

ABSTRACT

WORKSHOP FOR EDI CONFERENCE

Violence at work: Rethinking EDI in postcolonial contexts

Anne Crafford

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Ruwayne G. Kock

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Bronwyn Keene-Young

University of Cape Town

Background

Despite decades of investment in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), many postcolonial organisations remain sites of persistent exclusion. This is not because EDI initiatives are absent or because people are hostile or uninformed, but because EDI often produces visible activity without structural change. This workshop is grounded in the premise that most EDI initiatives in postcolonial organisations are not failing because people are hostile, uninformed, or resistant (though they may be), but rather because they stabilise whiteness and leave the deepest structures of power intact. As such, they produce activity without disturbance. Consequently, organisations often achieve representation without reimagination, and voice with no power. While new faces join the organisation, the norms they must embody remain unchanged.

In this way, EDI initiatives may inadvertently reproduce harm by stabilising whiteness as the unmarked organisational standard rather than disrupting the deeper power relations that sustain inequality. To understand the persistence of this pattern, the workshop draws on two interrelated forms of violence: slow violence (Nixon, 2011, 2019) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

According to Nixon (2011:2), **slow violence** is ‘a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but relatively incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing

out across a range of temporal scales'. Slow violence is incremental and accumulative, and for these reasons, it is often unnoticed. While it has its origins in environmental studies, it provides a useful lens for considering the harm caused by the EDI initiative, which neither recognises nor accounts for its violent effects. When applied to organisational life, slow violence illuminates how everyday EDI practices may normalise exclusion while appearing progressive.

Similarly, the subtle operation of power can be conceptualised as **symbolic violence**: forms of domination exercised not through overt coercion but through taken-for-granted norms, meanings, and evaluative standards (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In organisational contexts, these standards often position whiteness and European norms as the unmarked standard for professionalism, competence and leadership (Puwar, 2009). Because these standards are rarely named as racialised, exclusion is masked as meritocracy and thus effectively hidden. Together, these concepts help explain how EDI can function as a site of harm rather than a site of transformation.

Theoretical Framing: An Identity-Based Diagnostic Lens

From an identity perspective, the effects of Whiteness in respect of these forms of violence can be conceptualised along three dimensions (Crafford, 2022; Crafford et al., 2025):

- **Embodied practice** (for example, speech, tone, affect, dress, leadership presence, self-surveillance and emotional regulation)
- **Institutional arrangements** (promotion criteria, performance systems, credentialism or “readiness”)
- **Social capital** (informal networks, sponsorship and mentorship, economies of belonging)

This framework conceptualises whiteness not merely as an individual identity but as an underlying design principle that determines which bodies, behaviours, and ways of knowing are acknowledged as legitimate within organisations. While whiteness has its genesis in the study of “white” racial /ethnic identity being the standard, it has come to be associated with the privilege associated with normativity in various areas including gender and sexuality (Puwar, 2004). It will be in the latter sense that the word is used in this workshop.

Overall Goal

Rather than providing a critique of EDI solely, this workshop intends to reconceptualise EDI as a process of organisational restructuring rather than merely focusing on individual inclusion.

Framed from an identity perspective, this workshop aims to challenge mainstream EDI models that reproduce Whiteness in postcolonial organisations, and to equip participants with a redesign lens that addresses:

- a) slow violence as cumulative, normalised harm,
- b) symbolic violence as misrecognition framed as “professionalism”,
- c) and whiteness across three dimensions: embodied practice, institutional arrangements, and social capital.

Participants will leave the session with enhanced diagnostic clarity, a shared language for naming hidden forms of organisational violence, and principled orientations for redesigning EDI, beyond surface-level inclusion or “best practices” checklist.

Target Audience

This workshop is appropriate for people from diverse backgrounds who are engaged as EDI practitioners or academics, transformation leads, and senior managers. It is especially significant for professionals, educators, and community leaders who are seeking to move beyond compliance-driven or technocratic approaches to EDI, and engage more deeply with questions of power, identity, and inequality.

Duration

The workshop is 90 minutes.

Workshop structure and layout:

The workshop will be interactive (See Table 1), with experiential activities, group discussions and presentations. Participants will engage with lived organisational experiences by exploring ideas, asking questions, and participating in collaborative learning about the redesign of White spaces.

Table 1: Workshop Overview

Time	Duration	Activities	Activity teacher	Purpose
00.00-00.15	15 min	Session Introduction	Why EDI keeps failing	Surface dominant EDI assumptions
00.15-00.30	15 min	Framing the session	<p>Mapping Whiteness: Three dimensions framework.</p> <p>Purpose: Provide participants with a diagnostic lens.</p> <p>A: Embodied practice (for example speech, tone, affect, dress, leadership presence, self surveillance and emotional regulation)</p> <p>B: Institutional arrangements (promotion criteria, performance systems, credentialism or “readiness”)</p> <p>C: Social capital (informal networks, sponsorship and mentorship, economies of belonging)</p>	Introduce diagnostic lens.
00.30-00.55	25 min	Small group exercise	<p>“Where the violence?” In small groups participants explore possible forms of violence in organisational contexts relating to gender, race, ethnicity, religion.</p> <p>Purpose: Move from theory to lived organisational reality.</p> <p>Task</p> <p>In small groups, participants map forms of violence against the three dimensions.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where does slow violence show up <i>daily</i>? 2. Where is symbolic violence disguised as “standards”? 3. What form(s) do these take? <p>The aim is to focus on systems and norms, not specific people.</p>	Translate theory into organisational realities.

Time	Duration	Activities	Activity teacher	Purpose
00.55-00.80	15 min	Plenary session	<p>Purpose: Offer an alternative redesign logic, aligned to the three dimensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embodied Redesign • Institutional Redesign • Social Capital Redesign 	Introduce alternative redesign logic.
00.80-00.90	15 min	Plenary Session	Wrap up and conclusion.	Consolidate learning and insights.

Small-group work encourages participants to identify instances of slow violence within daily organisational life, and to recognise where symbolic violence is obscured as standards or norms. The focus remains on systemic patterns rather than attributing blame to individuals.

Proposed Contribution

Rooted in postcolonial organisational contexts within the Global South, this workshop advances international Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) discussions by presenting a critically constructive approach to reconceiving EDI as a venture of structural and relational transformation, rather than mere symbolic inclusion.

References

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