Diversity and Disability:

The Implications of White-Centered Diversity Logics on d/Deaf* Organizations

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Introduction

The underrepresentation of BIPOC interpreters is a problem for the Deaf community-many people feel as if their voices cannot be expressed correctly. Black Deaf individuals make up 8% of the Deaf population, but only 2% of interpreters within Ohio are Black, and 13% of interpreters nationally are people of color. In Cincinnati, there are only 6 nationally certified ASL/English interpreters who identify as Black (Washington 2021). However, the majority of ASL interpreters are white women, with 53.4% white and 76% female (Zippia 2022). There is an obvious disparity for Deaf individuals of color, especially Black individuals, and this presents an issue of misrepresentation. This of course is not always the case, but having an interpreter of the same/similar race and/or culture can be very helpful when trying to express oneself or different concepts. However, in d/Deaf* organizations, increasing diversity does not address the structural issues at hand. Many d/Deaf* People of color feel stuck between their two communities, without full inclusion in either. These values are important when studying any d/Deaf* organizations, which leads to the research question- How does diversity ideology in d/Deaf* organizations impact d/Deaf* people of color?

The organization I researched is the Hearing, Speech, and Deaf Center of Greater Cincinnati (referred to as the Center). This organization provides support and resources for those overcoming "obstacles regarding speech, language, literacy, hearing, or Deafness". They operate in the field of communications, audiology, and public aid. The organization was founded in 1925 as the Cincinnati League for the Hard of Hearing by Anna Pattison, a former Ohio first lady. As soldiers returned home from WWII, noise induced hearing loss became more common, leading to further development and research- thus creating the field of Audiology. In Cincinnati, Dr. Jean Rothenberg became a prominent figure in the Deaf community. She traveled and studied with

professionals, and then opened the center under the name Cincinnati Speech and Hearing Center in 1950. In 1999, the name was changed to what it is today to reflect everyone who may benefit from its services (Hearing Speech + Deaf Center 2021). This organization was created by white women, which is relevant for its racial formation.

Looking at the history of the Center, it is evident that the racial ideologies it began with have evolved, but not in a truly equitable way. The Center's staff is mostly white, which just scratches the surface of equity issues that lie below. This organization does not acknowledge the existence of other identities other than d/Deafness*, provide any support for d/Deaf* people of color, or attempt to provide support for aspiring speech pathologists, audiologists, or interpreters of color.

Literature Review

Racial Ideologies

The meso-level of society is an often neglected, but equally important area of study for understanding the creation and reproduction of racial ideologies. Organizations are racial structures, despite being seen as race-neutral, as they are as constituted by racial processes that can shape our institutions and individuals. Racial schemas are generalizable, and often unconscious default assumptions one makes in different contexts about an individual with a certain race. These schemas individuals bring into racial structures, paired with racial ideologies, can justify the inequitable distribution of resources. This is crucial for understanding organizations because how resources are allocated may be tied to racial schemas, and different organizations may have different schemas depending on the type of services an organization provides (Victor 2019).

Diving into racial ideologies, the current framework that dominates our society is color-blind racism. Color-blind racism uses four tenants, typically in combination, to defend white privilege. The overall claim is that race is no longer a prominent issue, as everyone is given the same opportunities. Those aligned with this ideology believe that "treating everyone equally" is how to combat any racial inequalities, disregarding system racism and reducing racism to individual interactions (Bonilla-Silva 2018). An alternative to color-blind racism is racial ignorance, as ignorance is a social product on its own, and people in power have the capacity to suppress knowledge and foster ignorance. This theory focuses on the absence of consciousness, and is grounded in the "cognitive accomplishment grounded in explicit and tacit practices of knowing and non-knowing". Many people turn to ignorance as an excuse for their participation in racist thoughts or actions, which is reproduced in organizations and institutions. However, ignorance is something that requires effort, as our world is full of evidence of racism, violence, suffering, and disparities people of color face (Mueller 2020). Diversity ideology is another prominent racial ideology that is gaining traction in our structures. It calls for race consciousness, but rarely, if at all, acknowledges and works against structural racial issues. It is important to address the "white-centering" of this framework, as it suggests white people's attempts to diversify spaces is enough to combat racial inequalities. It is centered around white people's desires and feelings, by allowing them to maintain control in spaces, by appreciating diversity on their own terms (Mayorga-Gallo 2019).

Connecting diversity ideology to organizations, it is found that diversity logic can actually do the opposite of what it intends to- although it increases representation, it unequally burdens employees of color with work that is outside their responsibilities and/or expertise, as it puts the work of combating racism on these employees. This is defined as racialized equity

labor- the extra work employees of color take on or are expected to do because of their identity (Hamilton, Nielsen, Lerma 2022). When looking at an organization that serves marginalized groups, it is crucial to visit the concept of intersectionality. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality considers the overlap and interconnectedness of social identities that create unique experiences for every individual. It is also a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects (Crenshaw 1989).

d/Deaf* Identities

Before looking at the field of d/Deaf* studies, it is important to understand the use of the term "d/Deaf*". The little d refers to an individual who doesn't strongly identify with the d/Deaf* community. The big D refers to those who strongly identify with the d/Deaf* community, uses ASL as their primary language, attended schools and/or other programs for the d/Deaf*, and have a strong place in the community. The asterisk acknowledges wide variety of d/Deaf* experiences and journeys, the range of d/Deafness* and hearing loss that exists (Berke 2023).

Intersectionality

Inclusivity when studying the d/Deaf* community has been an issue since the beginning, with the history of Deaf* Studies being focused on white American sign language users, giving them privilege in the community over those with different language backgrounds, races, and/or ethnicities. This exclusion has significantly limited research, and failed to understand Deaf* people of color, or those who might not use ASL. Just like spoken language, there are regional accents or cultural differences in signs and/or expressions of American Sign Language. With linguists focusing on White American Deaf* people, this erases the regional, racial, and ethnic differences in the language (Fernandes and Myers 2009). Many models are used to study

d/Deafness* with a prominent one being the minority model. The minority model attempts to compare the marginalization faced by d/Deaf* people to racial minorities, but has been racialized in ways that center the experiences of white, middle-class disabled Americans. This creates disability essentialism, assuming disability discrimination is a monolithic experience that is divorced from other forms of oppression, again erasing the experiences of d/Deaf* people of color (Frederick and Shifrer 2018). This includes the experiences of d/Deaf* students, who have a college graduation rate of about 30%. Most research on d/Deaf* college students fail to consider the unique experiences of d/Deaf* students of color, or doesn't use race as a variable, which erases the experiences these students face. This creates the illusion of a monolithic d/Deaf* culture, which is of course inaccurate and creates a false perception and understanding of the community (Stapleton 2015). Many d/Deaf* people of color identify with their race first, rather than their d/Deafness*. In one study, it was found that 87% of Black d/Deaf* adolescents identified as Black first, with the remaining 13% identifying as d/Deaf* first. This provides evidence to race as the master class in our society, as it is the identity most people of color feel the strongest connection to. However, the dual membership of both communities is central to their life and understanding of self, but many feel not fully accepted into either community (Solomon 2018).

A gap in the literature still remains on how diversity ideology affects in organizations impacts d/Deaf* people of color. It is hypothesized that just increasing representation does not tackle the systemic issues d/Deaf* POC face, as diversity is typically still centered around white comfort. It allows white people to appreciate diversity on their own terms, and celebrate bare-minimum accomplishments that do not work towards eliminating structural barriers d/Deaf* people of color face. This still creates that in-between feeling many d/Deaf* people of color

report, not fully belonging to either community and having to settle for limited resources and recognition from both ends.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered for this study, in an attempt to provide a wider range of data for analysis. This gives insight as to the racial ideologies the Center puts outward on their website, and those held within the organization by staff members.

Quantitative

Quantitative data was collected from the Hearing Speech and Deaf Center of Greater Cincinnati's website (https://hearingspeechdeaf.org/). The Center posts archived blog posts starting from 2017 to present. For this study, blog posts were analyzed from 2017-2020. The posts were coded numerically for their usage of the following key terms in the context of race: diversity, inclusion, race, discrimination, equality, and minority. These terms come up frequently in the context of speech impairments and d/Deafness*, but this particular study is analyzing racial ideologies.

The Center also has an Affirmative Action Plan created in 2017 posted on their website. This plan was coded by aligning phrases along diversity ideology's four tenants: diversity as acceptance, intent, liability, and commodity (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). The goal was to dissect this document and analyze if structural issues were being considered or addressed.

Finally, the staff demographics were analyzed. This was based on the racialization of the staff with photos included in their brief biography. This data was used to give further background on racial demographics of the staff, which informs the racial ideologies at use and can give

further evidence and possible reasoning as to how and why the racial ideologies observed were in practice.

Qualitative

Qualitative data was collected through a one hour virtual interview with a key informant of the Center. For this study, J.B. Boothe, the CEO of the Center, was interviewed. The interview was conducted virtually via Zoom, recorded, then transcribed using the tool Otter.ai. Boothe created the Affirmative Action plan alongside an attorney, which was very helpful for our discussion on its use and impact. The interview began with inquiry on the organization's history, involvement with the d/Deaf* community of Cincinnati, and the University of Cincinnati. Most of the interview involved analysis of the Affirmative Action Plan- how it is used in practice, its impact, and any notable changes identified after the adoption of this plan. The plan is separated into several categories, and the ones of focus for the purpose of this interview were staff recruitment, staff selection, performance evaluation, training strategies, and separation strategies/exit interviews.

After the transcription was edited, the responses were reviewed then grouped together based on relevance to applicable racial ideologies. Then, the responses were coded along the tenets of applicable racial ideologies, with specific quotes matching up to descriptions of color-blind racism and diversity ideology. The quotes were sorted based on relevance, which contributed to the overall findings of this study.

Results

Quantitative

The coding and analysis of key words from archived blog posts from 2017-2020 allude to racial ignorance and racial issues, with a holistic absence of race and no recognition that d/Deaf* people have identities other than their d/Deafness*. The code words diversity, inclusion, race, discrimination, and equality, in the context of race, only appeared one time each in three years worth of blog posts. The term "minority" did not appear in this sample of posts. The Affirmative Action plan was coded along diversity ideology's four tenants, with phrases falling into the acceptance and intent tenets. Acceptance refers to "the board tolerance and inclusion of difference across various azes, while equating structural difference with idiosyncratic difference" (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). It frames racial representation as a remedy to racial inequality, but does little to no work outside celebrating differences. Several sentences in this plan aligned with diversity as acceptance, which are presented as follows:

"let us work together to build an understanding of the dignity of every human being and the beauty of our differences"

"we provide equal access for all services to all members of the community and embrace diversity"

"...provide equal opportunity for minorities, women and disabled persons"

These phrases signify acceptance of differences, with a commitment to providing equal opportunities. However, additional information as to how equal access and opportunities will be achieved is not given, providing evidence that aligns with the ideology's central theme of white comfort.

There were several phrases that aligned with diversity ideology's tenet of intent. Diversity as intent "refers to the centering of good intentions during discussions of diversity issues and initiatives" (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). However, these intentions focus more on identity

constructive, rather than structural change. Some phrases that align with the tenet of intent are as follows:

"(Hearing Speech + Deaf Center) HSDC will make a good faith effort to recruit a diverse group of employees..."

"HSDC will ensure HR managers and supervisors understand this plan and hold managers and supervisors accountable for the effectiveness of this plan."

These phrases seem to have good intentions behind them, but again, fail to address structural issues or even provide additional information as to how the promises outlined will be performed and evaluated. For example, there was no additional information on what a "good faith effort" to recruit a diverse group of employees looks like in practice.

Finally, a quick analysis of the staff demographics via racialization of photos attached to biographies concludes 14/14 of the employees' pictures are white. This gives further evidence that the plan fails to recruit a diverse group of employees, or live up to other intentions outlined.

Quantitative

The conversation with CEO J.B. Boothe provided solid evidence that aligned with both diversity ideology and color-blind racism. First, aligning with color-blind racism, there was avoidance when asked about racial diversity and other racial concerns. When asked what racial diversity means to my informant and the Center, Boothe responded,

"Well, I'd like to talk about diversity as just diversity. Because, you know, racial diversity really kind of just zooms in on you know, what it what it says its racial diversity, and I understand that that might be more specific to your, your discussion, but, but we like to, when we do training, when we talk to our staff, when we look at are we diverse, excuse me, what's much broader lens than just, you know, racial diversity."

Later in the interview, I referred to the Affirmative Action Plan's statement that the Center will utilize procedures, processes, and techniques that are fair and do not have an adverse impact on

minorities, women, or disabled persons. When asked more detail on these procedures and

practices, Boothe responded,

"You know, we also, you know, don't do any prior screening before, you know, we set up an
interview. So there's no hidden agendas around trying to determine, you know, background,
ethnicity. We don't even have individuals, one of the things that we don't do that a lot of
organizations do. And I, I guess I understand it, because they are larger institutions. They'll have
you fill out a, an application, submit that application, and there's a lot of demographic
information on there. Now, obviously, you can opt not to answer that information. But we don't
do that, we look at the person's resume. And if they have the general qualifications for the job.
You know, there's no additional questions about race, ethnicity, ethnicity, disability, which those
are on the applications these days to do you declare a disability. We don't do any of that prior to
bringing someone in for an interview. So they're coming in on their own merits. They're coming
in on their own experience, without any pre judgment of you know, any of those factors, what is
listed in our affirmative action statement."

For context, this was in reference to when the organization receives an application from a

candidate, they do not ask any demographic questions, which strongly supports colorblind

racism. This organization opts out of having prospective employees fill out any demographic

information, as a way to base hiring completely off of merit. However, "merit" is a racial issue,

as there are centuries of structural barriers that have created a system that makes it exponentially

more difficult for people of color, especially Black people, to gain merit. They were (and are)

shoved into areas of concentrated poverty, with poorer schools, and therefore less prospects for

employment. Even Black students who do earn degrees still need to be more high-achieving than

whites at their same level to be taken with the same respect. To me, this quote aligns with

colorblind racism's overall message: everyone is equal, and race doesn't cause people to be

discriminated against anymore.

Strong evidence that this organization aligns with diversity ideology was also presented.

We discussed this organization's required diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training, and I

asked for examples on what information is typically discussed. The response is as follows,

"And we have done diversity training, we do a diversity training every year. We really do DEI, we brought in speakers as well. It was really interesting. Let's see, last year, a year before last, we brought in a speaker and they really really drilled down on like, macro and micro aggressions and I think it was the first time a lot of our staff had really thought about it but it just left them wanting more information."

This quote strongly supports diversity ideology as organizations see diversity as the "solution" to racial problems, and this organization isn't diverse at all, so their efforts really are as extensive as surface level DEI training.

There was a specific instance where diversity ideology really stuck out to me. The interviewee was discussing how they struggle with diversity because the fields of interpreting, speech pathology, etc. are dominated by young, white, females. However, nothing was mentioned as to why this might be so, or any comments/efforts as to how to change this. When asked about the diversity of the staff, Boothe responded,

"But we, we struggle with our racial diversity, because of the type of business we are. And we have a lot of documents where we have done our research to, to look at the demographics of the individuals who work in the professions that we have. So I didn't pull those out. But I probably can give you kind of just a quick overview, but so we hire speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, audiologist. And in those three clinical settings, the general demographics are young white females. And so we very rarely, I can't even remember the last time we received a resume, from anyone who was, you know, of African American or Hispanic or any other racial group or ethnic group, besides, you know, Caucasian, young females"

Here, it is very apparent that the organization does not work to tackle structural issues, as the current fact that this organization does not receive applications from racially diverse candidates does not have to remain that way. It was also stated that my interviewee did not notice any changes since adopting the Affirmative Action Plan in 2017. What this tells me is that this plan is more in place as a performative action, and is not truly lived out. It also shows that diversity ideology does not create real change in an organization. I also gathered that racial issues are not a priority in this organization, as no changes have been noticed since adopting this plan.

Obviously, people are not implementing and monitoring the message of this plan if no changes have been noticed.

Interviewer: *"So how has the adoption of this plan affected this organization? Have you noticed any changes in staff, clients? Just how the organization runs, anything like that?"*
Respondent: *"I don't think so. I mean, I think we've always been a very open and accepting organization. We meet people where they are. We have a very broad range of individuals that we serve."*

Overall, both the quantitative and qualitative data collected provide strong evidence this organization aligns both with color-blind racism and diversity ideology. As discussed, both ideologies are very harmful and do not address structural issues of equity. In an organization that serves a marginalized group, it would be expected to see the same support it provides for d/Deaf* and speech impaired individuals to racial minorities as well. Again, this organization appears to have a holistic absence to race, and does not recognize or support that d/Deaf* people have identities other than their d/Deafness*. Only acknowledging one identity ostracizes people and prevents them from fully engaging in services and communities. Again, this creates that in-between feeling with identities, and separates these individuals' existence into separate categories, rather than appreciating and supporting intersectionality. Ignoring the importance of race as the master status in our society contributes to institutional racism, and avoids work on structural inequities. Intersectionality emphasizes the importance of all of one's identities, creating different experiences of discrimination. However, this organization does not recognize intersectionality nor its importance, preventing d/Deaf* people of color from feeling holistically supported by this organization, and from feeling comfortable to fully engage in the services provided.

Discussion

As we have seen, it is extremely important to study the meso-layer, and understand how organizations create and reproduce racial ideologies. Organizations are the middle point between individuals and structures, and a part of society we interact with daily through work, entertainment, services, and politics. Through previous literature, we can understand the importance of race as the master class in our society, and how much equity is truly needed to support all individuals. This is especially important in organizations that work to serve other marginalized communities, such as d/Deaf* and speech impaired individuals. The harm diversity ideology brings to spaces outweighs the good, as it provides the majority with a sense of comfort and relief that they are making a difference. However, this ideology fails to address the necessary structural concerns that will eliminate barriers to all people fully engaging and being supported in society. However, the Hearing Speech and Deaf Center does not have to adhere to diversity ideology, and can create reforms to adopt a greater focus on equity. First, the Center needs to distinctly acknowledge racial identities and inequalities within d/Deaf* and speech impaired communities. The absence of racial acknowledgment tells d/Deaf* people of color that their identities are not important, and that they have to adhere to the standards of whiteness disabled communities often adopt.

The required diversity training for employees can also be reworked, with a focus on structural issues that the d/Deaf* community, and especially d/Deaf* people of color face. Rather than focusing on individual interactions such as microaggressions as they currently do, these trainings should spend most of the time focusing on how BIPOC are structurally unequal, and how this intersection is important. The training could allow employees to brainstorm different projects and enhancements the Center could do to change with the times and continue to be an increasingly equitable resource.

My key informant mentioned in the interview that occupations such audiology, speech and occupational therapy, speech language pathology, and ASL interpreters are white female dominated. Rather than failing to consider demographic information on candidates, the Center could provide resources to students and community members to get them interested in such fields and remove barriers. This could be ASL classes in high schools, shadowing opportunities, and even scholarships for students interested in respective fields.

This research is not all-conclusive and without its limitations. This study was conducted with one interview, at one organization in Cincinnati, Ohio. In order to gain a better understanding as to the racial ideologies of d/Deaf* organizations, a similar study on a larger scale could be conducted. Also, the organization did not have many documents to analyze, and archived blog posts were the most effective way to gather quantitative data. An organization with more internal documents that are for public view would be important to research.

In conclusion, organizations that adhere to diversity ideology can be very harmful for people of color, especially when the organization serves another marginalized community. Although the concept of intersectionality was developed by Crenshaw in 1989, still 34 years later we are failing to fully integrate it into our services and communities. Those with intersecting marginalized identities should not have to choose between them, nor feel like they have to water-down the importance of one identity in order to better fit into the community of another.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little about your organization- what are its goals/missions?
2. What is your organization's involvement with the Deaf community of Cincinnati?
    a. ex) what kind of services are provided? Fundraisers? Advocacy? ASL classes?
    b. What about the Deaf community outside Cincinnati?
3. What is your role in this organization? How long have you worked in this role?
    a. What changes in the organization have you noticed from when you began to now?
4. The next several questions are in regard to the Affirmative Action Plan, created in 2017. These questions are meant to see what steps have been taken, the results, and progress of the strategies.
    a. How did you go about the process of creating this plan?
    b. What does racial diversity mean to you?
        i. Is it important? Why/why not?
    c. Recruitment: How do you go about hiring employees?
        i. "Hearing Speech + Deaf Center will make a good faith effort to recruit a diverse group of employees and provide equal opportunity for minorities, women and disabled persons. Hearing Speech + Deaf Center will advertise positions in media outlets that will provide information and access to the underserved populations". (exact verbiage from Affirmative Action Plan)
        ii. What does "good faith effort" mean to you?
        iii. What media outlets do you use?
        iv. What are the results of this updated recruitment process? How do you track progress/results?
    d. Selection: HSDC will utilize procedures, processes and techniques that are fair and do not have an adverse impact on minorities, women or disabled persons"
        i. What procedures, processes, and techniques are used?
        ii. What does "fair" mean?
            1. How do you ensure they are "fair"?
        iii. What impact has this selection process made on the organization?
    e. Performance Evaluation: "HSDC will evaluate the performance of their employees on an annual basis. It should provide the necessary supervisory feedback to identify areas to be improved as well as to reinforce those activities that meet or exceed standards".
        i. How are employees evaluated?
        ii. How does this performance evaluation differ from prior to the AA plan from 2017?
    f. Training Strategies: "HSDC will attempt to diversify their workforce by utilizing training and apprenticeship programs with diverse participants. Training and

apprenticeship programs can increase the number of qualified minorities, women, disabled persons and veterans available for job placement"

   i. Can you tell me more about the training and apprenticeship programs?
   ii. What have been the results of this training program? How is this tracked?
   iii. What does it mean by "diverse participants?" How/why is this important to your organization?
g. Separation Strategies/exit interviews: "HSDC will conduct exit interviews as a problem-solving tool in an attempt to reduce employee turnover. Exit interviews can provide the organization with information about how to correct the causes of discontent and reduce the costly problem of employee turnover."
   i. What are some questions asked in exit interviews?
   ii. What patterns have you identified?
h. Each strategy has explicitly stated it does not discriminate against based on "based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, age (40 years old or more), military status and veteran status"?
   i. What does it mean to not discriminate against based on identity markers?
   ii. Anything else you would like to add as to how this organization honors this statement?
i. How has the adoption of this plan affected the organization?
   i. Noticeable changes in demographics of staff? clients?
j. Anything else you would like to add on how these intentions are put into action?
5. How do potential clients go about receiving this organization's services?
   a. What processes are involved?
   b. How do the racial demographics of your typical clients compare to those of the organization?
6. What role(s) does racial diversity play in serving the Deaf community?
   a. Does it matter? Why/why not?
      i. If so, how does the organization keep this in mind when serving the community?
7. Anything else you would like to discuss before we close today?