

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Implications of Ethnic Diversity in the Workplace

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Abstract: Diversity is the growing trend in countless societies, as the world seeks to expand in its quest towards globalization. Past research has shown support for adding ethnic diversity into the workplace, as well as addressing the arguments that are against it. Before understanding the need for diversity, this paper reviews how diverse groups come to form. Previous research has shown there are both benefits and challenges associated with increasing ethnic diversity in the workplace; however, research fails to come to a consensus on how to remedy the negative effects that exist. By analyzing the negatives specifically, this paper posits that the negatives effects of diversity are more perceived than actual. The findings suggest that remedying negatives means working on reducing perceived bias. Several interventions have been suggested to reduce bias, real or imagined, to promote multiculturalism and foster inclusion in the workplace.

Companies are on a hunt, scouting regionally and globally for the best and brightest talent in the market in hopes to capitalize on human potential. Recruiters look for everything from soft skills to years of experience. However, in recent decades, a matter of contention has been whether or not diversity is a worthwhile characteristic, and what implications it has within a group and on an organizational level.

This paper seeks to examine the effects of racial and ethnic diversity, specifically within the workplace. Literature over the years has indicated positive qualities and outcomes as a result of a more diverse group. At the same time, it also suggests that there are drawbacks to ethnic diversity. The gap in the literature involves the lack of consensus on how to address the drawbacks and remedy these negative effects that seem to arise from ethnic diversity. As diversity continues to grow in the United States, this paper aims to shed light on an overlooked area of research: perception of threat versus the reality.

Recent work seems to suggest that it may be the idea of diversity in a group that is actually threatening to the group's effectiveness rather than the group composition itself (Lount, Sheldon, Rink, & Phillips, 2015). Organizations must do more than merely state the need for diversity; they must demonstrate they are willing to implement practices to tackle the biased perceptions of threat and foster inclusivity in order to recruit and retain its employees and build a positive work environment.

Group Formation

In a multifaceted, multicultural world, groups form all around us—in neighborhoods, schools, and of course, the workplace. To explain this behavior, Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed the social identity theory, which seeks to explain that individuals develop their sense of identity based on their group membership. This often becomes a large part of an individual's being, as they become encouraged to preserve or better their social interactions after identifying positively with individuals within a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

These positive interactions within the group would therefore lead to positive group performance. Many organizations take this to mean that a positive work environment that fosters a sense of identity is good enough to create efficient groups, regardless of diversity. But as economies are advancing and becoming more ethnically diverse, it is important to first understand the role of diversity in groups before promoting or vilifying it.

Diversity in Groups

The landscape of organization behavior in the United States is slowly shifting to accommodate diversity. While diversity in terms of gender, for example, is commonly discussed, this paper seeks to shed light on a more complex type of diversity—race and ethnicity. For the purposes of this paper, the two

words will be used interchangeably. Ethnicity will primarily be defined by race, culture, nationality or geographic location. It is acknowledged that other psychological and cultural variables, such as values, attitudes, and the wider social context of experiences, are inherent in this definition as well.

While other forms of diversity are equally important, race and ethnicity are the focus of this paper because of how prevalent the topic has become, specifically when considering tensions in the United States in terms of racism and immigration on both a societal and political level. Diversity affects every level of social behavior, from how we interact with others to how we view the idea of the “other” as a whole.

Before discussing the positives and negatives associated with ethnic diversity in the workplace, it is imperative to understand why any group generally should strive towards increasing diversity. After all, if the group is functioning well enough without actively seeking out diversity, what is the harm? In reality, groups lessen their own potential by choosing not to engage with innate or acquired diversity, stifling innovation and leaving themselves with fewer ideas (Hewlett, 2013). Not only that, but in the United States alone, “half of all infants under the age of 1 in 2010 were members of a racial or ethnic minority group” (Hunt, Layton & Prince, 2015). Thus, it will soon be impossible to avoid diversity in society, so the goal must be to learn to adapt and hopefully appreciate it.

Theoretical Framework on Diversity in the Workplace

Ortlieb and Sieben (2013) worked to create a theoretically grounded framework to understand why companies choose to employ ethnic minorities. They based their framework on the resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), which explains how organizational behavior is influenced by external resources the organization utilizes. It proposes that there must be some transactional value when acquiring said resources, whatever they may be. In the case of Ortlieb and Sieben (2013), they argue that an organization’s dependency on minorities is what leads companies to hire them, and that these minorities possess value that they would then share with the organization they work for.

This theoretical framework supports much evidence that indicates that ethnic diversity is of value. To converge the theory with practice, we should look no further than data promoting heterogeneous groups in general. In the past decade, evidence has shown that that ideas from heterogeneous groups were both more effective and more feasible than those of homogenous groups, with the latter group lacking in perspective and diversity in thought (Mcleod, Lobel & Cox, 1996).

Understanding how any level of heterogeneity in a group makes them better and builds the credibility of ethnic diversity to yield positive results as well. In fact, Cox and Blake (1991) found that ethnic diversity, when properly managed, yields noticeable positive effects on organizational outcomes and serves as a source of competitive advantage. More recently, work has shown that more diverse organizations have broader talent pools from which to recruit and compete in the changing world (Hunt et al., 2015). Therefore, it befits organizations to discover ways to capitalize on the benefits of ethnic diversity.

Positives in the Workplace

Ethnic diversity positively contributes to the workplace in many ways, three of which will be discussed in this review: higher job satisfaction, increased financial performance, and better decision-making.

Paletz, Peng, and Maslach (2004) found that teams mostly comprised of ethnic minorities rated the group they worked with to be more pleasurable and reported experiencing more positive emotions towards group members. It is hardly surprising that workers from ethnic minority backgrounds report higher job and life satisfaction in more diverse workplaces, as Hunt et al. (2015) explain that simply the presence of minority group members in a larger group boosts a minority member’s confidence and self-esteem, breaking down the feelings that would normally lead to exclusion. Additionally, when groups are not as ethnically diverse, employees still identify positively in those teams when group members hold beliefs that are pro-diversity (Dick, Knippenberg, Hägele, Guillaume, & Brodbeck, 2008). As understood by the similarity attraction effect, similar individuals find social reinforcement in those relationships because they possess opinions

and worldviews that validate each other (Reis, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2007). This social reinforcement would therefore lead to workers feeling higher job satisfaction.

Secondly, ethnically diverse groups have been found to be a great asset financially. Research by Hunt and her colleagues confirmed that companies in the top quartile for racial/ethnic diversity were 35 percent more likely to attain financial yields above their national industry median. Not only that, but ethnic diversity in teams, particularly on the executive level, was seen to positively correlate with financial performance in countries worldwide (Hunt et al., 2015). However, some research suggests there is a greater reason to this financial prosperity in diverse spaces. In one study, researchers surveyed executives at 177 national banks in the U.S., putting together a database comparing financial performance, racial diversity, and the emphasis the bank presidents put on innovation (Richard, McMillan, Chadwick & Dwyer, 2003). For innovation-focused banks, increases in racial diversity were distinctly related to elevated financial performance.

Finally, there has been work done to support how ethnic diversity enhances decision-making in work groups. In a stock-trading simulation, one study found that if the traders were ethnically diverse, they made better decisions (Levine et al., 2014). Furthermore, published research from academia, corporations, and other organizations supports that diverse and inclusive groups have an enhanced quality of decisions and are often faster and accurate, with less instances of groupthink or cognitive bias (Hunt et al., 2015).

Negatives in the Workplace

Though there is a consensus on the value ethnic diversity has the potential to bring, some research indicates some negative effects of diversity in the workplace. These effects are categorized into three types: individual performance, cohesion, and turnover. After explaining the arguments made against ethnic diversity, the paper aims to shift the perspective from which these negatives are perceived.

Impact on performance. Chatman and Flynn (2001) studied the influence of demographic heterogeneity to gain insight on team performance. Five-person groups were created to take part in

this study. Controlling for the demographics (race, gender and citizenship status) and contact among groups, Chatman and Flynn (2001) examined team performance, among other variables. They found that at the individual level, culturally dissimilar work group members were less socially integrated, which ultimately led to lower individual performance (Chatman and Flynn, 2001). This can occur because deep-level, psychological differences become more evident as groups with surface-level or demographic differences work together (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002).

Feeling less social integration can lead to worries which limit ethnically different group members' desire to engage in learning behaviors, such as asking for help or publicly experimenting. As a result, their learning outcome potential, or how likely they are to learn, rapidly shrinks. Studies indicate that the more diverse the group, the lower a minority member's learning outcome potential becomes (Brodbeck, Guillaume, & Lee, 2010).

Another finding by Richard, Murthi and Ismail (2007) indicates that in a stable environment where there is a low rate of unpredictable change within the organization, there is a negative impact on intermediate performance as racial diversity increases. They found a U-shaped relationship between racial diversity and productivity most prominently in service-oriented firms.

Impact on cohesion. A more contemporary study took a close look at the impact of cohesion in diverse groups. It anticipated that ethnic diversity is likely to constrain work unit cohesion, which in turn leads to lower work unit performance, specifically when the work unit is comprised of two ethnic subgroups separated by a large status difference (Leslie, 2016). The research measured performance and cohesion by surveying 743 bank employees. They looked at both ethnic status and ethnic status subgroup (ESS) within their work groups. ESS categorized minorities based on their perceived societal status, assigning the top tier to Asians, then Blacks, and then Hispanics. Survey results indicated work unit performance is negatively related to cohesion when there are large differences in status among the ethnic subgroups (Leslie, 2016). Essentially, large status differences lead to more negativity, implying that diversity may just bring more issues into a room.

Impact on turnover. Diverse groups have been found to have more difficulty communicating, and communication difficulties can increase turnover (Price & Mueller, 1981). Even among native English speakers, racial and gender diversity often make communication difficult. A report from 2015 showed that Black and Latino workers in tech were 3.5 times more likely to quit than their White or Asian colleagues (Scott, Klein, & Onovakpuri, 2017). Leonard and Levine (2006) looked for the relationship between ethnic diversity and turnover rates but found no strong association between the two. Instead, their findings suggest that the harmful outcomes of diversity, such as negative affect (e.g. lower personal attraction) and communication difficulties, lead to a higher turnover of ethnic minorities.

Perceiving the Bias

Rather than take the aforementioned negatives at face value, it is necessary to step back and be critical of all the data that leads researchers to their conclusions. What hurts ethnic groups both in research and society is the idea of perceived bias, in which individuals implicitly believe that increased diversity will lead to increased ingroup conflict. Oftentimes diverse or minority individuals are socialized to feel that they may fall under a negative cultural stereotype, which may lead to conflicts in groups due to their constant vigilance. Therefore, having that bias, conscious or unconscious, leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially when the research is based on a self-report measure.

The reality is that while yes, diversity can increase conflict, it is more nuanced than most would believe. Lount, Sheldon, Rink and Phillips (2015) suggest that people overestimate the amount of conflict that truly exists on diverse teams. They tested this by asking MBA students to imagine that they were co-managing several four-person teams of interns, with one team asking for additional resources. After seeing photos of the team members—all Black men, all White men, or two of each—the MBA students read a transcript of discussions from each group and then rated the teams on various items. Surprisingly, though every group read the same transcript, the teams of four White men and four Black men were seen as having equal levels of relationship conflict,

while the diverse teams were seen as having more relationship conflict. Furthermore, this perception of greater conflict made the participants less likely to provide the additional resources the more diverse group had requested. Hunt et al. (2010) suggest that participants may have assumed more conflict in diverse teams because of implicit stereotypes, ingroup favoritism, and outgroup homogeneity bias.

Implicit stereotypes are sometimes referred to as subconscious bias. This is the tendency for humans to associate groups of people with certain traits, such as Black men and crime. Ingroup favoritism occurs when humans start to prefer people who look like themselves, which would innately influence Whites to work with Whites, and so on. And conversely, the outgroup homogeneity bias is the tendency for individuals to think their “ingroup” (the group they belong to) is more diverse, while their “outgroup” is more homogeneous, with members who appear alike or even interchangeable (Park & Rothbart, 1982; Park & Judd, 1990). So, for example, Whites may believe that all Mexicans must be good at landscaping, while believing that their own race or culture pursue many diverse careers.

These three cognitive responses to diversity and difference account for the results from Lount et al.’s (2010) study, and similarly explains social behavior in the face of diversity. It is through studies like this that bring to light a very stark reality: nothing is always what it seems. Once our social identity is formed with a group (our ingroup), there will always automatically be an outgroup, who is typically looked down upon. The conjecture of this paper is therefore that in reality, it may be that the negative effects of ethnic diversity found by some researchers are due to some form of perceived bias and other external factors.

Reintroduction of the “Negatives”

The findings below are not meant to be counterarguments to the previously stated negative effects but are merely meant to shift the perspective from which negative effects of ethnic diversity are seen. The impacts on performance, cohesion and turnover rates are reintroduced using a more positive approach.

Impact on performance. As described earlier, Brodbeck et al. (2010) found a negative correlation between an individual’s ethnic dissimilarity and

their individual learning outcome. They tested this by collecting data through two business simulation courses. In total, they consisted of ten ethnically homogenous work groups and 77 groups from which members were from two or more different ethnic backgrounds who worked together for two consecutive years. In addition, they also found that learning outcomes of ethnic minorities on a team decreased individually, but their work on the team positively contributed to the overall group's learning outcomes.

Similarly, the same work that found lower productivity with higher racial diversity in the short term, concluded that racial diversity does have a positive linear effect on long-term performance, especially in resource-rich environments (Richard, Murthi, & Ismail, 2007). Productivity was hypothesized to be lower in the short term because varying levels of heterogeneity may affect association and interaction amongst organizational members; however, over time, that difference fades.

Impact on cohesion. Leslie's (2016) study does not suggest that work unit ethnic diversity categorically lowers performance, as it's important to consider the degree of dissimilarity within each group. For instance, while her findings suggest the lowest levels of cohesion occur in groups comprised of two ethnic subgroups with a very high-status distance (Whites and Blacks), more cohesion exists between two relatively low status ethnic subgroups (Hispanic Americans and Blacks), as the degree of dissimilarity is smaller.

Impact on turnover rates. Historically, there has never been any proven causal relationship between the level of ethnic diversity in an organization and its turnover rate. Some studies interpret these turnover rates as the result of negative behavior experienced in the workplace, such as not being socially integrated within their group. It is this negative environment that actually leads ethnic minorities to leave, not their inability to function in a diverse setting. In reality, isolation from co-workers and from customers has been often associated with higher turnover (Leonard & Levine, 2006). Forty percent of African Americans, 16% of Hispanics, and 13% of Asians reported that they have experienced discrimination in the workplace due to their ethnicity, as compared to only five percent of Caucasians (Hunt, 2015).

This reveals that *the behavior of group members* in a diverse setting is more important than simply the diverse group composition.

Interventions for the Perceived Bias

Clearly, bias can have a significant impact not only on recruitment but also on the ways in which leaders create teams and encourage collaboration. Without realizing it, they may be reluctant to add diversity to a team or to assign colleagues with different backgrounds to work together, in response to an arguably overblown fear of potential tension and difficulty that could ensue. There are a couple ways in which organizations can begin to intervene before bias seeps in, specifically by priming and exposing groups to multiculturalism and by emphasizing the value of diversity.

In a study conducted by Plaut, Thomas, and Goren (2009), pairs of students (one White and one Aboriginal Canadian) were teamed up for a conversation. Results established a few significant discoveries: the value of multiculturalism, the dangers of colorblindness, and the effect on minority engagement. Prefacing meetings with a message supporting multiculturalism (versus no message) made the meeting more positive, while one endorsing colorblindness led Whites to act negatively toward their minority partners. Plaut et al. (2009) therefore concluded that multiculturalism predicts decreased bias and thus contributes to a positive diversity climate, while color blindness predicts the opposite. Whites' acceptance of multiculturalism was also associated with higher minority engagement with their White coworkers.

To emphasize the value of diversity, this paper posits that organizations may want to avoid the common ingroup identity model (Gaetner & Dovidio, 2012). This model proposes that intergroup bias can be reduced by shifting the groups' view from "us" and "them" to a more inclusive "we." While this method has been shown to help intergroup conflict, it may drain the value that the ingroup itself brings to the table. Moreover, the minimization of group differences could reinforce majority dominance and minority marginalization. This behavior, especially when intergroup conflict is not prevalent, promotes colorblindness in a sense, as there would be the assumption that "we" all have similar values, thoughts, and ideas.

People of color too often feel that they have to hide their true identities, the discomfort of which only breeds distance and distrust on both ends. More than 35 percent of African Americans and Hispanics and 45 percent of Asians, for instance, say they must act differently (e.g., by not speaking their native language or not bringing ethnic food for lunch) to conform to their company's standards of demeanor or style. An alarming fifth of Hispanics, third of African-Americans and 29 percent of Asians surveyed believe that at their companies, a person of color would not get an executive position and have their voice heard (Hewlett, 2012). Many studies, such as Brodbeck et. al (2010), have found that a biased assumption (based on faulty negative stereotypes) of minority groups makes them feel less able to speak up and feel heard. In other words, the opportunity to have their voices heard as part of organized, respectful, and informative discussions is valuable, as it may help address the issue of perceived bias.

From Diversity to Inclusion

In perceiving and acknowledging the bias present in research and society, organizations can get closer to eradicating bias and negative emotional response/affect before it begins. To do so, groups and organizations must foster inclusion. While diversity programs are a good first step, bias prevention and intervention trainings as well as integrative and inclusive practices must be emphasized if any true progress is to be made. In reality, the unfamiliarity that comes with diversity is a major catalyst for creativity and thinking. Once that is encouraged and appreciated, the organization—and everyone in it—are bound to reap the rewards.

One tangible model that organizations can refer to as they work toward addressing perceived bias is a model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). This framework illustrates that it is possible for an individual to have the requisite attitudes of respect, openness and curiosity, yet still be only marginally effective and appropriate in behavior and communication, without any further knowledge or skills. Adding knowledge through cultural awareness and skills (listening, observing and analyzing) ensures that an individual can be more effective and appropriate in their intercultural interactions.

With added flexibility, adaptability, and empathy, one can be even more effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

This further illustrates that intercultural competence is a *process*—a lifelong process that has no level of perfection. Therefore, individuals and organizations following this framework must pay attention to the development process of *how* one acquires the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Through this process, groups can critically reflect on their ability to gain lifelong skills in the process of intercultural competence development.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that people simply do not experience diversity in a one-dimensional fashion. Given the changing demographics of the United States, it's important for organizations to harness the potential of increasing diversity in the workplace instead of suppressing it. The findings suggest significant possibilities for meaningful change by incorporating inclusion into conversations on diversity and intervening before perceived bias creates conflict. Through inclusive practices and reducing perceived bias, we can restore balance in the conversation of diversity and inclusion.

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