A Post-Civil Rights Vision of Racial Equality:
Diversity Rhetorics and Initiatives in Three Organizational Cases

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Abstract

This paper examines the messages about racial equality that organizational decision-makers communicate through their rhetoric on “diversity” and related initiatives. Qualitative data from three case studies—neighborhood redevelopment, university admissions, and corporate management—show that decision-makers endorse a race-conscious, extra-legal vision of racial equality. Decision-makers have won adherents to this diversity vision by promoting it as compatible with the interests of cosmopolitan white people, organizational effectiveness, and elite leadership. This approach to racial equality affirms the inclusion of myriad identity groups and tolerant institutional cultures, yet it reinforces some racial and class privileges. The findings advance racial formation theory by borrowing insights from institutionalist research, showing how formal organizational rhetorics and structures socially construct racial group interests. The study also presents a methodologically novel approach to studying organizational phenomena across disparate organizational settings.