

Back Page: The Front Lines of DEI

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What led to your interest in this line of work?

The experience of injustice and oppression at work contributes to further inequality in our society. Creating change in a workplace at both the behavioral and the systemic levels has the potential to have a lot of impact. But I wasn't always interested in applied work. A few years into being a professor, I started to realize that a lot of psychology research is based on and conducted by White, Eurocentric, wealthier people, making it challenging to have a direct impact. So I quit academia to apply my research skills and expertise at the 'front lines' of DEI, where I can be more innovative and learn from others who have diverse experiences and talents.

Why do so many DEI programs fail or even have unintended consequences?

Because they ignore context, both on the organizational level and on the societal level. Organizations are living, breathing things that don't exist in a vacuum. And yet people often attempt to apply a blanket "best practice" that is meant to help a de-individualized "underrepresented group"—but these practices are often harmful when their consequences are not thought through, or when the context of the organization is not taken into account, or the people who are making the decisions are not in tune with the needs of different identities and groups or current events. We try not to advise people on strategy without understanding the workplace's unique context first.

You've also researched the specific challenges women face at work, including the quality of the feedback they receive. What's behind these "white lies" and how do they harm women?

With my co-author, Dr. Vivian Zayas, I found that women-identified people were given more upwardly distorted performance feedback than men, even when they were believed to be equally underperforming. Given the importance of clear, accurate performance feedback in the workplace, this bias belies a discrepancy in helpful information and patronizing behavior. An important note: In an attempt to decolonize my language, I no longer use 'white lies' to describe this bias (rather 'upward distortions'). Also, 'women' is a much broader identity group than was researched here—most of my research subjects

were White, Ivy-League college students. A more intersectional, representative, and nonbinary study of this bias would be needed to understand how it shows up across identity groups before applying this research in any sort of practice.

What advice would you offer to other early-career psychological researchers considering a career outside academia?

1. Trust your gut. You don't have to be miserable to do research, pursue interesting ideas, or make an impact.
2. Ask for help. Many of us have done this before and can help you transition, from putting you in touch with the right people to talking to you about the deluge of emotions that comes with redefining your career or pursuing the unknown.
3. Don't put pressure on yourself to know exactly what you want or to get the 'perfect job.' Know that your first job outside of academia won't be your best or your last, but it will help you learn and develop skills that will allow you to thrive.
4. Finally, don't believe people who tell you it's a bad idea. It's not their choice, and they honestly have no idea. Even when it's hard, it's so worth it.

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