Camouflaging Power and Privilege: A Critical Race Analysis of University Diversity Policies

Susan VanDeventer Iverson

**Background:** Universities continue to undertake a range of initiatives to combat inequities and build diverse, inclusive campuses. Diversity action plans are a primary means by which U.S. postsecondary institutions articulate their professed commitment to an inclusive and equitable climate for all members of the university and advance strategies to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse society.

**Purpose:** To examine, using critical race theory, how discourses of diversity, circulating in educational policies, reflect and produce particular realities for people of color on university campuses.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Data were collected from 20 U.S. land-grant universities. Line-by-line analysis, employing inductive and deductive coding strategies, was conducted to identify images of diversity and the problems and solutions related to diversity as represented in 21 diversity action plans generated throughout a 5-year period (1999-2004).

**Findings:** Analysis reveals four predominant discourses shaping images of people of color: access, disadvantage, marketplace, and democracy. These discourses construct images of people of color as outsiders, at-risk victims, commodities, and change agents. These discourses coalesce to produce realities that situate people of color as outsiders to the institution, at risk before and during participation in education, and dependent on the university for success in higher education. Using critical race theory as an analytic framework, this article aims to enhance understanding about how racial inequality is reproduced through educational policies.

**Conclusions:** The findings suggest that well-intentioned attempts to create a more inclusive campus may unwittingly reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequity.

**Keywords:** educational policy; discourse analysis; diversity; critical race theory

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A 2006 report released by the Education Trust, *Engines of Inequality: Diminishing Equity in the Nation's Premier Public Universities*, decries how public universities, namely, flagship and other “research extensive” institutions, contribute to serious inequities in higher education (Gerald & Haycock, 2006). This report, similar to many others, continues to elevate inequity and diversity on the agendas of most educational practitioners and scholars today. Typically, senior administrators assemble Diversity Councils to document issues related to diversity (e.g., attrition of minority students and faculty, concerns about “chilly” campus climate, exclusionary policies and practices) and to propose recommendations for change. These special committees compile their findings in diversity action plans—official university policy documents that serve as a primary means by which postsecondary institutions formally advance and influence policy for building diverse, inclusive campus communities.

Although recommendations, initiatives, and strategies proliferate, many segments of the national population continue to be grossly underrepresented on campus, and equity in education remains a much-sought-after goal (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). The scholarly literature on the impact and effects of diversity in higher education is growing; however, relatively little research exists investigating institutional policies (e.g., diversity action plans) and their role as a solution to social problems on college and university campuses. Iverson (2005), in her analysis of diversity action plans issued at 20 U.S. land-grant universities, investigated how discourses generated by these reports framed diversity in higher education. The findings suggest that the discursive representation of people of color in these policies is neither natural nor neutral. Rather, this representation is embedded in “the hegemonic system of White supremacy” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). As Evelyn Hu-DeHart (2000) argues, “the diversity project as we know it on our campuses is complicit in perpetuating the racial order as historically constructed” (p. 42).

In this article, I use critical race theory (CRT) as an analytic framework through which to examine the relative subordination of people of color in university settings and how racial inequality may be reproduced through educational policies. In a recent examination of university diversity action plans, Iverson’s use of policy discourse analysis illuminated the discursive framing of diversity and the cultural realities (re)produced for people of color through discourse. CRT adds to this analysis by illuminating the use of Whiteness as a standard in policy against which to measure the progress and success of people of color and exposes the inherent racism in diversity policies.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory

CRT originated in the 1970s from the work of legal scholars to contest the absence of attention to race in the courts and in law; however, its use and influence has extended to other disciplines. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) are credited with introducing CRT to education and its use as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research. This article extends this application by using CRT as an analytic lens through which to examine how educational policy may deploy dominant discourses that perpetuate racial inequality.

My use of CRT acknowledges the existence of racism in policy discourses and analyzes the deficit-based beliefs about people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001b; Villalpando, 2003). This article uses as its point of analysis an investigation of diversity policies that sought to understand how these documents frame diversity and what reality is produced by diversity action plans (Iverson, 2005). Diversity action plans typically describe people of color as outsiders to the university, disadvantaged and at risk before and after entering higher education, and in this discursive framing, propose strategies aimed at individuals to compensate for deficiencies (Iverson, 2005). A CRT framework challenges “dominant ideology that supports deficit theorizing” prevalent in educational administration and policies (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 156). Furthermore, the use of CRT as an analytic lens challenges preconceived notions of race and confirms that scholars and practitioners must listen to those who experience racism, sexism, and classism to counter the dominant discourses circulating in educational policies (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

CRT can expose forms of racial inequality in educational policy, assumed to be neutral or objective in diversity action plans, and challenge assumptions that White racial experience is and should serve as the normative standard for progress and success in higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000; Lopez & Parker, 2003; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Parker, 2003; Villalpando, 2003; Yosso, 2002). University administrators, faculty, and students drafting diversity action plans are ordering and constituting the cultural reality for people of color on campus through the ways in which they write about diversity. Who has the power to shape the perception about the logic and worth of diversity action plans is an important consideration as well as the ways knowledge is used to reproduce racial inequalities (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).
Policy Analysis

A variety of approaches to the study of policy exist. The dominant, conventional—sometimes called rational—approach to policy analysis views policy making principally as a process of problem solving; it involves “description, explanation, and prediction of issues” (Hawkesworth, 1988, p. 2). Policy makers employ formulaic steps in policy making, and value decisions are assumed to be “relatively straightforward” and are “clearly formulated in advance,” meaning the problem that the policy seeks to resolve is accepted as an unquestioned, objective fact, and attention is instead focused on identifying solutions to the given problem (Bacchi, 1999, p. 18).

Critiques of conventional approaches to policy analysis (Bacchi, 1999; Ball, 1990; Marshall, 1999, 2000; Scheurich, 1994) posit that such policy approaches are guided by a technical-rational evaluation of what makes effective policy—meaning they want to offer ways of “doing it better” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 20)—and serve to legitimize some socially constructed norm of behavior that functions to categorize people, things, and ideas. Policy problems, studied using rational approaches, are typically uncritically accepted, naturalized in the individual, and ignore the social construction of the policy problem (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Baez, 2002; Scheurich, 1994). From this perspective, policy implies consensus and risks “ignoring and creating silences on the contradictions of lived experience and social ideals” (Ball, 1990, p. 139). Such approaches to policy making and analysis often fail to examine underlying and often taken-for-granted assumptions about solutions embedded within how a problem is represented and the implications for these representations (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Baez, 2002).

Blending critical approaches to policy analysis with methods of textual analysis invites researchers to focus on silences and exclusions, giving voice to those at the margins (Baez, 2002; Revilla & Asato, 2002; Roe, 1994). Specifically, the use of CRT elucidates the ways in which Whites are primary beneficiaries of policy initiatives intended to serve historically disadvantaged and underrepresented populations (e.g., affirmative action; see Ladson-Billings, 1998). A CRT perspective on policy goes further than the rational approach in its attention to discourses that normalize some institutional practices and marginalize others (Baez, 2002; Bell, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2002). CRT approaches to policy analysis help to raise important questions about the control and production of knowledge and the ways that policy can be used to empower individuals to act on/in their environment to challenge dominant ideology (Aleman, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Morfin et al., 2006; Parker, 2003).
Discourse

In the study that serves as the point of analysis in this article, Iverson (2005) investigated discursive practices shaping diversity in university diversity action plans. As such, diversity was examined as a subject of discourse. Discourse is a term often used but without simple definition. For the purposes of this study, discourse is “larger than language, more than words” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 40); it is about what can be said and who can speak, when, and with what authority (Ball, 1990). Discourse refers to “the way in which language, or, more broadly, bodies of knowledge . . . define the terrain and consequently complicate attempts at change” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 40). Thus, knowledge is inextricably linked with power.

Discourse enables us to give meaning to the world and act to transform it; “through language [written and spoken words], we actively construct our experience” (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995, p. 35; also Mills, 1997). Language, then, is not simply descriptive or a reflection of the world; it “doesn’t just mirror reality; it actively shapes the way we perceive and understand it” (Fischer & Forester, 1993, cited in Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003, p. 14). Thus, the discursive practices set forth in educational policy “have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think” (Mills, 1997, p. 62).

Applied to this inquiry, the study of discourse (discourse analysis) includes the examination of text, its relationship to the social context in which it is constructed, and why, out of all the possible things that could be articulated, only certain statements and ideas are made visible or heard (Allan, 2003; Ball, 1990). Thus, a critical analysis of the discursive practices in diversity action plans illuminates “the ways in which arguments are structured and objects and subjects are constituted in language” (Bacchi, 1999, pp. 40-41). Furthermore, individual identities are shaped through discourse—“the place where our sense of ourselves . . . is constructed” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21).

METHOD

The data presented here are from an analysis of 21 diversity action plans issued at 20 U.S. land-grant universities from 1999-2004 (see Table 1). I conducted a search of the Web site for each “1862 land-grant” institution in each of the 50 states; I used the search function and keywords diversity and diversity plan. Every university, of the 50 screened, possessed diversity-related content (e.g., multicultural student affairs, faculty committee on diversity in the curriculum, diversity workshops). Most of the universities have one or more diversity-related groups committed to one or more of the
## TABLE 1

**Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Diversity Action Plan(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Auburn University</td>
<td>Strategic Diversity Plan, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>University of Arizona</td>
<td>Diversity Action Plan, 2003-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>University of Arkansas</td>
<td>Diversity Plan, 2002-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
<td>Report of the Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on Diversity, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>University of Connecticut</td>
<td>Diversity Action Plan, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>University of Georgia</td>
<td>Institutional Diversity Strategic Plan, 2002-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>University of Idaho</td>
<td>Diversity and Human Rights at the University of Idaho: Comprehensive Plan for Action and Accountability, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign</td>
<td>Final Report of the Diversity Initiatives Planning Committee, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>University of Maryland, College Park</td>
<td>Report and Recommendations of the President’s Diversity Panel, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>University of Nebraska, Lincoln</td>
<td>Comprehensive Diversity Plan, 1999 (revised draft)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>University of Nevada, Reno</td>
<td>Strategic Plan for Diversity Initiatives, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>North Carolina State University</td>
<td>Diversity Initiative, 1999 (revised and final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>The Ohio State University</td>
<td>Diversity Action Plan, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Oklahoma State University</td>
<td>Institutional Diversity Strategic Plan, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Pennsylvania State University</td>
<td>Framework to foster diversity, 2004-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M University</td>
<td>Report by the President’s Ad Hoc Committee on Diversity and Globalization, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
<td>Diversity Strategic Plan, 2000-2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
following concerns: recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations, curriculum change, and campus climate. I sought those universities that had a diversity committee, charged by a senior administrator (president, provost), that had at least one diversity action plan generated within the past 5 years (1999-2004). My Web search was complemented with numerous e-mail exchanges and phone conversations with academic and administrative personnel to discern which universities had policies that met the sampling criteria and to collect any documents not accessible via the Web. The search yielded a data sample of 21 reports from 20 institutions.

This investigation (Iverson, 2005) used the method of policy discourse analysis to investigate university diversity policies to understand how these documents frame diversity and what reality is produced by diversity action plans. A hybrid methodology, policy discourse analysis focuses on written documents; it is a strategy for examining policy discourses and the ways they come together to make particular perspectives more prominent than others (Allan, 2003). The use of assumptive concepts in language may limit a policy’s effectiveness and actually reinscribe the very problem the policy seeks to alleviate (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Stein, 2004). A university’s diversity action plan may construct a world for racial minorities that disqualifies them from participation, even as it strives to include them as full participants.

To examine the discursive framing of diversity in diversity action plans, the following questions guided this study:

- What are the predominant images of diversity in diversity action plans?
- How are problems related to diversity represented in diversity action plans?
- How are solutions related to diversity problems represented in diversity action plans?
- What discourses are employed to shape these images, problems, and solutions?

The process of data analysis was informed by established methods of coding and categorizing to identify broad themes and predominant images of diversity (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first phase of the analysis involved deductive coding in reply to the research questions. Through the use of NVivo, computer software designed for qualitative data analysis, I conducted line-by-line analysis of each report to identify and code images of diversity, the problems related to diversity described in diversity action plans, and the proposed solutions to these problems. Once all of the documents were coded, I used NVivo to generate reports for each category—images, problems, and solutions—across all diversity action plans; these reports were then analyzed using both deductive and inductive
processes, which served as the second phase of coding. These codes were then clustered according to common themes to generate image categories and identify identity positions that emerged from these images. All 21 documents then were reanalyzed inductively, listening for silences (Pollock, 2004; Stein, 2004) and with a focus on what is taken for granted or accepted as given, and analyzed deductively, using the following research question as a guide: What discourses are employed to shape the predominant images? In this phase of the analytic process, I also examined the identity positions that emerged in Phase 1 of the analysis to identify discourses that were most prominent in constituting these positions.

THE DISCURSIVE REPRESENTATION OF DIVERSITY IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The goal of the investigation was to understand how university diversity policies frame ideas about diversity and what realities are produced by the discourses carried in these documents. Analysis revealed four predominant discourses shaping images of people of color: access, disadvantage, marketplace, and democracy. These discourses construct images of people of color as outsiders, at-risk victims, commodities, and change agents. In this article, I argue that these discursive representations (re)produce a relative subordination of people of color and reinscribe a racially neutral conception of educational policies—even in policies that have as their focal point diversity in general and race in particular. Next, I examine these discursive themes through a CRT lens.

Discourse of Access

The discourse of access, along with three discursive strands (entrée, representation, and affirmation), coalesces to produce a reality where people of color are outsiders. As described in the diversity action plans, barriers and obstacles routinely limit access, retention, and advancement of people of color. Most arenas of the university—in fact, the institution itself—are characterized as inaccessible. Diversity action plans propose to “feed the educational pipeline” to open access, to “widen the net,” and to eliminate barriers and obstacles to increase the “presence” and “prevalence” of people of color who “remain hardly noticeable.” The emphasis in diversity action plans is on opening access for people of color, supporting their entrance to and participation in the university, and increasing numbers of people of color to achieve “critical masses.” Once inside the university,
diversity action plans shift their focus to affirming and welcoming the presence of marginalized groups. This insider/outsider binary also is visible through characterizations of people of color as different from a majority and different from both other members of historically disadvantaged groups who remain outside the institution and from some people of color who have achieved insider status. I will elaborate on each of these observations.

**Insider/Outsider: Whiteness as Criteria.** Diversity policies use a majority (White and male) as the standard against which to measure minority progress and success, as illustrated by this data quote: “Close the gap in educational achievement, by bringing retention and graduation rates for students of color in line with those of the student body as a whole” (University of Wisconsin, 1999). Similarly, another report observes that African American and Hispanic students have a lower graduation rate than do White students and recommends the development of “a plan to reduce the disparity in graduation rates between White and minority students” (Ohio State University, 2000). The majority, represented as the norm—White, male, and/or middle class—serves to signal the ways in which people of color are outsiders, as shown in the following quote: “a significant disparity in graduation rates persists between undergraduate students of color and White students” (Pennsylvania State University, 2004). These characterizations construct a White, middle-class standard against which others are judged (hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002).

A CRT analysis interrogates the unquestioned use of a White, male majority experience as criteria against which to measure the progress and success of people of color. This standard reifies a “Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on White privilege and ‘American democratic’ ideals of meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 171). CRT challenges claims by universities of “color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” and reveals these as “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups” (Villalpando, 2003, p. 623). CRT contests the “race neutral” movement in higher education that supports “the normalizing of White student behavior as ‘standard’” (Nebeker, 1998, p. 27). CRT invites a destabilizing of the structures and conditions that privilege some and systematically disadvantage others, disrupting the hierarchy and status quo (Solórzano et al., 2005).

**Insider/Outsider: Difference Within Groups.** The discourse of access also produces difference within racial minority groups as it works to produce sameness in relation to a White, male experience situated as the norm. The discourse of access (re)produces a standard of eligibility that accords an elite
status to people of color who achieve insider status; this representation is evident through descriptions of people of color who are desired and targeted (and ultimately included) as “high achieving,” “high profile,” “high performing,” and “promising.” For instance, one report recommends the following: “Identify high performing [italics added] people of color, women and members of other under-represented groups in staff positions and develop a professional development track for them” (Auburn University, 2004). Another document recommends, “Emphasize retaining and promoting high quality [italics added] faculty and staff members from underrepresented groups” (Pennsylvania State University, 2004). Still another report recommends using fellowships to attract “talented [italics added] junior faculty of color” (University of Wisconsin, 1999). Finally, one policy describes a program targeted at and designed to recruit “talented women and minority graduates . . . back to the campus when they have achieved scholarly distinction” (University of California at Berkeley, 2000, italics added).

By attributing insider status to one’s elevated placement on a hierarchy of achievement, reports denote that not all people of color are eligible (capable) of gaining insider status, further marking those who gain insider status as different. This framing is linked to assumptions of deficiency that I will discuss later; however, it also veils the standardization of White, male, middle-class culture. CRT reveals the racism that is “well disguised in the rhetoric of shared ‘normative’ values” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). CRT elucidates the ways in which specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities are valued over others, namely, the cultural capital possessed by privileged groups in society (Yosso, 2005). Thus, only the exemplary or elite people of color are the eligible candidates and the target of diversity efforts; therefore, only some people of color—those who “pass”—qualify (to compete) for insider status.

**Insider/Outsider: Difference Among Groups.** Finally, diversity action plans situate some people of color as outsiders among other historically disadvantaged groups, namely, describing Asian Americans as an exception to institutional diversity challenges. As observed by one report, the success of Asian Americans in moving from outsider to insider status skews the university’s diversity numbers.

The university continues to face major challenges in the recruitment and hiring of faculty of color. For fall 1997, faculty of color (all ranks) constituted only 10% (220) of the legal faculty (2,171). . . . When Asian American faculty are left out of our count [italics added], the number drops to 4% (100). (University of Wisconsin, 1999)
Another report suggests a similar assessment through its attention to only two racial-ethnic groups: “Although there has been some increase in the representation of minorities at the university, by all accounts net increases in the employment of Black and Latino faculty have been minimal in 8 years” (University of Connecticut, 2002). Still another document observes that what appears to be diversity in the international student population is largely attributed to students from Asian countries; thus, issues of diversity remain. This report notes, “There are issues of diversity within the international student population. Although 115 countries are represented in Texas A&M’s international student population, 55% of these students come from only three Asian countries: India, China, and Korea” (Texas A&M University, 2002). Finally, another report, in a comprehensive summary report of their climate assessment, implies that their diversity concerns do not include Asian Americans: “The responses of Asian faculty members on many items did not differ significantly from White responses” (Virginia Tech University, 2000).

CRT illuminates how these characterizations reinforce stereotypes and perceptions of Asian Americans as the “successful or model minority” and, consequently, Asian Americans are “excluded altogether from racial discourse on educational issues because it is believed that there is no need to address their educational needs or issues” (Teranishi, 2002, p. 144). Furthermore, the homogenization of a heterogeneous racial group (e.g., Asian Americans) erases the variation within identity categories and depicts different social and institutional experiences as monolithic “issues of diversity” (Ibarra, 2001; Teranishi, 2002; Walker-Moffat, 1995; Yanow, 2003).

Discourse of Disadvantage

The discourse of disadvantage is characterized in diversity action plans by descriptions of people of color as at risk before entering institutions of higher education and remaining at risk once a member of the university—at risk for educational failure, for being victims of hate crime, discrimination, harassment, nonpromotion, no advancement, no tenure, among other things. This portrayal is echoed by the U.S. Department of Education’s (1994) estimate that at-risk students make up anywhere from 20% to 40% of the U.S. student population (also Freeman, 1998). The Department of Education elaborates that the vast majority of at-risk students are poor and reside in the inner city, rural areas, or on Indian reservations, and many have limited English proficiency.

Before entering the university, people of color are typically described in the diversity action plans as deficient. One report states that “disadvantaged and underprepared students” need “college preparatory and remedial
courses” (University of Maine, 2003). Another report recommends, “Expand efforts with targeted middle and high schools to better prepare students for college [and] expand outreach efforts to parents of potential students from underrepresented groups” (University of Arizona, 2003). Yet another document suggests, “Enhance the academic summer program and introduce underrepresented, low-income youth to transportation career options” (University of Nebraska, 1999).

Looking through a CRT lens enables a critique of this discursive framing of diversity as disadvantaged and deficient. Yosso (2005) notes that “deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (p. 75). This construction of the problem focuses on the identification of individuals’ deficiencies, such as inadequate preparation or skills, and the need to develop programs and services to compensate for deficiencies (e.g., leadership and professional development, mentoring, academic support services, financial aid). The underlying assumption from this deficit perspective is that people of color “need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001b). Framed in this way, the playing field should be level for people of color who acquire the necessary skills and resources, risk will be reduced, and people of color will be more likely to succeed in higher education. This discourse situates people of color as vulnerable and at risk both inside and outside the institution and dependent on the university and its’ programs to compensate for these deficiencies. This discursive framing of diversity fails to critically examine the “systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities” for people of color (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 155).

Using CRT as an analytic lens also illuminates the presence of stressful events and conditions—both before and during attendance at college—that place students of color at risk of poor performance and attrition (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Throughout the diversity action plans, people of color are described as at risk for being victims of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, bias incidents, hate crimes, unfair treatment, silencing, isolation, and abuse. One report reveals that “on-campus African American faculty members perceived the climate for diversity, particularly outside their departments, as racist, and they were deeply skeptical of the university’s commitment to diversity in general and to the success of faculty members and students of color,” later adding that “approximately one third of all graduate students had heard derogatory comments or read insulting materials
concerning racial/ethnic minorities, nonheterosexuals, and individuals from Appalachia” (Virginia Tech University, 2000). Discriminatory acts, sometimes more euphemistically referred to as “potential problems (including hate crimes)” (University of Maryland, 2000), “climate issues” (North Carolina State University, 1999), or “obstacles” (University of Idaho, 2004), are described in most diversity action plans.

Although harassment and discrimination are viewed in the policies with dismay and concern, no exclamation of surprise exists, suggesting that racism is accepted as pervasive and commonplace. Rather than address the source of the problem—subtle and overt acts of discrimination—the policies suggest support services: “Create mechanisms to support and protect students who bring allegations of gender, sexual and racial discrimination in order to lessen their vulnerability, fears of reprisals and harassment” (Ohio State University, 2000) and “identify problem areas where women, persons of color, and gays and lesbians are not welcome, safe, and respected, and/or fairly compensated” (University of Maryland, 2000). Furthermore, numerous diversity action plans recommend creating ombuds services and implementing diversity awareness programming and sensitivity training.

Employing a CRT analysis explores the ways in which such support services and multicultural programming have (or have not) challenged and changed harassing behavior and discriminatory practices (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The discourse of disadvantage constitutes people of color as at-risk victims and focuses attention on their needs, challenges, fears, and inability to remain safe (Allan, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Pollock, 2004). Through frequent use of passive voice, for example, “Black staff receive inconsistent and unfair treatment” (University of California at Berkeley, 2000), the documents gave little attention to the source of discrimination. The bodies of people of color are inscribed as “always already” victims of oppression (Heberle, 1996). CRT exposes the “permanence of racism” in U.S. society and calls for an exploration of an institutional culture that allows individuals to feel comfortable in producing racist words and actions (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) and an environment that supports a negative racial climate and harbors the “threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 62). Rather than engage in provocative thinking about the inherent contradictions between goals of equity and fair treatment and the individual lived realities of discrimination and harassment, universities celebrate diversity concomitantly with developing strategies to help people of color feel safe (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Presented in this way, the origins of and systems that perpetuate discrimination are uninterrogated, and advantage remains camouflaged (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
Marketplace Discourse

Diversity action plans describe higher education as a “highly competitive market”; fierce competition exists in the recruitment of diverse individuals, and institutions strategize about how to maintain a competitive edge in response to “rapidly changing market conditions” and “a new demographic reality” in an increasingly global marketplace. Furthermore, in response to external pressures, diversity action plans describe the need for students to have exposure to multicultural perspectives to compete and understand the concerns of a global workforce. These characterizations in the reports are made visible by a marketplace discourse.

Diversity (and by implication people of color) is described in the policies as essential—“a key ingredient”—for achieving and maintaining a competitive edge. For instance, one document states that “internal and external constituencies both expect to see *visible signs of commitment to diversity* reflected in the institution’s leadership,” adding that “major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s *increasingly global marketplace* can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints” (Pennsylvania State University, 2004, italics added). Academic initiatives (e.g., developing Area Studies programs, creating international programs, and diversifying the curriculum) often are recommended for universities to respond to market demand.

Diversity action plans assert that “diversity increases educational possibilities” and, to capitalize on diversity, the reports recommend to “make effective use of all our citizens” and “take full advantage of educational benefits of diversity.” Furthermore, diversity action plans demand “effectively managing and leveraging diversity” to “promote the value and benefits of diversity” in and by the institution to maintain (or gain) a competitive edge and to achieve prominence in the academic marketplace. These characterizations are made visible by the marketplace discourse that produces people of color as a commodity that (who) has value to the university.

Analysis identified diversity (people of color) as useful (e.g., the university can use diversity to advance its reputation). Numerous diversity action plans describe the use of diversity in promotional materials to market the university’s commitment to diversity and the “value and benefits of diversity.” Cognizant of this use value, many diversity action plans also propose the “diversification of academic offerings” to “appeal to a wider audience.” An aspect of CRT is its illumination of “interest convergence”—that “Whites will tolerate and advance the interests of people of color only when they promote the self-interests of Whites” (Lopez, 2003, p. 84).

People of color, discursively shaped as a commodity, also have exchange value or economic value. This exchange value is most evident in linkages in
diversity action plans between the acquisition of diverse individuals and subsequent financial gains. For instance, this point is exemplified in one report that notes “increasing diversity” is “directly tied” to “expenditures of federal monies” (Auburn University, 2004). The exchange value of the diverse individual also is apparent in descriptions of the relationship between diversity and a university’s reputation, status, and ultimate standing in the market. Thus, the university who successfully acquires this commodity (diversity) enjoys elevated status in the marketplace and benefits from enhanced purchasing power to acquire other/more diverse individuals as well as related commodities (e.g., area studies programs).

A central tenet of CRT is the notion of race as property, and specifically that “Whiteness can be considered a property interest” (Harris, in DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 28). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) note that U.S. history is replete with race-based struggles over property—a commodity—and that “the ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central figure in America” (p. 53). Yet, they add, the centrality of property can be disguised as individual rights and civil rights and entangles democratic ideals with capitalistic pursuits. Descriptions of “area studies” (e.g., Black studies, ethnic studies) in diversity policies provide a useful illustration. These interdisciplinary, academic programs hold the promise to transform curriculum, redesign the criteria for evaluating scholarship in tenure and promotion decisions, and “engender fundamental structural change” (Hu-DeHart, 2000, p. 41). One report proclaims, “The strength of the Institute for Ethnic Studies and the Women’s Studies Program manifests the University’s commitment to racial and gender diversity” (University of Nebraska, 1999, italics added). However, recommendations to realize the transformative promise of these programs include proposals for “cluster hiring,” “shared visiting positions,” “joint recruiting strategies,” and “better coordination of priorities”—constraints imposed by limited funding to these programs. CRT reveals that the change-making potential of “area studies” and the broader, liberatory goals of the diversity action plans collapse under the greater weight of the marketplace discourse. This tension will be explored further later in this article.

Analysis informed by CRT reveals the racism embedded in representations of people of color as commodities—their being “objectified as property” (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995, p. 53). Furthermore, it is important to consider the question “Who benefits?” from the commodification of diversity. The CRT concept of reputation as property (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995) elucidates that universities benefit—the strategic use of this commodity enables universities to acquire or maintain a competitive edge in the market. As one policy considers,
 Those universities recognized in national rankings as among the best in the country are generally more diverse in their faculty, staff and student body than is Auburn. We must at least consider the possibility that their diversity contributes to the high regard that people have for these institutions. . . . Achieving prominence in the absence of diversity is just as improbable in academics as it is in athletics. (Auburn University, 2004)

In addition, CRT illuminates “interest convergence”—a university opens access to others knowing a more diverse faculty, staff, and student body will enhance its reputation (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Notably, however, a few diversity policies cite concerns about a perceived overemphasis on diversity and that an increase in diversity could compromise institutional reputation and undermine one’s standing in the market. For instance, one report remarks,

For many on the Berkeley campus, “diversity” is perceived as a compromise with academic excellence or a “trade-off” between academic rigor and political correctness. . . . Efforts to promote diversity at the expense of this norm [scholarly distinction], we believe, will be deeply resisted by the faculty and have little effect. (University of California at Berkeley, 2000)

Thus, using CRT as an analytic lens illuminates racist beliefs of “the ‘contaminating’ influence of Blackness” and justifies the absolute right to exclude some, constitutes others as outsiders, and situates still others as “intruders who have been granted special permission to be there” (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995, p. 60). This discursive framing of diversity is in tension with a discourse of democracy.

**Discourse of Democracy**

Analysis of diversity action plans revealed institutional calls for “inclusion and opportunity”; “civic responsibility”; “commitment to freedom, equity, and reason”; “deliberative dialogue”; and professed a “moral imperative” for “justice, fairness, and equal access” and social equality and respect for the individual within a community. These characterizations in the policies are made visible by a discourse of democracy, which emerges as an alternative to and challenges the constitutive power of the dominant marketplace discourse and shapes an image of change-agent, an identity status for individuals and institutions to inhabit. “Working together,” “the right thing to do,” “collaborative spirit,” “alliance,” and “grassroots action” are evidence of change-making potential that exists within the individual, a collective, and an institution.

“Shared democratic values” are exemplified by calls for equality. In large part, the purpose for diversity planning and policy development is to address intergroup disparities. Thus, inequality is described by diversity action plans
as a significant impediment to the realization of democratic ideals. The poli-
cies recognize “that previous discrimination . . . has foreclosed economic
opportunity” and cite the need to “redress historical inequities that continue
to plague our nation”; the reports further express concern “about the real
hardships imposed on some families” by current policies that produce “clear
inequity.”

Equality as a concept has been a cornerstone of democracy, yet this con-
cept has been contested throughout history and this struggle is evident in the
diversity action plans. A solution to inequality, not unique to land-grant uni-
versities, is the use of law to ensure equal treatment; more specifically, tak-
ing affirmative action and using equal opportunity laws. As one diversity
action plan succinctly states, “Affirmative action is a tool used to facilitate
equal opportunity” (University of Idaho, 2004; Virginia Tech University,
2000). However, the use of this tool often is characterized as a problem by
the policies: Explicitly stated in two documents that appended climate sur-
vey results in their diversity action plans, some faculty, staff, and students
associate the use of affirmative action with a reduction in standards. CRT
illuminates the ways in which the permanence of racism in institutional
practices, such as affirmative action, privileges Whites and Whiteness and
sustains exclusionary procedures (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings,
1998; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, CRT critiques the objec-
tivity, neutrality, and color blindness professed in liberal legal ideology, an
ideology that ensures only incremental and superficial change (Dixson &
Rousseau, 2005). Finally, CRT invites counterstorytelling that can “sound an
alarm” about equal opportunity initiatives that are more bureaucratic activi-
ties than assurances of equity (Aguirre, 2000).

In their calls for “the academy [to] remain free to educate all the nation,
opening doors of opportunity to all our fellow citizens” (Pennsylvania State
University, 2004), diversity policies identify “rigorous dialogue” as essential
for the realization of democratic ideals. For instance, one report asserts the
need for “critical institutional dialogue which will forge the agenda for
change” (North Carolina State University, 1999). Diversity action plans fur-
ther emphasize the need for intergroup dialogue. Scholars attest to the need
for and benefits of cross-difference dialogue (Boler, 2004; Bonnell & Hunt,
1999; Nieto, 1999; Tierney, 1992). Yet these policy recommendations to facil-
itate dialogue are situated in opposition to or in the shadow of calls for expert
hierarchy and centralized decision making. Although the intentions in the use
of dialogue are democratic—facilitate a robust exchange of ideas—CRT illu-
minates that the mechanisms by which to do this (presidential commissions,
town hall meetings) are elitist by definition. Furthermore, CRT exposes
and critiques “normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes”
The intergroup dialogue programs proposed in diversity action plans typically “skirt the very problem which multicultural education seeks to address: WHITE RACISM” (McCarthy, cited in Nebeker, 1998, p. 27). CRT’s counterstorytelling amplifies narratives of racially marginalized students, documenting their exclusion, challenging prevailing notions of race neutrality in education, and illuminating the “ways some have had to compromise their race to survive” (Parker, 1998, p. 49; also Aguirre, 2000).

The policy recommendation to facilitate dialogue may be a well-intentioned masquerade of counterstorytelling; however, the dominance of the marketplace discourse undermines the promise of dialogue and the change-making possibilities of the discourse of democracy. The change agent is situated as a resource to be exploited for what is “good” and “common” and “shared” and “normal” (Carlson & Apple, 1998, p. 13). Diversity action plans profess “the ‘rightness’ of democracy while ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52) evident in the marketplace discourse.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The goal of this research is to enable individuals engaged in the policy-making process (e.g., drafting diversity action plans) to be more aware of the discursive effects of their efforts to inform change and achieve equity in U.S. higher education. The findings of this study offer a particular perspective that invite an opportunity for thinking differently about diversity policies and the discourses carried by them. I will offer a few suggestions for how educational administrators might engage new possibilities for thinking to improve practice. Specifically, I will discuss the potential (a) for the use of counterstorytelling to amplify experiential knowledge and stories other than the dominant (institutional) one, (b) to facilitate dialogue for the purpose of understanding each other and our stories, and (c) for the strategic deployment of discourse to reframe the conception of the problem and facilitate discursive shifts.

**Counterstorytelling**

Diversity action plans are authored by institutional agents, faculty, administrators, and experts, all engaged in a policy-making process that is at times guided by contracted consultants; these diversity policies tell only one (part of the) story. A key tenet of CRT is the centrality of experiential knowledge, amplified through stories and counterstories told by people of color.
(DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001a; Villalpando, 2004). Although an exploration of the diversity-planning process quickly reveals multiple stories, the university’s narrative, disseminated through institutional policy (and the university newswire), is the dominant story; it can appear to be the only story and “looks ordinary and natural” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). Practitioners, then, are challenged with identifying and amplifying the many perspectives on campus diversity. I will draw on one university’s story to illuminate policy silences and suggest alternatives.

One diversity action plan described in its background and introduction that its diversity-planning efforts originated with a resolution by the Board of Trustees in 1996, which led to the generation of an initial plan in 1998 and the publication of a second diversity action plan in 2004; it also provided a demographic profile of the university and contextualized its commitment to diversity and equity with numerous references to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2003 landmark decisions “affirming the significance of diversity on college campuses” (Pennsylvania State University, 2004). Absent in the university policy was any description of the ongoing hate crimes and harassment that elevated student concern to outrage, resulting in student activism and ultimately a sit-in demanding the administration take a more aggressive stance in improving race relations. The Intercom, Penn State’s electronic news service, reported that “University administrators and members of the student Black Caucus came together to endorse a broad diversity plan for the institution” (Mountz, 2001)—this story makes visible the student Black Caucus but fails to illuminate the demands they made. A third-party source, The Daily Texan, reported, “For 10 days last spring semester, almost 100 students protested the way Pennsylvania State University handles racism by sleeping on the floor of the HUB-Robeson Center [student union]” (Swift, 2001). This third-party source, and a “history of hate at Penn State” published on a student organization (Black Caucus) Web site, reveal a very different story than was conveyed through policy. The university policy filters out and censors the racial reality.

Thus, the university, through educational policy, conveys a whitewashed version that appears to be the only truth. However, the use of CRT’s counterstorytelling can amplify other voices and additional sources of knowledge; it can tell “another story of a highly racialized social order: a story where social institutions and practices serve the interest of White individuals” (Chaisson, 2004; Lopez, 2003, p. 85). Practitioners involved in diversity-planning efforts can use their role and charge to uncover counterstories (similar to the one reported in The Daily Texan and accessible on the student Black Caucus Web site); they also can identify informants from the campus from whom to gain access to new/additional information. Practitioners then can amplify these
stories as an act of transparency. A cacophony of stories holds the potential to disrupt (erase) the “normative supremacy of Whiteness” (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002, p. 3).

**Facilitate Dialogue**

The counterstories, uncovered by practitioners, also can be used to facilitate cross-difference dialogue. Scholars attest to the need for and benefits of such dialogues (Boler, 2004; Bonnell & Hunt, 1999; Tierney, 1992). These are not tolerant, sensitive, affirming, homogenizing dialogues but rather are “dangerous discourses” (Nieto, 1999) that will likely generate “moments of discomfort, feelings experienced as we hover on the threshold between certainty and uncertainty, knowing and unknowing as we step out of familiar and into unfamiliar story lines” (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003, p. 359). Educational administrators and policy makers are challenged to provide “free spaces” (Phelan, 1994, p. 88) in which people can share individual histories and expectations and connect multiple communities. Furthermore, policy-making groups are encouraged to engage discussion of not just difference but also of privilege and power (Johnson, 2005). This should not divert attention from the material realities of oppression and disadvantage but extend discussion to include awareness of the privileging conditions that construct both discriminatory and empowering realities for individuals.

**Strategic Deployment of Discourse**

Another potential strategy for change is to reframe the problem. Generally, institutions approach educational policy making as a process of problem solving and thus every policy proposal contains within it problems representations and an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem (Bacchi, 1999). How the problem is framed determines the range of solutions available; in turn, it also conceals from view an array of options that could emerge from alternate conceptions of the problem. Awareness calls for an interrogation of the assumptions that ground the construction of the policy problem—the “assumptions about the causes of the ‘problem’” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 109; Lopez, 2003).

What does it mean to initiate an interrogation of assumptions? Practitioners are challenged to consider how the articulation of solutions in policy corresponds with the stated problems. For instance, in this investigation, the problems made visible by a discourse of discrimination are harassment, bias, racism, sexism, and homophobia; solutions include to offer support services to those who are victims, deliver training and education, and facilitate intergroup dialogue. These solutions are important but fail to
sufficiently address the source of the problem: the individuals or systems that are discriminatory, racist, sexist, and homophobic. Examining the (in)congruence between problems and solutions articulated in policy, coupled with an awareness of the discursive construction of diversity, can provide a different lens through which to view diversity. Such a “cognitive shift” (Bensimon, 2005) may inspire discussions about different solutions and deploy the tactical use of discourse.

Practitioners, then, have the potential to influence discursive shifts. Notably, individuals do not “stand outside of discourse and choose when, where, and how to take up particular discourses to produce some intended and predictable effect” (Allan, 2003, p. 65). Thus, policy makers cannot write discourse into a policy recommendation to produce different effects; they cannot simply rewrite policy by finding and replacing certain words with others, such as searching a document for *disadvantage* and replacing it with *equality* to shift from a deficit to an equity focus. However, practitioners can be more informed and critical of the ways in which policy documents are discursively constituted and inspire opportunities for different discourses to be taken up. For instance, as noted above, the marketplace discourse undermines the change-making potential of the discourse of democracy. Diversity councils could take up strategies made visible by a discourse of democracy to facilitate difficult dialogues, suspend a rush to affirm and unite across difference, and lean into conflict and dissonance. However, one must be cautious: As CRT illuminates, embedded within the discourse of democracy is an emphasis on inclusion, unity, and tolerance that privileges the “harmful fictions” of meritocracy, neutrality, and equality for all (Valdes et al., 2002, p. 3). CRT elucidates the inherent racism in the liberal ideology of this democratic discourse.

**CONCLUSION**

This article demonstrates the utility of CRT as an analytic lens through which to view the discursive construction of people of color in educational diversity policies and illuminates how well-intentioned attempts to create a more inclusive campus may unwittingly reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequality. CRT as a theoretical framework can enhance practitioners’ and scholars’ understanding about how racial inequality is (re)produced through educational policies, specifically, diversity action plans, and how existing policies and practices may reinscribe the problems they seek to address.

The use of CRT as an analytic lens theorizes that “the racial experiences of racial minority groups are subordinate relative to White racial experience”
(Lazos Vargas, cited in Lopez & Parker, 2003, p. 1). Diversity action plans, as discussed above, use White racial (and male, middle-class) experience as a standard against which to measure racial minority groups’ progress and success in higher education. I reject the assumption that this majority standard is guided by objective or disinterested criteria; instead, I assume that the White, male majority standard is contingent and contextual and seek to make visible the normative power of the practices and processes to which others must conform. Although the aim is to create and support a community inclusive and affirming of difference, the dominant discourses circulating in and through diversity action plans reinforce conformity to a taken-for-granted standard. To realize the professed goals of access and equity, diversity-planning needs to be informed by theory “based on ‘difference’ rather than on ‘sameness’” (Bensimon, 1995, p. 608). CRT offers such a theoretical framework for practitioners and scholars to analyze and critique “rules, norms, standards, and assumptions that appear ‘neutral’ but which systematically disadvantage or ‘subordinate’ racial minorities” (Lazos Vargas, cited in Lopez & Parker, 2003, p. 1).

In sum, those who produce and implement policy documents that will address racial inequities can be more informed and critical of the ways in which such documents are discursively constituted. A CRT analysis of the assumptions embedded in existing practices and how these may maintain existing racial inequities can “begin the process of naming and dismantling racism” in educational practice and policy making (Lopez, 2003, p. 87). CRT affords practitioners and scholars an opportunity to unveil the web of power and privilege that privileges some knowledge over others, constructs normative standards, and simultaneously conceals this practice. Furthermore, the “strategic deployment of discourse” (Allan, 2003) can lead to meaningful conversations about racial inequality, enabling policy makers to disrupt the status quo and destabilize the regulatory tendencies of dominant discourses.

NOTES

1. Although sampling from land-grant universities enabled the collection of data from a consistent institutional type, this does not mean that these institutions are all the same. They are significantly different in size, control, culture, demographics, and geography. However, land-grant universities hold status in the higher education community; their classification as research or doctoral institutions meets “the prestige standard by which most colleges judge their progress” and positions them, symbolically and in actuality, as a benchmark for other institutions on a local, regional, and national level (Fairweather & Beach, 2002, p. 99). Furthermore, the missions of the 1862 land grants—“the peoples’ colleges” (Campbell, 1995, p. 26)—are consistent with the professed values and beliefs articulated in diversity action
plans; these institutions are explicitly seeking to create an environment where people of diverse backgrounds and economic classes can flourish and contribute in the classroom and the workplace. Thus, land-grant universities hold the potential to emerge as a social force in higher education’s response to the public concern of diversity.

2. The designation of “1862 land grant” derives from legislation passed in 1862—Morrill Land Grant Act—that awarded land grants to states and were extended to more institutions as present state boundaries were defined. Typically, references to land-grant universities do not include this designator (1862); however, it is important to acknowledge and differentiate between the 1890 land grants and the 1994 land grants. For a complete list of land-grant universities in the United States, see The 105 Land-Grant Colleges and Universities available from http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Land_Grant/Schools.htm.

3. These diversity-related groups include President’s Council on Disabilities: President’s Commission on Women: President’s Commission on the Status of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Issues: and Provost’s Committee on the Status of People of Color.

4. Although committees and reports have various titles, I was seeking plans that addressed diversity in the broadest sense. This parameter excluded reports generated by other committees charged by senior administrators, for example, commission on women, disabilities.

5. For a complete description of these findings, see Iverson (2005).


REFERENCES


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