contexts where both groups gain (Brown and Jacoby-Senghor, 2022) – nonmarginalized groups continue to believe they

are losing out while others gain. In their studies, Brown and Jacoby-Senghor demonstrate that when presenting nonmarginalized participants with university admissions policies that increase spots for MBA students from all backgrounds, White students still misperceive the extent to which their group will benefit from such policies. Unfortunately, this mindset is enduring and problematic to advancing equality.

Relatedly, entitlement to certain opportunities and resources also shapes how nonmarginalized groups think about DEI policies, specifically as it relates to marginalized groups "stealing spots" (O'Brien and Major, 2009). Psychological entitlement is defined as the "stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others," (Campbell *et al*., 2004, p. 31). Implicit in this claim is the belief that certain groups (e.g. White people, men) are having opportunities and resources that they deserve taken from them by less deserving groups. That is, these groups are *entitled* in ways that others are not. The rhetoric surrounding the discussion of "stealing spots" suggests a widespread belief that, regardless of achievement or skills, certain opportunities and resources are reserved for some, and when others acquire them, it is perceived as undeserved and at the expense of nonmarginalized groups. Consider, for example, that this position was a cornerstone argument of *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*. Concerns about "stealing spots" and feelings of entitlement are not just individual experiences people have, but they are motivational experiences that have powerful implications for higher education and employment practices.

It is not just the psychological literature that helps us understand how DEI comes to be at odds with meritocracy, but also perspectives from sociology. Through understanding how social closure processes (e.g. Roscigno *et al*., 2007) and opportunity hoarding (e.g. Tilly, 2009) shape who gets into organizations and access to various resources, these structural perspectives provide a much-needed lens through which to understand how nonmarginalized groups maintain their group position under the guise of meritocracy. Under social closure and opportunity hoarding conditions, those in power might exclude or limit – through various means – who is in a given application pool for a resource (e.g. job or apartment) and then come to determine that whoever is selected from that pool was done so through meritocratic means (e.g. Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; DiTomaso, 2013). In this way, DEI efforts come to violate difficult to see and measure social processes that oftentimes invisibly favor those in power while further marginalizing vulnerable populations. These processes work together to fuel the belief that DEI is unmeritocratic – or more specifically, that DEI is at odds with the concept of meritocracy. In the minds of DEI opponents, it is unmeritocratic that race and other demographic characteristics be used favorably in evaluative processes, however they seem to have no issues that demographics often confer benefits to nonmarginalized groups in evaluations (e.g. Harris, 1993; Rivera, 2012; Rivera, 2015), and conversely, are responsible for a considerable number of disparities we observe in evaluations of marginalized groups (e.g. Abraham *et al*., 2024; Cuddy *et al*., 2008; Neumark, 2018).

Critically – and what is often left out of the conversation – is that discrimination runs rampant under the guise of meritocracy! Consider, for example, that researchers have shown that when organizations adopt a meritocratic culture, managers exhibit more explicit gender and racial bias (Castilla, 2008; Castilla and Benard, 2010). These ironic findings highlight the complexity of merit-based practices in relation to diversity within organizations. State otherwise, emphasizing merit-based practices has the potential to facilitate more, not less discrimination. In this way, meritocracy is not a salve to discrimination as it is often presented; instead, when implemented incorrectly, it allows decision-makers to shift blame from their biases to individual behavior and, in turn, to organizational culture and norms, which will not restore equity in organizations.

Despite the belief that diversity and meritocracy are opposing ideologies, it is possible that they can coexist (Konrad *et al*., 2021). As such, we believe it is imperative to shift our collective thinking in that direction. While organizations have long struggled to balance the fairness of merit-based judgments with efforts to improve outcomes and opportunities for marginalized groups (e.g. Leslie, 2019), we believe that a true meritocracy is only achievable

when diversity efforts are integrated. In order to evaluate individuals based on their skills, achievements and competencies, we would argue that diversity efforts that work to level the playing field – by reducing our reliance on biased metrics and practices (e.g. Berry, 2015), expanding the pool of qualified, often marginalized candidates (Johnson *et al*., 2016; Lucas *et al*., 2021), and implementing structured interview processes that help eliminate biases (e.g. Bragger *et al*., 2002; Kutcher and Bragger, 2004), for example – are the only way we achieve true meritocracy. In this way, it is not that these are *opposing* forces but instead *facilitative* forces that work together to make organizations fairer and more equitable.

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to explore rhetorical myths about diversity, equity and inclusion in organizations and society advanced by the Trump Administration and to explain how these myths work in tandem with broader resistance strategies. We developed a framework that identifies three resistance strategies to DEI: challenging (1) the legitimacy of DEI, (2) the necessity of DEI and (3) the fairness of DEI. Further, these strategies address threats that are sparked by the presence of DEI. We discuss how individuals may believe that DEI threatens the current social hierarchy and the status quo and thus fear they will lose power, status and privilege in society. Our hope is that this framework can provide language to describe and dismantle the current administration's falsely articulated DEI rhetoric, and, in turn, shed light on the misguided nature and potential impact of these myths.

Within each discussion – which we want to make clear are not exhaustive – we review relevant literature to date on what DEI is, why it is important, and on the psychological and sociological processes underlying resistance to DEI. From this review, we show that DEI benefits all, regardless of whether one's identity falls within an advantaged or disadvantaged group. We emphasize that the purpose of DEI in organizations is to make sure that everyone has equal opportunities, is treated fairly, and has the resources to succeed. On the other hand, we draw on research to explain what organizations may look like after the rollback of DEI policies and the harms that may proliferate without DEI safeguards.

Further, we want to also highlight some of the ways this article might be useful to practitioners, leaders, and policymakers who are trying to think critically about ways to support, protect and implement DEI programs under such hostile conditions. One of the main points we want to foreground from our research is that DEI work is evidence-based and should be discussed and continuously framed as such. Much of the criticism and critiques of DEI work hinges on this belief that it is rooted solely in feelings and opinions. That is far from true. As such, leaders and policymakers should frame these policies and practices as data-informed, evidence-based practices with proved track recorders for improving outcomes for marginalized groups. This will, in turn, strengthen the legitimacy of DEI policies in organizational contexts.

We also want to push implementers to think more deeply about how DEI programs are framed. As we have discussed above, it is often the case that these programs are associated with minority groups (e.g. Black people, women) and typically with racial minority groups. Given that the benefits of DEI programs extend well beyond racial groups, it would be useful to consider how we can reframe and communicate the value of these efforts to groups who do not often see themselves as beneficiaries. As we have already discussed above, a large portion of low-income Republican voters might have been less shocked by Republican cuts to Medicaid, and thus resisted it – had government-funded health insurance programs like Medicaid been appropriately and correctly reframed as DEI programs for low-income Americans. In this way, by broadening the scope of what we traditionally think of as DEI initiatives and who we typically think of as DEI beneficiaries, we might be able to combat some of the resistance to these efforts as well as generate greater support among those who do not see themselves as benefiting from such efforts.

There are a myriad of falsehoods and half-truths that prevent people from seeing the promise and truth of what DEI is and the power it has to continue advancing society. If we allow these beliefs to go unchecked – or even worse, buy into them – the very reality of DEI as we know it could cease to exist. The current Trump administration has made it its mission to spin a false narrative about what DEI is and is not, and we hope this article serves as a small piece of resistance – asserting the very real, very necessary reality that is diversity, equity and inclusion in the 21st century.

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