



**Institutionalized Inclusivity, Equity, and Discriminatory Practices:  
A Case Study of Workforce Perceptions in Fort Myers, FL**

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Abstract

Southwest Florida (Cape Coral/Fort Myers) is among the fastest growing urban areas in the US due to rapid immigration to the region from other states, Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. As the demographic makeup of US communities transforms, the need for public oversight of diversity, equity and inclusiveness in local government has emerged as a vital component of tangible and meaningful change. The Fort Myers Mayor's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Committee (MDEIAC) was convened to improve inclusiveness in City governance through data-driven decision-making. The purpose of this study is to investigate how perceptions of city diversity are shaped by individual experiences with exclusionary workforce practices. Research was conducted with  $n=343$  public and private workforce members in Fort Myers, FL using five structured instruments to measure perceptions of citywide diversity (diversity climate, inclusive practices, discriminatory practices) and personal experience with exclusionary forces (favoritism and discrimination). Results confirm the experience of discrimination is a moderate predictor of citywide measures, though experiences of privileged treatment/favoritism were not significant predictors, possibly indicating these complementary forces of exclusion are not viewed as such by all workforce members. Exploratory analysis further identified background, socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and religious attributes that potentially shape citywide and personal outcomes. The findings of this study will be used to advance diversity in Southwest Florida by procuring hard data to assist MDEIAC in advising local Fort Myers governance about inclusive and exclusive workforce experiences.

*Keywords:* diversity, equity, workplace inclusion, cultural relativism, nativism

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## Introduction

At the onset of the protests arising from the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the World Economic Forum (2021) reported that systemic racism has been brewing in the United States since even before the country was founded, shaping the lives of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other minorities for hundreds of years. The same is true in many other countries, too. As heartbreaking and frustrating as it may be, profound change may take just as long. Gillborn (2008) observed that in spite of the efforts to increase the level of inclusivity and equity in organizations, there is the inescapable conclusion of the fact that different forms of institutionalized discrimination abounds in many organizations all over United States and most other multinational states worldwide. In this paper, the authors examine how institutionalized practices become catalysts of discrimination. At the onset, it is important to establish the fact that what exactly institutionalized discrimination may mean in specific settings may differ from one organization to another. It also differs when applied to either individuals or organizations. Lincoln and Stanley (2021) pointed out that there is more consensus about how discrimination manifests itself at the individual level; however, when discussion turns to the institutional level, it often leads to denial on the part of institutional leaders.

The City of Fort Myers in Southwest Florida (SWFL) is one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the United States due to rapid immigration to the region from all over the world and other parts of the country. Largely due to the favorable weather and opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, Fort Myers has attracted people of diverse backgrounds for many centuries. In early twentieth century, the city attracted some of the notable founders of the American industrial revolution. For instance, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Harvey Firestone (*the uncommon friends*) founded their winter homes in the city in the 1920s.

In spite of attracting diverse populations, Fort Myers has remained one of the most segregated cities in Lee County, FL. According to a 1964 report from the Florida State Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, fewer than two percent of formerly segregated schools had experienced any desegregation by that point (Smith 2014).

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, diversity-related conflicts were accelerated by the global resurgence of nativism in this region with a confluence of diverse cultural identities in an historically segregated setting. As a force rooted in longstanding social,



cultural, and political-economic exploitation of human ethnocentrism (the natural tendency to view unfamiliar beliefs and behaviors as *other* than or inferior to one's own cultural expectations), nativist decision-making in local governance can result in exclusionary workforce policies and practices.

The concept of nativism is hardly new; it is a force that has resonated among human groups since prehistory, as culturally diverse groups encountered each other in constantly shifting ecologies. But contemporary iterations of nativist thinking more closely mirror early twentieth century upwellings of nationalism that gripped a changing world on the brink of rapid modernization. For early American Anthropologists such as Franz Boas, a cultural relativist approach became a potent, learned antidote to ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia. To Boas and many others, academia—and education more generally—was key to fostering diversity, and a critical entry point for engaging with local governance to improve and promote diversity.

### **Literature review**

In the last three decades, awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusivity is evident in the increasing availability of literature on the topic. A multicultural, inclusive organization is one in which the diversity of knowledge and perspectives that members bring to the workplace are critical for shaping work strategies, institutional missions, management and operating systems, as well as core values and norms for success (Holvino et al., 2004; Nair and Vohra 2008). Levine et al. (2004) noted that a group's ability to achieve its goals, and sometimes its very survival, depend on its composition as defined by the diversity of its members. Any forward-looking organization would benefit from on interventions for identifying the full benefits of diversity and inclusion, though such mediations are poorly understood empirically, necessitating closer examination of the benefits of fostering workforce diversity. In Fort Myers, we note that a study done by the University of Michigan pointed out that Lee County in which Fort Myers is located is one of the most segregated regions in United States.

Unfortunately, many organizations still experience one form of discrimination or another with dire adverse consequences. Pager and Shepard (2008) noted that the persistent racial inequality in employment, housing, and other social domains has renewed interest in the possible role of discriminatory practices in organizational performance. Although most of the various



forms of exclusion are fairly obvious to identify, it was also noted that the majority forms of contemporary forms of discrimination, however, are often subtle and covert. It has been noted that these pose problems for researchers dealing with studies on social scientific conceptualization and measurement of the way discrimination influences organizational behavior.

Goldman, Slaughter and Schmit (2008) observed that even an organization with a strong diversity policy may still be negatively affected by the perceptions and experiences of its workforce. In this study, in order to examine the depth of perception of the level of discrimination by individuals, the multiple needs model of justice was used. This enabled the researchers to explore the employee reactions to real or perceived discrimination. The level of discrimination was interpreted through the three levels of needs as per the model – economic needs, interpersonal needs, and deontic (ethical) needs (Ozfidan & Toprak, 2020). These were explored as consequences of the perceived discrimination and as antecedents of job attitudes and turnover intentions among individuals of different backgrounds. Whereas inclusive institutional practices may reduce actual discrimination, perceived discrimination still has a strong adverse effect on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall workforce citizenship. For this reason, senior management has become increasingly involved in diversity matters and training. A 2020 survey of 50 Pittsburgh-area firms employing nearly 140,000 workers found nearly 90 percent provided diversity training, while around a third of those firms' efforts to foster diversity and inclusion were headed by chief executives (Ensher et al. 2001).

Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart has noted that both individually and collectively, the private sector has begun to respond to racial injustice and inequality. Maxine Williams, chief diversity officer at Facebook, similarly explained that the social media platform has been used to raise awareness about Black stories and Black businesses following the murder of George Floyd with campaigns such as #shareblackstories and #buyblackfriday (May 2021). While these efforts are helpful in both reducing racially based tensions and creating public awareness, critics dismiss these efforts as strategic corporate marketing rather than meaningful change that actually fosters increased diversity and inclusivity. One of the consistent problems is that behind the rosy facade of corporate self-evaluation of diversity remains deeply rooted structural bias against women and people of color (Kerber et al. 2020).



A closer examination of efforts to foster workforce diversity and inclusivity therefore remains critical for evaluating the extent these efforts successfully effect actual progress in terms of positive perceptions and experiences of workers. In Fort Myers, there is greater involvement not only by political leaders but also senior City Management, including the City Manager and City Council. The Fort Myers Mayor’s Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council (MDIAC) was established in 2018 by then-Mayor Randall Henderson as a non-partisan committee of diverse community members from across SWFL’s private and public sectors. MDIAC was originally founded with 18 members assigned to PEAS Framework for Ethical Decision Making (Figure 1).

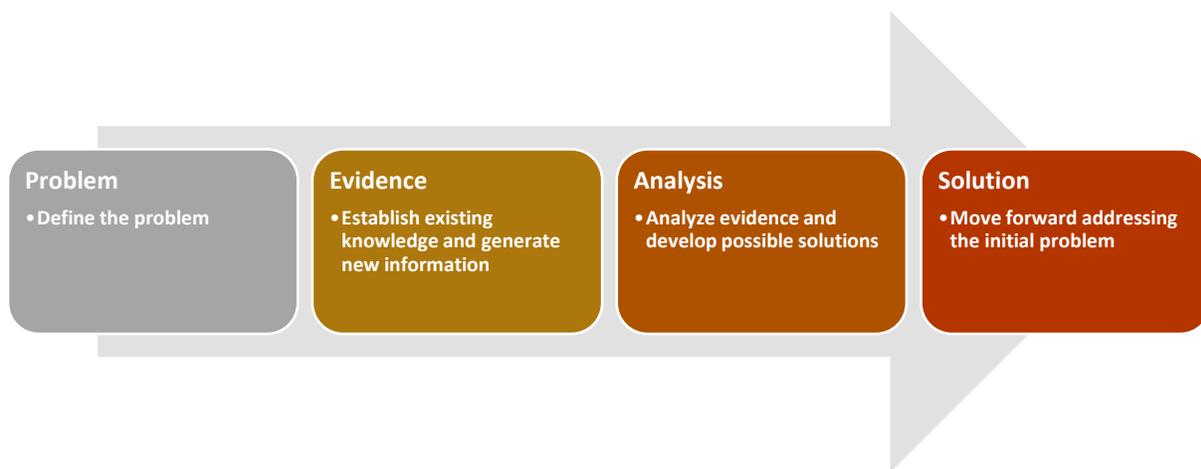


Figure 1. PEAS Framework for Ethical Decision Making

Taken From: [www.montana.edu/teachlearn/.../COBasmt-PEAS\\_FrmwrkCritThink.doc](http://www.montana.edu/teachlearn/.../COBasmt-PEAS_FrmwrkCritThink.doc)

## Methods

This mixed methods paper evaluates how perceptions of citywide diversity are shaped by individual experiences with inclusionary and exclusionary workforce practices. Research was conducted with  $n=343$  public and private workforce members in Fort Myers, FL using five structured instruments to measure perceptions of citywide diversity (diversity climate, inclusivity practices, discriminatory practices) and personal experience with exclusionary forces (privilege/favoritism, discrimination). It was hypothesized that personal experience measures significantly influence citywide scores. Exploratory analysis was further conducted to detect



significant associations across background factors such as age, gender, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic factors, as well as racial, ethnic, national, and religious identities. Research aims to understand community ideas and experiences with diversity to inform MDEIAC's recommendations for ethical citywide decision-making.

### **Sampling**

A non-probabilistic voluntary response sample of  $n=343$  Fort Myers-area workforce members was collected by distributing a 15-20-minute Qualtrics survey to City offices and local registered businesses seeking voluntary participation. Sampling criteria were that respondents were employed residents of the Fort Myers area (including city limits and unincorporated Fort Myers) for at least one year and at least 18 years of age or older. No monetary compensation was offered and all research protocols were approved by The Mayor's Office of the City of Fort Myers. The data was collected anonymously by sending out the survey to different social groups and organizations within the City of Fort Myers.

In order to ensure that all segments of the city's population were represented, a form of stratified sampling was applied. In this method, the population was first divided into subgroups (or strata) who all share a similar characteristic. In order to ensure that the sample was as representative of the population as possible, the groups were based on these four criteria; socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, and gender. The final data collected indicated that there was reasonable representation of respondents from all the subgroups.

### **Participants**

One of the fastest growing cities in America; our paper specifically focuses on workforce members so something about the labor industry here. Lots of professionals and business owners in our sample. Would be good to talk about how City of Fort Myers caters to local businesses. #2 Best place to Retire (US News & World Report 2020-21 rankings) based on affordable homes, low taxes, and ratings of happiness and desirability. The participants were diverse – coming from all the various subgroups sampled.

### **Data collection**

A 52-item semi-structured questionnaire was distributed by email to local public offices and private businesses in Fort Myers comprising three sections: background and identity details, perceptions of citywide diversity, and personal experiences of exclusion.



The survey instrument focused on various demographic variables that included age (intervals), biological identity (female; male), sexual orientation (exclusively heterosexual; bisexual; exclusively homosexual), disability status (disability reported; not reported), civil status (single; married; separated; widowed; divorced; domestic partnership), place of birth (within Fort Myers; within Florida; within United States; outside United States), highest education level (HS diploma/GED; tech/vocational/Associate's degree; Bachelor's degree; Master's degree or beyond), income level (intervals), occupational role (full-time student/retired; unemployed; part-time/seasonal/casual worker; full-time general employee; middle/senior management; CEO/business owner), ethnic/racial identity (African-American/Afro-Caribbean/Black; Asian-American/pan-Asian; Hispanic/Latinx; Middle Eastern/North African; First-Nation/Alaskan/Hawaiian Native; White; Multiple Reported/Other), and religious affiliation (Christian; Muslim; Jewish; Hindu; Buddhist; no religion reported). All non-interval categorical variables (i.e., nominal) included an "Other" option accompanied by a free-response box, and questions about ethnic/racial identity and religious affiliation allowed for selection of multiple options.

The data was collected through sending out the survey instrument through Qualtrics. This was anonymously sent to the various organizations and individuals from the various subgroups sampled. The completed survey instrument was received anonymously once the respondent clicked submit.

### **Data collected**

Table 1 presents items and response criteria for citywide and personal experience scales (5 outcomes total). Citywide scales include Perception of Citywide Diversity Climate (5 items), Citywide Inclusivity Practices (12 items), and Citywide Discriminatory Practices (4 items). All were queried using a 7-point agreement scale (strongly disagree; agree; somewhat agree; neutral; somewhat agree; agree; strongly agree). These will serve as dependent variable in significance testing, while personal experience scales will be tested as independent predictors controlling for background and identity variables. Personal measures include Perception of Privilege/Favoritism (10 items) and Perception of Discrimination (10 items), which both comprise yes/no responses to whether respondents experienced favoritism or discrimination based on their race, gender, age, religion, sexuality, nationality, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, disability status, or



civil status. Personal measures will also serve as dependent variables to further explore the effect of background and identity attributes on individual experiences of favoritism and discrimination.

Table 1. Items and response criteria for citywide and personal perception scales.

Outcome Scale	Response Criteria
<b>Perception of Citywide Diversity Climate</b>	
<i>-The City of Fort Myers</i>	
...has a strong commitment to embracing diversity.	1. Strongly disagree
...provides an environment for open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.	2. Disagree
...offers education and training programs about inclusiveness of all persons.	3. Somewhat disagree
...has fostered overall diversity in the last three years.	4. Neutral/Does not know
...has made progress with diversity initiatives in the past 25 years.	5. Somewhat agree
	6. Agree
	7. Strongly agree
<b>Perception of Citywide Inclusivity Practices</b>	
<i>-The City of Fort Myers takes diversity and inclusion into consideration...</i>	
...when awarding business contracts	1. Strongly disagree
...when recruiting employees.	2. Disagree
...when rewarding work performance.	3. Somewhat disagree
...hiring trainees/promoting career development.	4. Neutral/Does not know
...when hiring top management positions.	5. Somewhat agree
...in housing.	6. Agree
...in education opportunities.	7. Strongly agree
...when awarding community development projects.	
...promoting events that celebrate diversity.	
...fostering community connections.	
...promoting positive social change.	
...developing multicultural events.	
<b>Perception of Citywide Discriminatory Practices</b>	
...Diverse individuals are discriminated against in the City of Fort Myers.	1. Strongly disagree
...In general, people experience discrimination in the City of Fort Myers.	2. Disagree
...Fort Myers leadership has not taken necessary action on discrimination.	3. Somewhat disagree
...Discrimination, prejudice, and intolerance in the City of Fort Myers has not improved in the last three years.	4. Neutral/Does not know
	5. Somewhat agree
	6. Agree
	7. Strongly agree



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### **Personal Perception of Privilege/Favoritism and Discrimination**

*I have personally experienced privileged treatment or favoritism due to my...*

*I have personally experienced discrimination due to my...*

... racial identity.

... gender.

... religious affiliation.

... sexual orientation.

... age.

... nationality.

... political affiliation.

... socioeconomic status.

... disability status.

... civil status.

0. Has not experienced

1. Has experienced

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### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential analyses were performed in SPSS for the total sample and compared by trichotomous age groups (young adults [18 < 35]; middle-age adults [36 < 55]; older adults [> 55]). Background, socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and religious attributes were compared by age using Chi-Square tests of independence where applicable. Items for citywide and personal outcomes were analyzed using scale reliability analysis and summed to calculate individual scores for analyses.

Means (+sd, range) of citywide scales and medians (+range) of personal outcomes were compared by trichotomous age groups using two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the nonparametric equivalent. Bivariate correlations of outcome scales were also performed for the total sample and an online Fisher z-transformation tool (Lowry 2021) used to calculate z-values for significance testing of correlation coefficients by age groups. Sexual orientation (exclusively heterosexual, not exclusively heterosexual), civil status (single never married, other), and place of birth (US-born, not US-born), as well as racial/ethnic and religious variables, were minimized to dichotomous dummy variables for use as predictors in regression analyses.

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to test the effect of personal experience measures on citywide outcomes using 4-block models controlling for background, identity, and religious attributes. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation to normality,



linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Age, sex at birth, sexual orientation, highest education level, income level, and occupation role were entered at Block 1, seven racial/ethnic dummy variables at Block 2, a dummy variable for *no religion reported* at Block 3, and the personal experience measures at Block 4.

Stepwise linear regressions of personal scales were performed starting with 22 demographic attributes to identify theoretically good predictors of experiences of favoritism and discrimination for exploration in further studies. At each step, variables were chosen based on a significance threshold of  $p < 0.05$  to set a limit on the total number of variables included in the final model.

## Results

Table 2 presents background attributes for the total sample ( $n=343$ ) and by trichotomized age cohorts. The majority are middle-age adults (46.9%) with a lower proportion of older adults (35.6%) and the fewest young adults (17.5%). Nearly two-thirds of the sample is female (64.4%) with respective lowest and highest proportions among young (58.3%) and older adults (69.7%). Nine of ten respondents (89.8%) reported their sexual orientation as exclusively heterosexual with a significantly ( $\chi^2(1) = 14.17, p = .007$ ) higher proportion of older adults (96.6%) than middle age (86.1%) or young adults (86.2%). Little more than 5% of the sample reported a disability with older adults representing the highest proportion (7.4%) but not significantly different than younger groups. Expectedly, young adults are significantly more likely ( $\chi^2(1) = 56.50, p = .000$ ) to be single never partnered, and middle-age and older adults more likely to report being married or in a domestic partnership. However, young adults are significantly ( $\chi^2(1) = 37.43, p = .000$ ) more Floridian (50.0%) than middle-age (21.8%) and older (15.6%) cohorts.

Conversely, roughly two-thirds of middle-age respondents and three-quarters of older adults were born in the United States (US) but outside Florida. Young adults are significantly more likely to have been born outside the US (16.7%) compared with equal proportions of older (9.8%) and middle-age (10.2%) adults. The total sample is highly educated: 67.4% hold at least a Bachelor's degree with roughly equal proportions reporting a Bachelor's (34.7%) or Master's (32.7%) degree as their highest level attained. While not a significant interaction, attainment of Bachelor's degrees was consistent across age groups with predictably lower proportions of young adults holding Master's degrees. Income level also reflect the expected effect of age, with



greater wealth concentration among middle-age and older adults, though also not significantly.

However, a significant interaction was found ( $\chi^2(1) = 14.62, p = .023$ ) for occupation role. Young

Table 2. Background and identity attributes for total sample (n=343) and by age cohorts with significant results of Chi-square tests of independence indicated.

	Total sample <i>n</i> =343	Young Adults (18 < 35) <i>n</i> =60 (17.5%)	Middle Age (36 < 55) <i>n</i> =161 (46.9%)	Older Adults (> 55) <i>n</i> =122 (35.6%)
<b>Biological sex at birth</b>				
% female	64.4% ( <i>n</i> =254)	58.3% ( <i>n</i> =35)	62.7% ( <i>n</i> =101)	69.7% ( <i>n</i> =85)
<b>Sexual Orientation (<i>n</i>=333) *</b>				
exclusively heterosexual	89.8% ( <i>n</i> =299)	86.2% ( <i>n</i> =50)	86.1% ( <i>n</i> =136)	96.6% ( <i>n</i> =113)
bisexual	2.4% ( <i>n</i> =8)	6.9% ( <i>n</i> =4)	2.5% ( <i>n</i> =4)	--
exclusively homosexual	7.8% ( <i>n</i> =26)	6.9% ( <i>n</i> =4)	11.4% ( <i>n</i> =18)	3.4% ( <i>n</i> =4)
<b>Disability reported</b>				
% reported disability	6.1% ( <i>n</i> =21)	1.7% ( <i>n</i> =1)	6.8% ( <i>n</i> =11)	7.4% ( <i>n</i> =9)
<b>Civil or relationship status**</b>				
single never partnered	19.0% ( <i>n</i> =65)	50.0% ( <i>n</i> =30)	14.3% ( <i>n</i> =23)	9.8% ( <i>n</i> =12)
widowed/separated/divorced	16.3% ( <i>n</i> =56)	--	15.5% ( <i>n</i> =25)	25.4% ( <i>n</i> =31)
married/domestic partnership	64.7% ( <i>n</i> =222)	50.0% ( <i>n</i> =30)	70.2% ( <i>n</i> =113)	64.8% ( <i>n</i> =79)
<b>Place of birth***</b>				
Within Fort Myers area	11.7% ( <i>n</i> =40)	18.3% ( <i>n</i> =11)	11.2% ( <i>n</i> =18)	9.0% ( <i>n</i> =11)
Within State of Florida	12.8% ( <i>n</i> =44)	31.7% ( <i>n</i> =19)	10.6% ( <i>n</i> =17)	6.6% ( <i>n</i> =8)
Within United States	64.4% ( <i>n</i> =221)	33.3% ( <i>n</i> =20)	68.3% ( <i>n</i> =110)	74.6% ( <i>n</i> =91)
Outside United States	11.1% ( <i>n</i> =38)	16.7% ( <i>n</i> =10)	9.9% ( <i>n</i> =16)	9.8% ( <i>n</i> =12)
<b>Highest education completed</b>				
some high school/HS diploma/GED	19.0% ( <i>n</i> =65)	23.3% ( <i>n</i> =14)	16.8% ( <i>n</i> =27)	19.7% ( <i>n</i> =24)
tech/vocational/Associate's degree	13.7% ( <i>n</i> =47)	16.7% ( <i>n</i> =10)	13.7% ( <i>n</i> =22)	12.3% ( <i>n</i> =15)
Bachelor's degree	34.7% ( <i>n</i> =119)	35.0% ( <i>n</i> =21)	34.2% ( <i>n</i> =55)	35.2% ( <i>n</i> =43)
Master's degree or beyond				



	32.7% (n=112)	25.0% (n=15)	35.4% (n=57)	32.8% (n=40)
Income level				
\$0.00 – \$50,000	18.4%	23.3%	14.9%	20.5%
\$50,000 – \$100,000	(n=63)	(n=14)	(n=24)	(n=25)
\$100,000 – \$250,000	37.9%	45.0%	41.0%	30.3%
\$250,000 +	(n=130)	(n=27)	(n=66)	(n=37)
	38.5%	26.7%	41.0%	41.0%
	(n=132)	(n=16)	(n=66)	(n=50)
	5.2%	5.0% (n=3)	3.1% (n=5)	8.2%
	(n=18)			(n=10)
Occupational role (n=379)****				
Part-time/seasonal/casual worker	4.1% (n=14)	3.3% (n=2)	4.3% (n=7)	4.1% (n=5)
Full-time general employee	40.8%	(n=33)	(n=71)	(n=36)
Middle/senior management	(n=140)	33.3%	32.9%	41.8%
CEO/business owner	36.2%	(n=20)	(n=53)	(n=51)
	(n=124)	8.3% (n=3)	18.6%	24.6%
	19.0%		(n=30)	(n=30)
	(n=65)			
Racial/ethnic identity				
Black American/Afro-Caribbean	20.4% (n=70)	20.0% (n=12)	21.7% (n=35)	18.9% (n=23)
Asian/pan-Asian	1.2% (n=4)	1.7% (n=1)	1.2% (n=2)	0.8% (n=1)
Hispanic/Latinx	5.8%	11.7% (n=7)	6.8%	1.6% (n=2)
Middle Eastern/North African	(n=20)	--	(n=11)	1.6% (n=2)
First-nation/Alaskan/Pacific islands	0.9% (n=3)	1.7% (n=1)	0.6% (n=1)	0.8% (n=1)
White (non-Hispanic)	0.6% (n=2)	58.3%	--	69.7%
Multiple categories reported	63.8% (n=219)	(n=35)	61.5% (n=99)	(n=85)
	7.3%	6.7% (n=4)	8.1%	6.6% (n=8)
	(n=25)		(n=13)	
Religious affiliation				
Christian	71.1%	65.0%	72.0%	73.0%
Muslim	(n=244)	(n=39)	(n=116)	(n=89)
Jewish	2.6% (n=9)	1.7% (n=1)	3.1% (n=5)	2.5% (n=3)
Hindu	2.9%	3.3% (n=2)	2.5% (n=4)	3.3% (n=4)
Buddhist	(n=10)	1.7% (n=1)	--	0.8% (n=1)
No religious identity reported	0.6% (n=2)	--	0.6% (n=1)	--
	0.4% (n=1)	28.3%	21.7%	20.5%
	22.4%	(n=17)	(n=35)	(n=25)
	(n=77)			

\* $p=.007$ ,  $\chi^2(1)=14.17$ ; \*\* $p=.000$ ,  $\chi^2(1)=56.50$ ; \*\*\* $p=.000$ ,  $\chi^2(1)=37.43$ ; \*\*\*\* $p=.023$ ,  $\chi^2(1)=14.62$



adults are more likely to report full-time general employment (55.0%) compared with middle-age (44.1%) and older adults (29.5%), while the latter groups are 2-3 times more likely (18.6%, 24.6%) to be CEOs and business owners than young respondents (8.3%).

White (non-Hispanic) (63.8%) and Black/Afro-Caribbean (20.4%) are the racial/ethnic identities with highest representation, while respondents who reported multiple identities (7.3%) and Hispanic/Latinx (5.8%) were the next largest groups. Proportions of racial/ethnic categories were consistent across age groups except among White (non-Hispanic) and Hispanic/Latinx respondents. Older adults are whiter and young adults more Hispanic/Latinx, while the highest proportion of Black/Afro-Caribbean/African respondents are middle-aged (21.7%). Most respondents (93.5%) either reported being Christian (71.1%) or having no religious identity (22.4%), while Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist respondents only account for a total 6.5% of the sample. This trend in religious affiliation is consistent across age groups (> 90% Christian or no religious affiliation), though greater proportions of older adults identify as some Christian denomination while more than a quarter (28.3%) of young adults report no religious affiliation.

Table 3 shows comparison of mean citywide scores and median personal experience scales by trichotomous age groups with significant two-way ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test indicated; Cronbach's alpha is also reported. Most of the scales show clear internal consistency, with highest scores for Citywide Diversity Climate ( $\alpha=.91$ ) and Citywide Inclusivity Practices ( $\alpha=.95$ ) and similarly reliable scores for Citywide Discriminatory Practices ( $\alpha=.73$ ). Older adults have significantly ( $F(2,269) = 3.4, p=.036$ ) higher mean City Inclusivity scores than middle-age or young adults, while middle-age respondents have significantly ( $F(2,331) = 3.4, p=.036$ ) higher mean City Discrimination scores than other age groups. No significant differences were found for City Diversity Climate scores by age, which were consistent with the total sample within 0.9.



Table 3. Mean ( $\pm$ sd) and range shown for citywide perception scales and median and range shown for personal perception scales with significant results of ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test indicated for trichotomous age groups.

	Total sample	Young Adults (18 < 35)	Middle Age (36 < 55)	Older Adults (> 55)
Citywide Diversity Climate $a = .91$	20.0 $\pm$ 7.1 $n=343$ (range: 5-35)	20.0 $\pm$ 7.6 $n=60$ (range: 5-34)	19.2 $\pm$ 7.2 $n=161$ (range: 5-35)	20.9 $\pm$ 6.5 $n=122$ (range: 5-35)
Citywide Inclusivity Practices $a = .95$	47.2 $\pm$ 14.2 $n=272$ (range: 12-84)*	44.9 $\pm$ 15.4 $n=45$ (range: 12-84)	45.9 $\pm$ 14.4 $n=137$ (range: 12-84)	50.1 $\pm$ 12.9 $n=90$ (range: 12-84)
Citywide Discriminatory Practices $a = .73$	16.5 $\pm$ 5.1 $n=334$ (range: 4-28)**	16.4 $\pm$ 5.3 $n=59$ (range: 6-28)	17.2 $\pm$ 5.3 $n=158$ (range: 4-28)	15.6 $\pm$ 4.5 $n=117$ (range: 4-28)
Personal Privilege/Favoritism $a = .79$	M=0.0 $n=295$ (range: 0-9)	M=1.0 $n=50$ (range: 0-7)	M=0.0 $n=146$ (range: 0-7)	M=0.0 $n=99$ (range: 0-9)
Personal Discrimination $a = .50$	M=1.0 $n=343$ (range: 0-7)***	M=1.0 $n=60$ (range: 0-6)	M=1.0 $n=161$ (range: 0-7)	M=1.0 $n=122$ (range: 0-6)

\*  $F(2,269) = 3.4, p=.036$ ; \*\*  $F(2,331) = 3.4, p=.036$ ; \*\*\*  $(H(2) = 11.4, p=.003)$

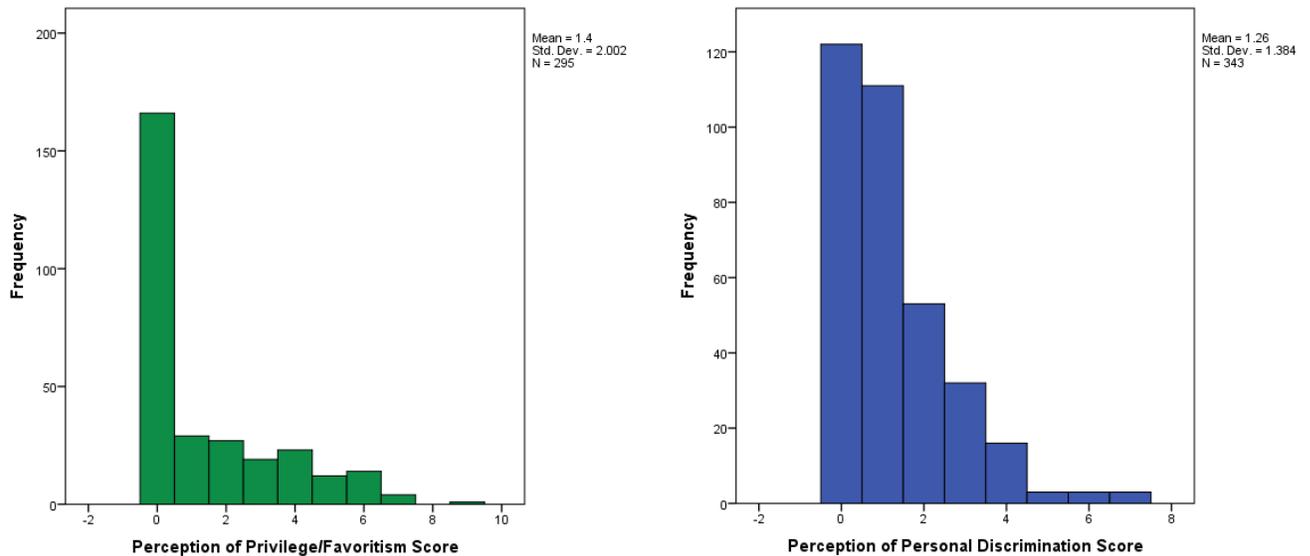


Figure 2. Side-by-side comparison of histograms for Personal Privilege/Favoritism and Personal Discrimination.



The reliability score for personal Discrimination ( $\alpha=.50$ ) is lower than ideal; the scale was based on the same yes/no checklist as Privilege/Favoritism, which showed reliability ( $\alpha=.79$ ), although this may be an effect of high proportions of respondents reporting no experiences of favoritism (45.8%,  $n=176$ ) or discrimination (36.5%,  $n=140$ ). This skewed distribution accounts for low median scores:  $M=0$  for privilege/favoritism and  $M=1$  for discrimination (Figure 2). A Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  test detected significant ( $H(2) = 11.4, p=.003$ ) differences among age groups for discrimination, with middle-age adults the only group to exceed scores of six.

Bivariate correlations of citywide and personal outcomes for the total sample and by age groups are reported in Table 4 with significant between-group correlation coefficients indicated. Citywide outcomes are all moderate-to-strongly correlated: City Diversity and City Inclusivity are positively correlated ( $r=.76$ ) and each negatively correlated with City Discrimination ( $r=-.71, r=-.63$ ). These scales' higher correlations do not pose collinearity issues for regression analyses because each will be tested separately as dependent variables. Personal Privilege is significantly correlated with City Diversity ( $r=-.14$ ) and City Discrimination ( $r=.13$ ), though the associations are weak. Personal Discrimination is significantly correlated with all three citywide scales as

Table 4. Bivariate correlations of citywide and personal outcome scales for total sample and by trichotomous age groups with significant correlations and significant between-group correlation coefficient indicated.

	Scale	1	2	3	4
Total Sample	1. City Diversity ( $n=384$ )	1			
	2. City Inclusivity ( $n=298$ )	.76**	1		
	3. City Disc. ( $n=369$ )	-.71**	-.61**	1	
	4. Pers. Privilege ( $n=324$ )	-.15**	-.09	.14*	1
	5. Pers. Disc. ( $n=384$ )	-.28**	-.29**	.36**	.26**
Young Adults (18 < 35)	1. City Diversity ( $n=64$ )	1			
	2. City Inclusivity ( $n=47$ )	.82**	1		
	3. City Disc. ( $n=62$ )	-.74**	-.65**	1	
	4. Pers. Privilege ( $n=53$ )	-.22	-.15	.10	1
	5. Pers. Disc. ( $n=64$ )	-.38**†	-.26	.42**	.36*
Middle Age (36 < 55)	1. City Diversity ( $n=167$ )	1			
	2. City Inclusivity ( $n=139$ )	.72**	1		
	3. City Disc. ( $n=162$ )	-.67**	-.57**	1	



	4. Pers. Privilege (n=149)	-0.13	-0.09	.15	1
	5. Pers. Disc. (n=167)	-0.14 <sup>†</sup>	-0.17 <sup>*‡</sup>	.25 <sup>**§</sup>	.26 <sup>**</sup>
Older Adults (> 55)	1. City Diversity (n=153)	1			
	2. City Inclusivity (n=112)	.77 <sup>**</sup>	1		
	3. City Disc. (n=145)	-.75 <sup>**</sup>	-.63 <sup>**</sup>	1	
	4. Pers. Privilege (n=112)	-0.13	.01	.10	1
	5. Pers. Disc. (n=153)	-.42 <sup>**</sup>	-.47 <sup>**</sup>	.49 <sup>**</sup>	.16

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; <sup>†</sup>  $z = 2.51, p = .012$ ; <sup>‡</sup>  $z = 2.50, p = .012$ ; <sup>§</sup>  $z = -2.19, p = .029$

well as personal privilege; it is negatively correlated with City Diversity ( $r = -.25$ ) and City Inclusivity ( $r = -.28$ ), indicating respondents with low discrimination scores tend to have slightly higher citywide diversity and inclusivity scores.

Discrimination scores are positively correlated with City Discrimination ( $r = .35$ ) and privilege scores ( $r = .24$ ), suggesting discrimination experiences are associated with perceptions of greater citywide discriminatory practices. Correlation coefficients of City Diversity and Personal Discrimination are significantly higher for middle age than older adults ( $z = 2.24, p = .02$ ), as are coefficients for City Inclusivity and Personal Discrimination ( $z = 2.50, p = .012$ ), while coefficients for City Discrimination and Personal Discrimination are significantly higher for older adults than middle age ones ( $z = -.204, p = .04$ ).

Hierarchical multiple regression (Table 5) was used to assess the ability of personal measures (privilege/favoritism, discrimination) to predict citywide outcomes after controlling for background, racial/ethnic, and religious attributes. Background and identity variables explain 12% of variance in City Diversity with sexual orientation, highest education level, occupation, and Middle Eastern identity significant model predictors before personal measures are entered at Block 4. Once added, the total variance explained by the model was 17%,  $F(16, 278) = 3.52, p < .000$ . Personal measures explained an additional 5% of the variance in City Diversity after controlling for background, racial/ethnic, and religious attributes. In the final model, personal discrimination was a significant model predictor of City Diversity Climate with a moderate effect size ( $\beta = -.20, p < .01$ ); sexual orientation ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ), Middle Eastern identity ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ), and no religious affiliation ( $\beta = -.11, p < .05$ ) were weak predictors, while occupation was



only significant in Block 4 at  $p < .10$ . Education level was also significant within  $p = 0.05 < 0.10$  in Models 1-3 but ceases to be in Model 4 with the inclusion of personal experience measures.



Table 5. Results of hierarchical regression analysis of citywide perception scales.

Ind. Variables	1. Citywide Diversity Climate				2. Citywide Inclusivity Practices				3. Citywide Discriminatory Practices				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	
Block 1:													
Bkgrnd													
age	.10	.08	.07	.03	.17**	.16*	.16*	.11	-.07	-.05	-.05	.01	
binary sex	.05	.03	.04	.02	.00	-.02	-.02	-.04	.09	.07	.07	.09	
sexual orient.	.16**	.16**	.16**	.12*	.12	.12	.12	.07	-.14*	-.17**	-.16**	-.11*	
edu level	-.12*	-.11	-.12*	-.08	-.07	-.07	-.07	-.04	.16**	.11	.11	.05	
income level	.10	.09	.09	.09	.11	.11	.11	.11	-.18**	-.13*	-.13*	-.12*	
occupation	-.11	-.13*	-.13*	-.11	-.06	-.08	-.08	-.06	.04	.05	.05	.03	
role													
$R^2$	<b>.07</b>				<b>.06</b>				<b>.08</b>				
$\Delta F$	<b>3.39**</b>				<b>2.61*</b>				<b>4.43**</b>				
												*	
Block 2:													
Identity													
African		-.02	-.05	-.03		-.07	-.06	-.03		.11	.11	.08	
Asian		.09	.08	.07		.02	.02	.01		-.13*	-.13*	-.11	
Latinx		-.08	-.09	-.07		-.08	-.08	-.05		.01	.02	-.01	
Mideast		.13*	.12*	.14*		.15*	.15*	.17*		-.04	-.04	-.06	
First nation		.05	.04	.06		-.01	-.01	.02		-.02	-.02	-.05	
White		.08	.07	.09		.02	.02	.03		-.22*	-.22*	-.24*	
Multiple		-.08	-.07	-.06		.04	.04	.04		.12	.11	.10	
$R^2$		<b>.11</b>				<b>.09</b>				<b>.19</b>			
$\Delta R^2$		<b>.04</b>				<b>.03</b>				<b>.11</b>			
$\Delta F$		<b>2.04*</b>				<b>1.25</b>				<b>5.19**</b>			
												*	



Block 3: Rel.						
Affil.						
No affil.	<i>-.13</i>	<i>-.11*</i>		.02	.01	.02
$R^2$	<b>.12</b>			<b>.09</b>		<b>.19</b>
$\Delta R^2$	<b>.01</b>			<b>.00</b>		<b>.00</b>
$\Delta F$	<b>3.74</b>			<b>.09</b>		<b>.07</b>
Block 4:						
Outcomes						
Pers. Priv.		<i>-.07</i>			<i>-.01</i>	<i>.09</i>
Pers. Disc.		<i>-.20**</i>			-	
					<i>.24***</i>	<i>.26***</i>
$R^2$		<i>.17†</i>			<i>.15‡</i>	<i>.27§</i>
$\Delta R^2$		<i>.05</i>			<i>.06</i>	<i>.08</i>
$\Delta F$		<b>7.60**</b>			<b>6.91**</b>	<b>14.70*</b>
						<b>**</b>

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .000$ ; †  $F(16, 278) = 3.52, p < .000$ ; ‡  $F(16, 234) = 2.50, p = .002$ ; §  $F(16, 278) = 6.34, p < .000$

Note: *Italics denote significance within  $p < .10$ .*



The regression model for Citywide Inclusivity Practices resembled the first measure. Background and identity variables explained 9% variance with only age group ( $\beta=.16, p<.05$ ) and Middle Eastern identity ( $\beta=.15, p<.05$ ) as weak significant predictors. Favoritism and discrimination measures explain 6% additional variance for a total of 15 % variance explained,  $F(16, 234)=2.50, p=.002$ . Discrimination inversely predicts City Inclusivity Practices with a moderate effect size ( $\beta=-.24, p<.000$ ); its inclusion slightly increases the weaker effect size of Middle Eastern identity ( $\beta=.17, p<.05$ ), which is the only other significant model predictor, as age ( $\beta=.11$ ) is only significant at  $p<.10$  in the final model.

Total variance explained by the Citywide Discriminatory Practices model was highest among citywide outcome variables—27%,  $F(16, 278)=6.34, p<.000$ —with background and identity variables explaining 19% and personal outcomes an additional 8% of model variance for a total of 27% model variance explained. Personal discrimination is a moderate predictor of City Discrimination ( $\beta=.26, p<.000$ ) as is white identity ( $\beta=-.24, p<.05$ ), while sexual orientation ( $\beta=-.11, p<.05$ ) and occupation role ( $\beta=-.12, p<.05$ ) were weak, inverse predictors. Before entering favoritism and discrimination measures in Block 4, Asian-American also had weak, inverse predictive value, but in the final model is only significant within  $p<.10$  ( $\beta=-.11$ ), as was a negligible effect of binary sex at birth ( $\beta=.09$ ).

Stepwise linear regression of personal scales was performed starting with 22 background and identity-based attributes to distinguish theoretically good predictors of personal experiences of favoritism and discrimination for exploration in further studies (Table 6). For favoritism, the stepwise regression was able to reduce the model to four predictors—Christian affiliation ( $\beta=-.16, p=.004$ ), highest education level ( $\beta=.21, p<.000$ ), white identity ( $\beta=.19, p=.001$ ), and age group ( $\beta=-.15, p=.008$ )—explaining a total model variance of 13%,  $F(4, 290)=10.39, p<.000$ . Christian identity and age group have weak, inverse effect sizes that indicate Christian and older respondents are slightly less likely to report higher privilege/favoritism scores. Conversely, highest education level and white identity are weak-to-moderate positive predictors of privileged treatment, suggesting that being white and more educated is associated with reporting of higher favoritism scores.

Stepwise linear regression for discrimination reduced the model to seven predictors: civil status ( $\beta=.15, p=.005$ ), highest education level ( $\beta=.15, p=.004$ ), sexual orientation ( $\beta=-.15,$



$p=.005$ ), disability reported ( $\beta=.15, p=.004$ ), age group ( $\beta=-.15, p=.004$ ), First nation ( $\beta=.13, p=.012$ ), and Black ( $\beta=.10, p=.048$ ). Together model predictors explain a total model variance of 16%,  $F(7, 335)=9.17, p<.000$ ) and indicate that being single never married, more educated, something other than heteronormative, disabled, younger, First Nation, and Black weakly predict reporting of higher discrimination experiences.

Table 6. Exploratory stepwise regression of personal outcome scales.

Personal Outcome	Predictors	R	R <sup>2</sup>	B	Std. Error	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Privilege/Favoritism*	(Constant)			1.18	.51		2.35	.021
	Christian	.20	.04	-.72	.25	-.16	-2.90	.004
	edu level	.27	.07	.39	.10	.21	3.80	.000
	White	.32	.10	.81	.24	.19	3.36	.001
	age group	.35	.13	-.23	.09	-.15	-2.67	.008
Discrimination**	(Constant)			1.65	.35		4.75	.000
	civil status	.20	.04	.53	.19	.15	-2.83	.005
	edu level	.26	.07	.19	.07	.15	2.88	.004
	sexual orientation	.31	.10	-.61	.21	-.15	-2.83	.005
	disability reported	.34	.11	.85	.29	.15	2.92	.004
	age group	.37	.13	-.17	.06	-.15	-2.89	.004
	First nation	.39	.15	1.30	.50	.13	2.52	.012
	African	.40	.16	.36	.17	.10	1.98	.048

\*  $F(4, 290)=10.39, p<.000$ ; \*\*  $F(7, 335)=9.17, p<.000$

### Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to test whether experiences of privilege/favoritism and discrimination influence perceptions of citywide diversity, inclusivity, and discrimination among Fort Myers' workforce, as well as identify potential predictors of personal experiences for



further analyses. It was hypothesized that personal privilege/favoritism and discrimination scales would be inversely associated with city diversity and inclusivity, and positively associated with discrimination. Evidence supports the hypothesis that the personal experience of discrimination is a low-to-moderate predictor of perceptions of city diversity, inclusivity and discriminatory practices. Greater encounters with discrimination appear to limit one's perceptions of overall diversity and inclusivity, and enhance the perception of discriminatory practices. Conversely, favoritism was not found to be a significant predictor in any of the three models, suggesting one's perception of privileged treatment does not influence their perception of citywide diversity, inclusivity, or discrimination practices.

Favoritism is an exclusionary force, as is discrimination, though it is possible respondents did not make that cognitive connection either because they do not view privileged treatment with equal severity or even the same nature as discriminatory practices. Beyond the conceptual facade of privilege may simply be an activated social tie, perhaps attestation to the old maxim 'It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know.' Respondents may be less inclined to equate their social navigation strategies to systemic exclusion, but the assumption remains that simply knowing a potential job candidate outside an occupational context introduces bias into the selection process, ultimately working against diversity. Future studies may consider addressing privilege/favoritism and discrimination as a question of cognitive cultural domains to understand how knowledge and ideas influence individual outcomes.

Some interesting insights emerged from analysis of background and identity attributes. Respondents were uniform across age groups in their perception of the Citywide Diversity, but older respondents were significantly more likely to see Fort Myers as more inclusive and less discriminatory. Perhaps in comparison to the accumulated social changes older respondents may have experienced, responses may reflect perceived strides toward inclusiveness. Although it is noteworthy that middle-age adults were significantly most likely to report city discrimination and personal discrimination scores. Despite fairly proportionate representation of white and black respondents, most other identities were likely underrepresented, especially Hispanic/Latinx, multiple categories reported, and Asian respondents. Older adults were whiter and young ones more Hispanic/Latinx and Florida born; older respondents typically claimed out-of-state origin.



Middle Eastern identity ended up being a weak but consistent significant predictor of City Diversity and City Inclusivity, but not City Discrimination, even though representation of Middle Eastern identity was only three respondents (Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2017). This was likely due to one Middle Eastern participant being a longtime Muslim Imam in Southwest Florida who has devoted their career to improving interfaith and intercultural relations; this in all likelihood skewed the data for Middle Eastern to being more perceptive to citywide diversity, which is not necessarily representative and would require further research to substantiate. Religion is a similar case in that nine of ten respondents were either some Christian affiliation or reported no religious identity, so there was limited explanatory value in the remaining religious variation beyond those two attributes.

Exploratory results of stepwise regression analyses provided further insight to potential predictors for encountering favoritism and discrimination in the workforce. With respect to privileged treatment, Christian and older respondents were less significantly less likely to report benefitting from favoritism, while being more educated and whiter were predictors of higher reporting of privilege. Conversely, being single never married, educated, something other than heteronormative, disabled, younger, First Nation, and black weakly predict higher reporting of discrimination experiences. Although stepwise regression analysis was used specifically for exploratory purposes, this finding is notable considering the largest proportions of the sample were female, older, white, Christian, abled, exclusively heterosexual, married, and educated.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The fact that data provided for this study depended on a very diverse individuals, private organizations and government entities, gives it some kind of strength. It collected information from public and private workforce sectors in Fort Myers, FL to provide evidence of the influence of personal experiences of exclusion on overall perceptions of citywide diversity and inclusion. Additionally, it identified potential predictors for personal discrimination which, in addition to informing future research, will be used to advise the Fort Myers Mayor's Diversity Equity and Inclusivity Advisory Council (MDEIAC). There were also several limitations of research. The collection of age as interval data was a limiting factor for both descriptive and inferential statistics that should be collected as continuous variables or calculated from date of birth. Representations for racial/ethnic identities were skewed toward white non-Hispanic and African-



American/Black and religious affiliations toward Christian affiliation and no religion reported. Other groups were likely underrepresented, especially Hispanic/Latinx, Asian-American, and Middle Eastern/Muslim workforce members.

Personal experience scores were simplistic and therefore posed some limitations to the current study with respect their skewed distributions and lower reliability scores. Future research may consider more developed response criteria and scale development. Another unavoidable limitation of the study is the historical confound of the covid-19 pandemic. Data were collected six months before the start of the pandemic and would likely look different today. Millions of women have yet to rejoin the US workforce, and current projections indicate this trend may not correct for years (Hsu, 2021). Future studies could further investigate the impact of the pandemic on Fort Myers' workforce gender diversity.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the above limitations, the findings from this study have been hailed as being helpful in peeling off the layers of institutionalized barriers to integration and proponents of unintended exclusiveness. It is important to note that going by the way that this study has been received by the city leaders, most people want to support racial equity, in theory, but they don't know how. The authors' recommendations and consequent discussions have led to our understanding of the fact that some of the inclusion barriers may largely be intentional. Breaking them down however must be intentional. Although the original intention of the authors was not advocacy, this study has been selected as a guide to make some changes to reduce the various forms of institutionalized forms of discrimination. In addition, the study has helped in unveiling the institutionalized forms of discrimination prevalent in the City of Fort Myers. Efforts have been made to address these through the MDEIAC. It is interesting to note that following the presentations of the findings of this study a diversity officer position was created to address the issues raised. The city administration is systematically working to break down the various forms of institutionalized discrimination identified in this report. Of paramount important to the city administration are the discriminatory practices that have economic and interpersonal consequences. The particular concerns being addressed are those that pertain to ethnicity and gender. The city has also initiated diversity and inclusion certification of all the heads of



departments. Every employee is now required to take some professional development based on an understanding of implicit biases.

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