

REALITY CHECK

What DEI research concludes about diversity training: It is divisive, counter-productive, and unnecessary



David Millard Haskell | February 2024

Introduction

In July 2023, public school principal Richard Bilkszto killed himself. When announcing his death, Bilkszto’s lawyer traced his deteriorating mental health and ultimate demise to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) workshops his school board required him to attend.¹ Recordings show that he was harassed and humiliated by the DEI trainer for questioning one of her claims.²

A growing number of high-profile cases suggest that diversity workshops and their supporting materials regularly promote questionable claims—particularly about the overarching, malicious character of the majority population.³ Similarly, hostility toward those who challenge DEI claims is part of the pattern.⁴ In Canada, students who challenge claims have been punished or expelled⁵; employees have been suspended.⁶ One whistleblower who leaked DEI training session material maligning the majority population lost his employment.⁷

While the hostility Bilkszto was subjected to during his DEI training is not unusual, his extreme response to it is an outlier. But it also sounds an alarm. It draws our attention to the potentially negative nature of this instruction that is now ubiquitously conducted—usually as a mandatory exercise—in most corporations, educational systems, and government agencies.

The DEI training that Bilkszto attended focused heavily on race; this is typical. While DEI instruction can be as varied as it is pervasive, so-called “anti-racism education” tends to get the most attention during workshops.

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Supporters justify DEI training—in particular, the “anti-racist” variety—with the argument that Canada, and Western nations generally, are systemically racist. The logic is this: the medicine must be applied everywhere because the disease is everywhere.

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Specifically, DEI advocates assert that discrimination against minorities, while not explicit, is embedded in society’s institutions, and therefore leads to disparities. They hold up any difference in outcomes between the country’s majority and minority populations—at least *when they skew negatively* for the minority—as obvious proof of systemic racism.⁸

However, a rudimentary understanding of statistical analysis leads to the conclusion that it is in fact not “obvious” that differences in outcomes between racial and ethnic cohorts are evidence of racism; correlation does not equal causation. In fact, in his recent Reality Check on systemic racism claims in Canada, the Aristotle Foundation’s Matthew Lau evaluates the empirical data and comes to this conclusion:

If the typical anti-racism activist in Canada today is looking for widespread institutional or systemic racism... they will not find it.

...Moreover, the data on disparities in income, educational attainment, occupational outcomes, and public school test scores show that, on average, Asians are doing better than the white population.⁹

Operating under the assumption that society is overrun with intolerance, the expressed goal in DEI workshops is to generate harmony amongst diverse populations. To that end, independent consultants or in-house DEI staff lead participants through a curriculum focusing on such concepts as implicit bias, white privilege, and micro-aggressions.

With reference to the existing scholarship, this Reality Check investigates whether diversity, equity, and inclusion instruction actually leads to greater harmony and tolerance—or to the opposite. As we will see, the national and international research¹⁰ shows there is often a disconnect between the evidence and the claims of DEI advocates.⁹

⁹ See the appendix table for a short summary of the literature on DEI instruction.

Diversity training in practice: Aggressive, and justified by circular “proofs”

To “prove” the effectiveness of DEI instruction, proponents often point to surveys conducted before and after workshops that show, following training, participants are much more likely to articulate answers that align with the pro-DEI ideas. That is to say, someone who takes the training can, afterwards, recite what they were told. In these testimonials it is seldom mentioned that for many participants job security and career advancement is contingent on giving the “right” answers.¹¹

This type of methodology has drawn criticism and has proven to be unreliable. In a 2022 article, after reviewing the scholarly literature on DEI instruction, psychological researchers Patricia Devine and Tory Ash concluded that scholars of diversity training “too often use proxy measures for success that are far removed from the types of consequential outcomes that reflect the purported goals of such trainings.”¹²

A disconnect between DEI claims and DEI outcomes: A look at the literature

Despite criticism of their methods, proponents of DEI instruction continue to assert that it is effective. “Effective,” for them, means more than just reciting talking points from a workshop, they claim that their programs actually change behaviour. Websites and public documents from independent DEI consultants and in-house DEI office staff promise that because of their instruction, workplace harmony, productivity, and collaboration across groups will increase, discrimination will be reduced, and bias and bigotry will be lessened.¹³

However, the research does not support claims of behavioural change.

For example, in their 2018 article “Why Doesn’t Diversity Training Work?” published in *Anthropology Now*, Harvard Sociologist Frank Dobbin and colleague Alexandra Kalev observed:

Nearly all Fortune 500 companies do training, and two-thirds of colleges and universities have training for faculty according to our 2016 survey of 670 schools. Most also put freshmen through some sort of diversity session as part of orientation. Yet hundreds of studies dating back to the 1930s suggest that antibias training does not reduce bias, alter behaviour or change the workplace.¹⁴

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Supporting Dobbin and Kalev’s observation, numerous systematic reviews and meta-analyses—an advanced research method that combines the data of multiple studies to identify overall trends—have determined that the ability of DEI training to elevate harmony and/or decrease prejudice (in any lasting way) is undetectable or negligible.¹⁵ Those systematic reviews and meta-analyses are cited in this paper’s endnotes; however, for the purpose of illustration, the key findings of some of the most significant and representative works are discussed below.

In a review of all available research between 2003 and 2008 focusing on the impact of DEI programs, Elizabeth Paluck, then at Harvard and now at Princeton, and Donald Green at Yale generated a sample of 985 studies. After aggregate, statistical assessment they concluded:

... the causal effects of many widespread prejudice-reduction interventions, such as workplace diversity training and media campaigns, remain unknown... Due to weaknesses in the internal and external validity of existing research, the literature does not reveal whether, when, and why interventions reduce prejudice in the world.¹⁶

Updating her research in 2021 with a second meta-analysis of over 400 current studies, Paluck and colleagues again found little evidence that instruction in diversity, equity, and inclusion works to decrease prejudice. They begin by stating: “Although these studies report optimistic conclusions, we identify troubling indications of publication bias that may exaggerate effects.”¹⁷

They then clarify what they mean by “exaggerate effects.” When examined through the lens of their rigorous methodology, Paluck and team found that the *effect size* of diversity-type training is near zero. This is of consequence because effect size measures the difference between those who participated in the training and those who did not. DEI proponents say their training makes a difference; the research disagrees. Importantly, the effect size (minimal as it was) *decreased* as the academic rigour of the study *increased* (e.g., as the sample size became larger).¹⁸

In their 2022 meta-analysis, Devine and Ash uphold the findings of Paluck and others, writing:

Our primary conclusion following our review of the recent literature echoes that of scholars who conducted reviews of the DT [Diversity Training] literature in the past. Despite multidisciplinary endorsement of the practice of DT, we are far from being able to derive clear and decisive conclusions about what fosters inclusivity and promotes diversity within organizations. Implementation of DT has clearly outpaced the available evidence that such programs are effective in achieving their goals.¹⁹

Contributing to the muted outcomes of DEI programs, the meta-analyses repeatedly observe that even when diversity-type training seems to produce a measurable, positive effect, that effect tends not be enduring. Negative stereotypes and prejudices that appear to decrease immediately following a DEI workshop typically re-emerge when evaluated a few weeks or months later.²⁰

DEI does have an impact... but it's not positive

While the “good” of DEI training remains elusive, the harms associated with such instruction are less equivocal.

DEI instruction has been shown to increase prejudice and activate bigotry among participants by bringing existing stereotypes to the top of their minds or by implanting new biases they had not previously held. Reviewing the related findings of past research, Dobbin and Kalev state: “Field and laboratory studies find that asking people to suppress stereotypes tends to reinforce them—making them more cognitively accessible to people.”²¹

For example, in a laboratory setting, a University of Toronto research team led by Lisa Legault (now at Clarkson University) determined that race-focused DEI campaigns that exert strong pressure on people to be non-prejudiced backfired, yielding heightened levels of bigotry.²²

Similarly, for their landmark paper “Out of mind but back in sight: Stereotypes on the rebound,” the University of Aberdeen’s Neil Macrae and colleagues conducted experiments measuring the outcomes of DEI-type training that, like Legault et al., asked participants to reject prejudicial stereotypes. They confirmed that in trying to suppress bigotry, DEI-type training can activate it:

Indeed, this work suggests that when people attempt to suppress unwanted thoughts, these thoughts are likely to subsequently reappear with even greater insistence than if they had never been suppressed (i.e., a “rebound” effect).

... The results provide strong support for the existence of this effect... stereotype suppressors [those told to suppress their bias] responded more pejoratively to a stereotyped target on a range of dependent measures.²³

Simply put, numerous studies show that when DEI-type workshop leaders instruct participants to suppress their biases—be they existing or newly implanted—many will cling to them more tightly and mentally generate additional justifications for their presence.²⁴

The language and practice of division: DEI's inequitable treatment and impact

While DEI-type instruction can activate prejudice in individuals of any race, in its ability to produce feelings of isolation and demoralization, it has a singular effect on the majority population.²⁵ In his article “Diversity-related training: What is it good for?” Columbia University sociologist and research fellow Musa al-Gharbi summarizes the findings on that phenomenon:

Diversity-related training programs often depict people from historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups as important and worthwhile, celebrating their heritage and culture, while criticizing the dominant culture as fundamentally depraved (racist, sexist, sadistic, etc.)

... In short, there is a clear double-standard in many of these programs... The result is that many members from the dominant group walk away from the training believing that themselves, their culture, their perspectives and interests are *not* valued at the institution—certainly not as much as those of minority team members—reducing their morale and productivity.

... The training also leads many to believe that they have to “walk on eggshells” when engaging with members of minority populations.... As a result, members of the dominant group become less likely to try to build relationships or collaborate with people from minority populations.²⁶

Illustrating al-Gharbi's point that DEI instruction can lead participants to perceive the majority population less sympathetically, researcher Erin Cooley at New York's Colgate University and her team found that teaching students about white privilege, a core component of the DEI curriculum, does not make them feel more compassion toward poor people of colour but can “reduce sympathy [and] increase blame... for White people struggling with poverty.”²⁷

“DEI instruction has been shown to increase prejudice and activate bigotry among participants by bringing existing stereotypes to the top of their minds or by implanting new biases they had not previously held.”

To al-Gharbi's point that such instruction hinders unity, a 2022 study from the University of Michigan analyzed online discussions and found that mention of white privilege made even previously “supportive whites” less supportive of racially progressive policies, less engaged in group discussions, and “led to less constructive responses from whites and non-whites.”²⁸

While the Caucasian majority is typically the focus of contempt in DEI instruction, leaving them feeling isolated and demoralized, increasingly participants of Asian ethnicity are also being targeted. In achieving, on average, greater salary and educational outcomes than the majority population (as Matthew

Lau showed in his Reality Check),²⁹ this community presents a problem to the major claim of DEI instruction that skin colour or ethnicity matters most for success.

The solution that some DEI advocates have adopted is to deny that Asians qualify as visible minorities. They claim that having outcomes similar to the majority population *puts one in* the majority population and excludes one from being a “person of colour.”³⁰ Borrowing ideas from academic race studies,³¹ some DEI proponents have begun to refer to Asians as “white adjacent” (or near white) and have accused them of perpetuating “white supremacy.”³² On the extreme end, certain school boards in the United States have gone so far as to remove the category “Asian” from student profiles, lumping anyone of Asian ancestry into the “White” category.³³

Beyond denying minority status to those of Asian ancestry, the current trend among DEI consultants and departments is to weight the scales against them (a move reminiscent of the institutional racism they faced in some Western countries during the 19th and early 20th century³⁴). Nowhere has this been more obvious than in college admissions in the US. Striking evidence shows that, for the benefit of diversity and inclusion, Asian students are being excluded from some of America’s most elite universities.³⁵

Specifically, submissions before the US Supreme Court disclosed that when applying to Harvard, the University of North Carolina, and other universities, students of Asian descent are required to hold entrance exam scores “450 points higher than black [students]... to have the same chance of admission.”³⁶ Thus, out of a possible score of 1600 for combined math and verbal skills on the SAT, Asian students need to be nearly perfect.³⁷

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Such universities justify their unequal standards for admission by citing their commitment to a core notion of DEI instruction: “Diversity is our strength.” They note that without intervention, the proportion of Asian students would skyrocket leaving less room for other visible minorities. That is, there would be “diversity” but not the right type of diversity. Therefore, to achieve the right outcomes, criteria other than academic merit need to be implemented.³⁸

In the US, these unequal standards have been successfully challenged. In summer of 2023, citing violations of America’s Fourteenth Amendment and federal civil rights law, the Supreme Court ruled that universities cannot discriminate by race when making admission decisions.³⁹

Canada has no such legislation; in fact, our Charter of Rights and Freedoms⁴⁰ and our human rights laws⁴¹ allow for discrimination against the majority population. This constitutional allowance has now resulted in employment postings that, in the name of DEI, explicitly promote reverse or “recycled racism.”⁴²

Conclusion

While job candidates not categorized as a minority are increasingly prevented from applying for certain employment openings, the research shows that a reputation for promoting DEI can more generally affect job applications to an organization. Specifically, findings reveal that some Caucasian candidates perceive organizations that heavily promote messages of diversity and inclusion as potentially discriminatory work environments.⁴³

DEI's negative perception extends beyond potential job candidates. Two-thirds of human resource specialists—those in charge of overseeing DEI initiatives—report that diversity training does not have positive effects.⁴⁴ Interestingly, both the research into DEI and the majority of those involved in such training have arrived at the same conclusion: when it comes to harmony and tolerance, DEI does not make things better, but it can make things worse.

About the author

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Appendix Table: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Instruction—Summary of Select Studies

Studies concluding there is no evidence that DEI instruction leads to increased tolerance and harmony or to lasting behavioural change

Article Title	Publication Date	Academic Journal	Lead Researchers & Affiliation	Important Findings
Diversity training goals, limitations, and promise: A review of the multidisciplinary literature	2022	<i>Annual Review of Psychology</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9b	Patricia Devine, University of Wisconsin & Tory Ash, Syracuse University	<i>"... we are far from being able to derive clear and decisive conclusions about what fosters inclusivity and promotes diversity within organizations. Implementation of DT [diversity training] has clearly outpaced the available evidence that such programs are effective in achieving their goals."</i>
Prejudice reduction: Progress and challenges (a review of 418 experiments reported in 309 manuscripts from 2007 to 2019... [this] quantitative assessment uses meta-analysis to estimate average effects)	2021	<i>Annual Review of Psychology</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9e	Elizabeth Paluck, Princeton University, Roni Porat, Hebrew University, et al.	<i>"Although these studies [promoting DEI] report optimistic conclusions, we identify troubling indications of publication bias that may exaggerate effects." Paluck and team found that the effect size of diversity-type training is near zero.</i>
Why doesn't diversity training work? The challenge for industry and academia	2018	<i>Anthropology Now</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9s	Frank Dobbin, Harvard University & Alexandra Kalev, Tel Aviv University	<i>"...hundreds of studies dating back to the 1930s suggest that antibias training does not reduce bias, alter behavior or change the workplace."</i>

Studies showing that DEI instruction can increase prejudice and activate bigotry

Article Title	Publication Date	Academic Journal	Lead Researchers & Affiliation	Important Findings
How the term “white privilege” affects participation, polarization, and content in online communication	2022	<i>PLoS ONE</i> https://bitly.ws/33Wai	Charles Quarles, University of Michigan & Liz Bozarth, University of Michigan	Instruction in the DEI concept of White Privilege made “supportive whites” less supportive of racially progressive policies, less engaged in group discussions, and “ <i>led to less constructive responses from whites and non-whites.</i> ”
Complex intersections of race and class: Among social liberals, learning about White privilege reduces sympathy, increases blame, and decreases external attributions for White people struggling with poverty.	2019	<i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9D	Erin Cooley, Colgate University, Jazmin Brown-Iannuzzi, University of Virginia, et al.	Teaching White Privilege, a core component of the DEI curriculum, does not make participants feel more compassion toward poor people of colour but can “ <i>reduce sympathy [and] increase blame... for White people struggling with poverty.</i> ”
Ironic effects of antiprejudice messages: How motivational interventions can reduce (but also increase) prejudice	2011	<i>Psychological Science</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9M	Lisa Legault, Clarkson University (previously University of Toronto), Jennifer Gutsell, Brandeis University, et al.	...race-focused DEI campaigns that exert strong pressure on people to be non-prejudiced backfired, yielding heightened levels of bigotry.
Out of mind but back in sight: Stereotypes on the rebound	1994	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> https://bitly.ws/33W9Y	Neil Macrae, University of Aberdeen, Galen Bodenhausen, Northwestern University, et al.	“ <i>...this work suggests that when people attempt to suppress unwanted thoughts, these thoughts are likely to subsequently reappear with even greater insistence than if they had never been suppressed...</i> ”

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10. Readers will note that most of the peer-reviewed publications in which these findings appear are US-based. This is not because the findings are only germane to America; it's because most of the top journals are American. The findings themselves are highly applicable to Canada. First, Canadian researchers and other scholars outside the US have contributed to the aggregate findings discussed in this paper. Second, DEI training in Canada is virtually identical to that in the United States and is, in fact, based largely on US practices and materials. For example, in Canadian DEI workshops, much of the instructional material is based on, or directly quotes, the books or articles by American "anti-racist" scholars such as Ibrim X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo. The concept of "White Privilege" is based on ideas proposed by American professor Peggy McIntosh; the notion of "implicit bias" is the creation of several American scholars operating out of a research institute at Harvard.
11. It is typically public employers or professions dependent on public funding—e.g., government, military, education, law, and medicine—not private employers, who insist that employees show competency in DEI terms and ideas to advance. Beyond basic tests, statements of alignment with DEI principles are now common.
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