

Diversity in work groups

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This contribution explains that minority and majority employees have a different perspective on workplace diversity. Expecting minority employees to fit in can undermine the added value of a diverse workforce. Neglecting the needs of majority employees causes resistance to change. Leaders who succeed in making all workers feel included and valued, contribute to an organizational climate that fosters the benefits of diversity.

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In interpersonal social contexts, people may choose to engage with others they like, for instance because they resemble them and affirm the validity of their views. However, in many work situations we are expected to collaborate with individuals who are different from us, in terms of their ethnicity, or life attitudes. Psychological insights about the way we relate to members of different social groups can help us understand why this is sometimes so difficult. This contribution reveals how we can overcome such difficulties and may even benefit from work group diversity.

Benefits of work group diversity

Society benefits from a diverse work force. An equitable representation of minorities and women in the workplace indicates social justice and equal employment opportunities [1]. In addition, work group diversity can also yield economic benefits. For instance, a recent survey of over 20 000 firms in 91 countries observed that companies with more women in leadership positions show a better financial performance than companies with fewer women in the upper echelons [2]. Additionally, a 15 year panel data study of the Standard and Poor 1500 firms revealed that female representation in top management correlates

positively with innovation [3]. A meta-analysis of 146 different studies examining 612 effect sizes, more generally demonstrated that employee diversity is related to a more innovative performance, particularly on complex tasks [4]. For example, companies with functionally diverse top management teams hold product portfolios that contain more products that are new to market or employ novel technologies than companies with homogeneous top management teams, and this benefits firm capital market performance (Tobin's q) [5]. In science, research teams in which more ethnicities are represented yield findings that are published in higher-impact journals, and are cited more frequently [6].

The benefits of diversity can also affect broader business and community outcomes. When more different perspectives and stakeholder groups are represented, a work team is able to cater to a larger variety of clients, offer a broader range of products, and has the potential to build more community credibility [7]. An examination of different groups of stock traders, for instance, revealed more prudent financial decision making when the group of traders was more diverse. This introduced more scrutiny of other people's decisions, and reduced price inflation [8]. A study of residential and business mobile phone records in the UK revealed that when there was more social and spatial diversity in communication networks, communities showed a better record of economic development, education, health, environmental quality and less crime [9].

Given that diverse work teams have the potential to be more creative and innovative, to make higher quality decisions, and yield superior joint performance than homogeneous teams, it seems advantageous to strive for greater work group diversity. However, this is not always easy to achieve. Even organizations that have an explicit diversity policy may not be able to successfully recruit or promote workers representing different backgrounds [10]. And if they do, it is still a major challenge to deal with diversity in a constructive way [11,12]. As a result, beneficial as well as detrimental effects of workplace diversity have been documented [13] and meta-analyses show overall effects that are quite small [14]. Here we review recent evidence to show which aspects of diversity benefit group productivity, which conditions need to be met to produce these benefits, and which diversity implications require further research.

Not all differences are equally helpful

Differences among work group members can take many shapes and forms. People can have a different outlook on

life because of their age, gender, or race and the social experiences this exposes them to [15^{*}]. However, there is no one-to-one relationship between these visible differences and the ideas, priorities, or expertise people bring to the table (Figure 1). Yet, we often treat characteristics that mark people as members of particular social groups as proxies for what they have to offer in a work context. For instance, we assume that female leaders have superior people skills [16]. So we are disappointed when they behave in a masculine and competitive way to succeed at work in contrast to stereotypic expectations [17]. This is why recruiting employees who represent a larger variety of social groups is not enough in itself.

In fact, the common practice to select, socialize, and promote individuals to all fit the same mold, makes it less likely that those with a different background will actually offer a unique perspective on the work that is done [18^{*}]. The gain of work group diversity is located in the provision of different perspectives, the combination of different types of expertise, and the willingness to explore different approaches, as a way to optimize the work that needs to be done. Thus, we have to look beneath the surface of demographic diversity features [19]. Apparent differences between individuals should also be meaningful at a deeper level, and represent different approaches to the task [20^{*}].

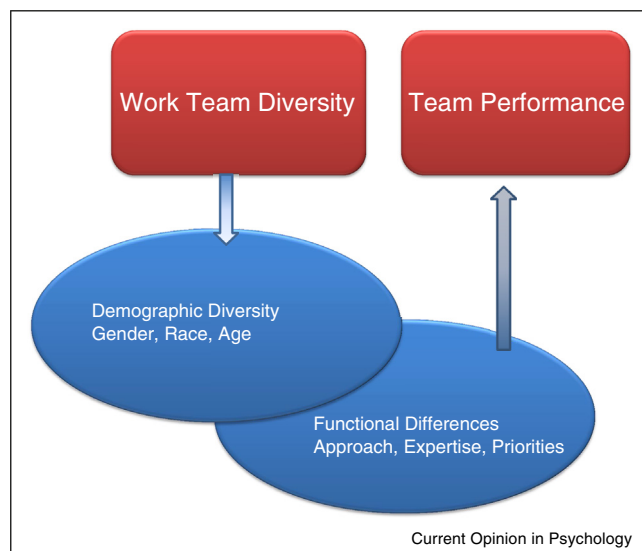
People are generally well able to integrate and combine different sources of expertise, different preferences, or different interests to achieve optimal joint outcomes. This only changes when different perspectives on what to do stem from the endorsement of different *values* [21,22]. For instance, individuals who had to resolve a

disagreement about the choice of transportation displayed a cardiovascular response pattern indicating a negative state of threat when their opponent endorsed different values (i.e., attached different importance to environmental concerns). Nevertheless, when the disagreement referred to diverging interests (relating to the cost of transportation), this elicited a positive state of cardiovascular challenge [23]. Disagreement on how best to perform a joint task is most likely to be productive when those involved in this process have a common goal, or agree about important values that help them integrate their differences.

It is hard to get along

When individuals with different backgrounds work together, group-based prejudice and negative expectations can spoil the working relationship (see Figure 2). For instance, a national survey conducted in the US revealed that Black workers receive less favorable performance appraisals and advancement opportunities when they are late for work, while no such relation between tardiness and rated performance was found for Whites [24]. Likewise, women and minorities receive lower evaluations if they are pro-diversity, but men and whites who favor diversity do not suffer this disadvantage [25]. Moreover, even though attendance of social activities at work (such as company parties) can improve relationships among co-workers, this was not found to be the case for cross-race relations [26]. A meta-analysis reviewing 79 observed effects illustrates the costly outcomes of such differential treatment. It revealed that workers who feel discriminated against because of their race not only have less positive job attitudes and are less likely to help others at work, they also have poorer psychological and physical health outcomes [27].

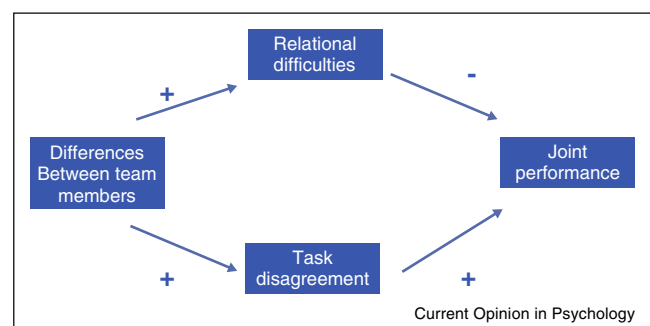
Figure 1



How demographic diversity features relate to functional differences and team performance.

This suggests it is not appropriate to consider the effects of work group diversity at an aggregate level. Employees of different gender, racial, or ethnic groups may have completely diverging work experiences, even when

Figure 2



The countervailing effects of relational difficulties and task disagreement.

working together on joint tasks. When members of these groups feel unfairly treated, this stands in the way of developing fruitful work relations. Women and ethnic minority members may be weary of being exposed to gender stereotypes that reduce their chances of equal treatment at work [28,29]. White men too can suffer physiological threat due to their concerns about revealing bias against others they try to treat equally [30], or when they feel neglected because of organizational initiatives aiming to increase diversity [31–33]. Only examining overall or averaged responses to work team diversity easily masks such different subgroup perspectives, leading managers to ignore the unique concerns of each group of workers. Even though it seems that more prolonged interactions may reduce negative affective responses, for instance in interracial interactions [34], these are important sources of concern that merit serious consideration when striving for increased work team diversity.

Fitting in or opting out

Individuals entering an organization or work team as minority representatives are faced with a dilemma. They can either adapt to existing practices, or emphasize what makes them different from other workers (see Figure 3). Feeling different from others can undermine life satisfaction and self-esteem [35], causing people to become ill or making them decide to leave. Those who remain, tend to cope with the situation by adopting traits that are characteristic for the majority of workers in the organization. For instance, senior women learn to act in a highly masculine and career oriented way in order to be successful at work [36]. Likewise, Hindustani workers who are confronted with ethnic bias in the workplace, emphasize their independence, punctuality and directness to distance themselves from the group stereotype [37]. However, such efforts to fit in make it less likely that a diverse workforce will also introduce a diversity of perspectives and approaches.

By contrast, when others in the work context acknowledge and explicitly value the differences that characterize different groups of workers, this is an important source of work motivation and belongingness for minority group members [38]. Thus, it is not the numerical representation

of different groups of workers, but the social acceptance of different people with different perspectives that is decisive [39]. Only when stereotypical expectations are challenged, and people are tolerant about their differences, will members of diverse work teams be psychologically healthy and productive at work [40].

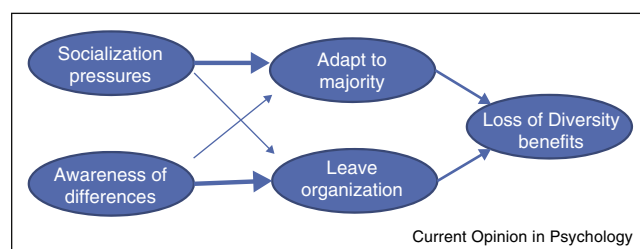
Bringing out the benefits of diversity

Results from scientific studies offer insights that can help reap the benefits of diversity [41]. For instance, African American students who were made to feel welcome and included as they entered college, had a higher GPA and visited their physicians less frequently during their three-year college period [42]. When supervisors succeed in making minority employees psychologically safe and included, these are more likely to work productively [43]. The inclusion of minority group members as core work team members is also important, because the impact of suggestions to the group to deviate from existing ways is more positive when made by someone who is seen to hold a central position in the group [44]. Likewise, companies that monitor whether equitable pay and promotion opportunities are provided to all workers, and offer diversity training have been found to be more productive and innovative, and have lower voluntary turnover [45].

It is not self-evident that equal treatment is provided, though. For instance, a series of experiments — in which team behavior was held constant — revealed that people perceive racially diverse (vs. homogeneous) teams as more conflictual, and they were less willing to allocate resources to such teams [46]. To further complicate matters, not all workers have the same needs. Minority members feel more included and satisfied and show more innovative performance in companies that explicitly endorse a multicultural perspective. But majority members feel more included when a ‘colorblind’ perspective is adopted [47]. It is therefore important to explicitly communicate to majority members that they too will benefit from diversity policies, as a way to gain their support for attempts to increase employee diversity [48].

Despite the fact that empirical studies have conceptualized and measured diversity in different ways [49], some large-scale investigations yield consistent effects attesting to the potential gains of exposing individuals to different perspectives. This is evident in the quality of work carried out by scientists after they migrate to a different country [50], or the originality of names generated for a commercial product by individuals who have multiple identities [51]. Experimental evidence more specifically reveals that when taking the perspective of others, people elaborate more on the information that is available, and this fosters creativity [52]. Being aware of the fact that others have diverging views also makes people more articulate about the reasons underlying their

Figure 3



Fitting in or opting out: seeking unity undermines diversity benefits.

own preferences, which improves the quality of joint decision making [53].

Conclusions

Due to changing social relations and global migration there is increasing demographic diversity in work teams. If managed properly, diversity can benefit employee creativity, group productivity and firm performance. Feelings of inclusion in multiple social networks, and the ability to take the perspective of others, may also introduce broader gains of diversity for the well-being of social communities, and for prudent business decision making.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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