

Review

Beneath the surface: Resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in organizations

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are widely adopted by organizations to improve work conditions and career outcomes for disadvantaged groups, yet they often struggle with achieving sustainable change. This paper examines employee resistance as a barrier to DEI initiatives' success. We review the literature on the conceptualization and study of resistance to DEI initiatives, and offer recommendations for future research. Overall, we advocate for a behavioral perspective to generate a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of this resistance, which highlights its potentially ambivalent and subtle manifestations, and emphasizes its evolving nature in response to changing contexts over time. Acknowledging this complexity is crucial for advancing our understanding of resistance to DEI initiatives and for organizations aiming to address it effectively.

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Introduction

Many organizations have developed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Leslie & Kim, this issue), or “practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantages in society” [1], p. 538. This may not be surprising given the

broad endorsement of DEI among companies and society at large [2,3]. Organizations generally commit to DEI through public statements like “we are committed to diversity” and “we take action to enhance minorities’ representation,” along with announcements of various DEI initiatives [4]. However, evidence for DEI initiative effectiveness is mixed. Organizations struggle to make sustained progress in improving disadvantaged groups’ representation [5–8]. Some initiatives even trigger unintended negative effects, such as backlash experienced by minority groups [1,9,10].

A key factor influencing the success of any organizational change initiative, including those focusing on DEI, is how employees respond to them [1,8,11,12]. These responses can be supportive, resistant, or at times ambivalent [8,13–15]. We argue that understanding employee resistance to DEI initiatives in particular—which can complicate or hinder DEI progress—is crucial. As we discuss below, resistance is examined and understood in various ways—sometimes studied directly, and other times more indirectly, through potential proxies like reduced levels of (active) support. To provide a broad and representative overview of the literature, we incorporate research on these diverse approaches and include studies that address resistance directly or examine it through the lens of (lack of or reduced) support.

We begin by reviewing the literature on how resistance to DEI initiatives is understood and studied. Next, we explore prior research on the drivers of this resistance, which may arise from individual, group-level, or contextual factors. Finally, we synthesize insights from this prior work to offer recommendations for future research. It is important to note that our review and recommendations focus on research related to the DEI initiatives themselves, rather than on studies that examine the support or undermining of the underrepresented groups these initiatives aim to advance. However, as we will demonstrate, there are areas where these may overlap, further complicating the phenomenon and underscoring the need for additional scholarly inquiry (see Table 1).

Understanding resistance to DEI initiatives

Employee resistance to organizational change has been widely studied by change scholars and broadly refers to

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Table 1

A summary and recommendations for future research.

Theme	Summary of review	Recommendations for future research
Conceptualizing resistance to DEI initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of consensus on conceptualization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ There is variability in how resistance is conceptualized, with a focus on motivational-cognitive and intentional components. ◦ There is variability in assumptions about the relationship between support and resistance (e.g., continuum, orthogonal), with little attention for ambivalence. ◦ Behavioral enactment of resistance is not well understood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify assumptions about resistance to DEI initiatives and better conceptualize its relationship with a lack of or reduced support. • Embrace conceptualizations of resistance that go beyond an assumed bipolar continuum of resistance versus support. Acknowledge the potential for ambivalent forms, where resistance and support can coexist simultaneously. • Conceptualize and measure resistance as a (consequential) behavior that impairs DEI-related progress. • Study relatively covert (e.g., sabotage, non-compliance), indirect (e.g., targeting beneficiaries, implementers) expressions of resistance to DEI initiatives.
Understanding drivers of resistance to DEI initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly three sets of drivers are associated with resistance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Individual-level factors (e.g., prejudice, personality) ◦ Group-related factors (e.g., race, gender) ◦ Contextual factors (e.g., initiative characteristics and framing, environment) • Perceived or experienced threat drives responses. • Studies often employ cross-sectional designs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore interactive effects of multiple factors (e.g., individual <i>and</i> context) on resistance, particularly on behavioral expressions. • Employ longitudinal methods to understand causal links across drivers and the development of threat over time. • Investigate interactions between context and emergence of different behavioral expressions of resistance (e.g., how changing norms may turn employees to overt versus covert expressions).

forces that “maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo” [16, p. 63]. In this work, resistance has been conceptualized through different lenses, such as individual dispositions [17], cognitions [18], attitudes [19,20], or behaviors [21,22].

Conceptualizations of resistance to DEI initiatives similarly vary, covering a mix of cognitive and attitudinal components, and some consideration of behavioral intentions. The majority of research examines responses to these initiatives through a bipolar framework of support and resistance, where favorable and unfavorable responses are situated at opposing ends of one spectrum [14,19,23–27]. For example, in some studies, participants rate several specific initiatives, such as diversity mentoring, on Likert scales ranging from strongly oppose to strongly favor. Several other studies infer such resistance from varying levels of supportive attitudes toward DEI initiatives [28–33], with lower ratings of support seen as indicative of opposition. However, this often assumed bipolar or mutually exclusive relationship between support and resistance may not hold universally. The resistance to organizational change literature has long acknowledged the possibility of ambivalence, where resistant and supportive responses can co-occur [17,34]. Although less common in the DEI literature, some scholars have highlighted a contradiction consistent with this idea: vocal support for diversity often coincides with a reluctance to support concrete DEI actions [25].

Others, while proposing a typology of DEI support based on the dimensions of endorsement and activism [11], identified partially overlapping response categories in which supportive and resistant responses can coexist within the same quadrant. Finally, adopting a person-centered approach, a recent empirical study uncovered several employee profiles in reaction to DEI initiatives, revealing that some employees simultaneously hold both supportive and resistant attitudes [15].

As most research has concentrated on attitudes, cognitions, or intentions that reflect employees’ resistance to DEI initiatives, research on actual behavioral enactments of this resistance remains relatively rare. Some studies include operationalizations in terms of behavioral intentions, self-reports on own actions, or effort put into diversity and inclusion [31,35–37]. In this work, participants typically report their level of agreement with statements indicating support (e.g., “I contribute to the successful implementation of the D&I policy of my organization.” [31]) or opposition (e.g., “I have shared my concerns with my manager.”, “I do not participate in any diversity-related initiatives in my workplace.” [37]). A few studies captured behavior or behavioral intentions more directly, focusing often on hypothetical scenarios. For example, they examined intentions to volunteer or sign a petition [30,38] and hypothetical funding or money allocation decisions for DEI initiatives [26,39,40].

Drivers of resistance to DEI initiatives

What drives resistance to DEI initiatives? Much of the research has identified individual, group-level, and context-related factors that shape this response. At the individual level, research indicates that unfavorable reactions to DEI policies are related to negative stereotypes and prejudice toward minoritized groups [24,35], to ethnocentrism [40], hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies [15], heteronormativity, and to religious intolerance [41]. More favorable responses to DEI initiatives have been associated with personality dimensions such as extraversion and agreeableness [26,35].

Group-related factors influencing varied reactions to DEI initiatives have been extensively studied. In general, white people and men profess less support for, or more opposition to, these initiatives than do people of color and women (e.g., [14,15,24,27,35,42]). This is not surprising given that resistance to the initiatives arises from perceived loss and anticipated threat [43]. Members of groups who do not (perceive themselves to) benefit from DEI initiatives can view these as threatening, often associating outgroups' advancement through a zero-sum lens; seeing others' gains as their own loss [23,25]. Such threat revolves around the potential loss of resources, including experienced harm to ingroup interests or status [41,44], but can also encompass perceptions of decreased respect [45] or sense of belonging [32]. Iyer [46] linked the oppositional responses of advantaged groups to three key categories of threat: (1) diminished access to resources and opportunities; (2) new values and cultural norms; and/or (3) own group's complicity in sustaining inequality.

Finally, context-related factors such as the framing or characteristics of DEI practices, or other cues from the organizational environment matter. Framings which call upon non-beneficiaries' responsibility in addressing inequity receive more [38], whereas framings that focus on correcting historic intergroup injustices receive less [30] support from these groups. Research on responses to gender-related developmental programs shows that those targeting women only (including statements such as "At [name company], we are proud to sponsor programs that provide *women* with the resources and support they need to succeed. [emphasis added]") receive less support than those adopting an all-inclusive approach (e.g., "At [name company], we are proud to have a culture that values and supports the contributions and perspectives of *all employees*. [emphasis added]" [28]). A more recent study corroborates these findings within the context of academic career development programs, showing that when organizations highlight the benefits of such programs for *all* employees, rather than focusing solely on women, employees respond more positively [42]. Furthermore, DEI policies and programs that are less prescriptive—allowing decision-makers more

flexibility in determining the extent to which DEI considerations influence their decisions—such as the role of group membership in hiring decisions—tend to receive greater support [24].

Perceived norms and individuals' structural power within organizations also matter. There is a positive relationship between perceptions of coworkers' and one's own support for DEI initiatives [15,35] suggesting that perceived social acceptance plays a role in shaping employees' reactions to these policies and programs. Finally, recent research demonstrates that organizational leaders may show greater opposition to DEI policies because structural power is associated with reduced perceptions of inequity within the organization [39]. This is particularly intriguing because this research indicates that the primary organizational actors, who are often tasked with championing DEI programs, may see less urgency, and be or become resistant to the programs due to their managerial roles.

Integration and recommendations

The rise of DEI initiatives has increased academic interest in understanding how employees perceive and respond to such initiatives. Our review discusses the dynamics underlying resistance to DEI efforts. This growing scholarly field has amassed substantial knowledge in recent years, but there is still room for further development and depth. Based on our observations of this work, we discuss three key areas where further elaboration could enhance theoretical development and effective implementation of DEI initiatives within organizations.

Carefully conceptualizing resistance

Scholars should reflect on their assumptions about resistance to DEI initiatives as a concept. Our review shows that a significant portion of studies assume a bipolar resistance-support continuum or infer resistance from varying levels of support for DEI initiatives. These studies certainly offer valuable insights on resistance, since lower support for initiatives may help to maintain the status quo. Hence, we recognize the scholarly position that a lack of or low levels of support effectively preserves an existing state, which is typically inconsistent with the goals of DEI initiatives. However, in light of other perspectives on employee responses to organizational change in general [34,47] and DEI initiatives in particular [15], it is also important to more thoroughly conceptualize resistance, understand how it compares to *and* differs from a lack of or reduced support, and illuminate their potential co-occurrence (i.e., ambivalence). That is, resistance and support may not fully operate on a continuum (where an increase in one means a decrease in the other) but instead exhibit a complex structure that current research may insufficiently capture [34].

Furthermore, we see that most research has focused on attitudes, cognitions, or intentions, rather than on actual behaviors. Such constructs may predict behavior under certain circumstances, but solely relying on these rather than on observable (in)actions may yield an incomplete or inaccurate picture. For example, there is the potential for a disconnect between intentions and actual resistant behaviors in daily work. We therefore advocate for a behavioral lens on resistance — examining what people “do” and the (in)actions that prevent a change from being implemented — because this allows us to separate the concept of resistance from its psychological predictors and, importantly, offers a better understanding of how various behaviors influence initiative outcomes—a critical gap in empirical research so far.

Taken together, we propose that resistance to DEI initiatives should be understood through a behavioral lens, paying attention to its conceptual links with a lack of or reduced support, and recognizing its ambivalent expressions, where resistance and support can coexist.

Unpacking subtle resistance through covert and indirect behaviors

We further propose that studies on behavioral resistance to DEI initiatives should recognize that these behaviors may often appear in subtle ways. Resistance in the context of DEI can evoke discomfort in employees, clashing with the need to see oneself as unbiased towards underrepresented groups, who are supported by these initiatives [48]. Aside from personal aversions, individuals might avoid openly opposing DEI initiatives because they fear social repercussions, such as disapproval, since such opposition may be seen as counter-normative and in contrast with seemingly widely held pro-diversity values (e.g., [3,49]). We posit that amidst such pressures, resistance to DEI initiatives may manifest in complex and unorthodox ways. First, it may be relatively *covert*, taking on subtler forms, such as non-compliance and covert sabotage. Despite its more subtle manifestation, the effects of such resistance can be substantial, as more covert resistance prevents those in positions of power from intervening, and limits the organization’s ability to harness the learning potential from employee resistance [50]. Second, resistance to DEI initiatives may manifest *indirectly*. That is, resistive employees may target their behaviors not directly on the initiative or its goals, but, for instance, on the people associated with it [1,51]. Consistent with this, emergent research suggests that anti-egalitarian beliefs are correlated with increased intentions to gossip negatively about women’s performance, particularly when the program challenges the organizational status quo [52]. Such gossip delegitimizes women’s position power, and increases their turnover intentions, thus undermining representational gains of DEI efforts. Hence, indirect manifestations of resistance—where opposition to the policy takes the form of interpersonal undermining behavior towards members of

underrepresented group (which may be challenging to identify)—can harm DEI goals.

Recognizing the complexity and dynamism of the resistance drivers

Existing research has been vocal about (potential) drivers of resistance to DEI initiatives. Nonetheless, several open questions remain. While many studies examine different drivers—such as individual-, group-, or context-related factors—in isolation, their interactions may ultimately shape employee responses, suggesting that studying them in conjunction is fruitful for advancing knowledge. Further, longitudinal designs can help to further establish causal links and provide more insight into how perceived threats to the policies develop and impact resistance over time. For example, currently, it is unclear whether perceived group-related threats always immediately trigger behavioral resistance to a DEI initiative, or whether such resistance only surfaces under specific circumstances and after a prolonged period of experienced threat.

Exploring temporal dynamics can also help to unpack the unfolding of different forms of resistive behaviors vis-à-vis contextual changes. For instance, employees who initially engage in relatively subtle resistance may become more overt about their stance when they have a new leader who allows more leeway. Alternatively, initial overt resistance can become more nuanced, and even be accompanied by support, when employees have a (new) supervisor who is a perceived or actual proponent of DEI. In both scenarios, employees may strategically adjust their modes of resistance in response to context, which implicitly dictates the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Exploring these shifts would yield important insights and reveal instances where apparent low resistance to DEI initiatives may, in fact, indicate resistance that has become more covert or subtle.

Conclusion

Our review reveals both the complexity and promise of better understanding resistance to policies designed to advance DEI. Going forward, scholars need to conceptualize such resistance in clear and transparent ways, acknowledge its potentially ambivalent content, and unpack subtle behavioral expressions of resistance, which, despite appearing harmless, may undermine DEI efforts. A more mature research tradition in this area will help organizations to develop targeted strategies to design DEI initiatives that are more impactful and sustainable.

CRedit author statement

SG: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **RK:** Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. **FR:** Writing - Review & Editing. **IJH:** Writing - Review & Editing. **MLS:** Writing - Review & Editing.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
 - ** of outstanding interest
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Further information on references of particular interest

15. This paper adopts a person-centered approach to understanding employee reactions to diversity initiatives. It uncovers individual and situational predictors of various response profiles, examines how these profiles relate to work-related outcomes, and assesses the extent to which they can be dysfunctional for organizations. Of particular interest is the finding that employee responses to diversity initiatives are complex and can be ambivalent.
23. This study examines how individual differences in lay theories of diversity initiatives predict support for or backlash against these initiatives in organizations. Specifically, it focuses on whether individuals hold zero-sum or win-win beliefs, and how these beliefs influence their reactions to diversity efforts.
34. This paper discusses resistance to change as a multifaceted phenomenon in which involved actors actively assume dynamic and evolving roles. The detailed examination of these roles and actions provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex and fluid reactions to organizational change efforts, offering relevant insights for DEI-related initiatives.
39. This paper examines resistance among a critical group of organizational actors—organizational leaders—to DEI initiatives. It demonstrates that the structural power inherent to leaders may lead to reduced support and increased opposition to these initiatives and utilizes a behavioral measure of resistance to provide empirical evidence.
46. This paper reviews and organizes dominant groups’ responses to DEI initiatives, focusing primarily on three types of threats: resource threat, symbolic threat, and ingroup morality threat. Furthermore, it discusses strategies for mitigating these identified threats.