

Seedlings in the Corporate Forest: Communicating Benevolent Sexism in Dow Chemical's First Internal Affirmative-Action Campaign

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Abstract

Organizational affirmative-action programs have often failed to reach their goals, especially in the context of STEM professions and companies. Our study analyzes one of the first internal affirmative-action initiatives, Dow Chemical's "Know More in '74" (KMi74) campaign, to explore discursive components that may play a role in this problem. An exploratory analysis of the campaign's pamphlets revealed that KMi74 upheld a framework of benevolent sexism. In subsequent analysis, we found that KMi74 communicated benevolent sexism through appeals espousing: (a) vagueness via generalization and absurdity, (b) circularity via redundancy and buzzwords, and (c) disingenuity via bait and

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switch argumentation. We suggest, given the government's public recognition of KMi74 as legislatively compliant, these appeals functioned historically as organizational scripts for inclusion initiatives in the years that followed, scripts that upheld (and continue to uphold) the law but not the changes in practice necessary for the achievement of meaningful inter-organizational opportunity and equity.

Keywords

affirmative action, benevolent sexism, gender, historical organizational scripts, inclusion, science communication

Introduction

On April 30, 1975, Violete Stevens filed for a solo patent on behalf of her work at the Dow Chemical Company. The patent, for polymercaptoesters of polyglycidols (Stevens, 1977), was a great achievement—one Stevens would repeat once more that year when she was granted another patent for linear copolymers of glycidol (Stevens et al., 1977). Her work required extensive research and served to benefit Dow for decades as the company developed consumer resins. Yet when Stevens, a senior research chemist, was featured in Dow's first affirmative-action campaign, "Know More in '74" (KMi74), her patents were not discussed. Instead, Dow characterized Stevens's scientific contributions to the company as a "hobby," one that "doesn't take her to a snowy ski slope, a painter's easel, or a potter's wheel, but instead leads her to Dow's Central Research Lab in Midland" ("The hobby of a whole job," 1974, para. 1).

What is especially notable about Stevens's portrayal in the KMi74 campaign is not that her research contributions were downplayed—she was not the first nor the last woman in science to be characterized in this way (e.g., Jensen et al., 2019; Rossiter, 1993; Smith & Garrett-Scott, 2021)—but, rather, that Dow coupled this diminishment of her contributions with statements of seemingly overwhelming support for women in the workplace and affirmative-action initiatives. Indeed, enthusiasm for this campaign saturated the company-produced literature, but KMi74's failure to attend to details such as Stevens' very real professional accomplishments at the company provides a telling clue about why such campaigns have, since their launch with the passage of U.S. affirmative-action legislation in the late 1960s, failed to translate more clearly into sex-and-gender equity, recognition, and leadership in the workplace, scientific or otherwise (Elias, 2018; Krawiec, 2003; MacLean, 2010).

For several key reasons, Dow's KMi74 pamphlets offer an especially illuminating case study through which to consider the historical trajectory of this failure at a discursive level. For one, Dow was (and still remains) a highly visible entity as one of the country's largest and most profitable chemical companies and a major employer of both unskilled and specialized workers (Chandler, 2005). For another, Dow was one of the first large companies to respond to a legislative requirement regarding equality in the workplace, in part because of its role as a government contractor beginning as early as World War I (National Economic Conversion Commission [NECC], 1970). When KMi74 debuted, it functioned as a direct response to the 1967 amendment of Executive Order 11,246, which added sex to the list of protected categories upheld under affirmative-action legislation passed during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The 1967 amendment, coupled with women's significantly increased involvement in the U.S. labor force beginning in the mid-1960s (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) and growing national attention directed at what would today be called Dow's "corporate social responsibility" infractions (Chandler, 2005; Hay, 2011; Kernisky, 1997; Müller, 2018), ensured that Dow's initiative in support of the new legislative mandate would be examined closely by multiple stakeholders. Ultimately, KMi74's materials were upheld publicly as not only compliant but also as good practice by the U.S. Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, a recognition that situated KMi74 as a model for internal, affirmative-action initiatives nationwide in the years to come (Committee on the Analysis of Executive Order 11246, 1982).

In what follows, we offer an analysis of KMi74's six extensive campaign pamphlets to identify the specific discursive mechanisms set by Dow to comply with affirmative-action legislation. Our exploratory analyses of the pamphlets revealed that KMi74 upheld a framework of what has been more recently theorized as "benevolent sexism" wherein women are positioned covertly as inherently inferior to men, often under cover of support for inclusivity and change, though with the caveat of women's need for patriarchal support and protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2004). In organizational contexts, benevolent sexism has been recognized for its "insidious dangers" to women employees' performance in terms of limiting their exposure to professional challenges and opportunities and even—over time—facilitating the development of increasingly hostile sexist attitudes (Dardenne et al., 2007, p. 764; Sibley et al., 2007); and, in the context of STEM fields and organizations specifically, benevolent sexism has been associated with a host of negative educational and professionalization outcomes (Kuchynka et al., 2018; see also Stone et al., 2020). Following our exploratory analysis, our subsequent qualitative, textual investigation of the pamphlets revealed that benevolent sexism was upheld therein through three central appeals related to: (a) vagueness via generalization and absurdity, (b) circularity via redundancy

and buzzwords, and (c) disingenuity via bait and switch argumentation. Ultimately, we find that these appeals functioned in concert to create an affirmative-action agenda lacking in the argumentative warrants necessary for either immediate or long-term organizational change. Moreover, we consider the ongoing function and impact of these communicative strategies to demonstrate how this particular campaign created a historical, organizational script for contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, a precedent that must be not just identified but also countered to effectively disarticulate organizational stagnation and sex- and gender-based inequality in the twenty-first-century workplace.

Organizational Scripts, Inclusion, and Benevolent Sexism

Scholars have long recognized that storytelling and narrativizing can function as a central mechanism of organizational culture-building and professional identity development, particularly in terms of conveying a shared organizational history and trajectory (Smith & Keyton, 2001; Weick & Browning, 1986). More recently, Maclean et al. (2016) extended this insight by identifying and advocating on behalf of “historical organization studies,” which draw from historical cases and data to theorize about topics such as the establishment of narratives and other modes of sensemaking that animate organizations over time (p. 609). Part of this work involves identifying historical organizational moments and cases wherein a discursive template, or script, is established that emerges in and over subsequent times as “residue or sedimentation” shaping the organization and its subsidiaries as a contemporary whole (Suddaby et al., 2014, p. 113). Scripts along these lines, especially when they are set in motion by major companies and upheld by overarching regulatory agencies, have the potential to shape the trajectory of an entire professional field or institutional structure because they come to function as generic or expected and, therefore, as outside the scope of what might be in need of evaluation and revision. In this respect, the identification of historical, organizational scripts via a focus on central organizational discourses of the past can offer insight into problems that are so sedimented that they appear to be without cause or viable solution, such as that of sex- and gender inequality and inequity in the contemporary workplace.

To be sure, the problem of exclusion and limited opportunity for advancement among women and those representing historically marginalized races and ethnicities in the workplace and professional organizations is one that has been studied extensively but has yet to be fully understood, despite extensive intervention at the level of organizational and governmental inclusion initiatives (Elias, 2020; Van Puyvelde, 2021). Some have argued that this may be because there has long been a lack of theoretical depth concerning

how exclusivity according to sex-and-gender functions (Glick & Fiske, 1996). In a broad sense, sexism has been conceptualized in terms of attitudes and behaviors reflecting hostility toward, or discrimination against, women. Yet Glick and Fiske argued that this view fails to consider a significant and pervasive aspect of sexism: “the subjectively positive feelings toward women that often go hand in hand with sexist antipathy” (p. 491). Accordingly, they outlined a theory of ambivalent sexism that differentiates between two distinct forms of sexism: hostile and benevolent. While hostile sexism is characterized by antipathy and otherwise overtly “negative attitudes” toward women—particularly those women “who are seen as stepping out of their traditional gender roles”—benevolent sexism represents a more covert, ubiquitous, and socially-accepted form of sexism wherein women are characterized as naturally inferior and therefore in need of assistance, guidance, and protection by men (Fraser et al., 2015, p. 233). In terms of the latter form, women—even in professional environments—are “cherished and protected given their weak/fragile state,” and they are characterized as “unable to succeed in the workplace” without “the help of social policies” (p. 234). Ultimately, benevolent sexism relies on “the same restrictive and stereotyped ideas of gender” as hostile sexism, yet it presents them “in a superficially positive light” and therefore is generally more difficult to pinpoint or disrupt (p. 233).

Glick and Fiske’s (1996; 2001) differentiation between hostile and benevolent sexism helps to account for the contradictions evident in many inclusion initiatives between the explicit celebration of women as valued and capable workers and the lack of opportunities women have for professional success, advancement, and leadership. Often difficult to identify or measure, benevolent sexism appears superficially to promote gender equality while, in actuality, it “subtly undermines it by contributing to occupational gender segregation and leading to inaction in promoting women in positions in which they are underrepresented,” most commonly positions deemed more masculine such as those associated with specialized skills, management, or leadership (Hideg & Ferris, 2014, p. 706). Outcomes of benevolent sexism in the workplace include not only the exclusion of women from most leadership roles (Hideg & Shen, 2019), but also negative evaluations of women’s competence (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019), impaired cognitive performance among women employees (Dardenne et al., 2007), increased support from all employees for maintaining the status quo set by traditional gender roles (Jost & Kay, 2005), and the limitation of women’s opportunities in traditionally male-dominated fields (Gervais & Hillard, 2011). Moreover, and especially pertinent to the present study, is the finding that benevolent sexism is also associated with lowered STEM major intentions, STEM self-efficacy, and STEM grade point average in women (Kuchynka et al., 2018).

It would be easy to assume that because benevolent sexism is less outwardly antagonistic than hostile sexism, that it is also less harmful. Research

suggests, however, that this is not necessarily the case. For instance, [Fraser and colleagues' \(2015\)](#) investigation of the moderating effects of benevolent sexism demonstrated that, while benevolent sexism actually predicts support for (rather than opposition to) gender-based affirmative action, it simultaneously upholds a paternalistic ideology that deflects from that support. Women are generally characterized in this framework as less capable than men and “thereby needing extra assistance to enter the workplace” (p. 241). Their workplace achievements, then, are attributed to affirmative-action policies rather than women’s own competence, which fosters a cycle of sexist attitudes and practices that limit women’s professional development opportunities. Furthermore, benevolent sexism tends to be deeply internalized and is thus more likely to be sanctioned in the workplace by both male and female employees ([Becker, 2010](#)). Indeed, in the case of benevolent sexism specifically, women are more likely to “endorse the very ideology that maintains their subordinate position” ([Fraser et al., 2015](#), p. 241). Because the protective paternalism granted through benevolent sexism extends only to those who conform to traditional, hierarchical gender roles, few opportunities for professional achievement are available either to women who uphold its tenets or those who resist its classificatory system of gendered employment.

Given this research on the pervasiveness and negative outcomes of benevolent sexism, the present study seeks to explicate how benevolent sexism has been communicated in historically influential—and therefore arguably agenda-setting—affirmative-action campaigns. We looked to Dow’s KMi74 campaign materials as a case study for helping answer this question because, for one, the central elements of—and criteria for—benevolent sexism emerged as an overarching finding from our initial, exploratory analysis. For another, not only was KMi74 one of the first internal campaigns of its kind, but also it was recognized publicly for the model of compliance and good practice it set in the early landscape of U.S. affirmative-action legislation ([Committee on the Analysis of Executive Order 11246, 1982](#)). That, along with Dow’s especially visible corporate identity then and now, situated the campaign to offer a historical organizational script for campaigns of this nature that followed in its wake. On the whole, this research extends [Calder-Dawe’s \(2015\)](#) exploration of hostile, “everyday” sexism in terms of its “choreography” and “organizing patterns” (p. 89), to the realm of top-down, benevolent sexism in the workplace. That is, the goal of the present work is to identify the means by which benevolent sexism in particular has been (and potentially still is) communicated so that those patterns can be more effectively identified, thwarted, and eliminated in contemporary organizational inclusion initiatives. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What were the identifiable rhetorical strategies of Dow’s KMi74 internal affirmative-action campaign?

RQ2: What specific appeals upheld these strategies in the KMi74 campaign?

Method

To answer these questions, the authors conducted a qualitative, textual analysis of the internal campaign materials. This involved, first, locating and procuring access to the KMi74 materials, which are not in public circulation. One of the study's authors traveled to the Othmer Library of Chemical History Archives, located at the Science History Institute in Philadelphia, PA, to view the "Advertisements from the Dow Chemical Historical Collection." This archival collection includes over 900 items of material produced by the Dow Chemical Company from 1921 to 1993, including advertisements, leaflets, and internal campaign materials such as KMi74. With permission from the Othmer Library, the author photographed and digitized the KMi74 campaign documents, which consist of six large pamphlets and accompanying pull-out posters (25 pages in total) that were distributed and circulated within Dow over the course of 1974.

Second, the authors began their data analysis by engaging collectively in a close, exploratory examination of the 25 pages of KMi74 materials. All authors (seven in total) used qualitative, primary-cycle coding to guide their inquiry and develop an early codebook of overarching themes (Tracy, 2013). Considering group analytical discussions and emergent codes, the research team identified benevolent sexism as central to the messages communicated throughout the data. They reviewed Glick and Fiske's (1996) theory of ambivalent sexism, wherein the benevolent sexism construct was initially explicated, as well as the growing body of literature published subsequently on benevolent sexism's manifestations (e.g., Blumell et al., 2019; Glick & Fiske, 2018; Ramos et al., 2018). At this stage, two authors employed the theory of ambivalent sexism as a framework to guide subsequent iterative coding. This involved alternating between theoretical consideration of benevolent sexism in terms of its communication of support and celebration for women's inclusion and advancement and its underlying exclusivity appeals (Fraser et al., 2015), and the emergent qualitative data (Tracy, 2013). They focused this comparative process on identifying the specific patterns of strategies and associated appeals evident in the data that seemed to uphold benevolent sexism's conflicting contentions.

Third, the two coding authors discussed their secondary codes at length with the whole research team, resolving discrepancies through negotiation and consensus to create a final coding scheme. This meant identifying key patterns like Dow's vagueness about affirmative action policy, definitions (or lack of definitions) of affirmative action, mentions of specific women as capable (over others, like secretarial staff), specific instances exemplified benevolent sexism

(infantilization of women, comparison of men and women), and/or language reassuring men that women in the workplace won't impact their jobs, etc. The authors worked both individually and as a group to identify specific examples from the data that exemplified the communicative mechanisms evident throughout the KMi74 materials. At this point, the data was encoded into NVivo 11 where phrases served as units of analysis. This process led to the formation of a comprehensive codebook, which guided the articulation of findings as they are presented subsequently. These findings are—first and foremost—the result of an iterative, team-oriented engagement with the data at hand.

Communicative Appeals in KMi74

Dow's "Know More in '74" affirmative-action campaign was dedicated to explaining, justifying, and outwardly celebrating the growing (and government-mandated) presence of women within the organization. Exploratory examination of the campaign materials demonstrated that its message was conveyed via benevolent sexism, thereby maintaining the illusion of compliance and even change while nonetheless preserving key elements of the status quo (Glick & Fiske, 1996; 2018). In the following analysis, we find that benevolent sexism is upheld and communicated in three primary ways through the KMi74 campaign, including appeals to: (a) vagueness via generalization and absurdity, (b) circularity via redundancy and buzzwords, and (c) disingenuity via bait and switch argumentation.

Appeals to Vagueness Via Generalization and Absurdity

Throughout the KMi74 materials, appeals to vagueness—which have been defined in legal contexts as those that lack the necessary detail to be upheld or otherwise facilitated (Goldsmith, 2003)—are especially prevalent. Vagueness, in this respect, is reflected in Eisenberg's (1984) exploration of "how people in organizations use ambiguity strategically to accomplish their goals" (p. 228), often as a "strategy for preserving existing impressions and protecting privileged positions" (p. 234). Vague and therefore ambiguous appeals—as well as the associated discursive control over information that such appeals entail—are made through sweeping assessments of generalized values or sentiments, rather than the identification of concrete problems or actions for change. For example, in the campaign's third pamphlet, "The Corporate Forest" (1974), Dow Company President Barnes is quoted stating that,

Just as too many people think of business only in terms of dollar values, too many people look at affirmative action in number values. This is unfortunate. At Dow we have a mixture of attitudes; some wholeheartedly accept and others

reject the idea of affirmative action. I see negative attitudes changing to the positive more and more about this effort. Thinking positive about affirmative action is a must for its success [emphasis added]. (p. 2)

Barnes works hard in this statement to guide readers toward assessment targets that cannot be empirically measured or even demonstrated in a tangible way, thereby employing a strategy of ambiguity that Eisenberg described as “essential to organizing” as it “allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message—i.e. perceive the message to be clear” (p. 231). Eisenberg characterized this strategic employment of ambiguity as a “political necessity” in that it allows for diverse groups of individuals to “apply different interpretations to the symbol” (p. 231). In this way, strategically ambiguous messages can unite and appease, all the while upholding the status quo.

This appeal, particularly as it tenders generalized over-specific conclusions, is also evident in KMi74 when the rewards of the program are characterized as an “awareness,” rather than as a measurable change in the company. For example, KMi74’s fifth pamphlet, “Building Blocks and People” (1974), celebrates the campaign’s contribution to changes in cognition rather than to action, noting that for one Dow employee:

The formation of new thoughts [inspired by KMi74] and the jelling of old ones has made Joann more conscious of her work environment. “I’ve become more accepting of others and more in touch with my own reactions to certain situations.” According to Joann, “I can take these thoughts and ideas with me wherever I go and I’m sure I’ll refer to the training book many times for years to come.” (p. 1)

Here, readers learn not what Joann has ascertained specifically from her affirmative-action training, nor how exactly she will employ that information to succeed and advance at Dow. What they learn is merely that Joann has different thoughts and attitudes now than she did in the past and that she hopes to conjure her new thought processes in indefinable ways in her future at the company.

Beyond generalization, another means by which the KMi74 architects communicate vagueness is by relying rather heavily on absurdity or humor, which deflects attention from the program’s concrete details while also taking up a great deal of content space. Lynch (2002) noted that humor can serve as a form of discursive control by upholding existing norms at the expense of those who seem to deviate from them. Appeals to humor in KMi74 function in this way by not only literally making fun of women’s societal advances but also by being featured at points in the pamphlets that would be more appropriately occupied with information about how affirmative action might work at Dow.

In these cases, the humor marks female employees as atypical and draws attention away from promises to provide more detail that would make the institution of change possible. For instance, at one point KMi74 includes a joke wherein the “salaried employment of at least one female Santa Claus” (“[Dow women then & now](#),” 1974, p. 1), is upheld as an example of the gains that have resulted from the broader women’s rights movement at the time, as is a stunt in which a woman supposedly towed a truck down the road with her teeth in 1973. These illustrations follow directly after a discussion in the previous pamphlet about how KMi74 will “cover major developments in recent times” about women’s professionalization (“[Know more in ’74](#),” 1974, p. 1).

The placement of jests where details and historical acknowledgements had been promised does little to create the expectation among readers that Dow leadership is approaching this task in all seriousness. Instead, as both [Lynch \(2002\)](#) and [McIlheran \(2006\)](#) theorized is often the case with the communication of humor in corporate environments, these absurd examples iterate the superiority of the existing system and create in-group cohesion by glossing over the specifics of the problems that brought about affirmative-action legislation in the first place.

Vagueness via some measure of subtle yet potent ridicule is evident, too, via the pull-out posters that accompany each individual pamphlet and feature affirmative platitudes that are difficult to pinpoint in terms of intent or meaning. The posters contain large watercolor paintings of landscapes and abstract shapes coupled with broadly metaphorical statements in delicate, cursive handwriting—pronouncements that are unclear to the point of being oxymoronic, especially in the context of working at Dow. In the second pamphlet, a watercolor of what seem to be either icebergs or abstract ships floats above the claim that “one must not tie a ship to a single anchor, not a life to a single hope” (“[Dow women then & now](#),” 1974, p. 4). In the third pamphlet, a painting of a pastel rainbow suggests that “the rainbow is much more beautiful than the pot of gold at the end of it because the rainbow is now” (“[The Corporate Forest](#),” 1974, p. 4). The posters take up two full pages in all but one of the six pamphlets, offering grand yet placid gestures of general agreeability and encouragement. On the whole, the most straightforward information that emerges concerning any of the pamphlets’ posters is an associated directive about how to get them purchased and framed. The back cover of the introductory pamphlet claims that “selected wood frames for Know More In ’74 posters can be purchased at a discount at Circle Decorators, 109 E. Ashman, Midland” (“[Know more in ’74](#),” 1974, p. 4). In this respect, it could be argued that the posters function as emblems for women employees at Dow, taking up space, worthy of purchase and display, but not always or necessarily justifiable in terms of work-related contribution. The posters are

absurd and incongruous and so, it is suggested, is the campaign itself and its affirmative-action policy more generally.

Appeals to Circularity Via Redundancy and Buzzwords

A second, related mechanism by which benevolent sexism is brought to bear in the KMi74 campaign is that of circularity. Otherwise known as *petitio principii* or begging the question, circularity is a mode of fallacious, informal logic involving an argument wherein the thesis and the evidence are equivalent (Woods & Walton, 1975). There are several points in the KMi74 pamphlets that seek to prove or explain a claim by re-stating the claim, sometimes in almost exactly the same way. For example, the campaign begins with the question: “Why is the program called ‘Know More In ’74?’” The answer put forth is that, “It’s simple. Through a series of six issues, Dow women and men at the Midland Headquarters Unit will know more in ’74 about the things affecting the lives of working women [emphasis added]” (“Know more in ’74,” 1974, p. 1). Here and elsewhere, questions are answered and claims are defined with a “simple” reiteration of those precise questions and claims. As such, women at Dow are encouraged to “be”—as a result of this program—“all that [they] are capable of becoming” (p. 3), and instructed that they will know which “path” to take once they select one (“Building blocks and people,” 1974, p. 3). The tautologies evidenced in these cases are time-consuming to follow and exhausting in the sense that they provide no additional information beyond what was available at the outset. Any actual barriers that women at Dow might have faced in advancement and employment as they related to, say, access to education, training, or structural support, were not acknowledged or discussed in these pages. Further, the individuals or entities who might determine women’s capabilities in this context stood unidentified.

In several instances, we found that redundancy takes a form that is more complicated and therefore less obvious than a simple restatement of what came before, though the communicative appeal functions similarly in that it fills space through repetition and fails to answer the question at hand. For instance, when Dow President Barnes is posed the question of how Dow compares to other industry affirmative-action efforts, he responds that:

“Dow’s Affirmative Action Program can’t be compared with any other. It’s not important how Dow looks next to other companies, what is important is how Dow looks to itself. In other words, we must be concerned about how we’re doing inside the company and how our goals are being reached.” (“The corporate forest,” pp. 1–2)

In this instance, Barnes repeats the question in ways that allow him to reconceptualize and reframe it in a slightly different light. Through this process, he is able to maintain a positive tone about Dow's affirmative-action initiative without being forthcoming about the initiative in terms of its means, goals, or outcomes. Circular reasoning as facilitated by redundancy through reframing allows him to sidestep the issue entirely.

Correspondingly, KMi74's dependence on isolated, de-contextualized buzzwords of the time such as "affirmative action" function primarily to obscure the circular reasoning on offer. In many cases, these buzzwords mirror terms featured in associated federal legislation such as the mention of "equal pay for equal work" ("[Dow women then & now](#)," 1974, p. 2). In KMi74, however, these words are not coupled with definitions, explications, or applications. Instead, they are defined only in light of claims and contentions put forward in other parts of the pamphlets. That is, they are simply a rephrasing of what came before. For example, in "[The Corporate Forest](#)" (1974) pamphlet, the text explicitly puts "dictionary definitions aside" to "develop some understanding and look at what affirmative action means to business" (p. 1). Subsequent discussion offers no explication of what "affirmative action" is, in business or elsewhere, but a basic celebration of "affirmative action" regardless of its meaning. In fact, a specific definition for affirmative action does not appear anywhere in the campaign. Instead, this particular pamphlet goes on to incorporate half a dozen references to Dow's enthusiasm concerning the government's requirement for corporate affirmative action, which it discusses using the tautology that "industry affirmative action is the name for a positive program to provide opportunity to people who haven't been given opportunity in the past" ("[The Corporate Forest](#)," 1974, p. 1). Further, this pamphlet asserts that affirmative action is, more than anything else, "good business" with both a "positive influence now" and a future that will "unfold many more good things for employees at all levels" (p. 2). Readers garner through this definitional work that the program's valence is positive, that it functions by offering opportunities to individuals who have previously gone without, and that, somehow, this offering of opportunities is good for the company in terms of business; the latter contention is one that [Perriton \(2009\)](#) termed "the business case" for organization diversity and reveals to be ultimately counterproductive in that it "removes any potential for challenge of the dominant values and behaviors of business" (p. 220). In this instance, the circularity comes in a structural sense as the program is labeled "positive," which then upholds "good" outcomes, though there is no delineation of how or why one leads to the other. Good follows positive, and that is as much explication as is provided. The circular form of the communication here and elsewhere functions iconically, in that the form also communicates content about the program itself ([Leff & Sachs, 1990](#)). The underlying message is that Dow's affirmative-action program is lacking in any new information or

approach which allows Dow as an organization to end up back where it started while still remaining in good standing by way of government compliance.

Disingenuity Appeals Via Bait and Switch

Yet another mode by which benevolent sexism is communicated in the KMi74 campaign is that of disingenuity through “bait and switch” appeals. In both colloquial and legal senses, this concept refers to a type of fraud in which a company advertises “an appealing but ingenuine” offer to sell products or services as a front to sell other goods ([Legal Information Institute, 2020](#), p. 5). These appealing offers (the “bait”) bring in customers, but, once the customers are in the door, the company reveals that these baited products are unavailable. An alternative, less desirable option that benefits the seller is upheld as available (the “switch”). Though this tactic originated in sales practices, recent research reveals that it has also been used in marketing for affirmative-action campaigns and efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion—notably including hiring practices (see [Andrade & Cooper, 2019](#); [Atay, 2019](#)). Hiring campaigns have been shown to market businesses as desiring “diverse” hires and valuing underrepresented groups, but after hiring, these employees often struggle with shifting expectations, microaggressions, and tokenism without adequate institutional support (e.g., [Reed & Mack, 2019](#)).

In relation to feminist movements and women’s inclusion in particular, [Aguilar \(1999\)](#) pointed to the pitfall of second-wave “difference feminism” in which the baited “inclusion” of women of color created a “paradoxical effect of ostensibly recognizing the ‘other’ at the same time that it conceals the material conditions underpinning that marginality” (p. 154). This concealment refers, in part, to the active process of denying or hiding the power of the in-group. In the case at hand, the KMi74 campaign ostensibly appeals to the centrality of women to success in science and business, and depicts women as enjoying newfound purpose in this industry (the “bait”). But despite these sorts of claims, the pamphlets primarily position women as working in peripheral roles by gendering their assumed motivations for work (the “switch”). This bait and switch move appears in two key forms, wherein a baiting of women’s future role in Dow and in scientific progress is accompanied by a switch that involves either: (a) an emphasis on the secretarial force and infantilization of this “unskilled labor,” and/or (b) the attribution of women’s success to the superior-subordinate relationship, rather than to the quality of women’s work in and of itself.

The first of these switches happens consistently throughout the campaign. While describing the types of positions available to women workers within Dow, the campaign pamphlets stress women’s role as support workers, rather than as independent employees. This is reflected in one respect by the campaign’s heavy emphasis on the secretarial force and women as especially

well-suited for secretarial positions. For example, the pamphlets make 21 individual references implying that secretarial work is largely unskilled labor, as well as a dozen references to how only some women or minorities are fit for skilled positions. This is seen most commonly in the final pamphlet, "[Talents and Technology](#)" (1974), as it includes numerous remarks suggesting that new word-processing technology will prevent the common mistakes made by disinterested, careless secretaries. For example, in an anecdote told from the point of view of a lab report (and thus drawing from a lens of absurdity and humor yet again), the report celebrates what the technology means in terms of, "no more saturation from opaque liquid, no more muttered remarks from the secretary. And, best of all, I am error free" (p. 1). Moreover, references to specific secretaries and secretaries in general often portray them as childlike and unprofessional. For instance, the fifth pamphlet in the campaign details and celebrates an ongoing professional development workshop at Dow where secretaries are selected to participate in teamwork activities that involve building with small wooden blocks in a classroom surrounded by white boards. The pamphlet explains that "block building wasn't a test of muscular skill or creative design; it was one of many learning games in the two-day training session for secretaries" ("[Building blocks and people](#)," 1974, p.1). Rather than learning specialized skills in this workshop, skills that might better position them to advance at Dow, participants report having garnered quite elementary concepts and mottos from the experience. They report making progress in overcoming their shyness, for example, and finding out "that two heads are better than one," a point accentuated with a photograph of two participants with their heads side by side (p. 2). These employees are upheld in this framing as wide-eyed pupils, so far afield from the scientists doing research and development in adjacent Dow quarters that their training registers as on-par with that of a nursery school.

Moreover, these sorts of infantilization appeals or "switches" are furthered by an ongoing metaphor describing women and minority workers as "seedlings" in a "corporate forest." At one point in the third pamphlet, readers are encouraged to

Pretend Sally, really an employee, is the struggling seedling we've described. . . with affirmative action planting a seed, Sally is given the air, water and light to grow in tree-language or she has been promoted to a more challenging job in people-talk. ("[The Corporate Forest](#)," 1974, p. 2)

The sing-song style in which this simplistic metaphor is delivered undermines the degree to which a reader might truly believe that "Sally"—a name that, it should be noted, frequented picture and early-reader books at mid-century—and her fellow female co-workers might go from "struggling seedling" to a "challenging job" at Dow. Anyone who is in need of, as the

pamphlet puts it at various points, “people-words” and playing “pretend,” is not situated realistically as in-line for a higher-level position in the company but is instead merely condescended to in the context of a professional work environment that requires the gestures of inclusivity (p. 2). No amount of “air, light and water to grow” could induce the degree of training, education, and transformation necessary (p. 2). In this instance, the bait of an authentic dedication to the incorporation and inclusion of women into Dow’s specialized workforce and leadership reveals itself almost immediately as an obvious switch in light of the patronizing even humiliating tone of this metaphor’s delivery.

Beyond appeals grounded in infantilization, KMi74 also switches up its baited claims about promoting women in science by attributing the successes of women at Dow not to the quality of their own work but, rather, to successful management by superiors. For example, in the fourth campaign pamphlet, Violete Stevens—a senior research chemist who is celebrated for having a “whole job” at Dow—is quoted saying that anyone can have a “whole job” or full-time, skilled position, “if the subordinate and supervisor do both their parts in molding” that role (“[The hobby of a whole job](#),” 1974, p. 2). The suggestion here is that the supervisor (who may be a woman but who, in the vast majority of cases, is a man) is needed to “manage” the lower-level employee in order to shape them into a good worker. Similarly, in the second campaign pamphlet, Marilyn Brown—a former member of the committee for Advancement of Women Employees at Dow (AWED)—states that over the years and in her capacity as committee coordinator she “saw many Dow women experience job enrichment because of an awakening of their managers” (“[Dow women then & now](#),” 1974, p. 2). In this respect, Brown puts the impetus for the success of specific women at Dow, including potentially herself, on those higher-ups at the company who came to see individual women as potential assets. This pamphlet goes on to explain that efforts to “better utilize women through a contact person who spearheads the activity and reports to local management” are ongoing and bolstered by the KMi74 initiative (p. 2).

This leveraging of a superior’s foresight and effort against the supposed successes of individual women employees is also evident in what the pamphlets describe as the “main job” of AWED, a committee composed of five female Dow employees because “women can better understand other working women” (“[Dow women then & now](#),” 1974, p. 1). The job in question is to “convince middle management that top management was committed to the promotion and utilization of women” (p.1). In this way, women at Dow are tasked with making a case for themselves and other women so that those in leadership positions can be convinced of women’s usability. Indeed, women are repeatedly upheld in these pamphlets as resources to be acted upon—whether on committees or in terms of their potential for completing

tasks—rather than as agents in their own right. In an interview about KMi74, sections of which were reproduced in the campaign itself, Dow President Barnes states that “line supervision is committed and lots of people in support groups are helping with recruiting, assessing, training and developing minority and women employees” (“[The Corporate Forest](#),” 1974, p. 1). He goes on, however, to state that “the tough part—the thing that is really challenging supervisors in Dow—is developing employees to go up the ladder into top jobs” (p. 1). This statement simultaneously suggests that developing women employees is a challenge, but also that the promotion and support of women is in the hands of supervisors. Those encountering the campaign materials learn that, while the goal of KMi74 is to include and support women in science and at Dow more broadly, if the women themselves cannot ultimately be shaped into proper employees, then the company is not to be held responsible for that outcome.

Discussion

This study offers a close reading of the communicative infrastructure of one of the earliest, government-sanctioned, affirmative-action programs in the United States—Dow Chemical’s “Know More in ‘74” campaign. In analyzing the campaign’s six internal pamphlets and accompanying materials, we found that—despite its explicit celebration of women employees—the campaign functioned in subtle but consistent and powerful ways to maintain the company’s status quo via what [Glick and Fiske \(1996\)](#) theorized as benevolent sexism. Since the publication of Glick and Fiske’s initial research on this construct, scholarship has made clear the many harms of benevolent sexism, particularly in the workplace (e.g., [Cassidy & Krendl, 2019](#); [Gervais & Hillard, 2011](#); [Hideg & Shen, 2019](#)), but little has been established about the communicative means by which benevolent sexism is upheld. Thus, in this study we focused on identifying and explicating KMi74’s communicative patterns. In this discussion, we concentrate on reviewing these findings: (a) considering their possible manifestations in contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, and (b) articulating some viable, communicative alternatives that may better uphold inclusivity and sex- and gender-based achievement in the twenty-first-century workplace.

The most pervasive communicative pattern that emerged from this analysis was that of vagueness wherein concrete details about Dow’s affirmative-action initiative were withheld, strategically obscured, or overlooked in favor of appeals to generalized values or attitudes. These types of generalizations provided the sense that change was happening or was about to happen at Dow by gesturing toward alterations in feelings or awareness but not toward changes in specific actions or behaviors. On one hand, this focus certainly had a lot to do with the strategic ambiguity built into the specific legislative terrain

of the early 1970s. As [Menand \(2020\)](#) pointed out, when affirmative action was first developed, the authors “needed a flexible phrase because Kennedy’s committee was a bureaucratic entity with a vague mandate meant to signal the Administration’s commitment to fairness in employment” (p. 2). At the time, the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity had “no real enforcement mechanism,” Menard explained, “so ‘affirmative action’ was intended to communicate to firms that needed to integrate their workforce something like ‘Don’t just stand there. Do something.’ What they were supposed to do, aside from not discriminating, was unspecified” (p. 3). This lack of specificity, and lack of active enforcement, was mirrored in the vagueness of KMi74 via ambiguous statements, absurd, humorous, and out-of-place exemplars and illustrations, and repeated centering of awareness over any concrete action. On the whole, this content functioned to help change the subject when concrete information about the program was not provided and to devalue the program itself and the ideals it represented, that of opportunity, support, and investment in women as employees at Dow and as professionals more generally. It also functioned by taking up a great deal of space in the pamphlets, which gave the impression that content would be about affirmative-action policy change at Dow. Instead, however, the pamphlets provided only vague generalities and nonsensical directives.

In concert with appeals to vagueness, KMi74 was also communicated through appeals to circularity. This mode of fallacious, informal logic poses questions, both overt and implicit, and then answers them in ways that lead back to those same queries. In KMi74, this took the form of simplistic redundancy in most cases, but also in terms of repetition coupled with slight reframing. It also took the form of repeated inclusion of federally and culturally relevant buzzwords that were not coupled with definitions or explanations but, instead, were defined only in terms of what had been stated in other pamphlets in the series. As in the campaign’s many appeals to vagueness, the campaign’s appeals to circularity functioned by bringing nothing new to the table. The campaign in an overarching sense, then, offered readers an insular, closed system, confusing enough to keep readers looking for answers but also frustrating to the point that the majority would give up searching before they realized that there was nothing to find.

Finally, KMi74 also upheld a framework of benevolent sexism by trading in appeals to disingenuity via bait and switch argumentation. Company employees and stakeholders were promised a future wherein women would help to progress the science that Dow oversaw and developed, but women ultimately came to be offered something different because the campaign framed them as a poor fit for upper-level, technical, and specialized opportunities. This framing involved infantilization wherein women were featured building with blocks and staring wide-eyed at each other rather than doing any type of specialized training, all the while professing how pleased they were to

accomplish small tasks such as speaking in front of a group. Moreover, KMi74 implied repeatedly that those who supervise and otherwise oversee women employees at Dow are responsible for their advancement, rather than the women themselves. The benevolent sexism inherent to these appeals encouraged all campaign viewers regardless of sex or gender to perceive women as less capable than men and as in-need of significant assistance to enter or advance in the workplace. This communicative trifecta of vagueness, circularity, and disingenuity assured that Dow's campaign lacked the argumentative warrants necessary for change, warrants related to women's training opportunities, advancement and specific skills needed for employment in Dow's technical positions, and the measures used to demonstrate the campaign's success over time. While the campaign may have proved itself in compliance with federal regulations, even as an exemplar of such compliance, it was nonetheless not communicated so that its audiences would "know more" about much of anything.

Today, some 46 years after Dow's initial affirmative-action campaign unfolded, there is some indication that the specific communicative patterns that KMi74 featured may have come to function as something of a historical, organization script for the communication of organizational inclusion campaigns to come, a script for maintaining the status quo of exclusivity and ensuring that mandated inclusivity initiatives are less than efficacious. For instance, Dow's current online "Diversity and Inclusion" statement—which while not equivalent to the internal KMi74 campaign still allows for some comparison between past scripts and contemporary ones—reflects some of the same vagueness and circular reasoning evident in KMi74. On the front page of the "Diversity and Inclusion" website, Chief Human Resources Officer and Chief Inclusion Officer, Karen S. Carter, is quoted stating that "Inclusion & Diversity is a business imperative for Dow and is not only the right thing to do, but it's the smart thing to do" (Dow, 2020). This statement mirrors "The Corporate Forest" (1974) pamphlet's tautological assessment—it's "business case" as Perriton (2009) identified it (p. 218)—that affirmative action is an inherently positive initiative because it "is good business" ("The Corporate Forest," 1974, p. 2). The major (important) difference between the two is that this current iteration of the statement is attributed to Carter, a Black woman holding an executive position at Dow. And yet, although Carter's attribution may seem to offer audiences proof that Dow values women's advancement and leadership, this statement is located five pages back from the corporate home page, making it unlikely that most audiences will come upon it. This webpage highlights buzzwords and phrases that seem to lead back only to themselves, such as "equal opportunity" and even "inclusion" more generally. Similarly, it could also be argued that disingenuity appeals via bait and switch are identifiable in Dow's current "Inclusion and Diversity" materials in that there is heavy reliance on the idea that leadership at the company is

responsible for women's and minorities' successes. In this respect, both past and contemporary inclusivity appeals at Dow reveal that the presence of industry standard buzzwords and vague reasoning concerning diversity as it is "good for business" are not the same as transparency about policies for diversity and inclusion. As [Ahmed \(2012\)](#) explained:

Statements of commitment can thus be understood as opaque: it is not clear what they are doing if they are not doing what they are saying. A commitment [to diversity] does not necessarily commit the institution to anything or to doing anything. (p. 116)

Accordingly, Ahmed contended that ultimately, "commitment needs to be explained, even when a commitment has been made" (p. 118). Soundbites referring to diversity as simply "the smart thing to do" are not an explanation of policy or action on the part of the company. Continued research into the major communicative mechanisms upholding present-day inclusion programs along these lines is needed to provide a clear assessment and comparison with KMi74, particularly research into recent internal campaigns at Dow and other companies that align with KMi74's function and focus.

Although it is beyond the scope of the current research to offer a rigorous analysis of contemporary indications of these specific modes of communicating benevolent sexism, it is important to note in the context of this historical research that, as [Calder-Dawe \(2015\)](#) explained, "sexism thrives in the present because it appears to dwell in the past" (p. 89). Indeed, it may be tempting to write off KMi74 and its communicative patterns as no more than a remnant of another age and therefore as less than instructive in the present moment. From the perspective of historical organization studies, however, this would be a mistake ([Maclean et al., 2016](#)), perhaps especially in this case where there is so much evidence that KMi74 was positioned in a number of ways to offer a discursive template or script for inclusivity initiatives that followed. We contend that the discursive sediments of KMi74 are likely not only evident in contemporary initiatives but are also playing a role in their longitudinal ineffectivity. Given this perspective, we identify some potential modes of resisting and ultimately replacing these communicative mechanisms, as well as the underlying scripts through which they are enacted, as they may be identified in contemporary inclusion campaigns. As all three of these appeals are grounded in argumentative fallacies related to (1) lack of specificity, (2) begging the question, and (3) failing to follow-through on promises made, it may be enough to get a resistive conversation started by identifying these fallacies and demanding details, evidence that differs from claims, and output that aligns with expectations. Certainly, the analysis at hand makes clear that those in position to design contemporary inclusion campaigns and initiatives must be sure to provide detailed information about how the program will

work, which involves foregoing generalizations and humor in favor of specificities and a more serious take on the subject matter. They will need to forego and upend circular reasoning by including new, verifiable information by way of evidence for claims, and by clearly defining the terms and ideas that form the crux of the language on offer. Further, they will need to give their stakeholders what they promise, as opposed to a lesser version of what audiences were led to believe. This will require—again—very clear details about measuring success in the program and upholding inclusive standards and actions. All the while, they must also not forget that communication in and of itself, no matter what its modes are, is not enough to change any exclusive system within an organization. Other factors such as an infrastructure that supports effective mentoring (Buzzanell et al., 2015) and attention to “culturally constituted organizational perceptions of women and their leadership potential” (Dutta, 2018, p. 233) have been shown to be vital in making women’s success in the scientific workplace a reality. These factors must be championed in concert with attempts to upend the communication of benevolent sexism.

There are several limitations to the present research that are important to address. For one, Dow’s KMi74 campaign is just one early affirmative-action initiative. Although it was touted and upheld as a model for other such programs, it is not necessarily representative of all such campaigns at the time and is certainly not representative of all inclusion campaigns today. To more comprehensively explicate either the construct of benevolent sexism and/or its communication in the context of inclusion campaigns, future research must analyze other campaigns and instances wherein benevolent sexism was and is communicated. These efforts will no doubt unveil other communicative modes by which benevolent sexism is circulated and may, in some cases, find some overlap with the appeals identified in this specific case. The work of theorizing benevolent sexism in an attempt to thwart its power and force will require continued effort on this front and a range of different case studies, methodological tools, and theoretical approaches. We hope that the present analysis provides a useful springboard for research along these lines, one that may in some potential ways be tempered by the understanding that the theoretical explication of benevolent sexism occurred some years after the KMi74 campaign circulated at Dow. To that point, though, we would argue that the communicative processes that benevolent sexism involves were as evident in the 1970s as they were when benevolent sexism was finally recognized by scholars several decades later.

Another limitation of this research is that we did not garner access to the campaign’s “Rapback” pamphlet, which is previewed in the other pamphlets as a follow-up to the campaign proper. In fact, we have yet to confirm if the “Rapback” pamphlet was ever actually created or circulated because no information is provided about it in the Othmer Library collection or associated

secondary literature. Should the “Rapback” pamphlet ever be located, an analysis of its promised “two-way conversation” between campaign creators and employees (“Know more in ’74,” 1974, p. 1) would offer some additional context to the response to and reception of KMi74.

Conclusion

On the whole, what our analysis demonstrates is that the specific communicative patterns at the heart of inclusion initiatives both past and present may play a central role in the realization (or not) of their goals, perhaps even more central than the explicit arguments pro-offered or promised by corporate and organizational authors. This study also contends that, because existing inclusion initiatives emerge from the discursive infrastructure of the movement’s founding in the 1970s, it is possible that they retain some of the counterproductive modes of appeal that were featured in those 1970s initiatives. As companies, businesses, and other organizations look to create a future where women, BIPOC, and members of other traditionally underrepresented and underserved communities are central players in skilled and leadership roles, they will need to ensure that their efforts avoid and resist the communicative patterns evident in KMi74, particularly because those patterns are some of the driving forces behind benevolent sexism in corporate, organizational contexts. The future of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs can be more effectively supported and achieved with a re-imagining of the scripts undergirding such programs historically.

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