Grand challenges in organizational justice, diversity and equity

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This inaugural article founding the Frontiers Journal Section on Organizational Justice, Diversity and Equity highlights four broad areas requiring further research in our field. First, organizational justice and DEI share common threads, and there is considerable room for work that conceptually integrates these two areas of study. Specifically, we need research that helps us understand how organizations as inequality-producing systems create and maintain perceptions of (un)fairness when individuals receive unequal rewards for their contributions, particularly in diverse workplaces. Furthermore, research is needed to enhance understanding of how to create and maintain high levels of organizational justice for both marginalized and predominant identity groups. Additionally, this is a space for empirical work that replicates prior findings, something that is essential to the development of science. It is also important to expand the scope of justice and DEI scholarship with a greater inclusion of research contexts from the Global South. Finally, Organizational Justice and DEI topics are inflamed in the contemporary U.S. context, and there is a need for investigation of how the societal context influences the development of our field.

For many reasons, we are delighted to write this inaugural article founding the Frontiers Journal Section on Organizational Justice, Diversity and Equity. Justice is at the heart of the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals and DEI is directly linked to addressing societal grand challenges such as gender equality and reduced inequalities (George et al., 2016). Conceptually, bringing scholarship on organizational justice together with diversity, equity/equality and inclusion (DEI) honors and strengthens the connections among these related research areas. Empirically, this Frontiers Journal Section creates a new space to publish original research investigating justice and DEI concerns regarding organizational treatment and outcomes at the micro, meso, macro, and cross-levels of analysis. Contextually, the timing of this founding is important. As we write this article in the year 2023, we cannot ignore contemporary developments in the political and social environment that are directly threatening our field.

In this article, drawing on the contemporary polarized context, the research replication crisis in science, the value of incremental improvements for scientific advancement and some key concepts from Justice and DEI literature that may facilitate integrative advancement of both fields, we attempt to articulate four important Grand Challenges in Organizational Justice, Diversity and Equity research for our Journal Section. We invite authors to respond to these Grand Challenges with their own original work. We also invite authors to add to our views by submitting high quality scholarship broadening this inaugural vision and highlighting other challenges that we do not mention here.

Conceptual integration

The fields of organizational justice and DEI share several common threads, and this Journal Section provides an opportunity to grow both fields as well as highlight and strengthen the connections between them. Furthermore, the organizational justice field provides several key concepts with great potential to inform the DEI field and vice versa.

Inequality, organizational justice, and DEI

Increasing social and economic inequality is a rising concern for the U.S. and other OECD countries (Pew Research Center, 2020). Organizations are key mechanisms driving social and economic inequalities, and organizational justice scholars have many opportunities to articulate the justice concerns arising from organizational practices that produce and reinforce inequality (Amis et al., 2020; van Dijk et al., 2020). As such, the field of organizational justice is well-positioned to investigate the workplace effects of growing inequality.

For example, talent management systems place selected individuals on an upward spiral of investment and organizational support combined with high levels of economic and social rewards (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). Such systems create opportunities for the selected individuals to build middle- and upper-class lives and support their families comfortably. However, many others receive little investment from their organization, experience low levels of organizational support, and receive minimal rewards for their contributions (Lepak et al., 2007). What is the impact on justice when people's organizational access is limited to jobs that will never provide their families with financial security or elevate their economic position beyond subsistence (Ragins et al., 2014)? Research suggests that individuals with high levels of "victim sensitivity" (one of the four dimensions of justice sensitivity) respond with unethical behavior when they believe that others who are undeserving are gaining better outcomes than themselves (Götmann et al., 2021). How do decision-makers expect employees to respond to low-paying positions with no advancement opportunities, and are those expectations perceived to be fair? What happens to justice when organizations widen the rewards gap between the most and least highly compensated employees? What is the impact on justice when organizations limit advancement opportunities to smaller and smaller shares of the workforce? Many justice questions arise from the impact organizations have on economic inequality, and organizational justice researchers can contribute valuable studies investigating such questions.

The burden of inequality falls most heavily onto the poor, and when historically marginalized identity groups are overrepresented among the poor, this context generates stark and highly visible intergroup inequalities (DiTomaso, 2021). Indeed, organizations have been dubbed "inequality regimes" for their key role in differentiating identity groups along status dimensions; resulting in accumulated privileges for predominant identity groups and accumulated disadvantages for marginalized identity groups (Acker, 2006). Membership in historically marginalized or predominant groups has been theorized as a "marker of inequality" due to the tight links between group membership and physical, symbolic, discursive, and structural indicators of status, all of which have implications for organizational treatment (Castro and Holvino, 2016). Multinational corporations pursue ethnocentric staffing practices that privilege home country nationals for career advancement over employees located in host countries (Froese et al., 2020). Organizations create systematic contextual hardships, presenting women with five distinct "faces of oppression" that limit women's career choices (Afiouni and Karam, 2019). As such, a key project for scholars seeking to enhance organizational justice is to remove the organizational barriers to career advancement experienced by historically marginalized groups.

Organizational justice scholarship can benefit from DEI concepts such as in-group bias and out-group derogation (Bettencourt et al., 2001), identity threat (Hall et al., 2018), and the simultaneous human needs for belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). For instance, in-group bias results in White students rating the promotion of a Black man as unfair compared to the promotion of an equivalent White man (Konrad et al., 2006). Experiencing identity threat on the job is likely to be viewed as highly unfair and damaging to one's career advancement (Emerson and Murphy, 2014). Inclusive leadership that simultaneously enhances individual belongingness and uniqueness is strongly correlated with overall perceptions of organizational justice (Chung et al., 2020). At the team level, justice research can draw from team level diversity research to understand factors that enhance or inhibit justice perceptions and inclusion in teams (Joshi and Roh, 2009). Similarly, justice research can examine exclusion in social networks (Konrad et al., 2017; Bhardwaj et al., 2021) for advancing justice research at the meso level. Integrating DEI concepts with organizational justice theorizing has the potential to generate fascinating research findings that enhance understanding of how inequality, diversity, equity, and inclusion influence and are influenced by organizational justice.

> GRAND CHALLENGE I: Understand how organizations as inequality-producing systems create and maintain perceptions of (un)fairness when individuals receive unequal rewards for their contributions, particularly in diverse workplaces, including how inequality becomes problematized and reduced in organizational systems.

DEI, organizational justice, and meritocracy

DEI scholarship can benefit from organizational justice concepts such as the important impact on fairness perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice as well as the interactions among them (Colquitt et al., 2001). Rupp et al. (2017) identify several key questions for justice research likely to be relevant to DEI. Integrating some of their recommendations with DEI concepts suggests important questions for future research, such as: (1) whether historically marginalized and predominant identity groups use different social comparison standards when determining the fairness of reward distributions, (2) whether marginalized and predominant groups show different preferences

for equity, equality, or need as distributive justice rules in the workplace (Kabanoff, 1991), and (3) whether interactional justice can substitute for procedural justice to generate positive fairness perceptions for marginalized as well as predominant identity groups. Future research can address such questions by examining how marginalized and predominant identity groups respond to the different dimensions of organizational justice and whether their responses differ in systematic ways.

Central to the organizational justice field is the concept of meritocracy, defined as a social system that rewards individuals on the basis of their merit (Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020, p.911). Scholars have explained the predominance of meritocracy as an organizational value espoused by most contemporary business firms (Scully, 2000) and have investigated how merit is socially constructed in organizations through the performance evaluation process (Castilla and Ranganathan, 2020). By linking rewards to merit, meritocracies seek to enhance distributive justice by allocating rewards on the basis of equity while also enhancing procedural justice by attempting to link reward allocations to procedures that are fair, accurate at assessing contribution, and consistently applied (Leventhal, 1980).

Unfortunately, in practice, many assessments are biased against members of marginalized groups. For example, research has shown that gay men applying for positions with sport organizations receive more positive evaluations if they engage in high levels of identity covering to avoid being stigmatized as gay (MacCharles and Melton, 2021). Asian newcomers to formerly all-White team environments are rated as less competent when personal information is revealed about them, because such information highlights how different they are from the White majority (Crane et al., 2019). Overall, supposed meritocracies actually result in cumulative social inequality in workplaces (CSI-W), due to societal under-investment in the human capital of marginalized identity groups as well as organizational systems that relegate marginalized groups to relatively unrewarding and precarious positions (van Dijk et al., 2020).

The relationship between meritocracy and DEI has been quite ambivalent, despite the fact that organizational homogeneity implies exclusion and bias (e.g., the *International Brotherhood of Teamsters* was found guilty of racial discrimination due to the total absence of African Americans from their trucking jobs). Meritocracy has distinct limitations for identity groups whose capabilities go unrecognized due to limited and biased organizational assessment practices (Carrero et al., 2019). Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that managers who believe their firms to be meritocratic are more likely to discriminate against members of historically marginalized groups (Castilla and Benard, 2010; Kaiser et al., 2013). Discriminatory barriers limit the advancement of women and racioethnic minorities to senior-level positions (McDonald and Westphal, 2013) such that top management teams and boards of directors in the largest, most powerful business organizations continue to be predominated by White men (Deloitte, 2021). Firms that fail to diversify their boards are less likely to invest in corporate social responsibility efforts (Byron and Post, 2016; Islam et al., 2022), potentially reducing justice perceptions among a variety of stakeholder groups.

The first author and her colleagues have conceptualized diversity and meritocracy as distinct values embraced by most

contemporary organizations such that leaders experience pressure to fulfill both values simultaneously (Konrad et al., 2021). The embeddedness of organizations within highly unequal societies creates tension between the values of diversity and meritocracy because, "gross societal inequities hamper the ability of marginalized groups to demonstrate their capabilities" (Konrad et al., 2021, p.2186). As a result of underinvestment in developing the talents of marginalized group members, meritocracy practices favor advantaged groups with the result that they predominate within the most powerful and rewarding positions in most contemporary work organizations (DiTomaso, 2021, p.2038). Despite stark intergroup differences in organizational status, power and rewards, predominant group members generally hold beliefs that society is equitable for everyone (DiTomaso, 2021, p.2039). Such beliefs (including belief in color-blindness) serve to maintain a sense of deservingness among members of predominant identity groups but are damaging to the well-being of marginalized groups in the workplace (Plaut et al., 2009). Indeed, Ng and Sears (2020) showed that CEO beliefs regarding the value of diversity are crucial to the quality of DEI implementation in their firms.

Conceptually, the first author and her colleagues have argued that despite the lay tendency to treat diversity and meritocracy as opposite ends of a continuum, diversity and meritocracy are positively interrelated such that high levels of diversity support the value of meritocracy while high levels of meritocracy support the value of diversity (Konrad et al., 2021). Research is needed to examine how organizational justice can be enhanced for members of both predominant and marginalized groups as individuals find themselves competing for powerful and rewarding positions. For instance, do organizational members perceive promotions decisions to be more fair if decision-makers transparently communicate the merits of the individual recipients, and is such communication particularly important for maintaining fairness perceptions when members of marginalized groups receive coveted rewards? Do organizational members perceive their organizations to be more fair if reward allocation processes formally consider a diversity of candidates, and is such consideration particularly important to fairness perceptions among marginalized identity groups? There is ample room for more research on how to construct organizational reward allocation practices in ways that effectively combine the values of meritocracy and diversity.

> GRAND CHALLENGE II: Understand how to create and maintain high levels of organizational justice for both marginalized and predominant identity groups, including documentation of inequities and inequalities as well as informal and interpersonal processes facilitating or hindering the development of organizational justice, diversity, equity/equality, and inclusion.

Empirical opportunities

This Frontiers Journal Section provides a relatively unique peer-reviewed space for organizational justice and DEI scholarship. Our mission is to publish high quality scholarship that falls into some yawning gaps among traditional peer-reviewed academic outlets. Many contemporary journals in organizational studies and

management place a high value on novelty, and routinely reject high quality papers for lack of a sufficiently novel theoretical perspective. Science requires incremental improvements and corrections, and to help develop science in our field, our Frontiers Journal Section will publish incremental theoretical contributions that might be too small for other peer-reviewed academic journals.

The development of science requires theory testing as well as theory development, and as a Frontiers Journal Section, we will publish rigorous theory-testing research as long as it meets our quality standards. For instance, Hall et al. (2019) articulated their MOSAIC model of stereotyping and intersectionality in the *Academy of Management Review*, which solely publishes theoretical work. Studies are needed to test the MOSAIC model and demonstrate its predictive power, and this Frontiers Journal Section invites such theory-testing studies as well as incremental theoretical adjustments or extensions to the MOSAIC and/or other theories. In their study of five organizations, Berdahl and Moore (2006) documented that minority women experienced more harassment than majority men, minority men, and majority women, supporting the value of an intersectional approach to studies of workplace experiences.

This Frontiers Journal Section encourages expanding the scope of justice and DEI scholarship by broadening geographical boundaries of empirical research with a greater inclusion of research contexts from the Global South. For example, research can more fully examine justice concerns of the marginalized caste groups (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Chrispal et al., 2021) such as the Dalits in India. Such scope expansion offers a valuable avenue for theoretical advancement through theory testing (Cotterill et al., 2014), refinement (Bhardwaj et al., 2021), and integration (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022). Expansion in geographical scope is likely to open up greater opportunities for pursuing comparative studies (e.g., Wilkerson, 2020) across marginalized identities in the Global South (e.g., caste) with marginalized identities in the Global North (e.g., race). Similarly, both the contextual and comparative examination of justice concerns of marginalized indigenous communities around the world offer fruitful avenues for expanding the scope of our field.

To have confidence in our theories, science requires replication, and as a Frontiers Journal Section, we will publish strong replication studies as long as they represent rigorous empirical contributions to knowledge. This aspect of our mission has the potential to add substantial value to our field. First, by publishing replications of main effects, our Frontiers Journal Section can keep our empirical knowledge base current, which is important for contested justice and DEI dynamics. For example, the meta-analysis by Eagly et al. (1992) examining subordinate reactions to male and female leaders requires updating to assess the extent to which its conclusions pertain to contemporary workplaces 30+ years later. Also, by publishing replications of mediator and moderator findings, our Frontiers Journal Section can add the types of contributions needed for more valid and robust meta-analysis of theoretical mechanisms and contingencies. Also, the DEI field provides several empirical phenomena ripe for testing key propositions of extant organizational justice theory, including research investigating the extent to which organizational justice concepts are generalizable across identity groups. For example,

many areas of organizational justice and DEI research have not yet considered the implications of intersectional identities in the workplace (Holvino, 2010).

In summary, our Frontiers Journal Section can potentially make many empirical contributions that will develop and strengthen the justice and DEI fields through theory testing, empirical replication, scope expansion, conceptual clarification, and incremental theoretical extensions. The accumulation of these types of studies is essential to the robustness of theorizing in our field.

> GRAND CHALLENGE III: Fill research gaps created by the traditional journal system's narrow focus on theoretical novelty; specifically, studies that test theory, clarify concepts, expand geographical scope, extend theory incrementally, replicate main effects that need to be updated, and/or replicate previously observed mediators/moderators for future meta-analysis.

Contemporary context

DEI initiatives in the United States are facing a concerted attack. Encouraged by the Supreme Court judgement decision prohibiting affirmative action, suits are being filed against companies to shut their DEI programs and 30 U.S. states are considering defunding DEI initiatives in state agencies and public universities (Banaji and Dobbin, 2023). For instance, the Florida State Legislature tabled House Bill 999 (HB 999, 2023) and its companion Senate Bill 266 (Higher Education, 2023), attacking DEI values in several ways. The bills specifically outlaw university spending on diversity, equity and inclusion programs and eliminate university majors and minors in "Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality." These bills also give university Boards of Governors the power to revoke tenure and fire professors, providing the system with an easy way to rid Florida's Universities of professors specializing in DEI. Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, is also working to halt DEI practices in business organizations, as indicated by his criticism of the National Hockey League's (NHL's) diversity career event intended to broaden the NHL organization by inviting individuals who, "identify as female, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and/or a person with a disability" as well as veterans who have performed military service. This wholesale attack on scholarship and application of DEI in organizations is a real and growing threat to our field yet it also points to the need to better understand the perspective of those opposing these DEI initiatives and the unintended consequences that the implementation of many DEI programs may have produced (Leslie, 2019; Banaji and Dobbin, 2023). These unintended consequences may partly be contributing to the concerted and sustained opposition to initiatives to enhance societal justice and fairness and to making DEI a difficult subject to study and practice. Better understanding of the opposing perspectives may require greater diversity among DEI scholars. For instance, greater cognitive diversity, cross-cultural diversity, and diversity across fields (e.g., economics, sociology, psychology) and

sub fields (e.g., organizational behavior, organizational theory etc.), in collaborative research teams may facilitate diversifying research questions and inhibiting homogenous narratives. Researchers from different fields may hold different views about the effectiveness and importance of DEI in organizations. Such research teams are more likely to test the assumptions and boundaries of current DEI research, theory and application.

Scholarship investigating backlash to organizational justice and DEI is essential to understanding the dynamics of these attacks and their impact in the workplace. Furthermore, the concept of "masculinity cultures" (Berdahl and Moore, 2006) seems highly relevant to today's political environment, where use of firearms and control of women's health seem to be lionized as modeling a desirable future in Florida and states undergoing similar dynamics. The polarized context calls for a greater understanding and enhanced cross-level research which incorporates the impact of broader societal and political context on diversity linked processes in organizations. With attacks on organizational DEI initiatives, cross-level research is needed to understand the role of organizational level policies (Livingston, 2020) and policy variations in shaping diversity in teams and the ability of diverse teams to deliver on their potential.

> GRAND CHALLENGE IV: Understand opposing perspectives and identify ways to strengthen organizational justice, diversity, equity/equality and inclusion at all levels and cross-levels of analysis in order to enhance inclusion of historically oppressed and marginalized groups in societies and economies around the world.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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