



PROFESSIONAL INSIGHTS

Redefining the way we look at diversity

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A review of recent diversity and inclusion findings in organizational research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to summarize the findings of studies presented at the 24th annual conference of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) in relation to how diversity is studied, microaggressions, when diversity is perceived, and employment outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) job applicants.

Design/methodology/approach – A select group of presentations are summarized based on observation, notes, discussions, and reading of material.

Findings – Researchers are beginning to redefine how diversity is studied as well as focus more on within-group variation that might uncover considerable interpretation differences based on study results. More subtle forms of racism are being explored in addition to examining experiences of sexual orientation minorities.

Originality/value – The diversity and inclusion presentations at the 2009 SIOP conference continue to evolve diversity theory and inform evidence-based organizational practice. This report summarizes a variety of findings during this conference.

Keywords Race, Gender, Equal opportunities, Sexual orientation

Paper type Viewpoint

Just as the hurricane waters inundated the city of New Orleans in August of 2005, thousands of researchers, practitioners, and students inundated the wonderful and historic city for Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) 2009. The conference brings together practitioners and scholars of a variety of disciplines to learn about and share their latest scientific discoveries and ideas through presentations, poster sessions, panel discussions, and workshops. This 24th annual conference was particularly astounding as the outstanding diversity scholar, Dr Kecia Thomas of the University of Georgia, was named an SIOP fellow. This year's conference included over 50 symposia, posters, and meetings related to diversity and inclusion in organizations. Topics included asking how much diversity is diversity, examining how to harvest the benefits of diversity, and practicing evidence-based diversity management to name a few. Researchers investigated pertinent issues from a variety of perspectives concerning women, ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) individuals, immigrants, and religious groups. Undoubtedly, a more comprehensible review of all of the insightful research on diversity and inclusion presented at SIOP is warranted. Nonetheless, this report is intended to highlight a brief survey of the relevant research presented concerning diversity and inclusion at SIOP 2009.

Unequivocally, Stella Nkomo's (1992) superb article, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Rewriting 'Race in Organizations'", advanced the scholarly dialogue on how ethnic



minorities have for far too long been overlooked in organizational research. Likewise, Arthur Brief, James Outtz, Belle Rose Ragins, and Kecia Thomas provided exceptional insights on the scientific methods of how race is currently studied in an invigorating panel discussion moderated by Lisa Leslie. These scholars answered questions as to whether treating race as a series of categories is the most accurate representation of the construct, whether studying it as a categorical variable is more problematic for some areas of diversity research than others, and what alternative methods they suggest for studying race/ethnicity in the future (Leslie, 2009). The panelists explored several methodological concerns. Particularly, studying race as a categorical variable is problematic as it potentially masks important within-group variation. For example, the different experiences and treatment of people of color based on varying skin complexions, different socio-economic levels of minorities, and the varying power perspectives that minorities have might not be found when race is treated as a single categorical variable. Although all panelists agreed that much has been learned by studying race as a categorical variable, going beyond this method, however, will answer important research questions otherwise overlooked. As a result, finding new ways to look at race/ethnicity should contribute significantly to advancing organizational diversity research.

In the “Slights, Snubs, and Slurs” symposium, scholars presented numerous cases of how microaggressions affect employees within organizations. Microaggressions are verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that employees experience at the hands of other organizational members, whether intentional or unintentional. Microaggressions can hurt employees’ feelings, affect their performance, and lower their morale. By going beyond studying race as simply a categorical variable, Harrison and Thomas (2009) were able to examine how one microaggression, colorism, affects Blacks in corporate America. Research shows that darker-skinned Blacks generally encounter more maltreatment than lighter-skinned Blacks (Thompson and Keith, 2001). In their previous study, Harrison and Thomas (2006) found that a light-skinned Black man with a Bachelor’s degree and less managerial experience received significantly higher ratings for a job recommendation than a dark-skinned Black man with an MBA and considerably more managerial experience. Physical characteristics, such as attractiveness, have been positively correlated with perceptions of ability and success (Umberson and Hughes, 1987). Harrison and Thomas argued that the media plays an important role in perpetuating stereotypes based on shades of color and cited research that colorism affects males and females differently. For example, lighter-skinned Black women generally enjoy higher salaries than darker-skinned Black women of similar qualifications (Hunter, 2002), whereas darker-skinned Black men are more associated with criminal and civil misconduct than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Hall, 1995). Harrison and Thomas suggested that more attention be given to the differential treatment of people of color based on variations of skin complexion.

Many organizations have included recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce as part of their strategic plans. Although some organizations are performing better than others in managing diversity, an important question to ask for any organization is how much diversity is diversity?. In their study, Guidroz *et al.* (2009) investigated the effects of types of diversity, amount of diversity, and information frame of diversity on judgments about the success of an organizational diversity program. Types of diversity were limited to race and gender and amount of diversity was determined by the proportion of minority representation in an organization. Information frame of

diversity was whether diversity was presented in terms of the amount of minorities or non-minorities present. The authors recruited participants from the StudyResponse Project, a non-profit academic service that connect researchers with people who are willing to participate in survey research. Because the relationships between men and women were found to be better than the relationships between people of different ethnicities (Soni, 2000), Guidroz *et al.* hypothesized that one's race or ethnicity will be perceived as contributing more to diversity than gender. In addition, they expected that participants would use an equality heuristic to determine when an organization will be perceived as being diverse such that the highest ratings of diversity will be given to organizations with an equal amount of minority and non-minority employees. Finally, they suggested that organizations will receive more favorable diversity ratings when group composition is framed using the minority group rather than the non-minority group. Guidroz *et al.* found support for their hypotheses and some unexpected interactions. First, they found that a significant effect on type of diversity was found only when diversity was framed in terms of the proportion of racial minorities (Blacks and Hispanics) in the workforce, not when it was framed in terms of the proportion of Whites, women, or men. Second, information framing only produced a significant effect in the race/ethnicity condition such that diversity management programs were rated highest when group composition was described in terms of the proportion of racial minorities in the workforce and lowest when described in terms of the proportion of Whites in the workforce. Their research findings revealed that people do assess diversity efforts differently. Furthermore, their results suggest that people link ethnicity more closely to diversity efforts than gender. Guidroz *et al.* proposed that future research explore possible interactions with diversity types such as age and physical disabilities and test whether women's career level (e.g. managerial level) would influence different perceptions of diversity efforts.

Recently, more researchers have been examining the experiences of LGBT employees in organizational research. In fact, a number of studies recount the discrimination and inequality that LGBT employees face in their work and personal lives (cf. Croteau and von Destinon, 1994; Day and Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith and Hebl, 2002; Hebl *et al.*, 2002; Kirby, 2006; Lyons *et al.*, 2005; Meyer, 2003; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001; Rostosky and Riggle, 2002). In a poster session, Pichler *et al.* (in press) presented their research that developed and tested a model of heterosexism in employment decisions. Heterosexism is "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community" (Herek, 1992, p. 89). Pichler *et al.* used a lack of fit model of discrimination and social-psychological research on attitudes towards gays and lesbians as the framework for their model. They hypothesized that job misfit will be negatively related to suitability and hirability ratings and suitability ratings will be positively related to hirability ratings. As such, a gay man and heterosexual woman would be rated less suitable and hireable for a stereotypical "masculine" job (e.g. firefighter), whereas a lesbian and a heterosexual male would be rated more suitable and hireable for the job and vice versa. Pichler *et al.* also expected that raters would rate more harshly sexual minority applicants of the same gender. They also proposed that diversity training would mitigate the relationship between job misfit and suitability and hirability ratings and that social dominance orientation would be negatively related to suitability and hirability ratings. Upper-level students of psychology participated in the study. Pichler *et al.* found that the gender of the hirer, whether or not he or she had diversity training, and the job misfit of the applicant all affected employment-related outcomes.

More specifically, they found that male raters rated gay male applicants least suitable for a job, regardless of the stereotypical characteristics of the job and that anti-gay attitudes, negative employability beliefs, and a socially dominant personality were related to the suitability and hirability of the job applicants. Women displayed discriminatory behaviors in their ratings based on attitudes, beliefs, and personality as well, but did so at a lesser degree than men. Pichler *et al.* called for future research to consider how different workplace climates (e.g. varying tolerance of LGBT climates) might affect hirability ratings of LGBT employees and consider studying heterosexism in organizations as cross-level and multi-level phenomena.

In summary, a number of scholars presented interesting and revealing findings that will advance diversity theory and provide empirically-tested guidance to practitioners. The steady increase of symposia, panel discussions, and paper submissions related to diversity confirm that more researchers are seeing the value of and need for doing rigorous research in the area of diversity and inclusion. Overall, the SIOP conference was eventful and informative and diversity and inclusion research was well represented.

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