

Minorities in Organizations: Effects of Diversity Management on Self-Identity

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**Abstract**

The present study addresses how African American students at predominately white institutions feel about the management of diversity and self-identity within mainstream campus organizations. As highlighted within the literature review diversity proposes conflicting thoughts and implications on studies due to its broad nature. Along with defining and managing diversity, this research suggests consideration of the increasing racial dynamics on predominately white campuses. The study is guided by the ideas and concepts derived out of social-identity theory and address two research questions through qualitative methods.

*Keywords:* diversity, diversity management, racial dynamics on campus, predominately white institutions, African American students, campus organizations, and social-identity theory.

## **Introduction**

Within the contexts of organizations, diversity research is a heavily discussed topic amongst scholars. Many findings contradict one another due to the broad nature of diversity; some scholars suggest that diversity within organizations is needed to spark innovation and to represent the perspectives of certain publics an organization may encounter, while other research claims that organizational diversity may be harmful to the group and cause individuals to give up their identity in hopes of being accepted. The literature review captures the complexity of diversity by looking at how diversity is defined by different scholars and their arguments for making such claims. It is concluded that the researchers' perspective on diversity impacts the way a study is carried out and its results. For the purpose of this study diversity has been defined as a racial difference, specifically African Americans students in organizational contexts at predominately white institutions.

Around the mid 90's, it was reported that one out of every four people in the United States was a minority, and that around 2000 or soon after, one out of every three people in this country would be a minority (Alire, 2001). This type of data advocates for the need of diversity management, which is also addressed in this study. No matter their stance on the implications or benefits of diversity, most scholars can agree that the management of diversity can heavily impact the way organizational members perceive diversity.

With the variables mentioned above and the application of social identity theory as discussed in the literature review, the current study seeks to understand how the racially diverse student perceives the management of diversity within mainstream campus organizations (those

organizations that are not geared specially toward minority students) and the impacts this presents on self identity. Two research questions were developed and answered through a series of qualitative interviews which supported the claims of social identity theory.

### **Defining Diversity**

Research concerning organizational or group diversity is becoming a trend across disciplines such as communication, business, sociology, etc. Management literature has tended to frame a debate about the impact of diversity with regard to what is good for the organization, whereas sociological and psychological literatures have tended to frame the issue with regard to the potential conflict among groups in the competition over valuable resources such as good jobs or self-esteem (DiTomaso, Post, & Parks-Yancy, 2007).

As diversity research develops and moves across cultural and disciplinary boundaries organizational researchers grapple with appropriately defining diversity and the purpose of organization diversity research (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002). Some scholars believe diversity should be defined comprehensively, while other scholars have argued that diversity should be separated into particular types. Jen, Northcraft, and Neale (1999) believe that diversity typologies often confuse which particular characteristics belong to a particular type. In a study done to refine the two-factor approach to categorizing diversity, Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, (2002) distinguished two different categories under which diversity falls. Some of them being visible differences or surface-level such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc, while others are less visible or deep-level such as education, values, beliefs, and sexual orientation. Neale, Neale, & Neale, (2005) confirm this same type of categorization by suggesting diversity can be approached by means of demographic factors such as race or age as well as non-

demographic factors such as education or functional background, which refers to work experience in specific areas. Another important aspect considered by scholars is that diversity is not an individual characteristic, but instead is a mixture of the different characteristics of all the organization's members, meaning diversity involves everyone (Grimes & Richard, 2003).

Regarding the purpose of organizational diversity research, Linnehan and Konrad (1999) believe that the field of diversity research has been diverted from its traditional aims of improving work opportunities for traditional excluded demographic groups. Other scholars such as Jenn et al. (1999) assume the purpose of diversity research is to link differences present in workgroups to organizationally valued outcomes such as conflict, satisfaction, and performance. It appears that the way a study is carried out and the results it yields depend on the way a researcher defines diversity.

In the article *Does Diversity Pay?: Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity* Cedric Herring (2009) addresses the complexity of diversity:

The definition of "diversity" is unclear as reflected in the multiplicity of meanings in the literature. For some, the term provokes intense emotional reactions, bringing to mind such politically charged ideas as "affirmative action" and "quotas." These reactions stem, in part, from a narrow focus on protected groups covered under affirmative action policies, where differences such as race and gender are the focal point. Some alternative definitions of diversity extend beyond race and gender to include all types of individual differences, such as ethnicity, age, religion, disability status, geographic location, personality, sexual preferences, and a myriad of other personal, demographic, and organizational characteristics. Diversity can thus be an all-inclusive term that

incorporates people from many different classifications. Generally, “diversity” refers to policies and practices that seek to include people who are considered in some way, different from traditional members. More centrally, diversity aims to create an inclusive culture that values and uses the talents of all would-be members (Herring, p.209).

In a simplified version, Williams and O’Reilly (1998) defined diversity as any attribute that another person may use to detect individual differences. While both definitions are accurate they still are quite broad. As a result, various categorization schemes based on factors such as race or gender, or based on the proportions such as the size of the minority, have been used to further refine the definition of diversity in teams (Mannix & Neale, 2005).

Understanding the complexity of diversity, it is important to address what aspect of diversity a study is based on and the purpose behind it. In the current study diversity is categorized as race, and defined specifically as African American students who belong to mainstream organizations at predominately white institutions.

### **Diversity Management**

Desired peer relationships don’t come into being by themselves, and behind successful diverse relationships is some level of diversity management. Patrick et al. (2012) suggest that diversity management is a process intended to create and maintain a positive work environment where the similarities and differences of individuals are valued.

The importance of diversity management was captured well in *Managing Workplace Diversity: Issues and Challenges* by Patrick et al. (2012):

Diversity management intends to create and maintain a positive work environment where the similarities and differences of individuals are valued, so that all can reach their potential and maximize their contributions to an organization's strategic goals and objectives. Diversity management ensures that all employees have the opportunity to maximize their potential and enhance their self-development and their contribution to the organization. It recognizes that people from different backgrounds can bring fresh ideas and perceptions, which can make the way work is done more efficient and make products and services better. Managing diversity successfully will help organizations to nurture creativity and innovation and thereby to tap hidden capacity for growth and improved competitiveness (Patrick et al., p. 2).

When diversity management is done effectively, what were once disadvantages turn into advantages (Polat, 2011). Patrick et al. (2012) concluded that organizations with diverse employees are better suited to serve diverse external customers in an increasingly global market and have a better understanding of cultural environments. To be successful in today's market, companies need to be flexible and use innovative management that can hold onto developed talent (Visagie, Linde, & Havenga, 2011).

Chang and Thorenou (2004) presented five key leadership competencies for managers of multicultural groups:

-*Cultural empathy*: Cultural awareness, cultural understanding, respect for values, treating people as individuals, using different perspectives and experience in other cultures.

*-Learning of the job:* Adapting to the context, curiosity, willingness to learn, tolerance for ambiguity and being observant.

*-Communication competence:* Listening, open-door policy, clear expression, non-verbal nuances, knowing other languages.

*-Generic managerial skills:* Motivating, consulting, human resource functions, conflict resolution, planning, goal and task focus, budgeting.

*-Personal style:* Emotional stability (Chang and Thorenou, p. 229).

When managing diversity, coherence and consolidation policies should be employed instead of assimilation policies which cause members to give up their differences to the majority population or look down upon others differences. In Patrick et al. (2012) study about potential barriers to workplace diversity, findings show that the major strategies adopted by organizations to increase inclusiveness is by training employees to be sensitive to cross-cultural differences; successfully managing diversity can lead to more committed better satisfied, better performing employees and potentially better financial performance for an organization.

### **Racial Dynamics on College Campuses**

Although the study is dated, Walter R. Allen (1992) points out since the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1952, not only had the enrollment of African Americans in higher education institutions increased, but three-fourths of the students enrolled attended predominately white institutions. To that, an estimated 60 percent of bachelor degrees awarded to Black students during 1988 were granted by those same predominately white colleges and universities. Chang (2002) looks at how diverse student enrollment continues to rise steadily at

predominately white colleges and universities which causes the complexity of racial dynamics to increase and affect students, then proposes an idea of what student organizations might look like on a hypothetical campus. She suggests:

Student organizations can be platforms for advancing the interests of groups that continue to be targets of racism; the lack of such organizations on campus makes it more difficult for students to challenge discrimination and incidents on campus that they view as racially offensive... Without those organizations, the few students of color enrolled on this hypothetical campus have two options for participation in student organizations. Option A: they could try to adopt and assimilate the norms of those who operate most successfully within the mainstream, with hopes of eventually integrating into those groups... or avoiding assimilation (Option B). By not engaging in organized activities, these option B students end up spending their out-of-class time while on campus in what may be described as the margins of the mainstream. They attend to their course work, and those who eventually complete their degrees move on without having made even a minor impact on the racial dynamics of campus life (Chang, 2002).

While Chang proposes a hypothetical scenario, some scholars argue that those universities who do offer minority student organizations contribute to racial and ethnic segregation, which can in turn be destructive to the creation of a common student identity (Sidanius, Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). In contrast, other research suggests that those same organizations are needed because minority students face different challenges that are derived from their background. Blackwell (1982) notes the differences between African American college students and their white peers are distinct and important. The parents of African American students are often more urban, have less education, work lower status jobs, and earn

less. These factors contribute to the struggle Black students on a predominately white campus deal with such as persistence rates, academic achievement, and overall psychological adjustment. Despite these circumstances African American students usually have higher aspirations than their white peers, but attain these goals less often (Allen, 1992). In a study to explore how students' academic and social involvement during the transition to college affects their grades and satisfaction, minority students appeared to benefit especially from involvement in extracurricular activities i.e. campus organizations (Fischer, 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

An individual, who is a minority of an organizational, may perceive that his or her identity is being threatened and will have an increased awareness of the characteristics of his or her own demographically dissimilar group (Riordan & Shore, 1997). In an attempt to understand and address this issue Social Identity theory will serve as the guiding theoretical framework. Social identity theory can predict when people categorize themselves and others as belonging to different groups; they inevitably assign preferences to the group they perceive to be like them. (DiTomaso et al., 2007, p.489)

*Psychology in Organizations- The Social Identity Approach* by Alexander Haslam, (2001) best summarizes the history and core assumptions of social identity theory:

Social Identity Theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. The theory was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Tajfel et al (1971) attempted to identify the *minimal* conditions that would lead members of one group to discriminate in favor of the ingroup to which they belonged and against another outgroup. In the Social Identity Theory, a person has not one, "personal self", but

rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national “level of self” (Turner et al, 1987). Apart from the “level of self”, an individual has multiple “social identities”. Social identity is the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the “us” associated with any internalized group membership. This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual’s unique attributes (Haslam, p.26-57, qtd. Utwente.nl).

As per Hogg and Abrams (1988) social identity theory provides both a cognitive and motivational perspective on the origins and consequences of group identification. Identification with a group involves membership and the collective interests of the group, because one of the key motivating factors in social-identity theory categorization is the bolstering and maintenance of self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

An assumption of social-identity theory is that out-group members in an organization are more likely to face stereotyping. It is expected that in turn minority members have to put in more effort finding a job and becoming a respected member of an organization and they will more likely identify with the organization and feel committed to the organization in hopes of receiving a positive social self (Rupert, Jehn, van Engen, & de Reuver, 2009).

Research about the affects of minority and mainstream campus organizations on African American students at predominately white universities is contradictory and at times controversial. Understanding how racial diversity is perceived and managed is important, but

understanding how the racially diverse student perceives these variables and identifies with campus organizations may be more enlightening. With this and the standpoint of social identity in mind, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Do African American students perceive the management of diversity in mainstream organizations as a method of assimilation or nurturing of the individual's identity?

RQ2: Do African American students feel that they must give up their individual identity in order to be accepted into mainstream campus organizations?

## **Method**

The present study will attempt to address RQ1 and RQ2 by employing a qualitative method. The purpose is to understand how the minority population of an organization struggles with identity and how the overall outcome of success within the organization is affected by this struggle. Much of the research done in this area has been quantitative; therefore this study will serve as a model for future studies in the qualitative field.

## **Participants**

In a quest for minority perspectives, participants will be gathered from Ashland University's mainstream campus organizations. The participant must be a racial minority, affiliated with a campus organization for at least two semesters, and at least 18 years of age or older. Request for research participation will be made through the office of Student Life (the office responsible of all student organizations), provided permission is granted. Anyone interested in participation will sign up in the office by signing a waiver and schedule for an interview time slot. The identity of all participants and the organization they are affiliated with

will be kept confidential and only demographic information pertaining to the individual will be released.

**Data Collection:**

A structured 20-question interview protocol will be employed during the course of the interviews to insure certain objectives are met. A tape recorder will be used to retain information for accuracy and further analysis. The following interview questions will be asked:

1. What campus organization do you belong to?
2. How long have you been affiliated with that organization?
3. Are there any requirements you must meet to be a member of the organization?
4. What type of students does the organization seek out?
5. What role do you play in the organization?
6. How would other members describe you?
7. Describe yourself when you first became a member of the organization.
8. Describe yourself currently.
9. How would the director of the organization describe you?
10. Describe the director.
11. Are there any students who are similar to you?
12. In what ways are they similar?
13. What does being African American in this organization mean to you?
14. How do you think other members feel about you being African American?
15. How do you think the director feels about you being African American?
16. Why you feel like you belong in the organization?

17. Did you have to do anything to feel like you belonged or were accepted?
18. How does this organization view diversity?
19. How does the director view diversity?
20. Is there anything you would like to tell me about being a minority in this organization or how this made you feel?

### **Data Analysis**

All recorded material will be transcribed; upon analysis phrases that correspond to the research question under consideration will be highlighted. Because this research will be done qualitatively, the data collected will not be paraphrased as it is true to the students' actual encounters and experiences. Once the interviews are transcribed the categories will be determined. After the categories have been defined, the transcriptions will be coded to develop answers for the research questions.

### **Results and Discussion**

From the data analysis emerged two sets of findings related to the expressions of participants' self identity within the context of mainstream student organizations. One pertains to the purpose or mission of the organization. The other focuses on the way the director of the organization is perceived to manage diversity as described by the participants.

When participants were interviewed their responses correlated heavily with the mission of the organization. African American students apart of organizations whose purpose was the serve the entire student population on campus such as Residential Assistants, or Orientation Team Members reported feelings of strong self-identity and acceptance in the organization. In those types of organizations diversity was valued because members were to provide services to

an array of diverse students belonging to the university. Participants spoke about how they reflected the student body they served and the organization needed their input on handling different issues. Participants belonging to those types of organizations also claimed to be aiding in the termination of racial stereotypes by being respected as valuable members of organizations and campus leaders that required high academic standards and high levels of involvement.

Those same organizations were also depicted as having directors who saw diversity as a positive contribution to the organization. Participants reported the only similarities members were required to have was compassion for who they served or the mission of the organization, academic standards, and respect for the protocols, rules, and/or procedures of the organization. While the directors of the organizations were said to respect students who were racially diverse, participants did admit that they came into the organization with preconceived thoughts about how they would be viewed and treated by others belonging to the organizations based on their racial differences.

The results yield information that supports the claims of social identity theory regarding the perception of one's social self. According to social identity theory, individuals have multiple "selves" that correspond with different group memberships. This was confirmed when participants were asked to describe themselves. Participants described different personality traits they would use in various roles; i.e. Resident Leader vs. friend to peer. Participants didn't suggest that they were giving up who they were, but instead they had multiple layers and would act according to the nature of the role they were in. The results also indicated that as members of campus organizations, students had higher self-esteem because they were held to higher standards, viewed as leaders, and accepted by the group. Here social identity theory is reflected

in the way each participant desired to maximize his or her self-esteem through a process of comparison in order to identify with a group.

The positive perceptions participants had of the organizations' directors indicated that diversity management is best handled and accepted when members aren't forced to assimilate or give up who they are. Contradictory to Chang's hypothetical campus organizations and the options minority students would have, participants are able to operate successfully within mainstream organizations without conforming or assimilating to the norms of other members.

The transcribed and coded interviews answer both research questions prompted in the literature review. Regarding research question one; African American students perceive the management of diversity in mainstream organizations as nurturing of the individual's identity due to the diversity of the population being served. Results suggest that African American students do not feel that they must give up their individual identity in order to be accepted into mainstream campus organizations, but use various forms of their personality to identify with the organization.

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