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## Uncovering diverse identities in organisations: AIRing versus auditing approaches to diversity management

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*The topic of diversity is of increasing interest to business, academics, and consultants. Diversity research tends to focus on the demographic characteristics of organisations and examines how managers might work with the ethnic, cultural, religious and gender differences of employees to maximise organisational performance. One strategy is to recognise and record the demographic diversity within the organisation (referred to as auditing) in order to use these diversity resources to strategically advance organisational goals. Based on a social psychological analysis of diversity, though, it is argued that auditing can be highly problematic. This practice can lead to an increase in prejudice and a decrease in performance on relevant organisational dimensions. In contrast, an AIRing (Ascertaining Identity Resources) process is outlined that is more likely to lead to organisational success.*

**Keywords:** diversity, social/organisational identity, workplace discrimination

The increasing interest in the topic of diversity is due, in part, to 1) changes in the demographic make-up of many societies and therefore organisational life, 2) growing acceptance of the view that it is wrong for people to be discriminated against in general and in the workplace, 3) an increased focus on talent and organisations wanting to make sure they do not limit their potential talent pool and 4) the fact that diversity is an issue that links a large body of social psychological research on prejudice (e.g. group-based discrimination) and strategies for

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prejudice reduction (e.g. ignoring, overcoming, or integrating group differences) with organisational practice.

Since the 1990s the concept of 'productive diversity' has shifted the focus of inquiry from purely moral or ethical arguments for diversity towards economic ones and this has increased the topic's breadth of appeal (Cox and Blake 1991; Department of Immigration and Multi-cultural Affairs 2000). The basic idea here is that a workforce comprised of various ethnic and cultural groups could provide economic benefits to an organisation by creating new export markets, opportunities for product research and development, and more successful marketing to national and international consumers (D'Netto 2000). As a first step towards harnessing such resources firms are encouraged to audit their diversity resources (e.g. ethnic and cultural status but also gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, language, physical and mental ability) and to document such information as part of usual human resource record-keeping practices.

Researchers propose that diversity information of this kind can be accessed to help achieve organisational goals. Such information also can aid identification of more or less explicit forms of prejudice in an organisation, for example, whether people from a certain background are disproportionately recruited to interesting 'special' projects, are offered opportunities for skill development, and are promoted. Without records of diversity information it is believed that an organisation will be less able to detect implicit forms of prejudice (Cox 1993).

While auditing is increasingly being recommended as one way to manage organisations' diverse resources (Nicholas 2000), there are a number of unresolved issues that could have significant (negative) consequences for organisational practice. On the surface the strategy may be appealing, but auditing has the potential to be detrimental to employee relations, organisational commitment, and employee satisfaction. In order to elaborate upon these points, in this paper we discuss the social identity perspective and its implications for an auditing approach to diversity management. This response is descriptive but flows directly from the social identity perspective and the evidence that already supports its main contentions. We then move on to outline an alternative AIRing process that could be more effective in dealing with group differences in an organisation. We conclude by reflecting upon the implications of our arguments for organisational practice.

## **The social identity perspective**

Social identity and self-categorisation theories (i.e. the social identity perspective) differentiate between the individual and the group (e.g. team, organisation, system) and focus on the impact of groups on people's cognitions, feelings and behaviour. More specifically, the term social identity is used to refer to self-descriptions that emerge from social group memberships ('we' and 'us'; one's

knowledge of oneself as a woman, a mother, a lawyer, an Australian) and is defined as a person's 'knowledge that he [or she] belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him [or her] of the group membership' (Tajfel 1972, 31). The idea of a social identity relates to a sense of a shared mission or vision for a group where there are similar goals, values and beliefs that define 'who we are' (ingroup) and 'who we are not' (outgroup) and underpin action. In contrast, the term personal identity relates to the individual qualities that make a person unique and different from other ingroup members ('I' and 'me'; Turner 1982; Turner et al. 1987; Turner and Oakes 1997). Many leadership and organisational practices seek to enhance the psychological connection between the employee and organisation and bring such a social identity into being. Often organisational identification is achieved through the use of mission statements (e.g., what makes 'us' distinctive and special compared to others), reinforcing the significance of purpose and importance of work tasks, and alignment of work goals.

A range of outcomes relevant to work groups and organisations has been directly related to this knowledge and the emotional and value significance associated with group membership (Haslam, Eggins, and Reynolds 2003) including:

- increased liking for other group members (Brown 1978; Terry and Callan 1998),
- greater cohesion and co-operation between group members (Hogg 1992; Kramer 1993; Tyler and Blader 2000),
- increased organisational citizenship behaviours (Ellemers, de Gilder, and van den Heuvel 1999; Haslam, Powell, and Turner 2000; Ouwerkerk, Ellemers, and de Gilder 1999),
- greater willingness to enact collective goals (Huo et al. 1996; Tyler and Blader 2000),
- increased group productivity (James and Greenberg 1989; Worchel et al. 1998),
- better communications (Dovidio et al. 1997),
- greater trust (e.g. Kramer, Brewer, and Hanna 1996), and
- increased ability for leaders and other group members to affect attitudes and behaviour through influence rather than coercion (Reynolds and Platow 2003; Turner 1991; 2005).

In relation to diversity it is the last point that it most relevant. Self-categorisation as an ingroup member provides opportunities for mutual influence and the resolution of disagreement (Turner 1991; Turner and Oakes 1989). The existence of an organisational, group or team identity means that there is a motivation to seek a shared vision about the relevant activity and increased commitment to its completion (Haslam et al. 1998; Tyler and Blader 2000). Given the expectation for ingroup agreement, when disagreement

occurs there typically is an attempt to bring expectations in line with reality by changing one's views in line with ingroup opinion; attempting to influence other ingroup members to adopt a different stance; recategorising ingroup members as outgroup; or clarifying the stimulus situation (i.e. ensuring that reference is being made to the same thing; David and Turner 1996, 1999; McGarty et al. 1994; Turner 1987, 1991). Disagreement with an outgroup member ('one of them') confirms that one's own opposing views are appropriate, correct and valid. Disagreement or criticism with an ingroup member ('one of us'), though, creates uncertainty and opportunities to discuss, debate and clarify one's own position (e.g., Hornsey, 2006; Turner, 1991). It is argued that it is only within a shared ingroup framework that diversity and differences in perspective can be resolved through clarification, attitude change and processes of mutual influence. Also a potentially difficult issue is that a belief in diversity can define and unify a group (Jetten et al. 2006; Reynolds, Turner and Haslam 2003; Rink and Ellemers 2007). A group can adhere to a set of values and beliefs where there is shared respect for diversity and difference.

In summary, developing an identity as a group member transforms idiosyncratic perceptions, motivations, and values into collective, shared endeavours. There is improved communication, trust, motivation to achieve group goals, pro-social behaviour, increased co-ordination of attitudes and behaviour, and the potential for influence and creativity as other group members become valid sources of information about what is right, normative, appropriate and valid.

## **Social identity and implications for an auditing approach to diversity management**

The social identity perspective has a range of implications for diversity management and auditing procedures in particular (Haslam, Eggins, and Reynolds 2003; Hogg and Terry 2000). These implications are derived from the social identity perspective and the extensive body of research that has confirmed its main arguments. Although auditing is only one strategy for dealing with diversity and bringing about organisational change (Cox 1993; Lessem 1998), it points to the inherent assumption in theory and research that demographic characteristics must be relevant to the workplace. As the discussion above suggests, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, a key point of the social identity perspective is that for groups to have an impact on organisations they must be psychologically meaningful for their members. To have the desired impact, decisions cannot be based on information that simply appears to be relevant from the perspective of an outside observer. For example, all things being equal, a female Vietnamese Australian who is a production line worker in a large organisation is as capable of defining herself in terms of her career aspirations, her co-workers, and her political views as she is in relation to her gender, language skills and other demographic qualities. To assume that

her ethnic identity is a primary basis of her self-categorisation at work (or elsewhere) may be completely inappropriate.

In effect the use of social category information that does not consider the degree to which these are psychologically meaningful to the individual perhaps can have unforeseen, negative consequences. These can range from treating employees in ways that do not fit their own work-based self-definitions; exclusion of the non-diverse majority from organisational policies, opportunities and programs; legitimising the use of social category thinking and treatment; and creation of a 'false' assurance that the organisation is diverse because members of different minority groups are represented in senior ranks and roles. Each of these issues will be expanded on and discussed in more detail.

Imposing a social category can serve to undermine rather than advance an organisation's objectives. The information about demographic characteristics is not necessarily psychologically relevant to the person it is applied to and the consequences of misidentification (e.g. treating an employee as a member of a category that is not self-prescribed) could lead this individual to recategorise the organisation and its members as outgroup rather than ingroup. Also, it limits the extent to which those social categories that are *psychologically* meaningful will be identified. As an example, knowing that an employee was born in Vietnam and can speak Vietnamese does not provide any information about why this person no longer resides in their country of origin, whether this person embraces the values of this culture, whether this person wants to speak the language, or about the extent to which they identify as Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Australian or Australian. Over and above these points, demographic information of this kind does not indicate whether these qualities are perceived by the individual to be meaningful to their role in the organisation.

In cases where demographic dimensions are judged to be irrelevant to the workplace, systems that impose these social categories can have negative consequences. An employer who insists on treating women as if being female were their primary self-categorisation (e.g. by talking to them about stereotypically 'female' topics) may cause more offence than if they did not engage with these people at all (see Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991, for a related discussion of 'over-accommodation'). Likewise, the introduction of a mentoring program for only female staff could offend those who do not perceive their gender to be relevant to their role within the organisation. Such actions could generate ill feeling towards, and reduce identification with, the relevant team or organisation in general. Additionally, as we know that recategorisation of others as part of an outgroup leads to a reduction in levels of commitment, productivity, and citizenship behaviour such outcomes can be very costly to an organisation. This is somewhat ironic given that the strategies are implemented as an attempt to work with group differences in a more effective way.

Along these lines, a survey of leaders in Australian organisations who were born overseas indicated that many did not perceive their backgrounds to be relevant to their work (Sinclair and Britton-Wilson 2000). Those interviewed

did not want to be judged with reference to their ethnic and cultural differences. These responses were interpreted as a reaction against persistent pressures to 'fit-in' but it could just as well be the case that these dimensions were not perceived to be relevant to the participants' own self-definition as a leader.

Procedures that audit diversity could also impact on the social identities that are relevant to the cultural majority in an organisation. Such strategies do not focus on the contribution of the non-diverse resources in an organisation and could marginalise those not considered to be from a diverse group. There are many reports of an organisational 'backlash' against diversity initiatives. In one case approval for the costs of bus travel for employees to attend a major 'gay and lesbian' event was countered by an anonymous request for equal resources for a 'pig-shooting' outing for other employees. There are also accounts of mentoring programs for women being treated with envy or contempt among men. Many of these examples are anecdotal but could well become the focus for further documentation and research. The point is that where diversity initiatives are not 'accepted' as being a legitimate response to an organisational issue that 'we all share' such a backlash is more likely to be evident. The challenge is to create an atmosphere where all groups in the organisation can see the benefits of initiatives that might be directed at only a few.

Diversity management can also create an environment that encourages inappropriate social category dimensions to become the basis for divisions within the organisation. In a sense, because auditing highlights demographic characteristics and such procedures are endorsed by the organisation, they legitimise categorisations along these lines and can provide the foundations for such divisions to become psychologically meaningful (Reicher 1984; Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). For example, auditing processes may send the message that it is acceptable to perceive others as 'women' or 'Vietnamese' rather than as co-workers or colleagues.

In addition, there are several issues with the prejudice awareness aspects of auditing – that is, where it is believed demographic information can reveal discrimination or the valuing of diversity in an organisation. In fact, there is no direct or necessary correspondence between knowledge of the demographic characteristics of employees and their psychological group memberships and associated values and beliefs. As an example, a female CEO may identify as a member of the leadership team and adopt a mainstream 'male-like' management philosophy. Consequently, the presence of a female in senior management is not necessarily indicative of a workplace that is tolerant of diverse opinion. Such an organisation could still have high levels of inequality and gender-based discrimination. One of the best examples of this point comes from evidence that the interests of women were undermined severely when Margaret Thatcher was the British prime minister (Kelly and Breinlinger 1995).

In summary, then, there is a range of unexpected consequences that flow from the practice of auditing where social categories are imposed in a simplistic way. There is no guarantee that such information provides any real indication of people's beliefs and values because demographic dimensions may not be

those that guide behaviour in the workplace or in other contexts. In order to manage diversity in an organisation effectively a range of additional measures is required. For this reason we propose an AIRing process as part of a strategy in which an organisation is encouraged to ascertain those identity resources that are most relevant to its members and its goals.

## **An alternative to auditing: Ascertaining Identity Resources (AIRing)**

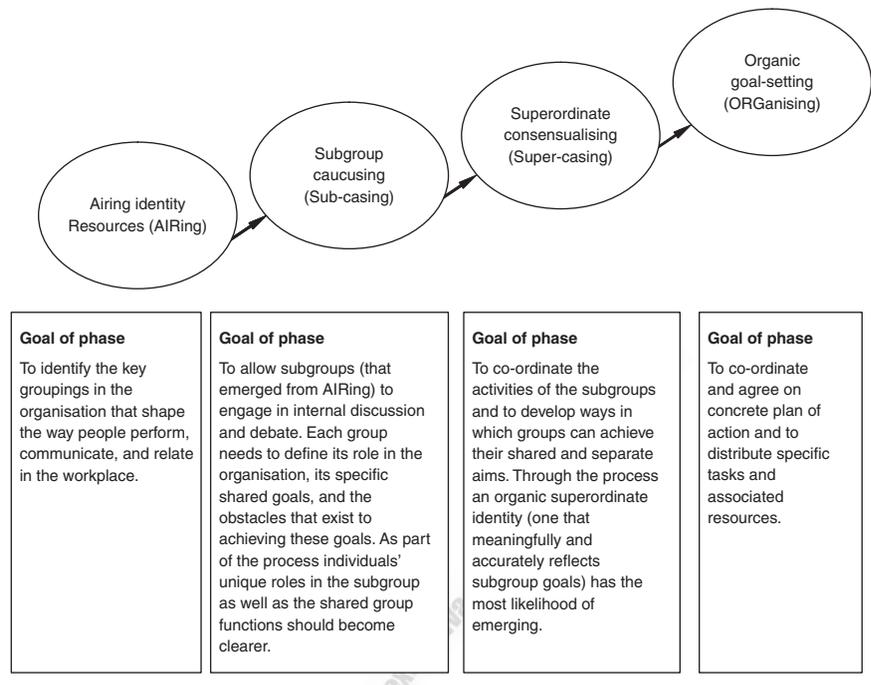
In an attempt to deal with a range of issues akin to those raised in the previous section, we have recently developed the ASPIRe model. This acronym refers to Actualising Social and Personal Identity Resources and it integrates the insights from research related to the social identity perspective into a model for organisational practice (Eggins, Haslam, and Reynolds 2002; Haslam, Eggins, and Reynolds 2003). As can be seen from figure 1, the model has a series of stages and attempts to outline the ways in which identity resources can be developed, utilised, and sustained through organisational processes.

The model is underpinned by the assumptions that social and personal identity resources are important features of organisational life and that structures that allow for the expression and development of each provide the greatest opportunity for organisational success and sustainability. For this reason there are a number of phases in the model (see figure 1) where personal identities contribute to subgroup social identities (Subgroup caucusing (Sub-casing)) and then these subgroup social identities contribute to the development of a shared superordinate organisational identity (Superordinate consensualising (Super-casing)). These identities then can be used as the basis for strategic planning and organisational change (ORGanising). Each stage is framed by an explicit understanding of the superordinate organisational identity which itself may shift in meaning through the ASPIRe process.

In contrast to contemporary organisational practice that has tended to focus on creating a monolithic, homogeneous organisational culture, the different phases of the ASPIRe model aim to harness the creative potential of disagreement and diversity. Diversity does not depend on the demographic qualities of staff but on a belief in the merits of diversity of perspective itself. Essentially the issue is whether this is an organisation that values conformity and uniformity or difference and diversity. The model makes explicit reference to, and use of, individual and group heterogeneity within organisations in order to produce a truly representative and shared higher-order homogeneity. The outcome is an integrative or organic form of organisational identity where individual and group differences are recognised and made sense of through reference to higher order commonalities (Haslam 2001; see also Berry 1991; Duckitt 2001; Eggins 1999)

It is the first phase, AIRing (for Ascertaining Identity Resources), that offers an alternative to the auditing approach to diversity management. Given our understanding of the dynamic and context-dependent nature of self-categorisation we know that it is possible under certain conditions for *any* of

Figure 1 Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources: The ASPIRe model

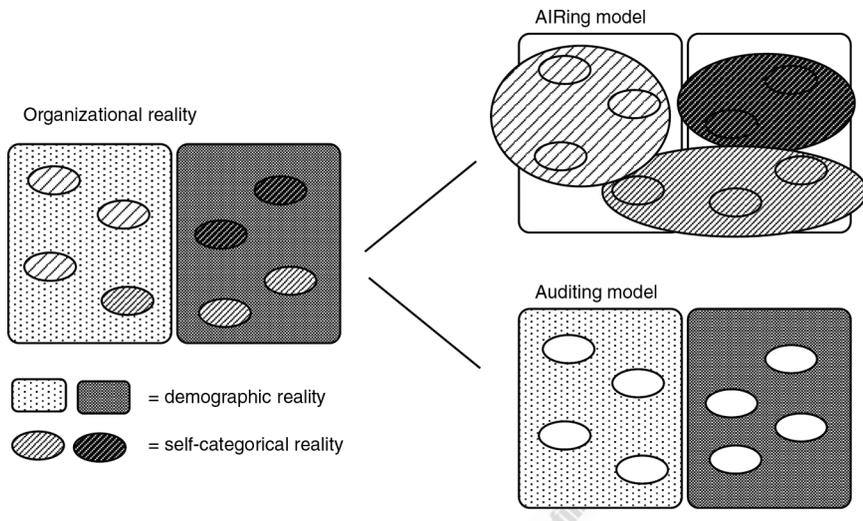


the various forms of diversity to be psychologically meaningful (Oakes, Haslam, and Turner 1994; Turner et al. 1994). It is therefore necessary to focus on those forms of identity that are perceived to be *most relevant* and *self-defining* for people at work. The starting point for diversity management is not necessarily to focus on demographic information but to ascertain from the employees themselves which self-categorisations are meaningful for them in relation to achieving their work-related goals and objectives.

Along the lines of the foregoing discussion, figure 2 gives one example of the way that the relevant self-categorical divisions within an organisation may not necessarily map onto the demographic characteristics of employees. In this organisation there are demographic differences between employees but the psychologically meaningful self-categorical divisions are defined on a non-demographic basis. An auditing procedure will accentuate those identities that previously have had a limited impact on attitudes and actions in the workplace. In contrast, an AIRing process ensures that employees' psychological map of the organisation is prioritised in the diversity management process.

Naturally, there could be multiple identities at play within any given workforce but the aim of AIRing is to identify those identities that people perceive to be most relevant to their work-related activities. For this reason, the AIRing process needs to take place within a context in which there is an explicit

Figure 2 A schematic example of the different outcomes associated with implementation of AIRing and auditing models.



understanding of the relevant superordinate organisational identity. Holding a departmental meeting or conducting a targeted survey are two ways in which the relevant work-related personal and social identities can be established. We have recently developed a number of tools specifically for this purpose.

An important element of this phase is that members of the organisation have to come to agreement about the most fitting subgroup divisions that then will form the basis of the Sub-casing stage of the ASPIRe process. The aim is to divide the superordinate identity into distinct subgroups so that the differences within the groups are minimised and those between groups are maximised (Oakes, Haslam, and Turner 1994; Turner 1985). So, for example, from a list that may include such social self-categorisations such as, area of specialisation, gender, ethnic background, seniority, work attitude, years of service and age, members of an organisation may decide that subgroupings defined in terms of area of specialisation best differentiate between groups of people within the organisation.

The other aspect of ASPIRe that is particularly relevant to diversity is that the process generates and affirms an organisational identity that is genuinely representative of its members. Because all members are involved in the process there is increased ownership of the outcomes. There is a better fit between the nature of the organisation's members and the defining norms, values, beliefs and goals of the organisation itself. The process and outcomes could apply equally to a small work group as to the organisation as a whole.

With respect to the positive outcomes associated with an AIRing versus an auditing type method, Eggins et al. (2008) describe both a case study and experimental work that supports the importance of the AIRing process.

Table 1 Auditing vs AIRing: A summary of the implications for organisational practices

Process	Nature of categorisation	Source of categorisation	Basis of categorisation	Likelihood of organisational dividends
AIRing	emergent	employees	influence	high
Auditing	imposed	others	power	low

In order to examine the relative implications of self-defining one's group membership versus being externally categorised, for example, an experimental study was conducted. In relation to planning around a contentious issue, participants could draw a 'self-generated map' where they indicated the groups that they thought should be consulted by authorities to resolve the issue or were told the pre-ordained groups that would be consulted – the 'imposed map' condition. Participants in the self-generated compared to the imposed group, indicated that they identified more with the group that included them, thought the exercise was more helpful and useful and that they had a greater understanding of others as well as their own approach to the issue at hand. These effects emerged even though there was no greater interaction or contact with others across the two conditions.

In summary, the strength of the AIRing process is that it provides information about those personal and social identities that are most psychologically meaningful for people in a particular workplace. There is a risk that if identities are externally imposed (e.g. by management or consultants) incongruity will be introduced into processes of diversity management that lead to dissatisfaction and rejection of the organisation and its representatives. Our core point is that in order to harness the identity-based resources in an organisation it is important to ensure that there is a *fit* between work-related self-categorisations and organisational practices and processes. The ASPIRe model outlines a process where members of the organisation all work together to establish this fit.

## Conclusions

A number of advantages are associated with the AIRing processes. Most obviously, we know from social identity research that there are a range of outcomes that emerge when people's shared social self-categorisations as ingroup members become salient. As outlined above, there is evidence of increased co-operation, better communication, and increased productivity, to name but a few. As the summary in table 1 highlights, the likelihood of such organisational dividends is highest when the nature of social self-categorisations

emerge from the employees themselves rather than being prescribed by others. When there is a fit between employees' own shared work-related self-identities and organisational practices the likelihood of acceptance and commitment to organisational goals increases because all members share the values and beliefs that define the organisation.

Auditing procedures can undermine shared self-categorisations because they impose less relevant categories and legitimise inappropriate divisions among employees. Demographic dimensions may not be those that guide behaviour in the workplace or in other contexts. In our view, an essential and underconceptualised feature of organisational success is a capacity to harness the personal and social identities that are important for employees in their working lives. In order for this to occur, though, we believe that practitioners need to move beyond the view that organisational reality can simply be audited, and acknowledge instead that a process of AIRing is likely to prove more valid, more acceptable, more productive and more sustainable.

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**S. Alexander Haslam** is professor of social and organisational psychology at the University of Exeter, UK. Together with colleagues, he focuses on the study of social identity in social and organisational contexts (his most recent book is *Psychology in organizations: The social identity approach* (2nd edn)). A Fellow of the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research, he is a former editor of the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and Kurt Lewin award winner.

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