

Institutional Silence on Racism: Negotiating Access to Corporate DEI

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Diversity, equity and inclusion at workplace

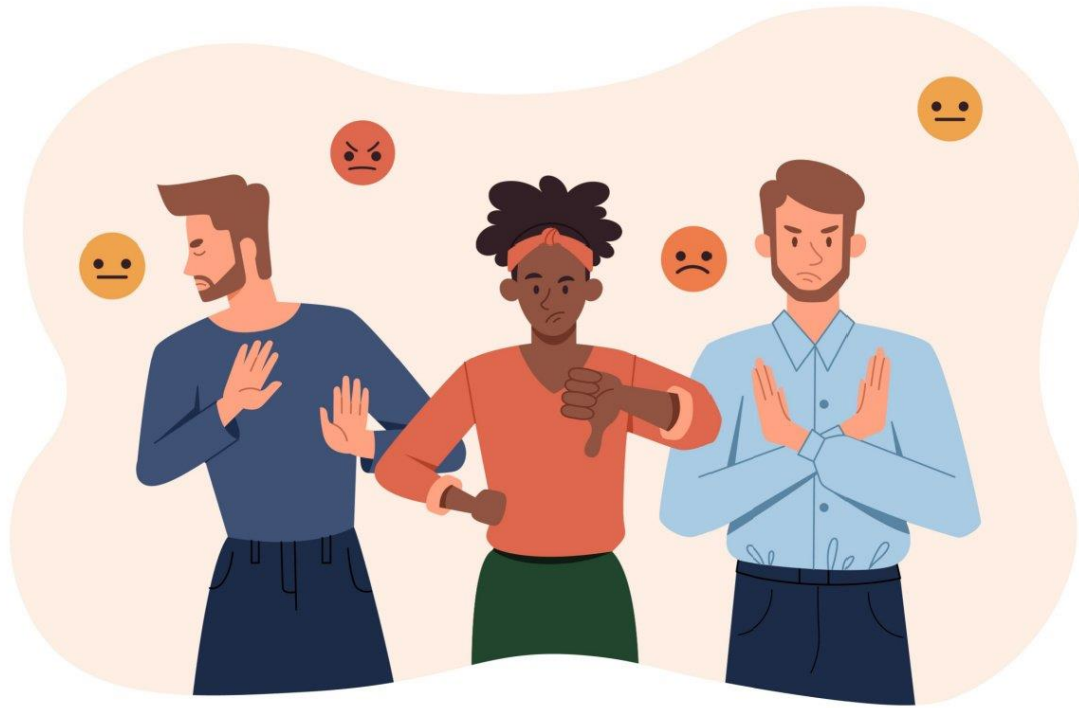


Promoting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace

DEI trainings:

- To gain shared understanding of topics related to DEI
- To increase awareness of our unconscious biases and privilege

Why should we examine DEI?



- DEI is a widely adopted practice that has been facing stronger resistance in recent years
- Research has revealed inconsistencies in DEI practices
- (Devine et. al. 2022; Onyeador et. al. 2021; Dover et. al. 2020; Ahmed 2009; Grimes 2002)
- There is limited understanding about how DEI initiatives are enacted in Finland (Rask et al., 2025)

How was I planning to do this?



Ethnographic research

- Observation of DEI training for knowledge workers
- Interviewing the trainers
- Interviewing the participants

How did it work out?

Desk research, access negotiations, events and interviews 2023-2026:

- Approaching and meeting DEI consultancies and freelancers (N = 8)
- Interviewing DEI consultants and freelancers (N = 5)
- Observing events organized by and for DEI practitioners (N= 18)
- Contacting private companies describing DEI initiatives on their websites (N = 62)
- Interview in-house DEI staff and HR personnel (N = 13)
- Observing DEI training for knowledge workers (N = 7)
- Interviewing the participants (N = 4)

Access in numbers

	Companies contacted	Replies	Research interview	Access to the training
DEI agencies / freelancers	8	7	5	0
Companies	62	43	13	2

Research questions

How is the research access to corporate DEI training restricted?

- How do racial power relations manifest when negotiating access within corporate DEI in Finland?
- What kind of a role do discussions of racism have within DEI?



Theoretical framework

Our research connects with critical diversity studies

- DEI as socially (re)produced context-specific processes that both reflect and shape existing power relations (Zanoni et al. 2010)

Our research draws upon research on work-life inequality and racism

- Growing number of highly educated migrants in low-wage sectors (Ndomo 2023), while white Finnishness and European identity are seen to improve employment opportunities in the labour market (Ahmad 2020; Krivonos 2019).
- Normative whiteness as a position of power, more complex than skin color, from which 'others' are perceived (Hoegaerts et al. 2022)

Key concepts

Racism as social structures producing inequality in organizations and society. Visible in processes of racialization: hierarchical ideas of race perpetuate discrimination, resulting in unequal positions and limited career paths for racialized minorities (Fanon 1963; Miles 1993; Peltola et al. 2022; Keskinen et al. 2021).

Racialization, context-specific process that makes racial difference relevant (Garner 2010).

White innocence, denial of racial discrimination as part of cultural archives that shape dominant knowledge (Wekker 2016).

Ethnography and access negotiations

Ethnographic observation of DEI (Hammersley et al. 2019)

- How power structures are played out in localized practices (Brady 2014; Haikkola 2018) when negotiating access to corporate DEI.

Focus on the process of data production and access negotiations (Monahan et al. 2014).

- Examining those actors who exercise power in the name of DEI (Tienari et al. 2022).

Access negotiations to corporate DEI (Jenssen et al. 2020)

- Perceptions of researchers as threats, rather than collaborators.

Data

Research journal written during and about the access negotiations (85 pages)

Ethnographic observation of events organized by and for DEI practitioners (N = 14)

- The notes written after these events (58 pages)

Selected interviews with DEI professionals and HR personnel (N = 4)

- Selected interviews have contained discussion on access to DEI training

Reasons to decline participation

No training	20
Not timely	7
Too much workload	7
No suitable training	7
Negotiations ongoing	4
No thematic focus on racism	3
Internal decline	3
Global DEI work	3
Challenging times for DEI	2
Another research collaboration	2
No explanation	2
Training rescheduled	1

Preliminary findings

Corporate DEI appears to take place in closed spaces, from where it is easy to refuse research participation.

Similar background did not help in gaining access: during fieldwork I have faces predominantly white female DEI and HR professionals.

Research collaboration raises concerns of safe space for the participants and trainers.

One needs to learn language of DEI to approach companies.

No perceived need for anti-racist training among highly educated staff.

Closed spaces

The respondents found the research highly relevant, shared additional official sources, wished success for the project, and expressed interest in the final results.

Access is controlled by several gatekeepers: person representing DEI might not be the person making decision about the access to DEI training.

... as safe spaces

DEI consultancies explained how safe space is important part of DEI trainings and feeling of being observed might danger that. They said that they need to ensure safe space for their clients adding how this is still so new in Finland and the work is on such beginners level.

Training on racism as an exception

“So there she said, you know, like, specifically pointed out the anti-racist training saying that, that's not... we're not that far yet.

...

It is difficult to find examples of companies that have done some anti-racism work, aaam.. Yeah.”

☐ DEI consultant

... as there is no need for that among highly educated staff

“Maybe that is one kind of a concrete opening or something, like where customers actually experience it, that there is need for anti-racism, erm, support for anti-racist work. This is, erm, service sector, where there is a lot of ethnic diversity and where there is a lot of working with customers. That how supervisors can support their employees (subordinates), who face racism from their clients.”

☐ DEI consultant

Case of anti-racist training

Company was organizing anti-racist training, which was showcased at a DEI event. After receiving no response for three months I managed to get a phone call. I learned they were hesitant fearing it might make the training facilitator uncomfortable. Now they had had a successful first run and I received an invitation to attend. At this point I discovered that the trainings were conducted “on-site” for employees engaged in manual labour. After clarifying my research focus on knowledge workers, the HR personnel realized that their training would not be suitable for my study. When I asked whether they would also have some anti-racist training for their knowledge workers, for example management, she replied that there was just no need for anti-racist training among their knowledge workers.

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Thank you so much! :)

Then some questions?

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