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From inclusion to control: structural racism in medical organization governance

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Abstract

Purpose This study examines organizational racial power dynamics through a case study of the interactions between a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee and the Board of Directors at an organization specializing in health care practitioner training. We explore how power—defined as control over resources by certain individuals while others lack such control—can be utilized constructively or destructively. Understanding the hoarding of power to maintain hierarchies, rather than fostering equitable systems, is crucial for driving proactive organizational change.

Design Employing a case study methodology, we analyze the division of power within an organization and elucidate behaviors that led to the concentration of power, highlighting its detrimental use. We also examine how organizational leadership systematically undermined the DEI Committee's efforts to establish an accountable, transparently governed organization committed to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Findings Our analysis reveals that when existing power structures are threatened, they adapt to defend their dominance, often at the expense of the organization's mission. A failure to integrate DEI principles resulted in the loss of relationships with field experts and inflicted harm on its members, ultimately leading to the organization's collapse. Harm included symptoms of racial stress and trauma in racialized board members. In addition to exposing governance failures, this study illuminates the psychological and racial trauma experienced by affected members, linking structural exclusion to cumulative harm. This analysis is contextualized within current events, where similar patterns of dismantling equity-focused initiatives are observed at national levels.

Originality This paper offers a unique and timely perspective on advancing organizational equity, particularly relevant for diversity consultants tasked with analyzing and resolving problematic organizational dynamics. We provide guidelines for distinguishing between appropriate Board governance and detrimental power hoarding, contributing to the broader discourse on fostering equitable organizational practice.

Implications
By examining the power dynamics between a Board of Directors and their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee, this paper reveals how power hoarding undermines organizational objectives and can harm people of color. The findings highlight the urgent need for transparent governance structures and empowered bodies to address these imbalances. In the current climate, where justice and equity initiatives face increased scrutiny and rollback, this study offers critical insights for psychologists and diversity consultants. It provides guidelines to

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identify and counteract covert power dynamics, thereby advancing organizational equity and resilience against external pressures.

Positionality

Below is a list of our various positionalities and our professional/lived experiences. These inform how we approached the present case study; through an examination of race-based power hoarding. Our various identities and life circumstances strengthened and challenged our understanding of how diversity, equity, and inclusion can be integrated within an organization. Early career co-authors consulted more senior career co-authors and all feedback was welcomed. Each author's positionality and lived experience was valued and improved our work. The first author, Sonya Faber, PhD, MBA, is an African American scholar residing in Germany, as well as a neuroscientist and pharmaceutical professional, with a specialization in clinical development and a passionate commitment to social justice issues. NiCole T. Buchanan, Ph.D. is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University; her research examines how race, gender, and victimization relate to well-being and how organizations can utilize workplace best practices to reduce bias and create healthy work environments where all employees thrive. Dr. Diana Quinn, a queer mestizo Chicana with a background in Cultural Anthropology and a doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine, positions herself at the intersection of holistic health and social justice. Her extensive experience in integrative mental health care, particularly for marginalized communities, reflects a commitment to Healing Justice and transformative practices that address generational trauma and oppression. Robyn Wong-Lee is a Chinese-Canadian ciswoman and a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Boston researching anti-Asian racism, Asian-American mental health, and resistance/activism. Daniel Zalewa is a graduate student at The University of New Haven studying Industrial Organizational Psychology with a special interest in work stress and health, particularly revolving around experiences of workplace discrimination and their impact on employee wellbeing. The senior author, Monnica Williams, PhD, is an African American woman living in Canada with expertise in racism, mental health, and anxiety-related conditions; she is a board-certified licensed clinical psychologist, tenured professor at the University of Ottawa, a major urban university, and Canada Research Chair for Mental Health Innovation and Equity. We recognize that our positionalities shape our interpretive lens, and we address this through methodological transparency and documentation of data sources.

Keywords Power hoarding, Board of directors, Racism, Diversity, Consulting

Introduction

Overview

Boards of Directors are entrusted with fiduciary oversight, policy governance, and ethical accountability [1–3]. However, the formal presence of diversity within a Board does not guarantee equitable distribution of decision-making authority. Power within governance structures can be used to promote shared accountability or to consolidate control within a select group [4, 5]. When authority is informally centralized despite formal diversity, justice-oriented initiatives may become structurally vulnerable to obstruction.

Verdantia (pseudonym), a U.S.-based nonprofit healthcare certification organization founded in 2021, serves as the focal case for this qualitative governance analysis. Verdantia was established to provide specialized training and practitioner certification in a developing area of healthcare. Its founding documents emphasized competency, safety, ethics, and a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Yet, as this case illustrates, formal commitments to equity do not necessarily translate into equitable governance practices.

This study examines how power was formally allocated and informally exercised within Verdantia's governance structure. Drawing on organizational documents, archival materials, and semi-structured interviews with individuals directly involved in Board and committee processes, we analyze how decision-making authority was distributed across executive leadership, the Board of Directors, and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee. Using power mapping and thematic analysis, we examine how governance procedures interacted with racialized dynamics in ways that concentrated authority and constrained reform efforts (see Supplementary Table 1 for terminology).

Corporate governance scholarship has long emphasized the importance of checks and balances in preventing executive overreach [3, 6]. Similar to political systems that rely on separation of powers, Boards require clearly defined divisions of executive, legislative, and judicial functions to ensure accountability [7, 8]. When these functions collapse into one another, decision-making authority can become concentrated in ways that undermine oversight and transparency. This study builds on that framework by operationalizing "power hoarding" as the concentration of decision-relevant authority in ways that restrict meaningful participation from other governance bodies [9–11].

Although the events at Verdantia unfolded within a non-profit setting, the dynamics observed are consistent with broader research on organizational exclusion and in-group alignment in many leadership structures [12, 13]. Even when Boards diversify demographically, informal networks, financial control, and procedural mechanisms may continue to privilege historically dominant groups [14–16].

Repeated procedural exclusion and devaluation of expertise can furthermore contribute to stress responses consistent with racial trauma, particularly when individuals encounter systemic invalidation within institutional contexts [17–20]. Such cumulative stress responses are rooted in repeated dismissal of voice, inequitable treatment, and constrained authority. In this analysis, racial trauma is examined not as an individual pathology but as a potential psychological consequence of structural governance practices.

Through this case study, we offer a structured framework for examining how governance policies, financial control, and committee authority interact to maintain or challenge existing power hierarchies. By documenting both formal power allocation and informal gatekeeping behaviors, this study contributes to governance and justice scholarship by illustrating how procedural neutrality can coexist with structural inequity. To guide this analysis, we ask: how do governance structures enable power hoarding to obstruct justice initiatives, what strategies are used to undermine justice-oriented decision-making bodies and how does power concentration within Boards contribute to racialized exclusion.

It is also important to note that the rollback of justice frameworks is not incidental; it is the latest iteration of a well-documented strategy to entrench power by eliminating structural accountability. Under the guise of "neutrality" and "merit," public institutions designed to enforce equity are being systematically dismantled, echoing past attempts to maintain racial hierarchies through procedural means [21, 22]. Just as past generations witnessed civil rights protections eroded by legal maneuvers rather than outright bans, contemporary governance structures are being reengineered to neutralize efforts toward equity while maintaining the illusion of fairness [23, 24]. For example, the gutting of the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), with nearly half its staff eliminated and multiple regional offices shuttered, exemplifies a strategy of crippling enforcement while claiming procedural necessity [25]. The case of Verdantia is not an anomaly, rather it is a warning.

Through this analysis, we offer a framework for recognizing and preventing the misuse of governance policies to entrench systemic inequities. Effective organizational leadership must be built on structures that distribute authority, enforce accountability, and prevent decision-making from being monopolized by any one group [3, 6].

Division of power in organizations

Boards wield significant authority over finances, policies, and leadership. However, power can be used to promote shared decision-making or to consolidate control within an elite group [3, 4]. Those who see power as a personal entitlement, a perspective shaped by in-group privilege and historical exclusion, tend to block policies that distribute authority fairly [5]. Power hoarding in Boards operates across two dimensions. Structural power involves formal decision-making authority, control over resources, and the ability to set governance rules [19, 26, 27]. Social power, by contrast, emerges from networks, influence, and informal mechanisms of control that shape organizational outcomes [5, 12]. This paper examines how these dimensions interact to sustain exclusionary governance practices.

Corporate governance mirrors political systems in its need for checks and balances. Just as governments rely on separation of powers, companies must establish independent oversight mechanisms to prevent those in power from silencing dissent and obstructing justice [7].

Board composition

Best practices in corporate governance emphasize equal opportunity as essential for ethical and effective leadership [1, 28–30]. Yet, in practice, Board appointments continue to be shaped by executives selecting members who reflect their own background and worldview [13].

In U.S. local health boards, for example, leadership demographics closely resembled top executives rather than the varied populations they serve [14]. Even in Boards which considered racial makeup, 96% remained predominantly White [14]. Such exclusion reflects broader patterns in governance research, where in-group alignment often shapes Board composition.

Power and exclusion in boards

Power within Boards is shaped not just by rank, but by whose voices are legitimized and whose are silenced [31, 32]. Power is not neutral; it is inherently political. Whether in corporate governance, policymaking, or institutional leadership, power determines whose interests are prioritized, whose perspectives are amplified, and whose authority is recognized [12]. Research shows that individuals tend to work with those similar to themselves [12, 33], reinforcing homogenous leadership structures that sustain the marginalization of underrepresented voices.

Regulatory bodies recently started to respond, with SEC Nasdaq-listed companies being required to disclose Board diversity and include at least two underrepresented members, recognizing that leadership must reflect a broader range of experiences [34]. These measures acknowledge that justice and equal representation are structural issues, not personal preferences. However, this progress is unfolding amid a historic backlash against equity principles, exacerbated by the authoritarian shift in the second Trump administration.

Efforts to advance justice and fairness have long faced resistance, often through strategic deflections designed to maintain existing power structures. Historically, this resistance has relied on three primary tactics. **Denial** functions by rejecting the existence of systemic inequities altogether, framing justice initiatives as unnecessary or based on false premises. **Detachment** shifts responsibility away from those in power, allowing individuals and institutions to avoid engagement by positioning justice as someone else's concern. **Diversion** attempts to reframe justice initiatives as distractions from more pressing matters, portraying efforts to correct systemic inequities as secondary to other institutional priorities [35].

These tactics are not new, but they have become more overt, aligning with a shift in power structures that no longer feel compelled to disguise exclusion under the language of diversity or fairness [23, 24, 36]. This has led to the emergence of a fourth and more aggressive strategy: **dismantling** [35, 37]. Where previous resistance efforts sought to stall or redirect justice work, dismantling moves toward the active removal of justice initiatives, policies, and institutional frameworks. No longer content to deny or divert, opponents now pursue the deliberate reversal of structural gains, defunding and eliminating these programs under the pretense of restoring neutrality, protecting meritocracy, or maintaining institutional tradition.

The shift toward dismantling marks a critical moment in the organized resistance to justice initiatives. While earlier strategies relied on rhetorical deflections or procedural delays, dismantling represents a concerted effort to erase structural progress entirely. The removal of justice seeking offices, legal prohibitions against group-conscious policies, and efforts to penalize discussions on systemic inequity illustrate this phase. No longer framed as a matter of ideological disagreement, opposition has evolved into a direct **reversal** of justice efforts, reinforcing inequities under the guise of preserving institutional stability and existing power hierarchies.

Power hoarding: the obstruction of merit and Equality

Power hoarding—the concentration of decision-making among a select few, undermines accountability, transparency, and fair governance [10, 11]. In Boards, this manifests as gatekeeping, withholding information, and silencing opposition.

When leadership refuses to share control, efforts to promote justice and equality become symbolic rather than transformative. Power-hoarding tactics create an illusion of shared governance while reinforcing exclusion [38].

Addressing the gaps: a case study in racial power hoarding

Research on power hoarding in Boards is limited [39]. While studies acknowledge power imbalances, they rarely examine how power hoarding is actively used to block fair governance and maintain in-group hierarchies.

This paper addresses these gaps through a firsthand case study of Verdantia's Board, analyzing how power hoarding obstructed justice initiatives and enabled racialized exclusion. By examining decision-making structures, we demonstrate how those in power strategically manipulate governance to maintain control while appearing to support equality. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for governance structures that enforce accountability, distribute authority fairly, and center justice as a core principle of leadership, recognizing that racial trauma is not only an outcome but also a mechanism through which inequitable governance sustains itself.

Verdantia provides a bounded case through which to examine how governance structures, committee authority, and financial control intersect in the maintenance or disruption of equity initiatives. While nonprofit Boards frequently contain formal diversity mechanisms, fewer studies empirically examine how authority is operationalized in practice. This case allows for analysis of both formal power allocation and informal gatekeeping behaviors. To guide this analysis, we ask the following research questions: (1) How do governance structures enable power hoarding to obstruct justice initiatives? (2) What strategies are used to undermine justice-oriented decision-making bodies? (3) How does power hoarding in Boards contribute to racialized exclusion? By answering these questions, this study contributes to governance and justice literature by demonstrating how procedural barriers, financial control, and structural gatekeeping function to consolidate power while maintaining an appearance of inclusion.

Methodological approach

Review of events

This case study examines racialized power hoarding within a nonprofit organization in the healthcare sector, referred to as Verdantia for the purposes of this paper. Verdantia, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, was established to provide health education services and practitioner certification. However, internal power struggles, particularly those related to racial equity and governance, ultimately undermined its mission. This case study is based on the accounts of leaders in the organization who experienced exclusion or marginalization. Recruitment focused on those with direct involvement in governance disputes, including former Board members, committee representatives, consultants, and subject matter experts (SMEs). Given documented power asymmetries and prior adversarial dynamics within the organization, central executive decision-makers were not invited to participate. This decision was made to minimize potential harm and protect confidentiality within a small professional community. However, the study includes the perspective of the external consultant retained by executive leadership whose documented findings aligned with participant accounts. Findings are therefore based on participant interviews triangulated with organizational records and findings of the independent consultant. This study follows a case study methodology [40] to examine how governance structures sustain power hoarding. Participants were selected based on direct involvement in Verdantia's governance, with efforts made to include perspectives from both executive leadership, and the DEI Committee, Given the focus on racial trauma, interviews intentionally explored participants' emotional and psychological responses to exclusions and power asymmetries. A total of five semi-structured interviews were conducted with former Board members, consultants, committee representatives, and organizational associates. These interviewees included individuals who had held leadership roles, those who had resigned in protest, and members of the DEI Committee who had directly engaged with governance conflicts. Interviews were coded using thematic analysis [41], with an emphasis on patterns of obstruction, financial control, and procedural exclusion. Coding proceeded in three phases: (1) open coding to identify recurrent governance conflict patterns; (2) axial coding to cluster patterns into broader themes (e.g., obstruction, financial control, veto mechanisms); (3) selective coding to map themes onto the power-hoarding framework. Coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion among authors. Additionally, power mapping was used to analyze the allocation of decision-making authority across Verdantia's governance units (Supplementary Table 3), allowing for a systematic assessment of structural imbalances. Interviewees were consulted throughout the interpretation process to ensure accuracy and address any missing details. Power allocation percentages were calculated by identifying decision-relevant tasks across governance domains (executive, legislative, judicial) and assigning them to units responsible for final authority. Percentages represent proportional distribution of formal decision control.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (Certificate #H-02-23-8904). All procedures were carried out in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). The study participants included a racially and professionally diverse group, all of whom provided informed consent. To protect confidentiality, identifying details, such as names, demographics, and specific roles, have been modified or omitted. Beyond formal ethics approval, the research team reflected on potential investigator bias and double hermeneutic effects [42]. Participants who were involved in the events detailed herein were encouraged to reflect on the risks of their involvement in the case study.

Sampling Frame and Recruitment. During the period in which the documented governance conflict occurred, Verdantia's governance structure consisted of thirteen active members across the Board, Executive Committee, and DEI Committee roles (with overlapping appointments). The sampling frame was limited to non-executive governance actors who directly engaged with the documented dispute. Three Board members and three DEI Committee members were invited via email to participate ($n = 6$). Of those invited, five agreed to participate (response rate: 83%). Executive Committee members were not included in the interview sample; their actions and decisions are represented through archival documentation and the independent consultant's report. Given the organization's small size and overlapping roles, participant characteristics are reported in aggregate to protect confidentiality and minimize deductive disclosure.

The study's analytic focus centered on the lived experiences of governance actors reporting exclusion within a small professional community. Given ongoing power asymmetries at the time of recruitment and the risk of reputational or professional consequences, the sampling strategy prioritized minimizing coercive dynamics.

All interviews took place in 2023 after the Verdantia Board had resigned. Interview questions asked about participants' identities, involvement in Verdantia, and observations or experiences related to DEI within Verdantia. Sample questions include "How did you first get involved with Verdantia Inc.?", "What events led up to the relationships between well-respected leaders and Verdantia Inc. becoming tarnished?", and "Did the White Board members and/or CEO ever display prejudiced behavior towards the DEI Committee or racialized Board Members? If so, please describe these interactions". Additionally, participants were asked to identify if they had witnessed or experienced behaviours used to hoard power such as an individual controlling the circulation of information for one's own use and profit, continually taking key responsibilities before others have the chance to, and repeating in one's own words what someone else had said to take credit for the idea.

As noted, the events analyzed in this study were reconstructed through a systematic review of organizational documents and corroborated by former Board members, DEI members, and the diversity expert hired by the board. Given that some Board meetings were open to the public, records were available for verification. Primary data sources included Verdantia's amended bylaws, Board nomination policy, and conflict-of-interest policy, as well as stakeholder feedback, annotated responses to concerns about power imbalances, resignation letters, and written correspondence between staff, subject matter experts, Board members, and the CEO. These archival materials provided a foundation for mapping the organizational structure and developing a detailed timeline of events leading to the dissolution of Verdantia. Interviewees were consulted throughout the interpretation process to ensure accuracy and address any missing details. Archival materials were systematically catalogued and reviewed for consistency (Table 1) with interview accounts. When discrepancies arose, interviewees were re-contacted for clarification. Publicly available meeting records were used to corroborate timelines where possible.

This study employs a power analysis framework, drawing on Okun et al.'s [9] conceptualization of organizational power hoarding. The framework identifies key behaviors associated with power hoarding and racialized exclusion, which have been adapted to the specific context of Verdantia's governance failures. These elements, outlined in Supplementary Table 2, provide a structured lens through which the mechanisms of power consolidation and obstruction can be understood within the organization.

Table 1 Materials used to develop and corroborate case study

Category	Document/Data Source	Description/Notes
Organizational Governance Documents	Amended Bylaws	Formal governance structure document
	Board Nomination Policy	Policy governing board appointments
	Conflict-of-Interest Policy	COI monitoring and ethics policy
	Hiring Process Policies	Policies governing committee/leadership hiring authority
Board & Meeting Records	Public Board Meeting Records	Open-session meeting documentation
	Board Meeting Minutes	Formal minutes from governance meetings
Internal Communications	Email Correspondence	Emails between staff, SMEs, Board members, and CEO
	Annotated Responses to Power Concerns	Written responses addressing governance conflicts
	Written Correspondence	Formal written exchanges among governance actors
Resignation & Stakeholder Materials	Resignation Letters	Individual and mass resignation letters
	Stakeholder Feedback	External/internal feedback regarding governance
Supplementary & Analytical Materials	Supplementary Table 2	Power-hoarding behavioral framework (Okun et al., adapted)
	Supplementary Table 3	Power mapping and decision authority allocation
	Table 5: Policy Methods for Disempowerment	Governance policy mechanisms analysis
Consultant-Related Documentation	Diversity Consultant Documentation	External consultant findings and related documentation

Data collection: power mapping and decision-making structures

Organizational power is exercised through decision-making authority, determining who has the ability to make critical choices and how those choices influence others. Identifying who controls key decisions is essential for ensuring fair governance and provides a means to quantify how power is distributed within a Board.

To analyze Verdantia's internal power dynamics, the study examined five core decision-making units within the Board (Fig. 1). Tasks performed by each unit in the early weeks of Board operation were systematically mapped and categorized. The allocation of these tasks was then assessed to determine whether responsibilities were appropriately assigned, particularly following the onboarding of new members from historically underrepresented groups. This structured approach allowed for an evaluation of power concentration, revealing discrepancies in governance practices and the extent to which authority was withheld or misallocated.

One critical aspect of this analysis involved task displacement—where responsibilities expected to fall under one committee were instead controlled by another group. For example, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee was established to make binding decisions regarding governance fairness. However, decision-making on key policies, such as defining qualifications for Board membership and leadership diversity requirements, was retained by the executive leadership.

Power-mapping was conducted through an inductive task inventory process. Governance functions were first enumerated collaboratively based on documented Board activities (e.g., nomination procedures, financial control, bylaw amendments, and committee appointments). To systematically document discrepancies, each decision-making task was recorded and assessed by comparing (a) the governance body that exercised the authority in practice with (b) the governance body formally designated to exercise that authority under the organization's bylaws, committee charters, written policies, and contemporaneous meeting records. Discrepancies between exercised authority and structurally designated authority were thereby identified (see Supplementary Data Table 3). This structured comparison allowed us to identify patterns of

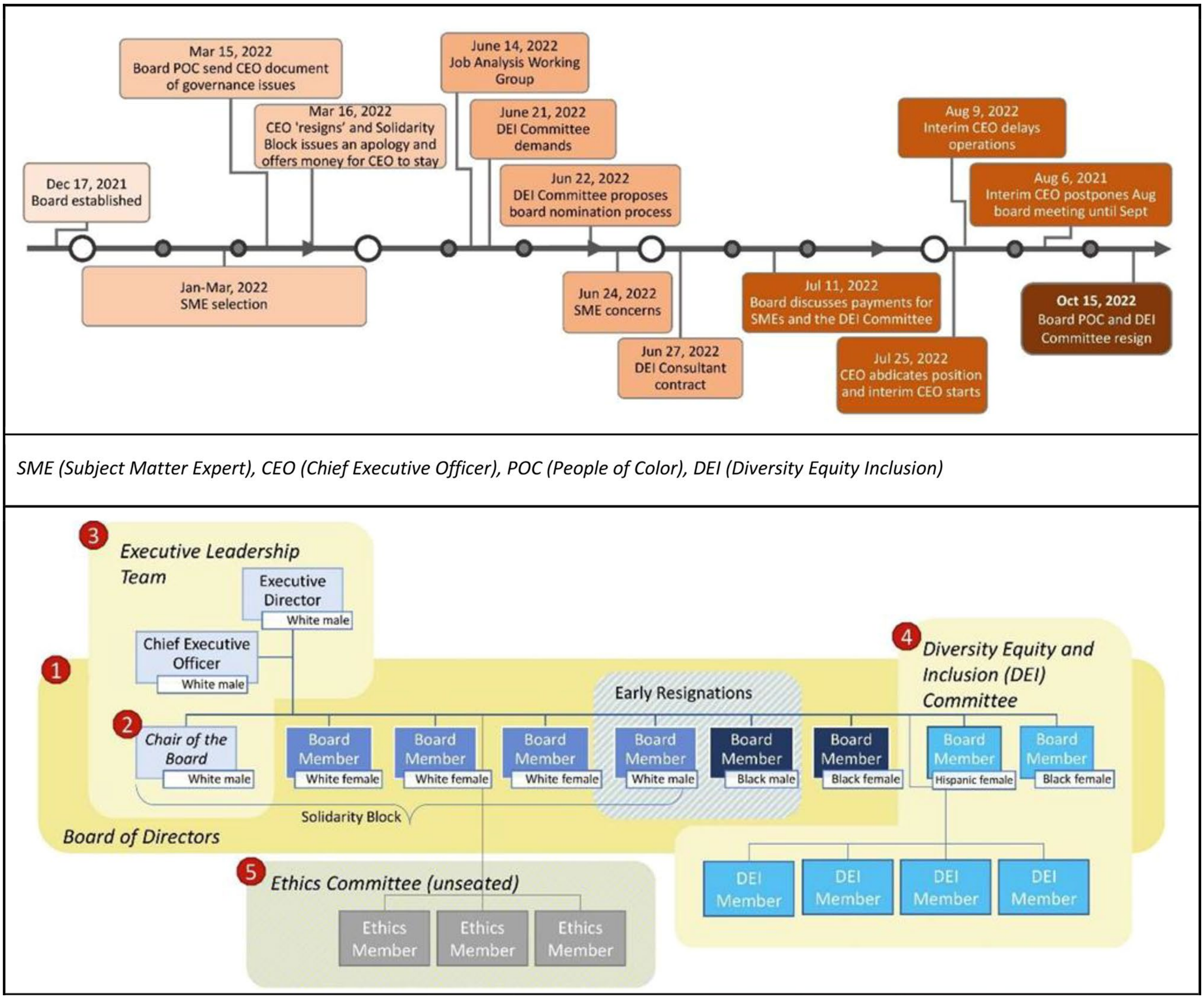

Fig. 1 Timeline (top) and Organigram (bottom)

authority concentration and task displacement within the governance system.

Case history

Organizational history and power hoarding in action

The following exchange based on interview accounts and corroborated documents, illustrates a pivotal governance rupture that shaped the organization's trajectory. This captures how tensions surrounding governance, authority and the organization's commitment to DEI surfaced during a critical early board meeting [43, 44].

> *There was tension in the air. Verdantia was not even three months old, and Theodore, the interim CEO of the fledgling organization, had just resigned. The Board was now assembled to determine the next steps. Brad, the Chair, took the floor. He passed around a copy of Theo's letter of resignation.*
>
> *Brad read the critical parts of Theo's letter aloud: "... Our vision to improve access and acceptance of new therapies to enhance healing is in question. Are we a DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] organization that aspires to certify – or a certification organization that aspires to embrace DEI? I feel like I can do one of these well. I do not have a background in DEI, and I can't change my old White man status."*
>
> *The room fell silent. Some Board members looked shocked and concerned, but others seemed unconcerned or even pleased.*
>
> *Brad continued, "I don't think any of us want Theo to go. He brings some amazing and essential talents to Verdantia, and we cannot move ahead without him. As such, I have drafted an apology letter to Theo, letting him know that all of us wish him to return. And*

> *we will be paying him $50,000 for his consulting services over the next 6 months as we identify a permanent CEO and Executive Director."*
> *There was a gasp and notable alarm from three Board members, all women of color. One of them raised their hand. "I don't know that we need Theo," she said. "Frankly, he has never been onboard with our diversity mission, and he undermines the work of the DEI committee." Another added, "He has treated me very disrespectfully." The women of color nodded in agreement. Nonetheless, Brad moved for a vote on his letter asking Theo to return. The vote fell along racial and gender lines. The 5 White Board members voted in favor, as did the one Black male. The 3 women of color voted against. The one Black male subsequently resigned. Theo was reinstated as interim CEO, and the Board was now visibly divided.*

This meeting marked an early rupture in the company's governance. The votes divided along racial and gender lines and the disregard for dissenting voices exemplified how decision-making authority remained concentrated among a small leadership group. For several members this was a moment of profound disillusionment and racial trauma. It was a turning point in their confidence that the organization's stated commitment to equity would be realized in practice.

The tensions introduced in the meeting resurfaced several months later during a subsequent Board discussion about leadership authority and compensation decisions. The following reconstructed narrative, based on interview accounts and corroborated documents, illustrates how these tensions extended into operational decisions affecting the organizations credentialing process.

> *During a bimonthly board meeting at Verdantia, a conflict emerged over the financial compensation of experts contributing to the organization's credentialing exam. The credentialing exam is intended to verify practitioners expertise needed to provide high quality care, setting knowledge standards for healthcare providers while protecting clients from harm. The non-licensed experts, many of whom were Indigenous or from historically excluded communities, had been actively involved in developing critical components of the exam.*
> *However, several had learned that the licensed experts had already been paid, and subsequently voiced their complaints about this to the board. They were informed that they would not receive compensation for their work until the project was complete – potentially a year away –unlike the licensed experts, who were primarily White professionals. The justification given by leadership was procedural: compensation, they argued, had always been allocated to credentialed professionals. Yet, this explanation disregarded the fact that these non-licensed experts had been recruited specifically for their expertise and cultural knowledge, both of which were integral to the exam's legitimacy. Their contributions had been solicited with the assumption that their labor would be valued equally. This unequal valuation of labor reflected patterns consistent with structural inequities documented in organizational governance research.*
> *Upon learning of the disparity, several of the non-licensed experts raised concerns, questioning the rationale behind the decision. Some noted that their involvement had been framed as essential early in the process, making the lack of financial recognition an apparent contradiction. Others pointed out that the exclusion of non-licensed voices from equitable compensation reinforced historical patterns of exploitation, where knowledge from marginalized groups was extracted without fair reciprocity.*
> *When their objections were dismissed, many of the experts resigned. Their departure was not merely an operational setback but signaled a fundamental failure in the organization's stated commitment to justice and fairness. The event illustrated how procedural mechanisms, such as selective compensation policies, can be used to maintain structural inequities while appearing neutral on its face.*

This incident illustrates how power operates within organizational structures to reinforce racial hierarchies [45]. The selective compensation of experts was not framed as an intentional act of exclusion, yet it had the effect of reinforcing existing disparities in professional valuation. This aligns with well-documented patterns in governance, where individuals from historically marginalized communities are often expected to contribute their expertise without equitable recognition or compensation [19, 46].

Verdantia was a healthcare nonprofit established in 2021 to provide specialized training and certification for healthcare professionals (Table 2). Its founding documents claimed a commitment to ensuring competency, safety, and ethics in an equitable and accessible manner. However, power within the organization was unequally distributed from the start, creating conditions for structural exclusion and governance failure.

The founding group envisioned Verdantia as diverse, yet when funding was secured in 2019, the organization was controlled by four White individuals, some of whom had assumed leadership divisions without a vote from the Board. Other positions were open for self-nomination,

Table 2 Essential goals of Verdantia

1	Create an exam to certify a broad range of practitioners in specialized health care techniques (spearheaded by Testing Committee)
2	Keep the exam up-to-date based on the evolution of the field (ongoing job of Testing Committee after initial creation of exam)
3	Determine criteria by which practitioners were qualified to take exam and keep these criteria up to date (job of Eligibility Committee)
4	Discipline certified practitioners who practice unethically (Ethics Committee)
5	Ensure the ethical practice of the organization including monitoring of potential conflicts of interest (COI) (Ethics Committee)
6	Operate in a manner consistent with DEI best practices (DEI Committee)
7	Execute goals as determined/approved by the Board of Directors (Leadership team)

however, several Board members were not informed about the responsibilities of the role, included in discussions about the nominees, or given time to consider nominating themselves. The contrast between an initial diverse group of stakeholders and an all-White founding leadership made race a salient issue from the outset.

The organization was formally founded in early 2021, with one of the founding members named CEO. By September 2021, an executive director (ED) was appointed, along with four interim Board members (three White, one Black). In December 2021, three women of color were added to the Board, making it nine members in total (five White, four BIPOC [47]). The Board members were selected by an external electoral committee of 14 people during the Fall of 2021, using a systematic process to ensure diversity in demographics and expertise.

Despite this increase in racial diversity, control remained centralized among White male leadership. The CEO, ED, and Board Chair who were all White men, were described by participants as maintaining primary control over access to funders, external counsel, and key decision-making processes. Notably, contemporaneous Board correspondence, meeting minutes and corroborated interview accounts confirmed that executive leadership controlled external communications and access to legal and financial stakeholders.

Power hoarding and structural barriers to fair governance

The DEI Committee at Verdantia faced multiple tactics of power hoarding, including neutralization of authority and deliberate role ambiguity (see Supplementary Table 2 for a breakdown of these policies and behaviors). From the very first Board meeting, racialized power disparities were apparent. The newly seated Board, including the first BIPOC members, was expected to approve governance documents drafted exclusively by the predominantly White leadership team. These bylaws were scheduled for a vote before new members had adequate time to review them, effectively forcing them to accept decisions already made. The executive team presented this vote as an urgent necessity, pressuring members to approve decisions or risk “legal and financial instability.”

As a result, White male leadership consolidated power before new members had the chance to engage meaningfully in governance. The CEO and ED were not Board members but functioned as part of the executive leadership team alongside the Board Chair, meaning that Verdantia’s leadership structure was legitimized through a procedural illusion, while in practice, decision-making authority was hoarded by a select few.

The marginalization of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) Committee

The DEI Committee was established to ensure fair governance and equal representation in credentialing decisions. Its primary task was to define equitable selection criteria for the subject matter experts who would be responsible for shaping Verdantia’s certification process.

However, the committee’s decision-making authority was obstructed from the start. First, the leadership delayed committee recommendations by withholding necessary approvals and information. Furthermore, decisions that should have fallen under the committee’s jurisdiction were instead made unilaterally by the CEO and Board Chair. Finally, attempts to ensure representation of historically excluded groups were met with resistance.

Four months after the committee’s formation, tensions escalated when the CEO resigned in response to documented evidence of power hoarding in the form of a timeline demonstrating a lack of transparency in governance and decision-making processes, sent to the Board via email by a Board member of color. Rather than addressing these concerns, the Board Chair reinstated the CEO, further entrenching racialized power imbalances.

The primary point of conflict became the selection of subject matter experts. The DEI committee’s charter mandated that at least 51% of experts be drawn from historically excluded groups. However, executive leadership delayed approvals, effectively obstructing this requirement.

Additionally, the DEI committee was tasked with establishing equitable Board replacement procedures, but leadership ignored their proposals, preventing structural reforms that would have increased fairness and accountability.

Frustrated by delays, obstruction, and uncompensated labor, non-Board members of the DEI Committee eventually demanded financial compensation for their time which was a request that further escalated tensions.

The crisis that led to organizational collapse

Verdantia's governance failures came to a head when the executive leadership, in collaboration with an external testing agency, devalued and excluded the experts selected by the DEI Committee. The SME (subject matter expert) selection process had been designed to ensure that practitioners from historically excluded communities, including Indigenous healers, gender minorities, and racialized professionals, had a role in shaping the credentialing exam. However, executive leadership and the testing agency actively sidelined these experts, reinforcing traditional hierarchies by prioritizing licensed practitioners over non-licensed experts. When it was revealed that the non-licensed contributors would not receive compensation until the end of an extensive commitment period, the resulting outrage led to mass SME resignations.

The CEO's second resignation did not bring reform, as he continued to exert influence over leadership decisions despite officially stepping down. The interim Executive Director, instead of working collaboratively with the Board or the DEI Committee, bypassed them entirely, consolidating executive control at the expense of governance oversight. For many participants these repeated acts of exclusion triggered racial stress reactions and elicited feelings of institutional betrayal, humiliation and fatigue consistent with racial trauma [48, 49]. The final rupture occurred when the unlicensed experts, having been publicly undermined and denied financial recognition, withdrew their participation. Their departure underscored the organization's failure to uphold its stated commitments to justice and equity.

Efforts to restore order proved futile. A diversity consultant was brought in but ultimately found Verdantia's dysfunction too entrenched for remediation. The DEI Committee, increasingly marginalized, disbanded. Together, the BIPOC Board members resigned, citing obstruction, power hoarding, and governance failures. As the crisis deepened, the remaining Board members followed suit, leaving the Chair, CEO, and interim Executive Director as the last standing figures within the organization. Isolated and without institutional legitimacy, they too resigned. In less than a year, Verdantia had collapsed under the weight of its own resistance to justice and power-sharing.

What went wrong?

Verdantia's failure was not just a case of poor governance, it was the result of deliberate power hoarding that obstructed justice, excluded marginalized voices, and prioritized hierarchy over fairness.

This case illustrates how power imbalances can be maintained even in organizations that claim a commitment to equity. The following sections analyze: How power hoarding tactics operate within Boards and leadership teams; The consequences of obstructing justice-focused governance reforms; Strategies to prevent similar failures in future organizations.

The lesson from Verdantia demonstrates that unless justice is embedded in decision-making structures from the outset, efforts toward fairness will always be vulnerable to sabotage. Without trauma informed awareness, even equity-oriented initiatives can unintentionally perpetuate harm among those they aim to empower.

Analysis and results

The manufactured collapse of justice initiatives: a power struggle in three acts

The failure of Verdantia was not an isolated case of poor governance but a reflection of how structural advantages operate in organizations. While early-stage non-profit instability, leadership turnover, and founder's syndrome may have contributed to organizational fragility, the evidence in this case indicated that governance structure and concentrated decision-making authority were the central drivers of Verdantia's collapse [50]. The tactics used to undermine, delay, and exclude members advocating for justice mirror broader patterns in corporate and institutional settings, where decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of a select few [51].

At Verdantia, leadership created the appearance of inclusion while maintaining actual control. The Board was diverse in composition but lacked structural authority. Executive leadership—entirely White men—retained control over bylaws, committee structures, and financial decisions.

A quantitative power analysis revealed how Verdantia's leadership consolidated authority. While the Board nominally held 50% of the power, its authority was diluted through procedural barriers. Executive directors controlled 32%, often bypassing the Board entirely when convenient. The Board Chair alone wielded 18% of the power, absorbing judicial authority that should have been shared with an Ethics Committee. Meanwhile, the DEI Committee held 0% of the power (Fig. 2). These percentages reflect the proportional allocation of formal decision authority across enumerated governance tasks, as derived from the structured task inventory described in Sect. "Data collection: power mapping and decision-making structures".

This discrepancy illustrates a larger reality within governance structures: while diversity can exist at a surface level, real authority is often retained by those who have historically held power [13, 24, 52]. The following analysis examines how Verdantia's power struggles played out in three key domains: executive power (who gets to

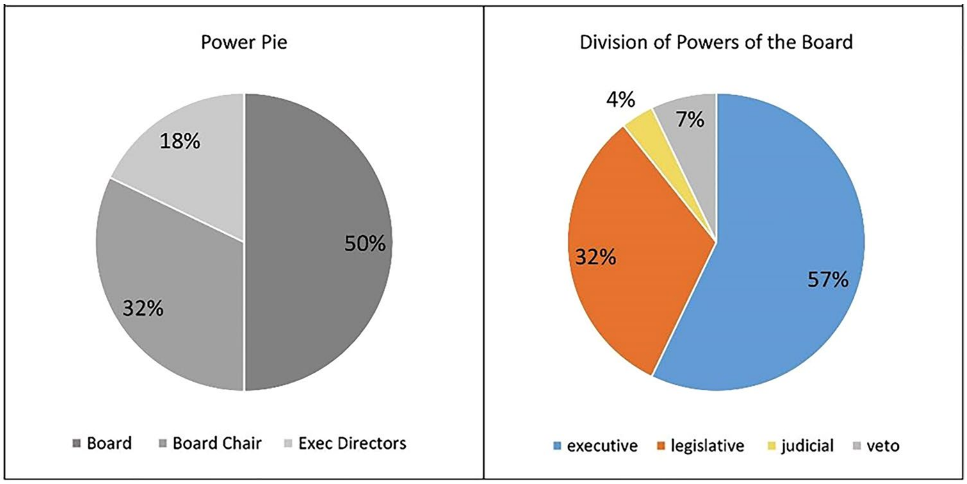

Fig. 2 Division of powers

decide?), legislative power (who makes the rules?), and judicial power (who enforces fairness?).

The executive level power struggle: gatekeeping and the illusion of Inclusion

From the very first Board meeting, the leadership team pressured newly appointed members and particularly those from historically excluded groups, to cede power. Executive leadership implemented several gatekeeping mechanisms to ensure that decision-making authority remained in their hands (Table 3). Bylaws, drafted entirely by leadership, were pushed for approval before new members had time to review them. Access to financial records and organizational decision-making processes was tightly controlled, and artificial time constraints forced rushed decisions, ensuring that power remained centralized.

One of the most contentious struggles involved the selection of experts for Verdantia's credentialing exams. The CEO insisted on his authority to select experts, bypassing the DEI Committee's recommendations to install his own candidates. This reflects broader patterns in hiring and credentialing: decision-makers, when given unchecked authority, tend to favor candidates who reflect their own networks and experiences, perpetuating demographic homogeneity in leadership roles [51, 53].

The legislative level power struggle: weaponizing policy to obstruct justice

Verdantia's DEI Committee was formed in response to concerns about exclusion, yet its authority was systematically undermined. Leadership dismissed its recommendations as "non-binding" while enforcing decisions made by other committees. The hiring of a justice consultant was stalled for months, ensuring that no reforms could be implemented. Meanwhile, leadership justified bypassing standard decision-making processes by citing the need for urgency, preventing oversight from taking place.

When Board members of color raised concerns about transparency and accountability, the CEO framed their critiques as disruptive, reinforcing a perception that they were obstructing progress rather than addressing governance failures [19]. This tactic (Table 2) is widely documented in organizational research: efforts to increase fairness are often dismissed as impractical or unnecessary rather than evaluated on their merits [54].

The judicial level power struggle: destroying accountability to retain control

One of Verdantia's most direct abuses of power was its failure to establish an Ethics Committee, despite being required by its own bylaws. Under the organization's governance rules, the Board Chair was responsible for initiating this process however, he refused to do it, leaving ethical oversight entirely in the hands of executive leadership.

The consequences were significant. The CEO and Chair could not be formally investigated for conflicts of interest. Hiring decisions, including the exclusion of non-traditional experts, remained unchallenged. Financial decisions, including disparities in SME compensation, were shielded from review. This pattern is not unique to Verdantia, research shows that when accountability mechanisms are not fully implemented, power tends to concentrate among those who originally designed the system rather than those tasked with oversight (e.g. [3, 7, 53, 55]).

The power of the purse: financial control as a tool of exclusion

When structural exclusion is challenged, financial coercion is often the next line of defense [10, 56]. The DEI

Table 3 Power struggle tactics

Executive Tactic	Definition and Context	Example
Show Hosting	A power play in which key responsibilities are taken by leadership before others have the opportunity to engage, consolidating control.	At the initial Board meeting, three major decisions were required: approval of the bylaws (not provided in advance), approval of the Board Chair (with only one preselected nominee), and financial expenditure approval. The third issue, expenditure control, was deliberately withheld from the agenda, allowing leadership to unilaterally assume control over financial decision-making.
Urgency	The strategic creation of artificial deadlines to limit discussion, prevent due diligence, and force decisions favoring those already in power.	The bylaws were pushed for immediate approval under the claim that funders required legal confirmation. Board members were told they could revise them later, yet subsequent attempts to amend the bylaws were blocked. The timeline, controlled by the CEO, ensured critical issues remained unexamined.
Power Claw Back Attempts	Reversing or undermining previously agreed-upon decisions to prevent long-term power sharing.	The Board initially voted to lower the threshold for amending bylaws from two-thirds to a simple majority, allowing for easier governance modifications. Leadership later attempted to reinstate the two-thirds rule to cement their control over policy changes.
Headless Kingship	Retaining informal leadership power and influence despite officially stepping down.	Although Theo resigned as CEO, he continued to direct Board affairs behind the scenes, advising leadership and retaining a high degree of influence over decision-making. He remained on official correspondence and continued participating in high-level discussions months after his departure.
Racial Solidarity	The consolidation of power by a racially homogenous majority to maintain structural advantages.	The "Solidarity Block," composed entirely of White Board members, routinely voted as a bloc to sustain leadership control and block reforms proposed by non-White members.
Maintaining the Status Quo	Using "tradition" or "best practices" as a pretext for maintaining unjust power structures.	The CEO justified executive decision-making authority by stating, "Deviating from this structure creates inefficiencies," dismissing concerns from the DEI committee about governance equity.
Internal Devaluation	The public diminishment of individuals or roles to erode their authority and suppress their influence.	The DEI committee was tasked with developing diversity guidelines, but their proposals were ignored by leadership. When raised again in meetings, White Board members repeated the ideas as their own, with leadership only responding to them when framed by White voices.
Legislative Tactic	**Definition and Context**	**Example**
Obstructionism	The strategic delay or prevention of governance reforms to preserve entrenched power structures.	The selection of a DEI consultant was stalled for months under the guise of "finding the right fit." The process was prolonged until the consultant acceptable to leadership was chosen, sidelining the DEI committee's recommendations.
Sneaky Veto	The covert introduction of new veto powers to strip authority from justice committees.	After leadership realized that the DEI committee was attempting to introduce governance reforms, they implemented a new "veto agenda items" rule, ensuring that only the executive leadership could control meeting discussions.
Tokenism	The symbolic inclusion of diverse members without granting them actual decision-making authority.	The CEO added a few non-White SME candidates to the credentialing committee but did not engage them in substantive decision-making, framing their participation as a means of "having a foot in both worlds" rather than integrating their expertise.
Judicial Tactic	**Definition and Context**	**Example**
Exploitation	The extraction of labor, expertise, or contributions from marginalized groups without fair compensation or recognition.	Non-licensed experts, primarily Indigenous and from historically excluded communities, were engaged for their expertise but later informed they would not receive financial compensation—unlike their White, licensed counterparts. Their resignations reflected a refusal to accept continued systemic exploitation.
Poison Pill Tactics	Introducing undesirable contractual clauses to silence critics or deter participation.	When the DEI committee was finally offered a contract, it included a non-disclosure and non-disparagement clause, making financial compensation contingent on their silence regarding leadership misconduct.
External Devaluation	Publicly dismissing or diminishing the value of marginalized individuals' contributions to justify their exclusion.	During an exam development meeting, a White consultant dismissed the non-licensed experts' contributions as "historical," signaling that their expertise was valued only as a performative gesture rather than a legitimate part of the credentialing process.
Strategic Resignation	Resigning as an act of protest against governance failures to expose inequities and disrupt the system.	Frustrated by the systemic obstruction, all non-White Board members and the DEI committee resigned, leaving the remaining leadership to justify their inability to retain a diverse governance structure to funders.

Committee issued an ultimatum demanding fair collaboration with the Board, the hiring of an equity consultant, and equal pay for all experts, both licensed and unlicensed. Leadership initially agreed but then obstructed implementation. It was revealed that licensed (predominantly White) experts had been paid months earlier than unlicensed (predominantly BIPOC and Indigenous) experts. Unlicensed experts were informed they would not be paid unless they attended all sessions with licensed experts, and BIPOC Board members were asked to sign non-disclosure agreements, limiting their ability to raise concerns [57].

When BIPOC Board members attempted to escalate the issue, they were ignored. One member called out the injustice in an email: "*Contracts just seem like one more tactic to harm, delay, and control disempowered POC in an already unfairly prolonged process. Justice delayed is justice denied.*"

This reflects a well-documented pattern in corporate and nonprofit settings, where financial decision-making is used as a means of reinforcing power imbalances [16, 56].

The final act: the mass resignation as the only remaining option

With no legitimate avenues for change, BIPOC Board members and the DEI Committee resigned en masse, sending their resignation letter directly to funders. Prior to resignation members of the Board and DEI committee consulted with the independent external consultant retained by the executive committee, whose assessment aligned with concerns regarding governance obstruction and power concentration. This was not an impulsive decision—it was a strategic act of last resort (Table 3).

Research on workplace resignation patterns suggests that historically excluded individuals are more likely to leave positions when faced with sustained obstruction rather than experiencing upward mobility within the same organization [19, 58, 59]. Shortly after receiving the resignation letter, the entire Board opted to disband itself.

The Verdantia case study is a real-world illustration of how racial and gender advantages persist in governance structures, not due to merit, but through control over decision-making, financial resources, and institutional policies [13, 14, 52]. Verdantia did not fail because it lacked talent or purpose; it failed because those in power ensured that justice was always out of reach.

Discussion

The marginalization of justice initiatives

As of 2025, efforts to address bias in governance, often through justice committees or fairness initiatives, have been thoroughly repressed [60–62]. Powerful individuals and institutions frame these efforts as divisive, even as they continue to benefit from the inequities such initiatives seek to correct [11, 63, 64]. The backlash against fairness is rooted in the fear that opening access to others will result or has resulted in a loss of status for those who have historically monopolized power [54]. Instead of acknowledging systemic barriers, they recast justice efforts as threats, reinforcing the very inequalities they claim to oppose. Such cycles of resistance may contribute to conditions associated with racial stress and trauma, particularly when exclusion is persistent [18].

Structural racism and the weaponization of Policy

The trajectory of Verdantia, from its ambitious founding to its swift collapse, is neither unique nor unpredictable. Rather, it follows a well-worn historical pattern, one that has been extensively documented in critical legal and organizational scholarship [65, 66] and that is playing out on a larger stage in greater society. Critically, power is never merely procedural; it is a mechanism for preserving or disrupting social hierarchies. Whether in governments, corporations, or nonprofit boards, power is exercised through control over policies, resources, and decision-making authority. Recognizing power as political is not an ideological stance, but a necessary framework for analyzing how governance structures maintain or challenge inequities [36, 67]. The underlying mechanism is clear: attempts to create structural equity are tolerated only to the extent that they do not threaten entrenched power. The moment those in control perceive a redistribution of authority that might weaken their dominance, resistance emerges; not in overt declarations of bias, but through procedural maneuvering, strategic delays, and the quiet suffocation of reform under the weight of bureaucratic inertia [36, 67]. These patterns also have profound psychological consequences, as racial trauma emerges not from overt hostility alone but from chronic procedural injustice.

The failure of Verdantia's DEI Committee illustrates this process in granular detail. While positioned as a body intended to safeguard fairness and transparency, it was systematically denied real authority, its decisions were obstructed, and its very existence became a site of conflict. This is no isolated incident. Across the United States, efforts to dismantle progress toward justice in governance structures escalated in 2023, with 34 bills across 20 states aiming to prohibit DEI initiatives in colleges and corporations [64]. Texas has codified such prohibitions into law, while similar measures gained traction in many other states. The culmination of these movements was the abolition of the federal Equal Rights Office in 2025 and the systematic dismantling of all federal structures designed to enforce or promote justice or power-sharing with historically disenfranchised or marginalized groups [23, 25, 64].

Similar mechanisms are being used in some countries to undermine structural equity initiatives under the guise of neutrality. Policies that appear procedural, such as the elimination of diversity-focused hiring, funding reallocation, or the dismantling of justice committees, often function as strategic efforts to preserve pre-existing power dynamics and punish people with marginalized identities [23, 54, 64]. This paper examines these tactics in depth, using Verdantia as a case study to illustrate how power hoarding operates within Boards, how justice initiatives are obstructed, and how exclusion is maintained through governance structures.

The dismantling of federal civil rights protections follows a historical pattern in which legal rollbacks precede systemic exclusion, laying the groundwork for deeper racial stratification [21, 22]. Just as the Nuremberg Laws and Jim Crow statutes codified subjugation under the pretense of legality, the erosion of justice mechanisms is not a neutral policy shift but the legislative scaffolding for segregation and disenfranchisement [23, 64]. Chillingly, in early 2025, a long-standing prohibition against segregated facilities in federal contracting was rescinded, removing explicit protections that had barred separate restrooms and waiting rooms in government-associated spaces [68]. While segregation remains illegal, this move signals an ideological shift toward legitimizing exclusion under the guise of deregulation, echoing past efforts to dismantle civil rights protections while maintaining the appearance of legal neutrality. The administration's justification which framed these repeals as a return to "merit" and "neutrality", mirrors the language historically used to obscure racial exclusion under the guise of fairness and equal opportunity [23, 24]. The rhetoric of "race-blind" policy has long served as a mechanism for *maintaining* racial hierarchies while obscuring the structural barriers that ensure access remains unequal [54].

The language used to justify these rollbacks is telling: these initiatives are framed as divisive, unnecessary, or, paradoxically, discriminatory against the very groups historically overrepresented in positions of power. The same resistance that Verdantia's committee faced has now played out on a national scale.

Policy weaponization is at the core of this resistance. In its most insidious form, policy is not wielded as a tool for fairness but as an instrument of control. Policies are drafted with an appearance of neutrality but are designed or selectively applied in ways that reinforce pre-existing hierarchies [53, 69]. The case of legacy admissions, recently criticized by Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch, is one such example: a seemingly benign practice that disproportionately advantages White applicants under the guise of tradition and meritocracy [70]. The same strategy was evident in Verdantia. The bylaws appeared equitable but in practice centralized decision-making power within a small group, ensuring that the newly established DEI Committee had no genuine authority. Where explicit exclusion was no longer socially or legally acceptable, procedural ambiguity served the same function.

Throughout history, unchecked executive power has been a mechanism for entrenching exclusion and silencing reform. From monarchies that dissolved representative bodies to corporate boards that consolidate authority under a select few, the elimination of legislative and judicial checks has consistently served to reinforce existing hierarchies. At Verdantia, this same pattern unfolded: executive leadership usurped the Board's legislative role, dictating policy without consensus, while also absorbing judicial authority by blocking the establishment of an Ethics Committee. Justice was not merely denied, it was procedurally erased. This concentration of power follows a long tradition of using governance structures not as safeguards against oppression, but as instruments to secure it. Without enforced separations of power, organizations claiming to champion justice risk becoming the very systems of exclusion they once sought to dismantle.

Audre Lorde's assertion that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" finds resonance here. Within Verdantia, procedural tactics, many of which have historically functioned to preserve power, were deployed to neuter the very body intended to address inequity. This was not a failure of policy but a calculated use of policy to obstruct meaningful change. As this case demonstrates, the absence of a policy can be as potent as the presence of a restrictive one: the failure to create a functioning Ethics Committee meant that no formal mechanism existed to challenge executive overreach. This is the ultimate lesson Verdantia provides: justice initiatives, if not explicitly protected against power hoarding, will always be vulnerable to it.

Power hoarding operates at multiple levels, requiring both immediate obstructionist tactics (Table 3) and long-term policy manipulation (Table 4). Tactics are short-term actions designed to maintain control, such as withholding information, gatekeeping, or creating artificial urgency to force decisions [27]. Policy manipulation, by contrast, is the strategic use of governance rules to entrench power, often under the guise of procedural neutrality [53]. At Verdantia, leadership combined both: tactics such as obstructing DEI Committee recommendations ensured that reforms were delayed, while structural policy changes, such as limiting the committee's authority, ensured those reforms would never be enacted. These dual strategies mirror broader patterns in corporate governance, where exclusion is maintained through both procedural inertia and active resistance [3].

The advantages of quantifying power—practical implications

If the Verdantia case offers a cautionary tale, it also provides a roadmap for intervention. Governance structures do not fail randomly; they fail in patterns that can be studied, anticipated, and corrected. One of the most critical interventions is the quantification of power, mapping where authority truly resides, rather than where it is nominally assigned.

Organizations with robust governance practices understand this. In corporate settings, well-defined decision-making frameworks prevent power from accumulating in unchecked silos. One UK financial services firm, for

Table 4 Policy methods for disempowerment

Policy	Example in Verdantia Case	References
Neutralization of DEI Committee Authority	Leadership overruled DEI committee recommendations, questioned their legitimacy, and circumvented their decision-making authority by covertly selecting experts without DEI committee input.	Knowles et al. [35]; Workman-Stark [36]; Fox & Alldred [42, 71]
Capricious Time Management	The Board Chair delayed meetings for months, preventing the DEI committee from exercising oversight and allowing executive leadership to act unchecked.	Betsch et al. [72]; Fox & Alldred [71]; Okun et al. [9]
Deliberately Undefined Roles and Powers	The Ethics Committee was never formally established, leaving ethical oversight in the hands of the executive leadership, reinforcing governance failures.	Bauer & Simmons [73]; Okun et al. [9]
Usurping Critical Responsibilities	The CEO assumed responsibilities meant for diversity experts, bypassing the DEI committee and shaping governance policies unilaterally.	Workman-Stark [36]; Knowles et al. [35]; Westphal & Zajac [13]
Undermining from Within	The interim ED proposed dissolving the DEI committee altogether, signaling leadership's intent to eliminate social justice committees rather than engage with them.	Knowles et al. [35],

example, makes public a list of "matters reserved to the Board," ensuring that all major financial and governance decisions remain transparent and accountable [3]. Another corporation has developed a 30-page delegation document that clearly delineates which decisions require Board approval, while others have implemented exhaustive protocols specifying director oversight over risk management and internal controls [3]. Such transparency measures mitigate corruption, reduce conflicts of interest, and reinforce accountability.

The absence of these safeguards at Verdantia created fertile ground for power hoarding. Decision-making tasks were not clearly delineated, leading to executive overreach. Authority was dispersed unevenly, with the Board Chair absorbing judicial functions that should have been exercised by an Ethics Committee. The DEI Committee itself had no formalized enforcement mechanisms, rendering its deliberations largely symbolic. These structural deficiencies allowed governance failures to masquerade as procedural inevitabilities rather than deliberate acts of obstruction.

Dysfunctional organizations tend to treat power as a finite commodity, something to be guarded rather than shared. This mindset fuels resistance to transparency, with leaders fearing that relinquishing control will leave them vulnerable. However, power hoarding ultimately weakens institutions, creating decision-making bottlenecks and eroding trust. To counteract this, organizations must ensure that power is not only distributed equitably but that its distribution is explicitly documented and understood.

The disempowerment of justice-focused governance structures

The fate of Verdantia's DEI Committee is not unique. Across industries, committees tasked with ensuring accountability are frequently structured in ways that render them ineffective from the outset. Many operate in advisory roles without binding power over organizational decisions, leaving them unable to enact meaningful reform [52]. In some cases, committees serve as symbolic gestures, offering the appearance of commitment to justice while functioning primarily to shield the organization from criticism rather than drive change [74]. Others suffer from resource starvation, receiving neither the funding nor the institutional support necessary to carry out their mandates [62].

At Verdantia, these dynamics were evident at every stage. The DEI Committee, despite its stated purpose, was structurally disempowered. Leadership circumvented its authority, obstructed its initiatives, and eventually rendered it ineffective. Without explicit protections, even well-intentioned justice initiatives remain vulnerable to co-option or outright elimination, as was the case here.

Recommendations: preventing power hoarding in governance

Table 5 presents governance safeguards derived from the failures at Verdantia. Specifically, the DEI Committee's disempowerment highlights the need for binding authority (Sect. 4.3), while the obstruction of diversity policies underscores the importance of external audits (Sect. 4.2). These measures, if implemented, could prevent power hoarding by ensuring procedural fairness and oversight.

Verdantia's failure was not inevitable. Governance structures seeking to avoid similar outcomes must move beyond symbolic gestures and implement substantive policy protections. Justice committees must be chartered with binding authority rather than relegated to advisory roles that can be ignored or overruled at will. Clear oversight mechanisms should be established to ensure that executive leadership cannot unilaterally override committee decisions, protecting governance from manipulation. External audits should be conducted regularly to assess governance structures, identify procedural imbalances, and intervene before entrenched power dynamics become irreversible.

These measures alone cannot guarantee success, but they can significantly increase the difficulty of obstructing

Table 5 How to create equity within boards

Process	Explicitly Define Power Relevant tasks	Define from the outset which tasks are power relevant and which Board members are responsible for these tasks – make a special effort to define and consider veto powers [3]
Process	Explicitly discuss Power sharing	Explain from the start that best practices involve dividing and sharing power. Clearly show that the DEI and, ethics committee and audit functions act as a check on the executive power of the Leadership entities [3]
Process	Set hard criteria for diversity of Board members	Recruit representatives of diverse racial groups ensuring that these individuals accurately represent the perspectives of their constituencies [75]. Avoid trojan horse appointees.
Process	Grant DEI power at executive levels	DEI initiatives must be endorsed by the Board and senior executive leadership otherwise they risk a lack of accountability, resistance to change and failure of adequate resource allocation [74, 76].
Process	Distribute Power	Quantify the distribution of power by putting power relevant tasks in writing and allocating responsibilities to Board members in a distributed way, across gender and racial lines and based on separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers [77]
Process	Carefully consider veto powers	Head off "sneaky veto" powers by those that already have outsized executive power. Rather grant veto powers to ethics bearing Board branches
Process	Build transparency into financial oversight	Power to spend should be divided between Directors and Executives with transparent checks and balances [6]
Process	Collective vote	Require voting on changes in agenda items, policies, and other organizational matters. Allow members to discuss the motion before voting
Process	Built in deadlines with consequences	Avoid covert usurping of power through delay tactics.
Process	Equal enforcement of rules and policies	Ensure that there is a separate empowered body to make binding decisions when Executive Leaders, Boards and Committees are at odds or when the rules are unclear. Membership should respect equity and diversity principles and members rotate out regularly to avoid entrenchment.
Process	Regular Internal Audit	Hire an external auditor to assess processes and procedures on a regular basis with results to be evaluated by the Board and Ethics Committee
Process	Financial Transparency	Lack of financial transparency can hide fiscal misconduct at the executive level; to avoid this, best practices are to share both financial information and decision-making powers with Board directors [3, 78].
Process	Board Education	Offer support and education to Board members about leadership, the role of the dominant culture and intersectionality in companies [15]
Practice	Call out disempowerment by disparagement	Cultivate respect. Build a culture that resists disparagement, disdainment and insult. When public insult occurs, require public apology to ensure respect.
Practice	Power and Process Review	Evaluate the CEO, company processes and initiatives. Governance committees should meet regularly without the CEOs presence to evaluate their performance [6]
Practice	Emphasize discussion	Rather than having an authoritative Board where one person's voice is more valuable than others, allow discussion between all parties when enacting policies, setting goals/agendas. Emphasizing discussion within an organization allows others to feel empowered and that their voice matters. Avoid long debates that can lead to losing sight of the larger objective [63]
Practice	Learn from Mistakes	Rather than punish an individual for making a mistake, learn from it and understand what could have been done differently. Learning from mistakes can help subordinates feel less targeted and singled out for making a genuine error and reinforce positive relationships with others on the Board [9]. This reduces levels of anxiety, self-blame, and avoidance in individuals while fostering growth within the organization. Revisit old conflicts to reflect on how it was handled and what could have been done differently.
Practice	Cultivate Mutual Understanding	Implement active Team Building exercises to build trust and respect for one another.
Practice	Encourage collaboration	Require multiple parties to agree on policy or goal changes, direction of organization. Not only does this help avoid changes being made to support one person's agenda, it provides others an opportunity to develop their personal leadership skills.
Practice	Trust one another	Trust that decisions are being made with the intent of enhancing the organization. One person should not be spearheading all of the work due to a fear of others abilities not being adequate enough.
Practice	Constructive feedback	Provide and encourage feedback of ideas and suggestions, but in a way that's constructive. Discomfort is the root of growth, and if non-collectivist ideas are not challenged they can be enacted without brute force [79]
Practice	Evaluate the status quo	Incorporating DEI is a difficult task and takes time. Organizations need to dedicate time to incorporate equitable practices. Rushing decisions without considering the needs of marginalized groups will ultimately cost more time [9]. Consider a needs assessment by an outside diversity consultant [80].

reform. The alternative is to accept what the Verdantia case makes painfully clear: without deliberate safeguards, justice initiatives will always be vulnerable to power hoarding.

Racial trauma and organizational harm

The systemic injustices at Verdantia did not merely result in procedural failure; they inflicted deep racial trauma and psychological harm on the individuals caught within their power struggles. The women of color on the management team, already carrying the burden of navigating predominantly White spaces, were subjected to continual undermining, erasure, and exclusion. Their expertise was dismissed, their decision-making powers curtailed, and their concerns framed as disruptive rather than corrective. The Indigenous experts, recruited under the pretense of equity, were devalued and financially exploited, forced to watch as their contributions were minimized while credentialed counterparts received both validation and compensation. This is the insidious nature of racial trauma within institutions is not just the denial of power but the repeated experience of dispossession, making individuals question their worth, their voice, and their place within the very structures they helped to build. This aligns with racial trauma models emphasizing cumulative harm from repeated exposure to invalidation exclusion and racialized double standards [76].

Limitations

This study relies on retrospective accounts from participants who elected to be interviewed. Although archival documents were used for corroboration, case studies are inherently bounded in scope. This study is a single-case qualitative analysis of governance dynamics within one nonprofit organization and therefore does not claim generalizability beyond similar contexts. The interview sample was limited to non-executive governance actors directly involved in the documented conflict, which constrains representation of dominant-group perspectives. However, dominant-group actions were examined through archival documentation and the independent consultant's report. Given the retrospective nature of interviews, recall bias is possible, though triangulation with contemporaneous records mitigates this risk. Finally, some authors had lived experience related to the events studied; analytic decisions were therefore documented and cross-checked against archival materials to enhance confirmability.

Conclusion

This case is analytically useful because it allows examination of how formal commitments to equity may be undermined by informal governance practices, illustrating mechanisms through which power becomes concentrated and reform efforts are resisted [39, 54, 81]. The downfall of Verdantia is not merely a failure of one organization but a reflection of the broader challenges facing justice-based governance. It demonstrates that inequity is not sustained through explicit exclusion alone but through the subtler mechanisms of policy weaponization, procedural inertia, and structural resistance to power-sharing. These forces act in tandem to preserve hierarchies under the guise of neutrality, ensuring that meaningful structural change remains elusive.

If future governance structures hope to succeed where Verdantia failed, they must internalize one fundamental truth: fairness is not self-executing. It must be built, safeguarded, and continuously defended. Organizations committed to justice must move beyond performative inclusion and adopt governance frameworks that explicitly protect against power hoarding. This requires not only policy changes but cultural shifts that recognize the ways in which power operates, who wields it, who is denied it, and what must be done to redistribute it equitably [82].

Future research should explore power hoarding beyond nonprofit governance, extending to corporate Boards and public institutions. Comparative studies could examine how different organizational structures mitigate or enable exclusionary governance. Additionally, longitudinal analyses tracking the impact of justice committees over time would provide valuable insights into their long-term effectiveness.

Verdantia's collapse serves as both a cautionary tale and a call to action. Without vigilance, organizations will continue to replicate the same cycles of exclusion and resistance to reform. But with intentional governance, transparent power structures, and an unwavering commitment to justice, it is possible to create systems that do not merely survive but actively advance equity. Ultimately, addressing racial trauma requires not only structural reform but also trauma-informed leadership practices that acknowledge and repair the psychological wounds created by systemic exclusion.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary material 1

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Author contributions

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Data availability
Data is provided in Supplementary Materials.

Institutional review board
Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (Certificate #H-02–23-8904).

Informed consent
Informed consent was obtained from the organization used in the case study described.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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