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Immersive inequality: Virtual Reality as a tool to foster Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive workplaces.

An exploration of how the theory of inequality beliefs helps us understand the dynamics within DEI trainings that use virtual reality to motivate participants.

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Abstract

In exploring the complex dynamics within diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings, this study examines how the application of virtual reality (VR) introduces novel perspectives on how participants engage with and perceive social inequality. Employing a theory of inequality beliefs, this study specifically aims to uncover how the interplay between meritocratic and structural inequality beliefs shapes participant motivation. It focuses on trainings conducted by NewBees INC., where participants are immersed in a 360-degree VR experience depicting a workplace exclusion scenario. In the analysis, VR emerged as a valuable educational tool, enhancing participant enjoyment, perspective-taking, and empathy. However, the pivotal post-VR discussions revealed variations in VR's motivational impact. Participants demonstrating lower identification with the VR scenario tended to have meritocratic interpretations, viewing the VR scenario as an isolated incident rather than a systemic issue. However, when being confronted with voiced experiences of social inequality by colleagues in the post-VR discussions, motivation toward DEI initiatives did not invariably suffer from meritocratic approaches. Conversely, participants who expressed high identification with the VR scenario showed higher ability to contextualize social inequality as a structural problem, making their motivation less dependent on additional evidence from social inequality within their own organization. This shows how the impact of VR as a motivational tool in DEI trainings is dependent on contextual factors including scenario identification, organizational inequality beliefs, and the composition of the DEI training's group.

Contents

1. Introduction

While the pursuit of social equality has a long history, the triadic concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has entered the political arena and debate relatively recently. Because issues related to DEI have gained prominence, companies began to recognize the moral and strategic imperative of integrating DEI initiatives into their organization (Kirton & Greene, 2021). Following this growing integration, DEI trainings have gradually emerged as a popular strategy to foster awareness, knowledge, and behavioral change among employees. With these aims in mind, DEI trainings address a broad range of topics, including biases, discrimination, or other systemic barriers that individuals face in their social and corporate lives. All trainings seek to attain similar goals; to facilitate a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce. What these concepts signify and how they unfold in practice, will be gradually elucidated through the course of this study.

Despite the widespread implementation of diversity trainings, there remains a significant gap in our comprehension of their impact. Scientists have been unable to reach consistent findings on the underlying reasons of DEI trainings' efficacy. This gap is twofold. Firstly, while scholars have concluded that DEI trainings are more effective when they are supported by the majority (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), there exists limited information regarding the general sentiment of employees towards DEI policies (Scarborough et al., 2019). Secondly, existing research has predominantly been focused on quantitative assessments, particularly regarding observable demographic shifts or policy support within the organizational context (Scarborough et al., 2019; Kalev et al., 2006; Singh Badhesha, 2008; Combs & Luthans, 2007). Such research uncovers whether certain policies are increasingly supported but gives little insight into the meaning-making process of individuals during the DEI initiatives. Such insight could derive from further qualitative measures that give attention to a broader range of contextual factors (Scarborough, 2019). Assessing whether individuals endorse DEI initiatives is as critical as comprehending the underlying motivations for their support. The latter delineates how this study seeks to expand upon existing DEI literature, a context that is briefly outlined below.

Organizations can make various strategic choices when it comes to promoting DEI among their employees. This section briefly describes such different approaches, a relevant step in distinctly demarcating DEI trainings as the central focus of this study. Kalev and Dobbin (2006) delineate three overarching approaches for fostering DEI within companies. Firstly, companies may opt

for an *organizational responsibility* approach, which revolves around establishing goals, monitoring progress and, most importantly, assigning responsibility to individuals tasked with facilitating the necessary measures. An example of such a DEI initiative is an affirmative action policy, which is a set of practices designed to provide specific benefits, thereby positively discriminating marginalized groups. One such goal could be a gender quota, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in organizational settings. Secondly, companies can aim to *diminish social isolation* of minorities, through the establishment of so-called 'diversity networks'. It is argued that these networks designed for various marginalized groups provide them with valuable contacts through which they can exchange information and seek advice (Kalev & Dobbin, 2006). Lastly, companies can focus on instigating *behavioral change* among all their employees, although many policies within this approach predominantly target managers. Shifts in behavior may be realized through training programs or performance evaluations feedback mechanisms, both often focused on addressing and reducing bias. It is the latter approach, predominantly facilitated through training initiatives, that focuses on transformative changes and therefore will be subject to this further in-depth inquiry.

Regarding DEI trainings specifically, various findings attempt to explain the extent of their impact (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Brickson, 2000; Alhejji et al., 2016; Jayne & DipBoye, 2004; Williams, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Ely, 2004). In terms of behavioral change, research generally suggests that DEI programs are more effective when their employees support broader DEI initiatives and are *motivated* to participate in the training (Kalev & Dobbin, 2016). Legate and Weinstein (2014) similarly explain that efforts to increase DEI in organizations have been lacking in lasting results due to their inability to integrate motivational principles in the programs. Building on that, this study argues that scholars must first comprehend the reasons behind participants' underlying motivations and values regarding DEI issues. For instance, Scarborough et al. (2019) found that support of DEI policies is strongly predicted by individuals' social background and their beliefs about inequality. While this is insightful in terms of policy support, there is little agreement on *why* participants hold such beliefs about inequality (Scarborough et al., 2019). Expanding on that, the theory of inequality beliefs posits that individuals observe social inequality and must infer the underlying causes, which are influenced by their past experiences and social environments (Mijs, 2018). In academia, a paradigm of diversity is generally contrasted against a paradigm of meritocracy (Imamura, 2020), with each having their own explanatory beliefs about inequality. On one side, meritocratic inequality beliefs assert that social inequalities arise from a fair and impartial

system, where individuals attain hierarchical positions based on their own efforts and abilities (Mijs, 2018). In contrast, structural inequality beliefs claim that social inequalities stem from systemic disparities and institutional barriers outside of individuals' control (Mijs, 2018). Although there have been many endeavors to conceptualize this paradox between meritocracy and structure (Wackym et al., 2024; Konrad et al., 2021; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Imamura, 2020), qualitative analyses of their inequality beliefs within the realm of DEI initiatives remain absent (Scarborough et al., 2019). This limits our understanding of meritocracy and diversity, and their intersection with equity and inclusion, in a context that could particularly benefit from a broader understanding of DEI principles. As Konrad et al. (2021) observe, "Research is needed examining how organizations leverage the interrelatedness of diversity and meritocracy to achieve diversity, inclusion, and justice among employees" (Konrad et al., 2021, p. 2180). Incorporating the theory of inequality beliefs thus contributes to our nuanced understanding of participants' underlying motivation during DEI trainings. It sheds light on how individuals perceive and interpret social inequality, offering insight into how they aim to address these issues in organizational settings. Following this theoretical foundation, the following research question emerged that will guide this research:

> RQ: How do inequality beliefs, and the interrelation between meritocracy and structure, shape participants' motivation during DEI trainings?

In pursuit of this inquiry, this study takes a single case approach, focusing on individuals participating in the VR training sessions facilitated by NewBees INC., a company that practically supports various companies towards a more inclusive organizational culture. It represents a typical example within the realm of DEI practices in organizations, capturing common approaches and dynamics. Particularly because they use virtual reality in their DEI trainings, a technique that has become popular in recent years. Scholars have recommended the usage of VR during DEI trainings due to its ability to enhance engagement, induce perspective-taking, and motivation towards DEI issues (Philip et et., 2023; Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022; Georgiadou, 2021; Collier-Spruel & Alanis, 2022; Bursztein et al., 2024). Following this, the VR training by NewBees INC. forms an appropriate typical case to examine the above theoretical perspectives. The training allows for an exploration of individuals' perceptions and understanding of inequality beliefs within their respective workplace environments. By immersing participants in a VR scenario that stimulates workplace exclusion, the training aims to evoke experiences that differ significantly from merely presenting participants with DEI

issues. Especially concerning inequality beliefs, as these are expected to stem from individuals' encounters with structural barriers in life, an immersive VR experience can contribute to participant motivation: "[d]eveloping a structural understanding of inequality requires that a person has some evidence of non-meritocratic processes" (Mijs, 2028, p. 10), in which the VR experience might provide such non-meritocratic evidence. More structural inequality beliefs are then expected to trigger more support and motivation for DEI initiatives (Scarborough et al., Legate & Weinstein, 2014). Furthermore, NewBees INC. provides DEI initiatives to different companies across various sectors, such as governmental, social, and healthcare organizations, allowing for within-case comparison of DEI trainings across different organizational contexts. The VR training provided by NewBees INC. thus offers an ideal setting to observe how these theoretical expectations manifest in practice.

To corroborate a coherent understanding of the DEI training, a multifaceted approach will be employed. Firstly, an analysis of the existing evaluation data from prior trainings conducted by NewBees INC. will serve as the foundation for this research. NewBees INC. has routinely administered evaluation forms to participants at the end of their trainings, offering insights into their perceived efficacy, motivation and support toward DEI issues. Secondly, participant observation during select training sessions will complement these quantitative measurements. This method allows for contextualized insights into participants' verbal and non-verbal cues regarding their perspectives on social inequality. Lastly, in-depth interviews will be conducted with several DEI trainers to elicit their perspective on the dynamics during training sessions, a somewhat novel approach within DEI research. Their narratives regarding participants' engagement with social inequality will ultimately complement the other methods, contributing to the triangulation of the final results.

This study thus aims to enrich scholarly understanding of the nuanced dynamics within DEI trainings and their implications for impact and efficacy. By adopting a qualitative approach that prioritizes the lived experiences of participants, deeper comprehension of the meaning-making process within DEI trainings will be offered. Specifically, the incorporation of the theory of inequality beliefs into the DEI field will provide a sociological dimension to the theoretical framework in understanding the cognitive processes underlying individuals' perceptions towards DEI initiatives. Although the interplay between inequality beliefs and DEI initiatives have been quantitively explored, scholars suggest focused research that dives deeper into the connection between individuals' inequality beliefs and their attitudes toward DEI issues

(Scarborough et al., 2019). Others similarly argue how individuals' underlying motivations toward DEI have been understudied, while motivation can be an explanatory factor in a DEI training's inefficacy (Legate & Weinstein, 2024). This study thus expands theoretical understanding of the intersection between inequality beliefs and motivation to participate in DEI trainings within organizational contexts. By using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this research will contribute to the methodological development of best practices for studying such complex dynamics. From a societal standpoint, this study holds implications for both organizations and broader social structures. With the increased recognition of the imperative of integrating DEI principles into organizational policies and practices, understanding the motivations and attitudes towards these initiatives is paramount to the effectiveness of such initiatives. By shedding light on the interplay between inequality beliefs and participants' motivations during DEI trainings, this research will offer valuable guidance for organizations striving to optimize the diversity, equity, and inclusion within workplaces. Companies may use these insights to tailor their DEI training programs to better address the needs and motivations of their employees. Additionally, understanding individuals' beliefs towards social inequality can inform policies and interventions beyond the organizational realm, promoting DEI for all members of society. This research may help policymakers gauge public opinion and support for such measures, contributing to educational and political discourse related to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This thesis is structured as follows. In chapter 2, a literature review will be conducted to establish the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of the data. This review will expand upon key concepts and theories within the domain of DEI, through which this study's theoretical contributions will become evident. Subsequently, chapter 3 will provide detailed descriptions of the methodologies employed during the data collection and analysis. In chapter 4, the analysis will gradually answer the research question. After that, a discussion and conclusion will finalize this study, offering suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

Before turning to the analysis of DEI trainings, the theoretical framework will be outlined. This chapter defines the concepts most relevant for the analysis, including diversity, inclusion, and equity, thereby illustrating how DEI became the compound term to address issues of fairness within organizations and society. Subsequently, this chapter describes theoretical and empirical approaches that researchers have thus far developed to study DEI trainings. Of these, the theory of inequality beliefs, and the dynamic intersection between meritocracy and structure, seeks to contribute to a better understanding of participants' motivation during DEI trainings. Exploring the nuanced nature of inequality beliefs gives us insight into support of individuals for policies concerned with unequal opportunities and outcomes (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). As the theoretical underpinnings gradually unfold, a critical reflection will reveal theoretical gaps that this study aims to fill. Prior to establishing such a theoretical lens, it is crucial to develop conceptual understanding of DEI's principles and how these manifests in organizational settings.

2.1 Diversity, equity, and inclusion

In this section, the triadic elements constituting the domain of DEI are expounded and conceptualized. Understanding these concepts and how they became combined as an overarching practice is essential for framing the subsequent theoretical lens employed in scrutinizing DEI training programs.

2.1.1 Diversity

While multiculturalism has a longstanding presence in academic discourse, the adoption of the diversity paradigm as an organizational strategy is a more recent development. The diversity paradigm can be described as the recognition and celebration of individual differences in perspectives and abilities (Kirton & Greene, 2021). This approach gained traction when scholars such as Thomas Jr (1990) highlighted the importance of preserving each individual's unique characteristics. He was among the first to articulate the diversity paradigm, advocating for organizations to cultivate a multicultural environment that embraces and enhances the full spectrum of employee diversity (Thomas Jr, 1990). Such multiculturalism is presumed to not only encompass structural group differences, but takes account of the uniqueness of every individual as Thomas states:

> The diversity I'm talking about includes not only race, gender, creed, and ethnicity but also age, background, education, function, and personality differences. The objective is not to assimilate minorities and women into a dominant white male culture but to create a dominant heterogeneous culture. (Thomas jr, 1990, p. 114).

To achieve a diverse workplace, scholars within the diversity paradigm argue that companies must facilitate cultural change and 'manage diversity' (Thomas jr., 1990; Johnston & Packer, 1987). Managing diversity became conceived of as an organizational strategy aimed at proactively leveraging the varied backgrounds, perspectives, and talents of employees to drive innovation, creativity, and competitiveness within the company (Johnston & Packer, 1987). Different approaches within organizational policy and practice serve a common goal, "based on the premise that harnessing these differences will create a productive environment in which everybody feels valued, where their talents are being fully utilized and in which organizational goals are met" (Kandola & Fullerton, 1998, p. 8). As one can imagine, the implementation of this diversity paradigm comes with inherent challenges and contradictions that surfaced as organizations navigated their way through the varying approaches. To address the emergence of DEI as a compound term, it is crucial to understand criticisms directed at the diversity paradigm.

Kirton and Greene (2021) illustrate how some scholars criticize the usage of diversity as a business model, as companies would not have any interest in diversity in the absence of complementary economic benefits. Jones (2004) even describes the diversity paradigm as a discourse of exploitation, in which individuals are deployed based on their demographic characteristics. Furthermore, others critical of the diversity paradigm argue that a focus on differences might re-emphasize dominant stereotypes on social groups. If we are predisposed to enable and value differences, our extensive focus on differences and divisions between groups increases the likelihood of legitimizing the structural segregation of different groups (Kirton & Greene, 2021). However, according to DiTomaso (2021), there can be no diversity without hierarchal inequality. She argues that to achieve equality in worth, one must consider the historical embeddedness of diversity and how it is still institutionalized in many organizational settings. In essence, one must understand how difference has brought about problems in the past to explain the interrelatedness of diversity and inequality in the present. DiTomaso's claims call into question the feasibility of diversity management in general. Is it

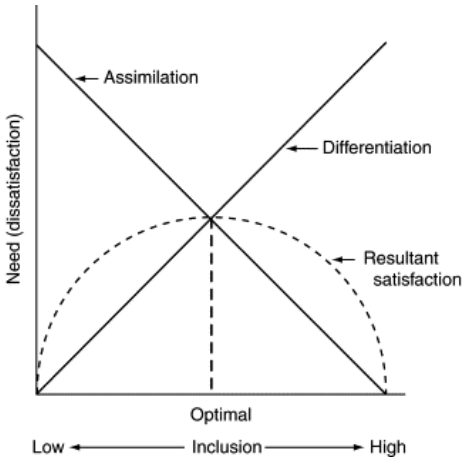
possible to maintain a balance between permitting and valuing of diversity, on the one hand, and to perceive every individual as equal in worth, on the other? In other words, is it feasible to simultaneously implement policies that both respond to and ignore diversity among employees? As will become apparent in the following chapter, initiatives around diversity can be conflicting in their appeals and impact, making it complex and demanding for policy makers to formulate concrete goals. One may have employed a very diverse pool of employees, but that does not mean they know how to make everyone feel valued and accepted. Because of this, approaches of diversity were combined with approaches of inclusion.

2.1.2 Inclusion

While diversity recognizes the value of differences within the workforce, inclusion is conceptualized as employees' feelings of belongingness, acceptance, and 'being themselves' within the company. Inclusion is the element that guides the process that integrates diversity into organizational practice, thereby fully realizing its value (Oswick & Noon, 2014, p. 26). In this way, policies that incorporate both diversity and inclusion emerged. The theory of inclusion is based on the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), which renders that one's social self can be similar and different at the same time. Human beings are expected to have two basic social needs. Firstly, humans desire inclusion and assimilation, in which they aim membership of social groups. Secondly, humans feel a need of differentiation and distinctiveness from their surrounding others. Such a balance is depicted in Brewer's (1991) original model, as can be seen in the figure below. To accommodate both needs, individuals seek social environments that simultaneously satisfy their need for inclusion and differentiation.

Figure 1

Opposing process model by Brewer (1991)



According to this optimal distinctiveness theory, organizations can achieve an inclusive culture when both uniqueness, which fosters employees' need for differentiation, and belonging which fosters employees' need for assimilation, is optimal. How should organizations navigate this equilibrium in practice? Research suggests that in real-world settings, inclusion is not a managerial tactic or a set of policies, but rather an organizational process filled with concrete activities (Priola et al., 2018; Tyler, 2019; Ortlieb et al., 2021), such as regular feedback forms, focus groups, or workshops. Ortlieb et al. (2021), describe three organizational practices that can vary in their inclusion and exclusion. Firstly, organizations can either *enable* or *restrict* employees. When employees are adequately enabled, they possess the autonomy to express their 'authentic selves', rather than having to conform solely to the organization's requirements. Secondly, organizations can either *invite* or *gatekeep* employees, which can encompass various activities and decision-making processes, such as access to information and resources. Thirdly, organizations can either *act in solidarity* or *act like a judge* towards employees. Essentially, this theoretical framework presented by Ortlieb et al. (2021) underscores the multifaceted nature of organizational inclusion, wherein practices of empowerment, invitation, and solidarity stand juxtaposed against potential barriers of restriction, gatekeeping, and judgement. This makes clear that every practice of inclusion entails a countering practice of exclusion, making relational power positions among employees ever so important for the level of inclusion within organizations and needing critical examination.

Critics of inclusion theories thus highlight the fact that organizational settings are full of unequal power relations (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Ortlieb et al., 2021; Zanoni et al., 2010) and disregarding these asymmetrical dynamics may result in an overestimation of the ability for minorities to feel included. This relates back to the acknowledgement of hierarchical inequality that is inherent in environments of diversity (DiTomaso, 2021), but also brings us to a third and final concept, that of equity. Inclusion is most likely to occur when diversity is accompanied by equity (Berry, 2016).

2.1.3 Equity

Equity is often referred to as the concept that levels the playing field (Wackym et al., 2024, p. 619), by many depicted in the analogy of the fence. Imagine people of different heights trying to look over a fence. While some have no trouble to look over it, others have trouble because of their smaller posture. Giving everyone an equal size box will not help the problem. Rather,

everyone needs a different size box to eventually have the same view. This metaphor is often used to demonstrate that different people should not necessarily be treated equal, but equitable. In many ways, it is similar to the radical approach from the 1970s and 1980s, as it is mainly occupied with achieving equality of outcomes. It therefore goes against the concept of liberal equality, which entails the equal treatment of every individual, but rather looks at unequal measures to ensure a 'fair' outcome. According to Worthington (2006), equity is inevitable in every way of life, as society's rules are commonly shaped and altered into more refined, complex, and discriminating forms.

However, critics (EEC, 2018) problematize the idea that some groups need more help and might thereby be inherently inferior. Perhaps the problem is not people's height, but that the fence is there in the first place. In any way, it becomes clear that navigating ways through the intersection between diversity, equity and inclusion became an indispensable and highly complex practice. A field of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) emerged that focuses on facilitating environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds are equally valued, have equal opportunities to thrive and can contribute from their own unique perspective (Wackym et al., 2024). DEI became not so much solely a field of social justice activism, but a professionalizing field of business carried by specialists, champions, consultants, and campaigners (Kirton & Greene, 2021). With this came various organizational measures to foster such environments, which will be more elaborately discussed below.

2.2 DEI trainings within organizations

As illustrated in the preceding chapter, DEI initiatives can either take an approach of assigning responsibility, providing diversity networks, or conduct trainings among employees (Kalev & Dobbin, 2006), of which this study aims to focus on the practice of DEI trainings. In general, DEI trainings can be differentiated into two broad categories: cognitive and behavioral trainings (Kalinonski et al., 2013). Whereas cognitive trainings focus on communicating information, behavioral trainings aim for participants to obtain a set of skills. Many educational methods to promote DEI overlap and are therefore not mutually exclusive, but some forms tend to dominate in DEI literature, of which three examples will be described. Firstly, and most popularly, organizations can opt for trainings that attempt to reduce employees' implicit/unconscious bias. In order words, trainers work toward reducing employees' automatic associations, often referred to as stereotypes, about social groups that cause our judgments to be biased (Carter et

al., 2020). Secondly, organizations can opt for inclusive leadership training to foster DEI among their managers/employees. Inclusive leadership trainings are aimed at enhancing the skillset of employees, which is why it is often defined under human capital development, but it needs to expand beyond the micro level to effectively increase inclusion among all levels of the organization (Booysen, 2013). This means that such training should not solely be applied to individuals within leadership positions, but both to managers and employees, in order to achieve a continuous process of interpersonal learning. Thirdly, a group of DEI trainings focuses on enabling cultural competency among employees. This strand of DEI trainings represents the need for cultural awareness, intercultural communication, and the ability to form relationships with people from different cultural groups (Qureshi et al., 2020). There have been several theoretical approaches to the research of DEI trainings that explain their efficacy, or lack thereof, of which I will focus on one overarching theme more extensively: that of motivation.

2.2.1 Motivation as the grounds for behavioral change

According to Gans and Zhan (2023), the limited evidence of DEI trainings' effects can be attributed to the resistance that is present in all kinds of organizational change efforts, a challenge that is particularly notable within DEI training programs (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Such refusal to participate in trainings offered by their organizations can originate from a variety of factors. Participants might have difficulty discussing sensitive topics or fear confrontation (Bezruka et al., 2016), feel skepticism toward DEI issues (Lipman, 2018), feel compelled to participate in the trainings (C.H. Miller et al., 2006), consider DEI initiatives irrelevant (Kawasaki & Zou, 2023), or feel discomfortable to change their behavior (Gans & Zhan, 2023). Such reasoning implies that a decrease in participants' resistance towards DEI initiatives will ultimately lead to an increase in the programs' efficacy. This is consistent with a growing body of research acknowledging a crucial factor in DEI trainings' efficacy, which points to the premise that *motivation* grounds participants' attitudinal and behavioral change (Carter et al., 2020; Onyeafor et al., 2021; Schamder et al., 2022; Hagiwara et al., 2020; Legate & Weinstein, 2024). Motivation is described as the activating feeling individuals have for engaging in a particular activity (Manganelli, 2018). The core idea of this conceptualization is that motivation is not an inherent trait, but rather elicited within a specific context. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), people are most effective and productive when they engage in an activity out of intrinsic motivation, because they find the activity inherently enjoyable. Studies similarly show that DEI trainings are more likely to have higher impact when participants are

motivated (Kalinoski et al., 2012), which tends to occur when they believe their organizations highly appreciates DEI (Kulik & Roberson, 2008) or when they clearly understand the relevance and importance of the training (Mathieu & Martineau, 1997). Legate and Weinstein (2024) delineate two types of motivational approaches in the design of DEI trainings. Approaches aimed at increasing participant motivation can be either be top-down, typically incorporating theoretical elements into the training, or bottom-up, often prioritizing an experience-driven approach. In the latter, common experience among participants is thought to self-generate motivation, which is thereafter supposed to ameliorate the DEI trainings' behavioral impact (Legate & Weinstein, 2024). This theoretical premise of shared experience is particularly relevant to the DEI trainings under this study, which utilize virtual reality as means of collective engagement. The practical effectiveness of virtual reality in stimulating motivation will be further examined in the analysis.

It becomes evident that scholars frequently employ motivation as a theoretical framework to understand the effectiveness of DEI trainings. This is particularly pertinent for this study, as understanding the underlying motivations of participants will provide valuable insight into factors that facilitate or hinder their engagement with DEI trainings in general, informing the implementation of more impactful initiatives. To delve deeper into the norms and values driving participants' motivation, I will draw upon the theory of inequality beliefs. This theory is deemed valuable for understanding DEI trainings because scholars argue that peoples' attitudes towards DEI policies are influenced by their explanations of social inequality (Mijs, 2018; Kluegel & Smith, 2017; Bobo, 1991; Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Understanding such explanations of inequality are a crucial part in uncovering DEI trainings' efficacy, because as outlined above, motivation is significantly important in changing one's assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors (Legate & Weinstein, 2024, p. 4). The following section will therefore elaborate on the theory of inequality beliefs and its specific contribution to this study.

2.3 Inequality beliefs

Prior research has connected motivation towards DEI initiatives to individuals' underlying perceptions of inequality (Scarborough et al., 2019). Whereas leaders use inequality beliefs to inform the implementation of policies (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010), employees use inequality beliefs to inform their support for a certain policy or initiative (Burnstein, 1991; Wright, 2001). To effectively understand the role of inequality beliefs in motivation for DEI trainings, it is

essential to fully delineating the theory of inequality beliefs and its concepts regarding meritocracy and structure. By understanding the interplay between meritocratic and structural inequality beliefs, we can better comprehend how individuals perceive and respond to DEI issues. This section dives deeper into normative perceptions on social inequality, allowing us to analyze how participants' underlying beliefs shape their motivation towards DEI initiatives, a factor deemed important in trainings' efficacy.

The relationship between causes and social outcomes, such as social inequality, cannot be directly observed due to the intricate interplay of numerous social factors, many of which are not immediately visible. Consequently, individuals implicitly make assumptions regarding the unobservable causal factors underlying a given outcome, typically building on available information and past experiences. Such assumptive explanations of unequal social outcomes are what scholars refer to as inequality beliefs (Mijs, 2018; Kluegel & Smith, 2017; Mijs, 2021). Many researchers have attempted to uncover the relationship between certain inequality beliefs and demographic characteristics, but there has been little agreement on the causality between the two (Scarborough et al., 2019; Janmaat, 2013; Kluegel & Smith, 2017). Other researchers approach inequality beliefs as more of a sociological process from which peoples' inequality beliefs result and as part of which they make inferences about social unequal outcomes based on their experiences and their environment (Mijs, 2018; Koster-Hale & Saxe, 2013). This denotes that inequality beliefs can be adjusted as one's environment changes. Mijs (2018) describes how individuals can either opt for meritocratic or structural inequality beliefs, each grounded in two different paradigms explained below.

2.3.1 Meritocratic inequality beliefs

Whereas autocracy favors a domination of autocrats and monarchy favors a domination of monarchs, meritocracy favors a system in which individuals with merit stand at the top of the hierarchy. Merit, which literally translates to 'particularly good' or 'worthy/deserving', achieved by ability and effort (Daniels, 1978, p. 207), is the legitimizing factor of someone's position in society. Presently, meritocracy in academia is used to describe a social order/ideal, such as a corporate organization, that is normatively built around a notion of merit. This narrative is thus underpinned by the idea that the most abled and hard-working get ahead in society, those who are less abled must try even harder if inequalities are ought to become smaller (Scully, 2002, p. 399). It is a very dominant narrative that is produced and reproduced

by many institutions, such as media, politics, or education (Hochschild, 1996; Piketty, 2014). One can think of The American Dream as an exemplary case, which convinces people that hard work will ordinarily lead to societal success (Hochschild, 1996; Mijs, 2018).

Meritocracy explains and justifies positions of power through merit and similarly rationalizes varying hierarchical positions by attributing them to divergent levels of merit. This means that inequality beliefs embedded in this paradigm mostly explain social or professional inequality through an *unequal distribution of merit*, leading to two inherent implications. Firstly, explaining social inequality solely on merit implies the existence of a fair playing field (Mijs, 2018). In its extreme, unequal outcomes are then the result of a fair and impartial process that is solely influenced by individuals' effort and abilities. Secondly, this perspective places responsibility on individuals' agency and control. It justifies an uneven allocation of resources based on the assumption that individuals are to be held accountable for their own outcomes.

As described above, scholars describe inequality beliefs as the result of a process of socialization of one's past experiences and environments (Mijs, 2018). When it comes to meritocratic inequality beliefs, scholars contend that a *lack of exposure to diversity* heightens the likelihood of embracing meritocratic explanations for inequality (Ridgeway, 2001). For example, those individuals occupying the top of a professional system are posited to be particularly inclined to validate the meritocratic nature of the system, arguably because of their relative lack of structural barriers that might have hindered such attainment (Kluegel & Smith, 2017). Such theorizing has also translated into empirical results, as Reynolds (2014) has pointed out that younger, upper-class, and white Americans were most likely to view their society as being ruled by meritocracy. In essence, theoretical underpinnings of meritocracy predict that experiences absent from non-meritocratic encounters are most beneficial as inferential spaces for meritocratic inequality beliefs (Mijs, 2018). However, complete absence of non-meritocratic processes might not correspond to the lived experience of some individuals.

An apparent critique leveled against the meritocracy approach is that individuals are often unlikely to make fully unbiased decisions and that social situations are never free from historical or structural influences (DiTomaso, 2021). Vinkenburg (2017) paradoxically shows that the existence of meritocratic ideals within organizations ironically diminishes the extent to which decision-making is grounded in merit. If employees believe that managers have attained their higher organizational position based on their merit, they will implicitly show positive bias

towards this prevailing dominant group. Consequently, decision-making, such as selecting or promoting, becomes less based on merit (Vinkenburg, 2017, p. 213). This is not so easily resolved but must be taken into consideration during implementations of DEI initiatives (Esienhardt, 2000), which is particularly interesting for this study. Individuals who subscribe to meritocratic inequality beliefs may be more inclined to view their organizational hierarchy as fair and impartial, potentially diminishing the perceived need for and relevance of DEI trainings (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). Other scholars have similarly described meritocratic beliefs as legitimizing social inequality (Kwame Sundaram, 2020), thereby less motivating in the domain of DEI. However, other scholars argue that employees that hold meritocratic beliefs should be motivated to combat discrimination, as it hinders the impartial assessment of merit (Son Hing, et al., 2014). To critically examine this interplay that appears paradoxical, this study dives deeper into participants' meritocratic inequality beliefs as they interpret social inequality during DEI trainings. Navigating this meaning-making process, the following theoretical assumption was formed:

H1: I expect participants that hold meritocratic inequality beliefs to be less motivated to participate in DEI trainings.

2.3.2 Structural inequality beliefs

Advocates of structural beliefs of inequality recognize the systematic impediments to meritocracy's 'fair' evaluation. Whereas meritocratic inequality beliefs particularly center the individual and their agency to explain their hierarchical position, structural inequality beliefs consider *situational factors* beyond an individual's control, such as discrimination or the fortunes of birth (Mijs, 2018). Such structural inequality beliefs are similarly the result of social experiences that shape people's inferential accounts of inequality. Mijs (2018) theoretically expects exposure to non-meritocratic processes to increases an individual's likelihood to attribute greater explanatory power to structural explanations of inequality. If individuals' identities matter and become the basis for discrimination, they witness systemic and institutional barriers based on how they are born. Empirical findings lend credence to this theoretical approach.

Cech & Blair-Loy (2010), for example, found that women who experienced increased exposure to structural barriers within their careers were less likely to support the meritocratic justification

for the absence of women in higher organizational positions. Such experiences thus impacted their inequality beliefs and thereby also their support for DEI initiatives. “Individuals who account for inequalities with structural factors may be likely to support policies and programs designed to undermine unequal opportunities or outcomes; those blaming inequalities on individual failings may be likely to reject such measures” (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010, p. 372). Reynolds’ (2014) statistical research showed that it is mainly individuals from minority groups that hold non-meritocratic beliefs. Besides first-hand experience with social inequality, various studies have also pointed out that being immersed in a more diverse environment similarly stimulates individuals to adopt a more structural understanding of unequal outcomes in society (Wilson, 1996; Evans, 1997; Gerber, 1999). In sum, both personal encounters with structural barriers and immersion in diverse environment decrease individuals’ likelihood of legitimizing hierarchical positions solely by merit (Mijs, 2018). Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the second theoretical assumption was formed:

H2: I expect participants that hold structural inequality beliefs to be more motivated to take place during DEI trainings.

2.3.3 VR as experienced non-meritocratic evidence

It is less clear in these findings, however, when such beliefs inferred out of experience translate into attitudinal change, such as support/motivation for DEI trainings that this study is concerned with. Although quantitative studies have established a relationship between inequality beliefs and DEI support, scholars have noted that theoretical understanding would benefit from more qualitative exploration of real-world organizational settings (Scarborough et al., 2019). Such deeper understanding of a context-sensitive initiative is what this study aims to contribute, by discovering how meritocratic and structural beliefs about inequality influence a DEI training’s dynamic. In the context of NewBees INC.’s trainings, the VR experience immersively and interactively exposes participants to non-meritocratic evidence, a phenomenon that according to the theory of inequality beliefs can significantly influence their perspectives and motivation towards DEI initiatives (Mijs, 2018; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Burnstein, 1991; Wright, 2001). By exposing participants to instances of social inequality, the training may evoke more structural interpretations of inequality, thereby potentially influencing their motivation and support for DEI initiatives. Following such theoretical assumptions, a third hypothesis will be explored:

H3: Virtual reality, as experienced non-meritocratic evidence, increases participant motivation in DEI trainings.

2.3.4 Meritocracy, diversity, equity, and inclusion

Whereas meritocratic and diversity beliefs are often portrayed as opposing paradigms, in which organizational choices are a trade-off between the two (Imamura, 2020) and their inequality beliefs are mainly mutually exclusive (Mijs, 2018), other scholars also highlight the overlap of various contexts. Strikingly, and perhaps paradoxically, Wackym et al. (2024) illustrate that true meritocracy requires diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI levels the playing field that is conditional for meritocratic assessment. In essence, complete DEI would eliminate structural barriers and allow for an individual's merit to be a primary source of evaluation or as Wackym et at. (2024) state: "[t]he intersection of meritocracy and diversity, equity, and inclusion requires thoughtful consideration and careful navigation to strike a balance between recognizing individual merit and promoting [DEI]" (Wackym et al., 2024, p. 620). Scholars highlight the necessity for research into how organizations can effectively balance between diversity and meritocracy to foster DEI among its employees (Konrad et al., 2021). Although this study specifically examines this balance during DEI trainings, it also provides theoretical foundation for broader organizational strategies to address these issues. Whether mutually exclusive or not, the sociological explanations that individuals use to understand inequality have real-life effects on organizational processes. Ultimately, by examining the tension between meritocracy and diversity within the context of DEI trainings, this study aims to deepen our understanding of their efficacy and participant motivation.

3. Methodology

This chapter elaborates on the case selection of this study and delineates the methods employed for its analysis. To comprehensively explore how DEI training programs contribute to our understanding of employees' inequality beliefs, I have taken a multifaceted approach comprising of three key methods: evaluation surveys, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. As a result, triangulation occurred as the various data sources converged to qualitatively shed light on employees' inequality beliefs during the DEI training. Before this is more elaborately described, the DEI trainings that make up the unit of analysis are nuanced below.

3.1 NewBees INC. VR trainings

As became evident in the preceding chapter, findings on DEI trainings and their impact have been inconclusive and unclear, needing deeper understanding on their dynamics and sociological underpinnings. Qualitatively zooming in on one particular kind of training is therefore useful because contextual factors make up much of its effect on individuals. For this reason, this research has opted for a singular case study, allowing for this exact deeper understanding of one specific context. In particular, this research places the VR trainings provided by NewBees INC. as the center of analysis. NewBees INC. is a Dutch company that offers training initiatives to various organizations aimed at fostering diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces. NewBees INC.'s VR training sessions typically take up 3,5 hours and accommodate up to 12 participants. During these sessions, participants are immersed in a simulated scenario of workplace exclusion via virtual reality technology, first as the victim and then as the bystander. This is followed by facilitated discussions to unpack their emotions and relate them to their own workplace experiences. The selection of NewBees INC.'s VR training as the focal point for deeper understanding of DEI initiatives stemmed from its alignment with this study's interest in exploring inequality beliefs, as elaborated upon subsequently.

The selection of a single case can be a complex process that requires careful consideration. Initially, the selection of the DEI training provided by NewBees INC. mainly originated from practical considerations such as accessibility and availability. As the research progressed, it became evident that this training presented an increasingly typical example of DEI practices within organizations. Its relevance as a single case study is twofold. Seawright and Gerring (2008) posit that the selection of a case should be calibrated to achieve both representativeness

and optimal theoretical variation. The case of NewBees INC. can be illustrated in light of this principle. Firstly, case studies are often chosen in terms of their representativeness (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), referring to the generalizability to similar cases. In the field of DEI trainings, NewBees INC.'s VR training is a typical case as it encompasses a common practice for organizations to implement such programs to address DEI in their workforce. DEI trainings that use VR have become increasingly implemented and acknowledged as a valuable manner to stimulate perspective-taking and empathy among participants (Philip et et., 2023; Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022; Georgiadou, 2021; Collier-Spruel & Alanis, 2022; Bursztein et al., 2024; Collier-Spruel & Alanis, 2022). Although the context-sensitive character of this typical case must be taken into account when considering its representativeness, a deeper understanding of one common real-world setting is of great value. The narratives of such typical cases are often recognized as a viable avenue within social affairs (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In terms of policy intervention: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 2016). Taking a DEI training as a single case provides a qualitative narration of lived experience during trainings, which according to Mijs (2018) is particularly beneficial in the study of inequality beliefs. Secondly, NewBees INC.'s trainings offer a within-case variation that is relevant to the dimensions of theoretical interest (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Given that this DEI training is deployed across multiple organizations, the individual responses it elicits are likely to manifest significant variability. Consequently, this study stands to glean meaningful theoretical insights on inequality beliefs from these different within-case conditions associated with the same training program. In sum, a focused approach allows an exploration of the contextual factors intrinsic to DEI trainings, which findings can then be applied or tested in similar contexts or compared across cases.

In the time span of four months, six iterations of NewBees INC.'s VR DEI training have formed the basis of the data collection. The selection of these iterations was a more organic process. Because this research had no control over when and where a VR training was given, the size of the sample was based on what naturally presented itself in the context under study in the time span of March till June of 2024. Nevertheless, the trainings under study encompassed implementation across a wide range of organizational contexts, revealing varying responses to the VR experience in the DEI training and therefore having larger theoretical generalizability (Tsang, 2013).

3.2 Theoretical significance

Having established the NewBees INC. DEI training as the focal point of this research, the subsequent elucidation pertains to the salience of their VR training modules in evaluating the theory of inequality beliefs, especially concerning the motivation behind individuals' participation. Motivating to participate, as became clear in the preceding chapter, rests on individuals' values and beliefs. It allows participants to engage in simulated situations that mimic evidence of non-meritocratic processes that would theoretically influence one's sociological explanations of inequality (Mijs, 2018). Observing how participants react to such an experience will allow a preview into their cognitive processes on how they perceive social inequality. For example, whether they explain the VR scenario with more structural causes/solutions or they focus on individual merit as the cause/solution of the social inequality, deepens our understanding of their inequality beliefs. Such discourse within the DEI training can be connected to discourse and behavior that reveals participants' motivation to take place in the training. The theoretical expectation concerning this connection is twofold. Firstly, scholars posit that a shared experience among the trainings' participants fosters a heightened sense of motivation (Legate & Weinstein, 2024), a factor of considerable importance for its overall efficacy (Carter et al., 2020; Onyeafor et al., 2021; Schamder et al., 2022; Hagiwara et al., 2020; Kalinoski et al., 2012). Secondly, VR's immersive character is generally expected to increase motivation to participate in DEI trainings (Wagler et al. 2020). How this plays out in the context of NewBees INC.'s training, will be the focus of analysis. Subsequently, the fourth hypothesis explores the method of VR as a general means to *change* motivation and will be as follows:

> H4: Virtual reality, as a shared immersive experience, increases participant motivation in DEI trainings.

3.3 Data collection

The methodological exploration of all hypotheses entails careful consideration. This section delineates how these considerations guided the collection and analysis of the data. The collection process was separated into three methods: evaluation surveys, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. This combination of methodological approaches aimed to capture the contextuality that most accurately situate participants' inequality beliefs, an approach emphasized by the theorist Mijs (2018) as crucial for understanding inequality beliefs. Firstly, this study used data from NewBees INC.'s evaluation surveys following the VR training

sessions. Up until the data collection, these evaluations consisted of 17 VR trainings and 188 participants. This post-evaluation survey data provided a structured insights into participants' perceptions and beliefs following the training. For instance, participants were asked on a scale of 1 to 5 whether the training has helped gain more insight into how diverse or inclusive their organization is, as well as whether the training has motivated them to involve more into DEI initiatives. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on aspects they found most and least beneficial about the training. This feedback is crucial as it provided specific and actionable insights into the effectiveness of the DEI trainings and the role of VR specifically.

Secondly, participant observation served as a valuable complement to the survey method. It provided contextualized insights into participants' beliefs and behaviors that may not be captured through self-report measures alone. Participant observation is a scientific method that allows the researcher to take place in collective experiences as a method for understanding both the explicit and tacit dimensions of their normative routines and cultural practices (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). This is particularly relevant in the context of exploring inequality beliefs, as individuals may not always be fully aware of or able to articulate their deeply held values and attitudes, especially regarding sensitive topics such as diversity and meritocracy. While I was part of the DEI trainings, my role as researcher mainly revolved around observing and taking field notes (Musante & DeWalt, 2010), while barely interfering in the conversations. The study objectives were stated priorly, with particular emphasis on the participants' anonymity. Altogether, this allowed the observations of my participation of select training sessions to offer contextualized insights into participants' verbal and non-verbal cues regarding their perspectives on meritocracy and diversity.

Lastly, conducting semi-structural in-depth interviews with DEI trainers allowed the exploration of their perspectives on the dynamics of the training sessions. Originally described as "a conversation with a purpose" (Webb & Webb, 1932, p. 130), in-depth interviews are a helpful method to construct knowledge about our social world through human interaction (Legard & Keegan, 2003). My interviews were semi-structured in that they were guided by a set of questions but were also flexible to additional topics or deeper explorations based on the DEI trainers' responses. In total, three DEI trainers were interviewed, whose names have been anonymized for privacy purposes. This offered a unique and novel perspective within the variety of DEI approaches, that I consider significantly valuable. Trainers possess an insider's

view of the dynamics and nuances of the training sessions, providing valuable insights into the processes by which participants engage with and internalize the content. Unlike participant observation, which focused on the behaviors of participants, the interviews with trainers delved into their interpretations, experiences, and reflections on the training sessions. Trainers can offer contextualized explanations of how participants respond to different training techniques, discussions, and activities, shedding light on the effectiveness of various strategies in challenging or reinforcing inequality beliefs. Overall, by capturing trainers' narratives regarding peoples' beliefs about inequality and the perceived effectiveness of DEI training, this method enriches the analysis by incorporating expert insights into the complexities of addressing inequality beliefs within organizational contexts.

3.4 Data analysis

A multi-method approach allowed for an analysis in which findings from different data sources are compared and triangulated to strengthen the validity of the results. As most responses in all three methods are in Dutch, translations for the purpose of this study are by the author. In the examination of the data, discourse analysis is used to discover discursive themes deriving from the data. Discourse analysis allowed for an examination of the ways in which groups or individuals exert power and influence through their language and interactions, mostly during the DEI trainings. Critical discourse analysis in particular offers an approach for "critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities" (Mullet, 2018, p. 116). It intends to assimilate theoretical insights of power into an empirical study of discourse. In this study, I aim to analyze how the theory on inequality beliefs helps us understand the ways language is used to construct meanings of social inequality and DEI, specifically relating to participants' motivation to take place in DEI trainings. Subsequently, such discursive practices will be situated within their broader socio-political and organizational contexts, shedding light onto potential structural constraints and opportunities for DEI initiatives.

3.5 Ethical considerations

In these methodological approaches, it is imperative for the *reflexivity* and *critical representation* of my role as a researcher to be emphasized. As Moronex (2014) elucidates, researchers that practice reflexivity throughout their study demonstrate sensitivity to their own positionality and the multifaceted power dynamics inherent in the research process. By

acknowledging both my own position and that of the participants, I strive to uphold ethical standards and maintain a nuanced understanding of the research context. DEI trainings typically explore how power structures operate within organizational settings, therefore often addressing topics of sensitivity. Engaging in such training environments highlights the necessity to critically navigate my positionality and interpretative frameworks with critical awareness. It is exactly those power dynamics and individuals' perceptions thereof that my research is concerned with. Moreover, I will incorporate critical representation, which involves the adeptness to represent participants through interpretive lenses (Moronez, 2014), thereby also acknowledging the subjective nature inherent in data interpretation. By embracing collaborative approaches and engaging with participants in ongoing dialogue during the trainings, I seek to generate precise representations that reflect their perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, the multitude of methods serve to collectively corroborate a common understanding of the role inequality beliefs play in DEI trainings, with those incorporating virtual reality in particular.

4. Analysis

This chapter amends by explaining how various forms of DEI trainings gradually came into being as organizational strategies and practices. A historical overview will trace the development of VR trainings specifically, thereby highlighting their emergence as a prevalent DEI initiative. Following that, the findings of this study are illustrated and interpreted through the theoretical framework of motivation and inequality beliefs, addressing all four hypotheses. A discursive analysis of the data in light the theory of inequality beliefs is structured into four overarching sections: new perspectives, meritocratic motives, structural experience, and contextual evidence. These assumptions will be thoroughly discussed and connected to the existing empirical discussion.

4.1 DEI as organizational policy and practice

During the 1970s and 1980s, the domination of free market theories largely facilitated the proliferation of liberal approaches within organizational frameworks. Regarding equality, these liberal theories were based on assumptions of 'sameness' and social justice and called for equal treatment of employees. The premise was that every individual should have equal access to employment opportunities regardless of their social background, thereby minimizing differences and fostering competition based solely on merit (Kirton & Greene, 2021). However, over time this liberal approach became increasingly subject to criticism. According to critics, the approach focused exclusively on equality of opportunities at the expense of equality in outcomes. Whereas the principle of equality of opportunity assumes that all individuals have an identical starting point, equality of outcome presumes that an equal outcome can only be attained through the redistribution of opportunities. In response to the critique of liberal approaches, radical approaches to equality emerged (Kirton & Greene, 2021). Such approaches were referred to as radical because they promoted positive discrimination, known as affirmative action, to achieve equal distribution of resources and rewards within organizations. Radical approaches were predicated on the understanding that merit cannot be evaluated completely neutrally as it always involved a value judgement. However, critiques have been leveled against these approaches as well, particularly with respect to their alleged failure to effectuate long-term structural change (Kirton & Greene, 2021). Consequently, the 1990s witnessed a shift from equality towards diversity-based approaches.

In contrast to the traditional pursuit of equality, which either searched for sameness of opportunities or outcomes, the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed a deregulation of the labor market and the emergence of new forms of human resource management (Webb, 1997). One of these new forms became known as the diversity paradigm. Unlike equality, which sought uniformity, the diversity paradigm embraced the recognition and celebration of individual differences in perspectives, abilities, and characteristics. Influential scholars in this new way of thought such as Thomas Jr's (1990) book published in 1990 titled 'From Affirmative Action to Affirming Diversity' was one of the first to introduce what came to be known as the diversity paradigm, according to which organizations must strive for a workplace that is not blind to culture, but rather create a multicultural environment that fosters the full diversity of each employee (Thomas Jr, 1990).

To achieve such a multicultural and heterogenous culture, proponents of this approach advocated for organizations to facilitate cultural change (Thomas jr, 1990). Influential economic reports, such as that by Johnston and Packer (1987), similarly promoted the importance of a diverse workforce for a company's success in the 21st century, thereby introducing the concept of 'managing diversity'. Managing diversity was now conceived of as an organizational strategy aimed at proactively leveraging the varied backgrounds, perspectives, and talents of employees to drive innovation, creativity, and competitiveness within the company. Gradually and simultaneously, a variety of diversity approaches within organizations emerged which differed in how they envisioned that diversity could 'effectively be managed', as described in the previous chapter. Although facilitating and valuing a diverse workforce became gradually incorporated into corporate strategies, more recent scholars (Gill et al., 2018) began to claim that diversity must be combined with both *equity* and *inclusion* to effectuate positive change within organizations. "For this transformation to take place, the focus of a successful and effective strategy needs to shift from "diversity" alone to "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)" (Gill et al., 2018, p. 196). As outlined in the previous chapter, inclusion focuses on ensuring that the diversity of employees feels accepted and a sense of belonging. Equity further enhances this by ensuring that every included employee is valued equally and provided with equal opportunities. Consequently, a triadic concept began to manifest itself as an increasingly professionalizing field within organizations, embodied in various policies and practices. In this, the element of training employees was a prominent strategy to aim for behavioral change among employees.

4.1.1 Discovering efficacy among DEI trainings

Since various DEI initiatives increasingly manifested themselves into organizations' policies and practices, scholars have since then attempted to map out their effects. Kalev and Dobbin (2006) claim that the most effective DEI programs are multifaceted in that they address barriers to inclusion at the individual, group, and organizational level. Gill et al. (2018) empirically confirm this, by going beyond the existing notion that commitment from leaders should be DEI's focus and showing that the most positive change comes from engagement from every single employee within the organization. DEI initiatives should therefore not be departmental but have integrated programs throughout the organizational culture (Gill et al. (2018). Almost all programs incorporate some form of training for employees (Kim & Roberson, 2022), which can either be arranged internally or externally. As described previously, *trainings* around DEI mainly focus on behavioral change that facilitates environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds are equally valued, included, and have equal opportunities to thrive (Wackym et al., 2024). Although training programs have become more common, organizations have struggled to get the desired results (Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022).

Research has not yet been able to reach consistent findings on DEI trainings' direct effects. On one hand, research has shown that DEI trainings have the ability to enhance knowledge and awareness (Brickson, 2000; Alhejji et al., 2016), effective collaboration among diverse groups (Jayne & DipBoye, 2004; Williams, 2005), or broader organizational performance benefits (Ellis & Sonnenfield, 1994; Ely, 2004). On the other hand, research has pointed out the consequences of negative interpersonal attitudes (Pendry et al., 2007), higher levels of interpersonal conflict (Harrison & Klein, 2007), and a lack of other skills to create and adequately manage diversity (Kochan et al., 2003). Consequently, to this day, scientists have been unable to reach consensus on the formulation and implementation of such trainings. One overarching consensus within DEI research indicates that the trainings' efficacy is higher when participants are motivated and engaged with the program's contents (Kalev & Dobbin, 2016; Legate & Weinstein, 2014). This led them to explore ways and tools to enhance this engagement among participants, which leads us to the focus of this study, the use of virtual reality within DEI trainings.

4.1.2 Immersive DEI: the use of virtual reality

In the last couple of years, a growing strand of scholars began to explain the benefits of utilizing the technology of virtual reality within DEI training programs (Philip et et., 2023; Mason &

Chrobot-Mason, 2022; Georgiadou, 2021; Collier-Spruel & Alanis, 2022; Bursztein et al., 2024; Collier-Spruel & Alanis, 2022). Virtual reality has been used in the educational domain for some time, as it is supposed to induce perspective-taking experiences and thereby increase engagement and the message's persuasiveness (Wagler et al., 2020). An immersive experience as a tool for education would enhance indirect learning by allowing participants to identify with the character, thereby literally taking their perspective and coming out with more conformity to the VR's content (Green & Bock, 2000). In theory, it increases participants motivation and engagement with the issue, which is often delineated as the problem around the inefficacy of DEI trainings (Legate & Weinstein, 2014). Because of this, recent scholars began to advocate for the use of VR technology within DEI trainings. Putting on VR glasses transports participants to a virtual world that makes them experience scenarios related to DEI in an immersive and interactive manner. As a result, the VR trainings would increase motivation to participate in the training (Wagler et al., 2020), cultivate empathy (Georgiadou, 2021), provide attitudinal change towards DEI issues (Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022), manage biases (Bursztein et al., 2024), and promote general awareness, knowledge, and practice of DEI (Wagler et al., 2020). However, scientists thereby also emphasize the need for further research to explore underlying mechanisms (Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022) within VR trainings to conclude on optimal training designs (Bursztein et al., 2024). This study aims to build on this immersive advantage by exploring whether experiencing exclusion through VR glasses might reveal inequality beliefs and motivation for DEI trainings. While prior research focused on the establishment of causal relationships between the VR within DEI trainings and its outcomes, this study aims to build on the above results by *understanding* the trainings' dynamics, rather than explicitly aiming to explain causal relations. Given that DEI programs are more effective when participants are more motivated to engage with the training, it is my aim to understand how this motivation interplays with the theoretical lens of inequality beliefs.

4.2 Findings

Now that the existing debate on VR within DEI trainings have provided a context for this study, the following section presents the findings from NewBees INC.'s trainings and puts it into context. On the basis of the surveys, interviews, and observations, it became clear that the use of virtual reality elicited an engaging response from nearly all individuals, though in varied ways. Prior experiences with non-meritocratic encounters suggested to account for much of this variation, although it was not necessarily determinant for participants' motivation. To explore

participants' motivation in light of the four theoretical assumptions, the findings are described among four overarching sections: new perspectives, meritocratic motives, structural experience, and colleague contextualization.

Before diving into the data that will lead to our findings, it is helpful to know the contents of the VR scenario to better comprehend the participants' responses. All participants were shown the same VR video depicting a workplace exclusion scenario. In a 360-degree video, participants take on the perspective of Emmanual, who is denied a job opportunity by his manager due to assumptions about his cultural background. Emmanual and his female colleague set up the project independently, but the execution and network responsibilities are assigned to their Dutch colleague. The manager justifies this decision by assuming Emmanual does not drink alcohol, therefore not suited to network, because of his presumed religion. The decision is made swiftly, leaving little room for disagreement. After this scenario, participants then experience the same scenario from the perspective of the female colleague, taking a role of the bystander in the discrimination of Emmanual based on his assumed cultural background.

4.2.1 New perspectives

Prior to examining the impact of VR on the dynamics of DEI trainings through the theoretical framework of inequality beliefs, it is constructive to first consider VR as a tool in DEI trainings more broadly. To this end, the fourth (methodological) hypothesis will be discussed first, focusing on the general effect of the VR experience on participants' motivation. As mentioned above, scholars have identified several positive effects of using VR in DEI trainings, all associated with its ability to immerse participants into a scenario (Georgiadou, 2021; Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022). Additionally, the established theoretical backgrounds suggest that a shared experience can stimulate bottom-up motivation among participants (Legate & Weinstein, 2014). Based on these insights, this section will be based on the following theoretical assumption:

> H4: Virtual reality, as a shared immersive experience, increases motivation to take place in DEI trainings.

Motivation is conceptualized as an elicited feeling of activation during a particular activity, thereby increasing the expected impact of that activity (Manganelli, 2018). Such a feeling

formed the focus of my attention during my participant observation, interviews, and surveys. One consistent observation across all data sources, was the *activation* of participants through the use of virtual reality. These observations can be explained in light of several theorized effects. Firstly, Burzstein et al. (2024) found that despite other effects, virtual reality within DEI trainings make for a more enjoyable method than other trainings, making it more likely to capture and maintain participants' focus. Wagler et al. (2020) correspondingly describe VR as a form of entertainment education, as it serves as a strategy of purposefully implementing a message to both entertain and educate, in order to foster knowledge about a social issue and shift social norms. Participants might be more engaged to take place in the DEI training, as they consider VR a more 'fun' way to be trained. My observations confirmed this assumption; participants entered the room with high curiosity upon seeing and hearing about the upcoming VR component. Apart from their response to the contents of the VR experience, their excitement towards the tool itself suggests a heightened attention to the DEI training. Moreover, experiencing the VR did indeed seem to have additional positive effects on their engagement. When asked what participants appreciated most from the training, the element of VR was frequently mentioned. The following display presents 10 responses that from NewBees INC's evaluation survey after each session:

Table 1

Responses representing acknowledgements of the VR experience

Participant	Response
1	The VR experience truly creates a shared experience, making it easier to discuss.
2	It triggered emotions, sparked the debate, and made room for relevant discussion.
3	The VR is impressive; all your senses are engaged. I felt activated and wanted to participate in the conversation.
4	Unfortunately, the VR situation is quite recognizable; nobody says anything or knows what to do, so things like that can happen. It's good to discuss it together.
5	Empathizing with different perspectives through VR is truly of enormous value.
6	I found the use of VR very powerful. You were right in the middle of the situation.
7	Through virtual reality, I've come to realize that everyone has a role in contributing to a pleasant work environment.
8	The VR deep dive was great, you really empathized with the people.
9	The 360 glasses added more value than I initially anticipated.
10	The VR made it concrete and gave me insight into how I can handle such situations myself.

Note: The table presents responses from an existing evaluation survey conducted by NewBees INC. (2024) after each VR training session. In the 'Top' section, respondents are asked to specify the aspect of the training they found most favorable.

Secondly, prior research on motivation in training programs by Legate and Weinstein (2024) highlights that common experiences effectively generate bottom-up motivation among participants, thereby enhancing the likelihood of the trainings' behavioral impact. As participant 1 mentions in the evaluation survey, the VR element creates a 'shared experience' among all participants. Subsequently, such a shared experience paves the way for a discussion. This insight is corroborated during my interview with trainer John[1]:

> *And it [VR experience] provides a sense of safety because it's not about you, it's not about the organization. […] So, you have a shared experience, but one that doesn't necessarily directly translate to your own workplace.*

He explains how the VR experience provides a shared experience among the participants, at a 'safe' enough distance for the participants to openly discuss the topics surrounding DEI. Such an activity during a DEI training is thus expected to elucidate motivation (Legate & Weinstein, 2024) as it prompts participants to discuss their collective experience. This finding is in line with the theoretical expectation, and as will become gradually evident towards the end of this chapter, is particularly paramount for the rest of the hypotheses.

Thirdly, Bursztein et al. (2024) found that VR within DEI training increased DEI participants' *understanding* of multiple perspectives. In correspondence to this finding, participants 5 and 7 reported in the survey to have a gained a multiplicity of perspectives and realizations, as they experienced viewpoints different from their own. This aligns closely with the perceived effects of NewBees INC.'s trainers during the interviews. When asked about what trainer Sarah[2] likes about the training, she answered:

> *I like it when you notice that people are really learning something new. And that's mainly because of the virtual reality. So that you really notice that people suddenly take in a*

[1] Interview with trainer John, conducted in person, May 27, 2024.
[2] Interview with trainer Sarah, conducted in person, May 13, 2024.

different perspective. That they're like, oh wow, this is very bad. Or this is really not possible. And that you get a new perspective. […] Because you can talk about it, but really sit on the chair of someone who is disadvantaged - because of all the assumptions - is different.

Sarah's response underscores the emergence of new perspectives among participants. She was not the only one, as other trainers responded with similar observations. Such perspective-taking-experience within VR trainings is mainly due to the first-person immediacy, meaning that participants are an active character in the scenario rather than observing a situation (Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022). Because the technology made it feel more 'real', it made them more motivated to take part in DEI initiatives (Bursztein et al., 2024). The immersive character of the VR experience is also evident in participants' survey responses, as participant 3 reveals that the 'engagement of all senses' led to their activation and motivation to participate. This finding suggests alignments with the prior theoretical assumption that the immersive character of the VR experience heightens participants' motivation during DEI trainings.

Finally, several participants noted that their *empathy* was heightened after the VR experience, which scholars such as Wagler et al. (2020) have predicted to result from such an immersive experience. Their research illustrates how the VR as an immersive experience would increase participants' empathy towards issues of DEI, thereby also increasing their motivation to take place in the training. Similarly, an empirical study by Mason and Chrobot-Mason (2022) further confirms this as they showed that participants' empathy levels significantly increased right after completing the VR training. Such empathic feelings toward issues of DEI are the cornerstone to effective behavioral change among employees, as scholars point out: "The internal state of the attendee who is undergoing training is therefore crucial to consider; conveying information to the attendee is not enough" (Legate & Weinstein, 2024, p. 5). They explain how this energizes engagement toward DEI issues, creating a motivation necessary for the trainings' efficacy. Whether such 'internal states' of participants are really shifted is hard to draw conclusions on. However, among other, this study's survey data show that participants 5 and 8 declared to 'empathize with the people' and 'empathize with different perspectives', which suggests conformity to the theoretical assumption that VR serves as an adequate tool to increase empathy during DEI trainings. This must be complemented with some acknowledgements on the contextual factors that influence this result. For example, the study by Mason and Chrobot-Mason (2022) showed that empathy levels increased most with participants who had higher

initial empathy and awareness of DEI issues. This indicates that their experience of the training can additionally depend on personal characteristics or initial motivation.

In essence, the survey responses, interviews, and participant observations revealed feelings of enjoyability, shared experience, perspective-taking, and empathy among participants as a result of the VR. Although such findings are aligned with the prior theoretical assumption, no conclusions can be derived on the long-term increased support around DEI policies caused by the use of VR within the training. Prior research suggests that positive effects of VR on participants engagement with DEI issues gradually disappear over time (Mason and Chrobot-Mason, 2022). It is still valuable, however, to know whether VR as a method for DEI training increases motivation and engagement *within* the training itself. Such temporal motivation must be combined with complementing components that speak to participants' personal culture to effectuate long term change (Legate & Weinstein, 2024). To dive into norms and values that are expected to influence participants' longer-term perceptions towards DEI initiatives, the next two theoretical assumptions aim to understand how the training reveals inequality beliefs among all individuals, focusing on both meritocratic and structural beliefs.

4.2.2 Meritocratic motives

While most participants considered the VR experience valuable for taking on (new) perspectives, it is this study's main objective to look at this through the theoretical lens of inequality beliefs. During the training, I closely observed how participants described social inequality. These observations were compared with the survey and interview data that similarly explored participants' inequality perceptions and motivation towards issues of DEI. Gradually, it appeared that those with meritocratic inequality beliefs experienced the training differently from those with more structural perceptions of inequality. Mijs' (2018) theory of inequality beliefs assumes that individuals with relative absence of structural barriers and live in less diverse environments are more likely to hold meritocratic inequality beliefs. Building on that, Cech & Blair-Loy (2010) predict that individuals with meritocratic inequality beliefs are less likely to support DEI initiatives. Accordingly, the theoretical assumption that guides this section was formed as follows:

> H1: I expect participants that hold more meritocratic inequality beliefs to be less motivated to participate in DEI trainings.

Before one can understand the dynamics associated with meritocratic inequality beliefs, it is crucial to identify such ways of thought among participants. As illustrated in chapter 3, meritocracy explains social inequality through the varying levels of merit, implying that individuals are responsible to their own outcomes (Daniels, 1978). In the case of NewBees INC.'s training, participants with meritocratic inequality beliefs would be those who perceive individual abilities and effort as the cause of the social inequality in the VR scenario. This perspective received my attention during the participant observation but was also queried with the three trainers interviewed. Trainer Maya[3], when asked about the challenges she faces while giving the VR trainings, highlighted the following:

> *What I find difficult is that you sometimes have participants who strongly deny the experiences they have in the virtual reality. That makes it very hard to have a conversation about it. Unfortunately, that happens occasionally.*

During my participation in the trainings, I similarly encountered participants who exhibited denial toward the VR scenario. However, my interpretation suggests that these individuals did not necessarily deny the existence of situations of social inequality altogether but were rather tentative of its *structural nature.* A considerable proportion of participants acknowledged the 'unfairness' of the VR scenario but attributed the causes and solutions of the social inequality to individual actions rather than structural factors. This perspective often led them to propose personal responsibility and effort as remedies for the depicted unequal situation. For instance, commenting on the VR scenario, one participant remarked: *"This has nothing to do with exclusion or discrimination, but with bad leadership[4]"* a sentiment echoed by several others. Another participant declared: "*You can always stand up, it must just be worth it to you*[4]*",* whereas someone else said: "*After such a situation, one can work on their assertiveness.*[4]*"* These statements indicate that these participants explain the social inequality in a very individualistic way. Factors such as 'lack of assertiveness' as the cause of social inequality reflects the responsibility that individuals have in their own success and is therefore part of a meritocratic belief system (Mijs, 2018).

[3] Interview with trainer Maya, conducted via telephone, May 21, 2024.
[4] Personal communication, April 15, 2024.

As meritocratic perspectives on social inequality are theoretically linked to the absence of experiences with meritocratic encounters (Mijs, 2018), it is assumed that those in the NewBees INC. training who express lower identification with the disadvantaged character in the VR scenario hold more meritocratic beliefs. The findings from the interviews and participant observations lend credence to this theoretical assumption. During my interviews with the DEI trainers, I inquired about the origins of such individual explanations to social inequality. Sarah explained that individualistic responses to the VR experience are likely shaped by the extent to which participants have experienced regular barriers within their career:

> *Well, because they don't feel how such a situation is in which you can feel powerless. Because people who, imagine the stereotypical white man of 40 plus who just had a nice career and actually didn't have any limits in terms of growth or opportunities. He just thinks, I have succeeded because I'm working hard. And when you see someone that is regularly limited, it is sometimes really denied. […] And then you notice, people who don't recognize the situation themselves, that they go from their own standpoint and then I think they often have the conviction of, oh, you just have to work hard. You can do something yourself. This is within your influence.*

Sarah's response points towards several interesting points in support of the theoretical assumptions. Firstly, she suggests that participants' explanation of success in terms of 'working hard', an individual level of merit, is connected to their prior experiences with structural limits. This is unsurprising considering Mijs' (2018) expectation in his theory of inequality beliefs, in which absence of non-meritocratic experiences, such as structural inequality, increases the likelihood for individuals to explain success based on individual abilities and effort. Kluegel and Smith (2017) describe similar theoretical objectives when they demonstrate individuals occupying the top of a professional hierarchy to be particularly likely to affirm the meritocratic nature of the system. Again, mainly due to their relative absence of structural obstacles that could have impeded their success. When individuals are not exposed to explanatory factors other than, as Sarah calls it, those 'within their influence', they are likely to overestimate the influence of their individual actions (Mijs, 2018). In NewBees INC.'s DEI training, the perceived salience of individual factors over structural explanations is related to participants' prior experiences with social inequality, which can be induced out of their expressed *relatedness* to the VR scenario. Such expressions manifested in various forms, mainly through the extent they considered the scenario 'recognizable' (as participant 4 indicates in table 1).

Sarah's response brings light to a second significant implication. It uncovers that participants with a more meritocratic approach to the VR experience are more likely to deny situations in which others are 'regularly limited'. In other words, absence of experienced social inequality can lead to the undermining of structural barriers experienced by others, as Sarah further explained:

> *But I think that many people who have such an individual approach ignore the fact that there are certain power structures and that is the basis of the whole story of inclusion and diversity. That there are certain structures in an organization, in a society that ensure that certain groups are excluded. And if you're always like 'you have to work hard yourself and then you get there', then it's like you ignore the fact that there are real obstacles on the way for people of color, or for women in certain positions, for example.*

During my observations within the DEI trainings, such denial of social inequality as a structural problem became similarly evident through participants' responses to the VR scenario. For example, when talking about the VR situation, one participant said: *"There are no hierarchical differences between the employees, so he could have made use of his assertiveness*[4]*".* While this person referred to the hierarchical differences in their organizational positions, they dismissed additional structural barriers as being a source of the unequal treatment. Additional differences would be those power dynamics referred to by DiTomaso (2021) as inevitably present in every organizational setting. In the case of the VR video, an employee is excluded from the job because of his assumed cultural background. This cultural background can form the foundation of the unequal outcome (Mijs, 2018). However, instead of structural barriers, some participants highlighted the incidental character of the VR scenario, an insight Sarah corroborates:

> *[…] Some people understand that it's about larger societal themes. But I think that many people, again taking [company X] as an example, see it just as bad management. That it is just a bad apple.*

Sarah's response indicates that some people interpret the VR scenario as a 'bad apple', thereby characterizing it as an incidental occurrence rather than a 'larger societal theme'. This underscores a tendency to attribute outcomes to individual factors rather than situating the VR scenario within a broader socio-cultural context. During my observations, I equivalently

encountered instances where participants approached social inequality outside of a systemic framework. For instance, some participants dismissed the scenario as not constituting discrimination. Although discrimination can be rooted in endless factors, my interpretations suggest that these individuals referenced discrimination based on social background/ membership of a social group. In that context, a reluctance to characterize the VR scenario as discriminatory implies a disregard for it as a systemic or institutionalized form of social inequality. The inclination to individualize the VR scenario highlights a key aspect of theoretical expectation. Meritocratic inequality beliefs are based on the assumption that success comes solely from merit, thereby disregarding the complex systemic nature of causes to disparities (Mijs, 2018). DiTomaso (2021) theorizes how the denial of historical and structural factors of social inequality will detract from DEI initiatives' efficacy. Consequently, this study theoretically expected a meritocratic belief system to be associated with lower levels of motivation during the DEI training. However, this relationship appeared contingent upon more contextual factors, as further elucidated below.

Following prior studies that have associated meritocratic inequality beliefs with a lower support of DEI trainings (Scarborough et al., 2019; Cech & Blair-Loy; 2010), the theoretical assumptions included an expectation of participants with a meritocratic approach to have lower motivation during the DEI training. As findings indicated above, this would commonly mean that participants who treated the VR scenario with more individuality and expressed lower identification to the disadvantaged character, would be less motivated during the DEI trainings. Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) explain this prediction by the fact that perception of inequality as a result of merit takes away the unfairness and impartiality of an unequal outcome, thereby also the need to 'solve' this through DEI trainings. However, the findings of this study are not fully consistent with this hypothesis. When asked whether an individualistic perspective led to lower motivation among participants in the DEI training, Sarah answered:

> *No, I don't think so. Only they might understand less what the theme is really about. […] I don't think you fully understand what it's all about if you pin it all on the individual.*

It appears that she considered participants with meritocratic beliefs not necessarily less motivated but undermining of the essence of DEI. Trainer John similarly explained such a complicated relation to motivation among participants with meritocratic causes/solutions to the VR scenario:

Look, the motivation is that they want to do something. No- the motivation is that they want to do something with DEI. But their motivation not necessarily means that they want to look at their own issue. Why their behavior is a certain way and what they themselves need to change.

John's response builds on the consequences of the above-described lack of contextualization that can come with meritocratic approaches. Even if DEI is considered valuable in a general manner, for motivation that leads to behavioral change, participants must contextualize the VR scenario as a social structure that they themselves are also part of. In other words, they must recognize social inequality as a structural problem *within their own organizational context*. Such findings became similarly clear during my participation in the DEI trainings. The fewer participants within the group expressed identification to the VR scenario, the less connection could be made to their own work environment. As a result, the personal relevance of DEI was not as much discussed and sometimes completely denied, having comments such as *"this doesn't happen here"* consequently. However, as both trainers John and Sarah note, meritocratic inequality beliefs do not invariably lead to such comments. This complexity demonstrates the significance of context-dependency in the relation between meritocratic beliefs and the legitimization of social inequality (Shekhar, 2021). Similar results appeared in research by Son Hing et al. (2011), who show that the correlation between meritocratic beliefs and support for DEI depends on participants' acknowledgement of structural bias as a problem in their own organization. In this study's case, this would mean that participants that do not see the VR scenario as an exemplary case of social inequality within their company, thereby describing the VR scenario as a relatively isolated incident, would believe their organization to be based on merit and therefore not needing of DEI initiatives (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). However, if participants with meritocratic inequality beliefs recognize the VR scenario as an exemplary structural issue within their context, they would be more motivated to support DEI initiatives in order to eliminate partiality and make the 'success race' being based more on merit. This was also shown by Son Hing et al. (2002) who described DEI policies in the light of meritocratic beliefs as a 'concession' to create a fairer system that can be based on merit. This study's findings are in accordance with these findings. My observations and interviews suggest that participants who approach social inequality as less of a structural issue within their own organization were less engaged with the DEI training. This insight suggests that for meritocratic inequality beliefs, participants' motivation is not entirely dependent on their

explanation of social inequality, but rather their ability to see DEI necessary within their own organization.

In sum, the findings only provide partially uniformity to the theoretical assumption and suggest dependency on additional contextual factors. Meritocratic inequality beliefs make it less likely for the relevance of DEI within their organization to be discussed within the training, as individuals less likely identify with the VR scenario and see social inequality as a structural problem. However, *if* such personal relevance is discussed, motivation can benefit from meritocratic responses that aim to mitigate social inequality that is not based on merit. This suggests that a meritocratic belief system can lead to motivation towards DEI, but perhaps need more 'structural evidence' from within their context to demonstrate that the VR scenario is not just a 'bad apple'. How such structural evidence can manifest in and ameliorate the dynamics within a DEI training, is discussed in the following section.

4.2.3 Structural experience

Whereas some participants disclosed more meritocratic responses to the VR experience, thereby highlighting the VR scenario as an isolated event, other participants recognized the structural element of the VR narrative. To form an understanding of how participants explained social inequality in a more structural manner, I paid attention to the extent to which they used situational factors as causing the unequal outcome (Mijs, 2018). These refer to more historical and contextual explanations, which in the case of the VR scenario could be one's cultural background, gender, or relational power dynamics. According to scholars on inequality beliefs, structural explanations generally follow either out of own experience with institutional barriers or immersion in more diverse environments (Mijs, 2018; Wilson, 1996; Evans, 1997). Again, more structural explanations of inequality are by various scholars connected to their motivation toward DEI issues (Scarborough et al., 2019; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010), on which the following hypothesis was formed:

> H2: I expect participants that hold more structural inequality beliefs to be more motivated to participate in DEI trainings.

In accordance with the first hypothesis' findings, participants who expressed identification with the VR scenario, thereby relating to the disadvantaged character, *never* showed denial of

inequality as a structural problem. Participants' identification with the VR scenario was evident in their responses to the VR experience, exemplified by statements such as "*I have had many encounters like this before.*[5]*"* Remarks of this nature highlight the parallels perceived by participants between the social inequality depicted in the VR scenario and their own past experiences. Consequently, based on my own interpretations as well as illustrated by John, these participants consistently recognized the VR scenario as a structural issue of social inequality:

> *Well, I think if you have experienced exclusion yourself, in certain forms like discrimination or racism, I almost always see recognition. So that is never motivation to deny it [structure].*

John's response aligns with Mijs' (2018) theoretical framework, which posits that experiences of discrimination expose individuals with non-meritocratic processes in society, increasing their likelihood of recognizing structural causes of social inequality. When people have encountered situations similar to the VR scenario, they are less likely to deny such issues of social inequality in a broader context. As became evident in Sarah's and John's answers, participants who understand social inequality in a more structural manner have more ability to understand the essence of DEI and contextualize it into a broader societal theme. This means that in contrary to meritocratic inequality beliefs, they do not need to be complemented with further proof of structural social inequality for participants to engage with the training, lending credence to the theoretical assumption and H3. On top of that, participants with expressed identification to the VR scenario appeared to have additional impactful effects on their colleagues, which are elaborated upon in the fourth and final section.

4.2.4 Colleague contextualization

Given the anticipation that a structural comprehension of social inequality would ensue from non-meritocratic evidence (Mijs, 2018), this study endeavors to probe further into the extent to which the VR technology can provide such evidence of structural inequality. If the VR is established as a valuable manner for participants to experience *immersive perspectives* (Wagler et al., 2020; Green & Bock, 2000; Georgiadou, 2021; Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022), it is theoretically expected to let participants experience non-meritocratic evidence during the DEI

[5] Personal communication, May 30, 2024

trainings. Such experience can bolster structural explanations of social inequality and therefore motivation towards DEI issues (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010), which as described in the second section, is particularly important for participants with more meritocratic inequality beliefs. In accordance, the fourth and last hypothesis was formed:

> H4: Virtual reality, as experienced non-meritocratic evidence, increases motivation to participate in DEI trainings.

This theoretical assumption was mainly formed to explore whether the VR scenario served as a confrontation of structural social inequality to those who might not have experienced it themselves. However, the analysis has thus far shown how the VR scenario can by some participants be treated as an isolated incident outside their organization. Because this potentially led to a lack of connection to their own workplace, the VR component cannot be classified as effective structural evidence of social inequality on its own. However, my observations and interviews demonstrate how it can be described as a valuable *tool* to provide such effective evidence. When asked whether the VR elucidates motivation among participants, John responded:

> *No, I actually think the conversation afterward is the most important. And that works because you show that VR of course. Because you literally see the same thing, but people see all kinds of different things.*

This relates to the prior observation of how the VR experience was perceived as a shared experience, opening the floor for discussions on DEI to be had. John additionally explains how the experience can be interpreted in countless manners, making it insufficient to invariably motivate participants but nevertheless makes it easier for these different interpretations to be discussed. Next to different interpretations, John makes it clear how the VR also serves as a tool to discuss participants' own working environments: "*It's not about people you know. So that allows you to talk about it. And then you make a connection to your own workplace"*. Corroborated in my observations, discussions about the VR scenario makes a safe and gradual transition to discussions about similar situations in participants' context. Sarah highlights the significance of discussing experiences within participants' own organizational settings:

Yes, yes. I've noticed that before, that people think: oh, this also happens to us. […] That also happened in another group where a man of color told that he was called an animal in a meeting, everyone was really outraged. And that someone also said: this makes me more combative. Because that VR of course is something outside your organization but if you see a colleague who experiences this weekly, you know what you're fighting for.

This response from Sarah holds an interesting extension to the contextuality as described in meritocratic motives, which showed how participants with less identification to the VR scenario needed recognition of structural problems *within their organization* to show motivation toward DEI issues (Son Hing et al., 2011). As it appears here, shared experiences of colleagues within the training provide further proof of institutional barriers to those that might initially interpret the VR scenario as a 'bad apple'. When provided such proof within their own context, they – as Sarah describes it – 'know what they're fighting for'. During my own participations, this peer response was also very clear. When participants declared they had similar experiences to that of the VR scenario, colleagues often commented with: "*wow, I really see that it touches you*[6]". John further corroborates this point, narrating a situation in which someone shared their own experience: "*And well, people were very shocked by it. Very upset. […] Yes, it really helps when someone shares something within the organization".* Such 'shock' during DEI trainings seems most crucial to enhance participant motivation, as Sarah explains:

Maybe precisely because people think oh, at this organization, that doesn't happen. And then they realize that they're no different from other organizations. […] And if you see that and understand that you're actually part of such a structure, I do think that helps, yes. Yes. That motivates.

Whereas the VR scenario in itself might not be contextualized by all participants into broader structures of social inequality, the data suggests that being confronted with social inequality experiences from participants within one's own context can show how they are *part of a structure* of social inequalities. The fact that the sharing of experiences within DEI trainings helps significantly with other participants to recognize DEI as a structural issue is unsurprising. As mentioned, inequality beliefs are the result of a combination of both the available information and one's environment/experiences (Mijs, 2018). The second theoretical

[6] Personal communication, May 30, 2024

assumption revealed that absence of structural barriers increased participants' tendency to only go off the VR as a sole incident. However, hearing similar experiences from colleagues within their own organization complements this available information with experiences from their own environment, which thereafter can form perceptions of inequality. In the conversation, participants witness how the road to success in their organization is not always an impartial process, making it less likely to believe inequality to be meritocratically caused (Mijs, 2018). Therefore, this study's data indicates that non-meritocratic evidence within own contexts holds greater personal relevance and therefore stimulates more motivation than the VR experience by itself. However, the VR technology is still valuable in that it offers an immersive yet safe way to make a bridge to participants' own workplace, opening the floor for any experience to be shared. Such personal experiences are not only effective for the DEI trainings' incentives but are also requested by and needed for participants to engage with the training. The survey responses elucidated the latter. When asked what could be ameliorated about the training, a lot of participants mentioned an increased connection to their own workplace. The following table displays ten responses that represent this sentiment.

Table 2

Responses representing desired discussion about participants' own workplaces.

Participant	Response
11	Involving our work environment.
12	Talk a bit longer about situations within the organization.
13	Involve more concretely the department.
14	Discuss more practical examples and identify more tools.
15	Ask more follow-up questions on concrete examples.
16	Let more colleagues speak about examples.
17	I do have a need to delve deeper into own cases.
18	Focus a bit more on the practice of [company].
19	How to enable more specificity into examples/experiences of people in the room.
20	Collect examples from the workplace beforehand via a survey: quieter people tend to stay behind in such a group, and this gives them a platform.

Note: The table presents responses from an existing evaluation survey conducted by NewBees INC. after each VR training session. In the 'Tip' section, respondents are asked to provide tips or suggestions for future trainings.

These responses illustrate that a part of the DEI trainings does not make as many connections to own workplaces – thereby demonstrating contextual relevance – as wished for by the participants. Trainer Sarah described situations in which the sharing of experiences remains relatively absent: *But if you have a homogeneous organization, that stays relatively superficial*, a sentiment confirmed in my interview with John. This indicates that achieving the contextual relevance necessary for increased motivation would benefit from a diverse group of participants. In the light of inequality beliefs, such data aligns with theoretical expectations. While diverse environments generally lead to more structural explanations of social inequality (Mijs, 2018), a lack of exposure to diversity lead to an increased likelihood of holding meritocratic perceptions (Ridgeway, 2001). This is mainly because "homogeneity reduces a person's exposure to explanatory variables other than a person's attitudes and actions, that may importantly affect social outcomes" (Mijs, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, the VR component is most effective in a heterogenous group of people, as it enhances the likelihood of encountering different experiences and perspectives within one's own organization. Such experiences of social inequality from colleagues thus form explanatory evidence against their organization as being organized by merit, increasing the opportunities participants have for observing the salience of structural factors to social inequality (Mijs, 2018). As the data has suggested, such perspectives on participants' own work environment can especially be determinant in motivation for participants that hold more meritocratic inequality beliefs.

In sum, this analytical exploration of four overarching theoretical assumptions gradually unveiled the complex interaction between VR trainings, inequality beliefs, and motivation towards DEI initiatives. The first assumption, new perspectives, suggested that VR serves as an valuable educational technology. It is enjoyable for participants, makes different perspectives feel tangible, and fosters empathy among participants. The conversation that followed the VR experience in the DEI training, however, appeared most crucial to effectuate support for DEI initiatives. The second assumption, meritocratic motives, revealed that participants who showed lower relatedness to the disadvantaged character in the VR scenario approached the VR experience in a more idiosyncratic manner. Also, they were more likely to perceive the VR scenario as an isolated incident rather than a structural problem of inequality in their organization. In contrast, the third section, structural experience, illustrated how participants that expressed relatedness to the discrimination depicted in the VR scenario invariably contextualized social inequality as a structural issue. The fourth assumption, colleague

contextualization, indicated that the VR component is most effective in inciting motivation within diverse groups, because non-meritocratic evidence from within one's own organization provoked the strongest activation among participants. Contextuality is ever so important, considering identification with the VR scenario, meritocratic beliefs about participants' own organization, the heterogeneity of the DEI trainings' group of participants, and the facilitation of an open conversation after the VR experience. This raises questions about the optimal organization of these sessions. What these findings implicate for theory and policy, is discussed in the following chapter.

5. Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the findings through the theoretical framework, after which their theoretical and practical implications are elaborately discussed. Finally, a discussion of alternative explanations, limitations of this study and suggestions for future research will conclude the exploration of how current DEI trainings with VR can be enhanced.

5.1 Summary of findings

The data of the survey, interviews, and participant observation were explored according to four theoretical assumptions. Firstly, H4 showed that VR is an effective educational tool that enhances enjoyability, shared experiences, perspective-taking, and empathy among participants within DEI trainings. These findings align with previous studies highlighting VR ability to increase participants' motivation through capturing focus (Burzstein et al., 2024), common experiences (Legate & Weinstein, 2024), providing multiple perspectives (Burzstein et al., 2024) and increasing empathy toward DEI issues (Mason & Chrobot-Mason, 2022). Secondly, participants who did not relate to the disadvantaged character in the VR scenario approached the unequal outcome in the VR narrative through a meritocratic lens, focusing on individual abilities and effort as explanatory factors to the social inequality. This focus was often accompanied by the perspective of the VR experience as an isolated incident rather than indicative of systemic inequality. This is in line with Mijs' (2019) theory of inequality beliefs, as absence of structural barriers increases the likelihood for participants to explain social inequality in terms of personal abilities and effort. Whether meritocratic inequality beliefs directly decreased participants' motivation toward DEI initiatives, which Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) predicted and was expected in H1, proved to be not so self-evident. The observations and interviews of this study suggest that a decrease in motivation rather depends on whether participants can recognize social inequality as present in their own organization. This finding was also identified by Son Hing et al. (2011), who demonstrated that the relationship between meritocratic beliefs and support for DEI is influenced by individuals' acknowledgement of structural bias within their company. If structural inequality is recognized, meritocratic values can boost individuals' motivation to make their organizational 'success race' fairer (Son Hing et al., 2011). Conversely, if they consider their organizational system to be meritocratically organized, scholars found that individuals are most likely to legitimize inequality within that system (Sekhar, 2021). Based on the findings of the study conducted here, it can be concluded

that participants' motivation during the DEI training is likely to depend on the extent to which they perceive VR scenarios as an *exemplary structural problem of inequality* within their own organization. However, while the VR experience itself proved to be valuable, it appeared to be insufficient for inequality to be recognized, complicating the theoretical assumption inherent in H3. Findings suggested it is rather the facilitated post-VR conversation between participants within the DEI training that confronts participants with evidence of structural inequality within their own organizational context. This is because these conversations make room for responses to the VR scenario, allowing for similar experiences to be shared and connections to their own organizational context to be made. These findings suggest that participants who could relate to the VR scenario more, also appeared to be more likely to acknowledge structural inequality as being present in their own environment. Again, this corroborates with the theoretical expectation of inequality beliefs (Mijs, 2019), in which experience with non-meritocratic barriers decreases individuals' meritocratic beliefs. As theoretically expected in H2, decreasing meritocratic perceptions of social inequality increases their motivation and support toward issues of DEI (Scarborough et al., 2019; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). Their experiences with non-meritocratic processes, especially within the company, provide evidence of structural inequality for participants with lower identification to the VR within the training. In that way, the VR experience is not necessarily non-meritocratic evidence in itself, contradicting H3, but a valuable *means* for participants to discover the status of DEI within their own context, which consequently impacted their motivation to participate in the DEI training. As the observations and interview revealed, such confrontation remains relatively absent in a homogenous group of participants. Ridgeway (2001) has priorly showed that a lack of exposure to diversity increases individuals' meritocratic beliefs. In the context of this study, this means that a lack of diversity decreases the likelihood for experiences of structural inequality within own organizations to be shared. Overall, these findings suggests that inequality beliefs can influence how participants interpret and engage with DEI content. What this tell us about the enhancement of theory, policy, and practice, is discussed below.

5.2 Theoretical and policy implications

These findings have several theoretical implications. Firstly, this study supports the integration of VR technology as an educational tool within DEI frameworks, highlighting its ability to make abstract concepts like inequality tangible and relatable. However, theoretical exploration of VR in DEI trainings should always contextualize the use of this technology to fully

comprehend its effects. Concluding that VR's effectiveness is influenced by participants' identification with the VR scenario and the heterogeneity of the group, suggests that existing DEI theories should incorporate these variables to enhance their explanatory power and practical relevance. Without careful considerations of additional contextual factors, the effect of VR within DEI trainings might be misplaced and overlook important nuances of individual social perceptions. Correspondingly to previous scholars' suggestions, "inequality beliefs are best collected contextually" (Mijs, 2018, p. 12). Secondly, the study's findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on inequality beliefs by demonstrating how these underlying beliefs influence participants' approach to the DEI training. Discussions within the domain of DEI could therefore benefit from a better understanding of how different belief systems and motivation come with different perceptions toward inequality and how to address it. Additionally, this study suggests several practical implications to be considered during the design and implementation of various DEI trainings.

Firstly, the importance of the subsequent discussion after the VR experience emphasizes the need for skilled facilitators who can guide meaningful conversations. These discussions should focus on connecting the VR experience to the participants' real-world experiences and organizational context, to ensure a deeper engagement with DEI issues from a larger part of the training group. Moreover, the findings suggest that the VR experience is most impactful in diverse groups, a result which DEI training designers could benefit from as it suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the composition of training groups. Especially for individuals with less experience with structural inequality, confrontation with structural evidence from other participants within their own organization seems to be the most motivating. For participants with strong meritocratic beliefs, DEI trainings should include components that challenge these views by presenting structural evidence of inequality within their own company. Such structural evidence of social inequality within own contexts could involve sharing data, personal stories, and case studies that illustrate systemic issues of privilege and exclusion, thereby encouraging a broader understanding of inequality. However, ethical concerns must guide the consideration to play into such contextuality. For example, it is questionable to intentionally increase the heterogeneity of the group of participants for the purpose of increasing the likelihood of sharing personal experiences with structural inequality. Even then, the choice to share experiences is always up to the individuals themselves. It is DEI's main goal to foster each individual uniqueness and produce equal feeling of belonging. Relying on certain demographic groups to

provide structural evidence could unintentionally reinforce group segregation or cause undesired psychological effects.

5.3 Limitations

Although this study has mapped out certain contextual factors that influence the DEI trainings' dynamics, it is essential to identify and discuss the limitations of this study to provide a balanced perspective and indicate areas for future research. Whereas this research has focused on the comprehension of the dynamics *within* the DEI training as a single case, it has not mapped out effects in the longer term. This means that we cannot know whether increased motivation during the trainings has remained toward future DEI initiatives or issues. Moreover, this study mainly focused on prior experiences with structural inequality and the heterogeneity of the trainings' group as contextual factors. But as explained, other contextual variability, such as organizational culture, policies, and existing DEI initiatives across different organizational settings might affect how participants respond to the VR scenario. For example, participants' pre-existing values and prior experiences of DEI trainings could have influenced their responses to the training's contents. Also, the positive reactions to VR might be partly due to its relative novelty. Participants might have found the VR experience engaging and enjoyable because it was a new and different method of training, rather than due to its intrinsic ability to persuade content or present perspectives. The usage of VR within DEI trainings has only existed and been studied for several years, which is why we cannot know its impact once this novelty has disappeared. Furthermore, the various skills and approaches among the different trainers leading the post-VR discussions could have impacted participants' perception and motivations, or willingness to share these. A particular trainer might have been more inviting for specific participants to share their own experiences then others.

5.4 Future avenues for research

Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of VR-based DEI training on participants' beliefs and support. Also, comparative studies could assess the impact of VR against other DEI training methods. This could include an experimental setting in which two groups receive the same training, one with and one without the VR component. Or to further explore the impact of the post-VR discussion, experiments could include one group that undergoes facilitated conversations immediately following the VR experience, contrasted with another group that does not engage in such discussions. In this way, robust evidence can be explored whether VR is indeed a valuable manner to make connections

to structural inequality within participants' own environment, thereby increasing motivation toward DEI issues. Furthermore, future research should explore the impact of customizing contextual factors, such as VR scenarios or group composition, to further investigate their significance within the design and implementation of DEI trainings. Again, ethical considerations must lead such future studies to ensure the psychological safety of every participant.

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