

E X C H A N G E

“WOKE” DIVERSITY STRATEGIES: SCIENCE OR SENSATIONALISM?

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The recent *Academy of Management Perspectives* article “Rethinking Diversity Strategies: An Application of Paradox and Positive Organization Behavior Theories,” by David Waldman and Jennifer Sparr characterizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies as a paradox between diversity and unity. We are concerned by the incendiary and imprecise adoption of core terms (e.g., woke, woke-washing, unity) and the dearth of engagement with existing scholarship—specifically, critical race theory, positive organizational scholarship, and DEI scholarship. In this Exchange, we posit that their article yields potentially harmful conclusions for DEI. We write this commentary to clarify definitions, bodies of literature, and diversity strategies. Maintaining scholarly standards is particularly important in diversity research because inaccuracies have real-life implications for some of society’s most vulnerable and marginalized communities.

By denying scientific principles, one may maintain any paradox.

—Galileo Galilei

The recent *Academy of Management Perspectives* (AMP) article “Rethinking Diversity Strategies: An Application of Paradox and Positive Organization Behavior Theories” by Drs. David Waldman and Jennifer Sparr opens with the claim that “diversity initiatives often focus only on diversity while essentially neglecting an equally important element: unity” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 174). The article continues: “‘Woke strategies’ take a single-edged approach to diversity, whereby concerns for diversity are pursued

without concern for potentially detrimental effects on unity.” In contrast, the article asserts that integrative strategies simultaneously activate the advantages of both diversity and unity, “while neutralizing their downsides” (p. 174). The article also argues that woke diversity strategies are proliferating (p. 187) and have negative effects on diversity and unity goals. As scholars familiar with the rich empirical and theoretical literature on diversity and inclusion, we have grave concerns about the premise and the execution of this article.

While our concerns about Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) *Perspectives* article are numerous, we focus our commentary on the three areas we believe have the greatest potential for undermining the legitimacy of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) research, harming members of historically marginalized groups

All authors contributed equally. Authorship order was determined at random.

(as well as members of historically power-dominant groups), and preventing organizations from reaping the benefits of DEI. Accordingly, this Exchange is organized into three sections. First, we address the article's use of terminology, including "woke," "woke-washing," and "unity." Second, we identify misrepresentations of critical race theory (CRT), DEI literature, and positive organizational scholarship (POS). Finally, we question whether the article's policy recommendations align with DEI best practices, or instead are predominantly incendiary, drawing from characterizations of race relations that have engulfed the popular press in recent years.

CONSTRUCT CLARITY: WHAT IS WOKE?

In his *Academy of Management Review* editorial, Suddaby (2010: 347) advocated for construct clarity, warning against "using terms described as constructs and assuming that the reader understands the intended meaning." Breaching this advice, Waldman and Sparr's (2023) *Perspectives* article imprecisely defines and employs a plethora of constructs, which we illustrate via the article's loose definitions of the terms *woke*, *woke-washing*, and *unity*.

The definition of woke is first provided in a footnote (p. 175): "'Woke' is a catch-all term that has been used in modern vernacular to coincide with leftist movements and ideologies, especially emphasizing identity politics and what is perceived by its proponents to be social injustice. Thus, it is mainly used for referring to racial or social discrimination and injustice (Steinmetz, 2017)." The article later reads (p. 178), "The term 'woke' was included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2017, with the main use of the word referring to being alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice (Steinmetz, 2017)." Waldman and Sparr's article misrepresents the definition of woke and broadly mischaracterizes the DEI literature.

According to Steinmetz (2017), the word "woke" originally referenced being awake and evolved into a reference about being informed. She provided the following *Oxford English Dictionary* definition:

woke, adjective: Originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice; frequently in stay woke. (Steinmetz, 2017: para. 2)

It is unclear how Waldman and Sparr stretched this definition to indicate that woke coincides with "leftist movements and ideologies" and "identity politics" (p. 175). While woke's origins are colloquial

(Rhodes, 2021) and the academic treatment of the term are limited, extant scholarly work characterizes woke as awareness of cultural differences (Caldera, 2018). Of particular relevance to the present Exchange, Rhodes (2021) unpacked not only the origins of the term "woke" but also popular uses of the term, including how some people have repurposed the meaning of woke in pejorative ways.

A second, related term employed coarsely is "woke-washing." Waldman and Sparr's article argues that woke "has also been used with a negative connotation; for example, in the marketing literature, referring to 'woke-washing' as advertising that builds on feminist or social activist issues" (p. 178). According to one of the same citations that Waldman and Sparr use here, however, woke-washing is "inauthentic brand activism" (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kempfer, 2020: 445). Waldman and Sparr's *Perspectives* article makes it seem that being woke (i.e., aware of racial and social injustice) has negative connotations. In actuality, woke-washing relates to inauthentically claiming to care about racial and social justice.

A third term that Waldman and Sparr's *Perspectives* article uses imprecisely is "unity." The authors characterize unity as synonymous with sameness: "unity (i.e., sameness)" (p. 175). In contrast, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022) defines "unity" as "the state of being in agreement and working together." It is unclear why Waldman and Sparr define unity as sameness. Notably, DEI scholars caution against encouraging conformity (i.e., sameness), due to adverse effects on historically marginalized group members' identities, the perpetuation of stereotypes, suppression of ideas, withdrawal, and exhaustion (Clair, Humberd, Rouse, & Jones, 2019; Harrison & Klein, 2007; Hewlin, 2009; Sitzmann & Campbell, 2021). Waldman and Sparr's article does not explain the decision to use the term "unity"—and prescribe it as a goal—instead of "inclusion."

Notably, the DEI literature rarely utilizes the term unity—preferring to discuss inclusion (e.g., Nishii, 2013; Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011) or belonging (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001). The construct of inclusion accounts for both group belonging and individual uniqueness (see Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011). Nishii (2013: 1754) offered a concise explanation of why inclusion matters in the context of systemic inequality: "In inclusive environments, individuals of all backgrounds—not just members of historically powerful identity groups—are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision-making." Notably, inclusion yields not only dignity to individuals, but also benefits teams and

organizations, such as when individuals leverage knowledge and social capital resources from their multiple identities for work-based tasks and activities (Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015). (For further scholarship on inclusion, see Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Ferdman, 2017; Opie & Livingston, 2022; Roberson, 2006, 2019; Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018).

Overall, Waldman and Sparr's article fails to meet the minimum standards of construct clarity. This blunder might be due to the errant application of core theories, which we address next.

ENGAGING WITH EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

A second broad concern about Waldman and Sparr's *Perspectives* article is their inadequate engagement with existing scholarship. First, we address how the article's characterization of CRT closely aligns with popular press discord but is misaligned with academic scholarship. Waldman and Sparr's article reads:

At the core of CRT is the notion that racism is institutionalized or systemic throughout society and organizations, and progress over time toward reducing or eliminating racism is illusory, which makes it commonplace and permanent (Rollock & Dixon, 2016). In other words, while one could point at some signs of progress in reducing racism, the underlying roots of racism persist in modern times. (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179)

CRT is a systems-level theory focusing on how laws, education, health care, policing, and historical acts contribute to "structural racism" (Crenshaw, 2011: 1326). Kimberlé Crenshaw, a co-creator of CRT, described CRT as "a prism for understanding why decades after the end of segregation, over a century and a half after the end of slavery, after genocide has occurred, why racial inequalities are so enduring" (Ottesen, 2022). For example, management scholarship has long recognized that organizations create systems that are implicated in the creation and expansion of inequality (Amis, Mair, & Munir, 2020; Tolbert & Castilla, 2017).

Waldman and Sparr's article states that CRT claims that racism is "commonplace and permanent" (p. 179), misrepresenting a core tenet of CRT. Indeed, Crenshaw (1988) explained how America's racial history represents a cyclical pattern of reform, retrenchment, and backlash, but ultimately progress has been made. Even when research on CRT is used to critique the narrative of "the near inevitability of racial progress" (Ray, Randolph, Underhill, & Luke, 2017: 155), CRT theorists attempt to promote progress, not

to deny that such progress is possible. Depicting racism as permanent suggests that societies are impotent in reducing structural racism. In fact, positive social change is at the heart of CRT. Ray (2022b: xxxix) wrote: "Critical race theorists recognize that racism is a structural feature of American society, and [theorists] share a commitment to racial equality."

Second, we discuss the article's claim that CRT forms "the basis of a woke organization approach to diversity policies and practices" (p. 179), because assumptions underlying this claim reflect a lack of engagement with the DEI literature. "Woke" (n.d.) is defined as "alert to injustice in society, especially racism," which aligns with CRT's focus on unveiling and, ultimately, redressing systemic racism. It is unclear why being alert to racism would undermine "the development of psychological capital on the part of both minority and majority group members" (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 174). In contrast, seeking deep insights should foster intellectual capital. Insights from diversity can be "resources" that "people bring to bear on complex problems" (Ely & Thomas, 2001: 233).

Waldman and Sparr's article also claims that, because of CRT, members of historically marginalized groups are at risk of engaging in "victimhood" (pp. 180, 183, 184).¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2022) defines "victim" as "a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action." It is unclear how anyone would differentiate "true" victimhood from "over-generalized or exaggerated" victimhood (p. 184). The juxtaposition in Waldman and Sparr's article suggests that some people of color are likely to misperceive themselves as victims of racism. DEI research suggests the opposite: people from marginalized racial groups may minimize perceptions of discrimination, preferring to attribute workplace challenges to themselves rather than to racism (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). In fact, Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) found that Black and Asian people tend to attribute negative feedback to themselves *not* to racism under ambiguous conditions. Black and Asian people only attributed negative feedback to racism when it was 100% probable that racism had occurred. Additionally, Kraus, Rucker, and Richeson (2017, 2021) found that, while high-income White respondents tended to overestimate racial economic equality in the past, Black

¹ Because CRT has its roots in legal scholarship, early scholarship focused on understanding victimhood in a legal sense, including victims of crimes and overzealous incarceration that unduly burdened some citizens more than others (Crenshaw, 1988).

respondents, on average, underestimated the degree of past racial economic equality. Such empirical findings starkly contrast with Waldman and Sparr's unsubstantiated warning that people of color will inaccurately claim to be victims of racism.²

Waldman and Sparr's article also claims that "CRT encourages minority members to over-attribute any failures on their part to external factors, such as systemic racism" (p. 180), which the authors propose will have negative outcomes—specifically, reduced self-efficacy. However, research suggests that stigma consciousness can be adaptive (Wang, Stroebe, & Dovidio, 2012) and lead to positive outcomes. For example, the recognition of racism and prejudice can inspire collective action and group identification (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Together, DEI research casts doubt on the claims made in Waldman and Sparr's article and suggests that, when people of color report racism, organizational leaders should believe them.

Third, Waldman and Sparr's article includes a similarly inaccurate characterization of positive organizational behavior (e.g., "a 'woke' strategy is antithetical to the tenets of positive organizational behavior"; p. 196). Dutton and Glynn (2008: 394) defined POS as "a broad framework that seeks to explain behaviors in and of organizations. It focuses explicitly on the positive states and processes that arise from, and result in, life-giving dynamics, optimal functioning, or enhanced capabilities or strengths." If we rely on the dictionary definition of woke—alert to injustice in society, especially racism—we posit that being woke is not antithetical to but, rather, at the core of POS. In the opening chapter of *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline*, Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn (2003) contrasted two extreme, hypothetical worlds: one where organizations are typified by greed, selfishness, abuse, and distrust, and another where organizations are typified by appreciation, collaboration, compassion, and respect; while POS recognizes the first world, it works to create the second. Research that integrates POS and DEI has demonstrated that inclusivity is integral to

positive organizational change (Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008; for additional reading on POS, see Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Caza & Cameron, 2008; Caza & Caza, 2008; Dutton & Sonenshein, 2007).

We elaborate on the ensuing implications of misrepresenting these three literatures for policy in the following section.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

AMP's mission requires that authors identify policy concerns and provide recommendations based on management research. Waldman and Sparr's (2023) *Perspectives* article fails to ground organizational policy recommendations in management research and thus provides policy recommendations that could hamper DEI. Foundationally, the premise of the Waldman and Sparr article—that woke diversity strategies are the "prototypical approach of implementing diversity in organizations" (p. 185) and are the antithesis of integrative strategies—falls apart when we use the dictionary definition of woke (i.e., aware of racial or social discrimination and injustice). It is unclear how racial awareness is oppositional to integrative strategies. Furthermore, the article makes multiple claims about how "woke diversity strategies" are implemented in organizations with limited evidence to support those claims. Below, we address three examples of deficient assertions, contrasting the arguments in Waldman and Sparr's article with DEI and CRT scholarship.

First, Waldman and Sparr's article offers diversity quotas as an example of a woke strategy. They state that Ray (2019: 17) recommended disregarding "merit or other qualifications" and that "quota-based hiring and staffing should be implemented." However, Ray did not discuss quota-based hiring or ignoring hiring qualifications. Importantly, quota-based hiring has been unconstitutional in the United States since 1978 (in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* [1978]) and, thus, this "'woke diversity' strategy" (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 180) is not proliferating (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 187) in the United States. Furthermore, research contradicts the article's representation that "racial or gender identities" versus "merit or other qualifications" are easily decoupled criteria (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 181). Research suggests the reality is far more nuanced; racial inequality can be exacerbated by individuals claiming to "not see race" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) or organizations proclaiming inevitable racial progress and purporting to be a meritocracy (Amis et al., 2020; Castilla & Benard, 2010;

² In fact, it may be dominant and privileged groups that miscalculate the relationships between systems and their own agency. For example, Phillips and Lowery (2015) found that it is threatening when people are faced with evidence that their group benefits from privilege and people will claim hardships to manage this threat. These claims of hardship allow individuals to deny that they *personally* benefit from privilege, while still accepting that group-level inequity exists.

Kraus, Torrez, & Hollie, 2022; for further discussion, see also Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020; Martin, 2018; Ray, 2019; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005).

Second, Waldman and Sparr's *Perspectives* article suggests that CRT proponents justify discrimination against Whites to achieve equity:

Some CRT proponents might even argue that, based on their widespread culpability for systemic racism, there is justification to discriminate against Whites in order to achieve social justice or "equity" (Christian, Seamster, & Ray, 2019; Ray, 2019). (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 181)

Yet, CRT does not advocate for discrimination against Whites. The authors call this "reverse discrimination" and cite Leslie (2019) for this characterization, but Leslie does not utilize this language. A review of the texts cited in the Waldman and Sparr article and the foundational texts of CRT (e.g., Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, 2017) reveals no arguments prescribing discrimination.

Third, Waldman and Sparr's discussion of the intersection between CRT and diversity training is also provocative. Based on decades of evidence, Dobbin and Kalev (2022: 33) advocated for the benefits of diversity training, whereby people learn the benefits of understanding others' perspectives and "treat managers as model citizens, not culprits." And, among those who have spent their careers studying diversity training, there are rich debates about how to improve the effectiveness of this critical process (see Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2022). Scholars acknowledge that not all diversity training is equally effective. For example, presenting managers' biases as the source of inequality (namely, anti-bias and anti-harassment training programs) is less effective than training that emboldens those in power to change systems and make their workplaces more inclusive (namely, cultural inclusion training and ending-harassment training) (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). Waldman and Sparr's article concludes that "CRT calls for majority group members (especially White males) to essentially do a *mea culpa*, whereby they acknowledge their personal responsibility for the structural or systematic racism that exists" (p. 181), but we were unable to find evidence supporting this claim. While Waldman and Sparr's article linked structural racism to personal culpability, this connection is not based on CRT, which focuses on systems, rather than individual-level processes (Crenshaw, 2011).

Relatedly, Waldman and Sparr's article later describes "woke training of CRT" as problematic

because it is "typically done in a dogmatic or intolerant manner" with "little room for disagreement or alternative viewpoints" (p. 181). The citation for these incendiary claims is a *Newsweek* Opinion article by Wax and Vedder (2021). We posit that researchers should avoid providing scientific credence by repeating what *Newsweek* accurately labeled as "opinion." Waldman and Sparr's article offers no other evidence to support the claim that CRT training is "dogmatic and intolerant" (p. 181). Further, Waldman and Sparr's article overlooks best practices established in the robust diversity training literature (e.g., Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012; King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010; Roberson, Kulik, & Tan, 2013). For instance, perspective-taking is a critical goal of DEI training (e.g., Ragins & Ehrhardt, 2021), which prioritizes tolerance and understanding.

Notably, authors whose research and arguments were missed or twisted in Waldman and Sparr's article expressed their concern and disappointment on Twitter (Ray, 2022a). Bernardo Ferdman tweeted that "it's distressing that my article on paradox, which was much more nuanced, was used in the way it was, to justify an argument that will end up being harmful, I suspect" (Ferdman, 2022). Victor Ray (2022c) tweeted that a summary of Waldman and Sparr's article from *Academy of Management Insights* was "confusing and confused."

While the policy recommendations in Waldman and Sparr's article are poorly grounded in academic literature, they are grounded in explicitly political sources. For example, Waldman and Sparr's article includes the example of politician Ron DeSantis to push back against "woke" education in Florida by "[protecting] Florida workers against the hostile work environment that is created when large corporations force their employees to endure CRT-inspired 'training' and indoctrination" (p. 197). This legislation engenders the same errors as Waldman and Sparr's article—poorly defined constructs that overlook scholarly evidence.

Additionally, Waldman and Sparr's article includes a citation from Rufo (2021) to argue that Raytheon Technologies Corporation, the second largest defense contractor in the United States, delivered training "forcing White employees to recognize and admit to their 'privilege'" (p. 181) based on the principles of CRT. We reviewed the training materials that Rufo reported came from Raytheon. Those materials failed to support Waldman and Sparr's characterization of diversity training as "[running] counter to the concept of unity" (p. 181). Rather, Raytheon's training appears to follow best practices of empowering employees to

redress inequality (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). We also question whether Rufo is a credible source when his reputation is conservative activism and generating conflict over CRT (Wallace-Wells, 2021). In his own words, Rufo has stated that, “‘Critical race theory’ is the perfect villain ... ‘critical race theory’ connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American” (Wallace-Wells, 2021: paras. 6–7).

Indeed, throughout Waldman and Sparr’s article, many of the criticisms waged against CRT—for example, “Organizations are seen as structurally flawed (e.g., ‘systemic racism’) in terms of historically racist policies and actions” (p. 183)—seem to be derived from how the theory has been mischaracterized in the popular press (e.g., “America is inherently racist”; Omokha, 2021) rather than a thorough scientific understanding of CRT. Front of mind is how the term “anti-woke” has been used to characterize legislation passed in Florida to prohibit schools and organizations from having conversations about race (“Judge Partially Blocks Gov. Ron DeSantis,” 2022; Ottesen, 2022). Ray (2022b) indicated that countering misinformation was a foundational motivation for writing his book on CRT. Instead of counteracting myths, Waldman and Sparr’s article fans the flames of misinformation.

CONCLUSION

Waldman and Sparr’s article posits that an integrative approach to diversity is needed, but an integrative approach has already been discussed by diversity scholars for over two decades. Furthermore, Waldman and Sparr’s article is replete with criticisms of “woke diversity strategies” but fails to accurately represent or properly contextualize the term “woke.” Waldman and Sparr’s article also alleges that woke strategies negatively affect people from historically power-dominant and historically marginalized groups, but the article neither properly cites existing research nor provides theoretical support for its assertions. We contend that Waldman and Sparr’s article does not make the contributions promised because it fails to engage with prior research in a substantive or accurate way. Instead, it contributes to the divisive, unsubstantiated discourse about diversity scholarship and programing. While debate is critical to rigorous discourse, when scholars participate in conversations that are politically charged, we should prioritize engaging with the literature deeply and providing clear evidence for our claims. This is not just quibbling about terms or definitions. Particularly when management research is intended to be applied in organizations and the lives of employees, the stakes

are high. It is critical that the arguments we make are based on a rich, in-depth review of scientific evidence. Waldman and Sparr’s article failed to meet these standards.

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