

Which Racial Groups Are Associated With Diversity?

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This article examines which racial groups are associated with the concept of diversity. Results indicate that regardless of perceivers' racial in-group, minorities (Asians, Blacks, and Latinos) tend to be more associated with diversity than do Whites. In addition, members of minority racial groups were found to associate their respective in-groups more strongly with the concept of diversity relative to minority out-groups. Consequences for addressing issues of racial equity and representation through the pursuit of diversity are discussed.

Keywords: ●●●

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Few words in contemporary American culture are bandied about as much as “diversity.” Racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is extolled by many organizations as being one of their key sources of strength (Bunn & LaCour, 2009; Richard, 2000). Businesses and universities that endorse multiculturalism go out of their way to advertise the value they place on creating and maintaining diversity within their organizations (Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Kochan et al., 2003; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). But despite the plethora of attention that diversity receives, recent research suggests that diversity is a concept that is neither clearly defined nor well understood by the general public (Banks, 2009; Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Peterson, 1999; Unzueta & Binning, 2009).

This article contributes to the clarification of this concept by exploring which racial and ethnic groups people associate with the concept of diversity. This is an important research question because the term “diversity” has become the normative (and perhaps euphemistic; see Andrews, 1996; Bell & Hartmann, 2007) way for individuals to talk about issues of racial equity and fairness in contemporary workplaces and institutions of higher education. Given the ongoing debate over diversity initiatives like affirmative action, it is imperative to understand which racial groups people believe contribute to the creation of diverse organizational environments.

Technically, as a word meaning “difference” or “variety,” the term diversity does not pertain to particular groups more so than any others. However, given that the term diversity came into common usage following the Supreme Court’s decision in the Bakke case on affirmative action—a case that made the pursuit of

racial diversity a legitimate state interest (“Regents of the University of California v. Bakke,” 1978; see also Wood, 2003)—it should come as no surprise that diversity tends to be associated with racial minorities more so than Whites (see also Diaz, 1997). Consistent with this idea, multicultural initiatives that tout the importance of creating and maintaining diverse workforces and student bodies have been criticized by some for overlooking Whites as potential contributors to the diversity of a given environment (for a review, see Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Thus, we expect to find that Whites are less associated with the concept of diversity than are racial minorities (i.e., Blacks, Latinos, and Asians).

However, it is unclear if all racial minority groups are equally associated with diversity. Research suggests that minority participants tend to perceive higher levels of identity-based trust and comfort in organizations that endorse diversity relative to those that reject diversity by endorsing colorblindness (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008; see also Le, Lai, & Wallen, 2009). If minorities associate diversity with identity-based comfort, it stands to reason that minority perceivers would associate the racial in-group more strongly with diversity than they would associate minority out-groups. This is because the presence of minority in-group members is most likely to contribute to the perception that a given environment is comfortable for and welcoming of their particular identity. In support of this idea, research has shown that, in a variety of domains, individuals tend to express a preference for contexts in which similar others are present (Avery, 2003; Byrne, 1961; Morry, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1985; see also Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). Thus, to the extent that diversity is associated with identity-based comfort for members of minority racial groups, such individuals may come to associate their respective in-groups with the concept of diversity more so than they associate minority out-groups. As such, we expect to find that minority group members will associate their racial in-group most strongly with diversity, relative to minority out-groups.

Finally, a related question we address is whether Asian Americans are associated with diversity to the same degree as traditional minority racial groups like African Americans and Latinos. Although Asian Americans are a numerical minority like African Americans and Latinos in most parts of the United States, the idea that Asian Americans are “model minorities” suggests that Asians

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as a group could be thought of as qualitatively different from traditional minority racial groups (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998; Petersen, 1966). However, a closer examination of this assumption suggests that even though Asian Americans have attained success in some notable contexts (e.g., higher education; Egan, 2007), their outcomes in other contexts (e.g., the corporate world; Dugger, 1992) are more similar to outcomes experienced by traditional minority groups (see also Narasaki, 1995; Borja, 2004; Fernandez, 1998; Wang & Wu, 1996). Of course, it could be that Asians, more so than African Americans and Latinos, are more aware of the similarities between Asians and traditional minority groups. If this is the case, then we may find that African American and Latino participants tend to associate African Americans and Latinos more so than Asians with diversity. However, in line with the idea that minorities may tend to associate their respective in-groups most strongly with the concept of diversity, Asian participants may associate diversity with their racial in-group more so than they associate diversity with traditional minority groups.

Method

Participants

Participants were 109 students (66 women; 43 men) from a private, West Coast university who participated in a mass testing session, lasting approximately 30 min, in exchange for \$10. Mean age was 19.69 years ($SD = 2.61$). The self-identified racial make-up of the sample was as follows: 46 White participants, 34 Asian participants, 14 African American participants, 11 Latino/a participants, and 4 participants who indicated more multiple racial categories. Because of a small sample size, this latter group of 4 participants was excluded from the analyses reported below.

Procedure and Measures

Participants received the study materials as part of a larger packet of unrelated surveys. Participants were asked, "When you think about the concept of 'diversity,' to what extent do you think about the following groups?" Below this question was a list of four target groups: Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Latinos. Participants indicated their response for each group on a 7-point scale (1 = *Don't think about at all*, 7 = *Think about a great deal*).

Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis that minority racial groups, compared to Whites, are more strongly associated with diversity, we conducted a 2 (participant gender: female vs. male) \times 4 (participant race: White vs. Black vs. Asian vs. Latino/a) \times 4 (target group race: Whites vs. Blacks vs. Asians vs. Latinos) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), with repeated measures on target group race. No **effect** main nor interactive effects of gender were found. A main effect of target group race was found, $F(3, 291) = 124.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .56$. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Participant Race \times Target Group Race interaction, $F(9, 291) = 4.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. The cell means for each target group, broken down by participant race, are displayed in Table 1. **T1**

Simple effects tests conducted on the marginal means revealed a large number of significant pairwise comparisons (see subscripts in Table 1). Given the large number of significant pairwise comparisons, we provide a summary of overall mean patterns here (Figure 1). In general, the mean patterns for the main effect of target group race held across participant groups. Namely, Whites were consistently less associated with diversity ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.43$) than Blacks ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 291) = 192.99$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.65$; Latinos ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 291) = 179.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.59$; and Asians ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 291) = 113.15$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.30$. **F1**

Black and Latino targets were seen as equally associated with diversity by all participants, regardless of participant race, $F < 1.0$, *ns*. We found divergence among participants regarding Asian targets' association to diversity. Specifically, White, Black, and Latino participants tended to perceive Asians (*combined* $M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.99$) as less associated with diversity than Blacks (*combined* $M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.12$), $F_s(1, 291) > 5.86$, $ps < .02$, $ds > 0.29$, or Latinos (*combined* $M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.13$), $F_s(1, 291) > 14.28$, $ps < .001$, $ds > 0.45$. Asian participants, on the other hand, tended to see no difference in the association to diversity between Asians ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.01$), and Blacks ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.15$), $F < 1.0$, *ns*, or between Asians ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.01$) and Latinos ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.16$), $F < 1.0$, *ns*.

Having demonstrated that White participants do not see the in-group as relevant to the concept of diversity, we next investigated whether minorities associate their in-groups most strongly with diversity. Data for Black, Asian, and Latino participants were coded into in-group and out-group perceptions. Thus, these participants had two scores, one for how relevant they perceived the

Table 1
Means and SDs of the Extent to Which Target Groups Are Relevant to the Concept of Diversity, Separated by Participant Race

Participant race	Target racial groups, M (SD)			
	Whites	Blacks	Latinos	Asians
White	2.99 _{a,x} (1.41)	5.69 _b (1.15)	5.69 _b (1.16)	5.13 _c (1.01)
Black	2.10 _{a,z} (1.35)	6.25 _{b,x} (1.10)	6.00 _{b,x} (1.11)	4.65 _{c,x} (0.97)
Latino	3.38 _{a,x} (1.33)	5.68 _b (1.08)	6.03 _b (1.09)	4.77 _{c,x} (0.96)
Asian	3.28 _{a,x} (1.41)	5.19 _{b,y} (1.15)	5.28 _{b,y} (1.16)	5.56 _{b,y} (1.01)

Note. Across rows, means with different subscripts (a, b, c) are significantly different from one another ($p < .05$). Within columns, means with different subscripts (x, y, z) are significantly different from one another.

DIVERSITY ASSOCIATIONS

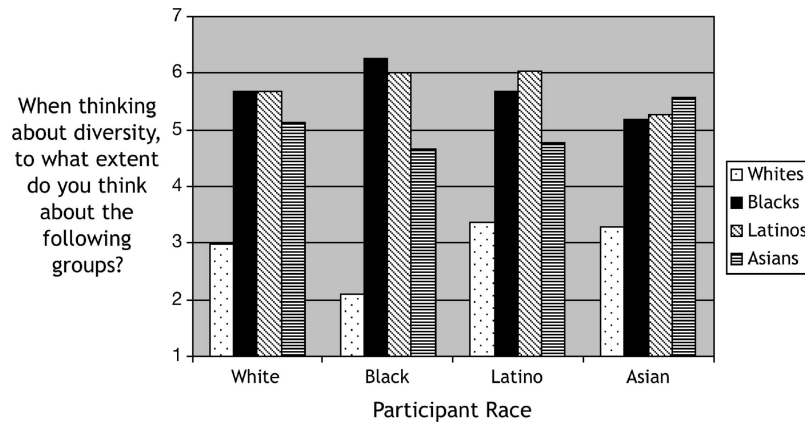


Figure 1. Target racial group associations with diversity as a function of participant race.

in-group to the concept of diversity, and one representing the average of how relevant they perceived the two other minority out-groups to the concept of diversity. These two scores were treated as a within-subjects factor in a 2 (Perception type: in-group vs. out-groups) \times 3 (Participant race: Black vs. Asian vs. Latino) ANOVA.

Consistent with the idea that racial minorities associate their in-groups most strongly with diversity, there was a significant main effect of perception type, which indicated that participants were more likely to think of the in-group ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 0.82$) than they were to think of minority out-groups with respect to diversity ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.02$) $F(1, 53) = 21.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$. The interaction term was not significant, $F = 1.69$, $p = .193$, indicating that the tendency to associate the in-group more so than minority out-groups with the concept of diversity was similar for all three minority groups.

General Discussion

Aside from some variation in how participants tended to view out-groups, these results suggest that each minority group tended to regard itself as being highly associated with the concept of diversity. In contrast, all participants, Whites included, generally did not associate Whites with the concept of diversity. Moreover, while the data suggest that, for Whites, diversity is a concept relevant to “them,” each minority group tended to see diversity as highly relevant to “us”—that is, their respective racial in-group.

An important implication of these findings pertains to when individuals are likely to consider an organization to be diverse. For Whites, “diversity” is most closely associated with the presence of Blacks and Latinos, followed by Asians. Thus, for Whites it may matter little which particular groups are needed to achieve diversity. Conversely, for minorities diversity may be best achieved when their particular in-group is represented within the organization. This may engender a number of significant consequences. For example, if Blacks and Latinos do not closely associate Asians with diversity, then Blacks and Latinos may feel uncomfortable in an organization composed primarily of Asians and Whites, even though Asians (and possibly Whites) may not see there being a diversity problem because of the representation Asians in the given environment. For Latinos and Blacks, the presence of Asians may

contribute only weakly to the perceived diversity of the organization and thus the organization may be a less attractive and welcoming place for them to work.

Moreover, if diversity excludes Whites as a group, then it might behoove organizations to change the way racial equity is talked about so as to include Whites in the discussion. By changing the way organizations talk about issues of group fairness it might be possible to frame the lack of racial minorities in a given organization as underscoring the existence of White privilege in the given environment. For example, if an organization is using recruitment procedures that tend to yield an overwhelmingly White applicant pool, then instead of talking about a lack of diversity in the applicant pool, organization may refer to an overrepresentation of Whites in the applicant pool. Such a frame may highlight the presence of potentially unfair advantages bestowed to Whites by the recruitment procedures. Previous research has found that when racial inequities are convincingly framed in terms of White advantage, Whites become motivated to support affirmative action policies as a way to mitigate such unearned advantage (Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2009; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Thus, to the extent that the concept of diversity can be used to highlight White privilege when and where it exists, then the pursuit of diversity may be an effective approach to minimize racial inequity in organizations.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the clarification of the concept of “diversity” by exploring which racial groups people associate with the concept of diversity. Results suggest that minorities are more associated with diversity than Whites. Moreover minority groups tend to associate their respective in-groups with diversity more so than they associate minority out-groups. It is our hope that by clarifying what diversity represents in the minds of individuals, diversity’s benefits may stand a better chance of being realized.

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