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A Comment on the Language of Diversity

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The language we use to talk about diversity holds important implications for theory and research on diversity as a topic in the organization sciences and for the practice of management. The need for conceptual clarity in this area of research was underscored for me recently when I read a dissertation proposal from one of my students. She is interested in how the strength of identification with a social group (like gender) gets translated into specific behaviors such as advocacy on behalf of women in organizations. I noted her use of the following set of terms, all referring to a person's group memberships: social group, social–cultural group, social category, self-categorization, social identity group, psychological group, social categorization. This student is struggling with the dual problems of concept definition and the need to consistently use the same term to refer to a given phenomenon. The example illustrated that conceptual clarity sometimes does not exist *within* a piece of writing to say nothing of across writings by different authors.

The fact that the absence of conceptual clarity is common in social science research should not be used as an excuse to perpetuate it with the topic of diversity. Not only does confusion and ambiguity in terminology make it difficult for writers to build on previous work, but with this topic perhaps more so than others, they might also give rise to interpretations which can then be used to undermine the value or support of the work.

To achieve conceptual clarity in the language of diversity we have to begin with the term 'diversity' itself. The specifics of how the term is defined and treated go a long way toward establishing the ideology that will frame thinking about the topic in important ways. With this in mind, I advocate to practitioners and academics the following three specific points about the language of diversity: (1) diversity is a description of the total workforce not a name for members of minority groups; (2) diversity must be distinguished from related concepts such as affirmative action and race research while at the same time preserving the legitimacy of these topics; (3) diversity is best examined on multiple levels of analysis.

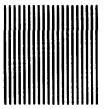
Diversity Does not Mean Women and Non-majority Men

The existing literature on diversity offers at least two reasons why diversity should not be defined as referring only to people who are in a gender or racio-ethnic minority group in a particular social system. First, many have noted that workforce diversity includes group identifications beyond gender and racio-ethnicity (e.g. Jackson et al., 1991; Cox, 1993). Secondly, theory and research on gender and racio-ethnic effects by definition applies to members of the gender/racio-ethnic majority groups as well as to those from minority groups. In a multi-gender system we all have a gender, likewise in a multiracial system, we all have race. Thus even if we restrict attention to these two dimensions of difference the research interest is still inclusionary.

People often respond to the topic of diversity as meaning only members of minority groups partly because much of the work focuses on the dynamics of minority-group oppression in majority dominated social systems. However, if we acknowledge that indeed some members are disadvantaged by their identities, then this implies that others are advantaged by theirs. Since the values of meritocracy and distributive justice are presumably widely held in much of the world, wouldn't all people have an interest in removing both the advantage of the majority as well as the disadvantage of the minority. Only in this way can all people genuinely examine their true abilities and have confidence about attributions for their accomplishments and effort toward accomplishment.

One of the ways in which the distorted meaning of diversity as referring only to minority-group members gets manifested is that in international forums diversity is frequently branded as an 'American' issue. In making such a charge, Europeans and others first of all undervalue the unmistakable importance of gender and racio-ethnic differences in the employment systems of their own countries. In addition, however, they ignore the obvious implications of learnings from research on diversity for improving cross-national relations. These implications include not only learnings from work that focuses explicitly on nationality as the dimension of difference, but also the important opportunities for transference of knowledge from one dimension of diversity to other dimensions. This last point was illustrated by a story told to me recently by a diversity manager in a large corporation. After viewing a videotape vividly illustrating racial prejudice against Blacks in the United States a Frenchman from the audience approached my friend to give him some feedback. He stated that although he found the tape interesting he did not think it was particularly relevant to his issues as a member of the French affiliate of the US based firm. He then went on to say that he often feels he is treated just like the Black in the film in his interactions as a Frenchman in a US dominated company. What this person obviously missed was that his second statement directly contradicted his first. I find this kind of thinking is prevalent in dealing with the topic of diversity.

If the language of diversity encourages people to think of diversity as



referring only to members of minority groups, then the definition of the term itself can be used to polarize people and reduce cross-group collaborative effort to promote work related to it.

Distinguishing Diversity from Other Research Topics

In speaking and writing about diversity we must also be careful to make clear how diversity relates to other, more traditional topics in the organizational literature such as equal opportunity, research on gender and race and affirmative action. Perhaps the greatest difficulty so far has occurred around affirmative action. Although I believe that organizational affirmative action plans are a part of what is meant by managing diversity, and likewise that research on affirmative action is within the umbrella of diversity research, the two concepts are clearly not equivalent. Affirmative action is a tool for facilitating changes in demographic representation in workgroups. The domain of work on diversity is certainly much broader than this, yet some writers insist on using language as though the two were equivalent.

The following case in point is from an article appearing in the 8 July 1991 issue of *Business Week*.

> Call it affirmative action. Or minority outreach. Or perhaps you prefer 'managing diversity', the newest, politically well-scrubbed name for policies aimed at bringing minorities into the business mainstream through preferential hiring and promotion. (Race in the Workplace: 51)

The language featured in this article takes the term managing diversity, which is comprehensive in the types of human group identities it addresses and in the type of organizational activity that it encompasses, and reduces it to only one dimension of difference (race) and only one organizational activity (namely affirmative action). This choice of language was made despite the fact that even a casual referencing of the available literature on managing diversity for practitioner audiences would have revealed the much broader definition of managing diversity offered by Roosevelt Thomas (Thomas, 1990) among others, (e.g. Copeland, 1988; Cox and Blake, 1991; Loden and Rosener, 1991).

The *Business Week* article further reduces affirmative action, which has been defined in the executive order that created it as 'systematic steps to ensure that past discrimination is remedied and that further discrimination does not occur' (Werther & Davis, 1993: 105) to two actions, namely preferential hiring and promotion of minorities. A further reading of the article shows that even the attention to racio-ethnic minorities is further restricted to one group, Blacks. Finally, the message that managing diversity is merely a new name for affirmative action is further reinforced in the article with the following statement:

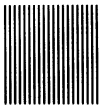
> To get past the emotional charge carried by affirmative action, some employers have embraced a new catch-phrase: managing diversity. (p. 58)

What is the effect of this use of language (which I would say represents a distortion of the established meaning of the concepts) on subsequent work on the topic of diversity? If diversity is defined as a new version of affirmative action, then the ideological and motivational obstacles which have plagued affirmative action in both research and practice will also be applied to diversity. For example, Kluegel and Smith (1986) have suggested that these obstacles include self-interest and a belief in the 'dominant ideology'. Self-interest refers to the notion that people will tend to resist actions or policies which they think will result in a decline in their personal circumstances and support those things which they think will have a positive impact on their personal circumstances. Collective self-interest refers to motivations based on how a policy or action is expected to affect a group with which one identifies. The dominant ideology is a set of beliefs about human economic accomplishment which are ingrained in Euro-western culture, namely: (a) that everyone has an opportunity to succeed economically; (b) that personal, not situational attributes determine economic success and failure; and (c) that inequality of economic outcomes is justified because those outcomes inevitably represent inequality of effort or contribution. To a large extent the dominant ideology is the belief that social systems like employing organizations operate as meritocracies. When one believes that meritocracy is in place, it seems logical that interventionist strategies like affirmative action would be thought unnecessary. If managing diversity is treated as a synonym for affirmative action, then the same objections will automatically be applied to the newer work.

To adopt the language used by *Business Week* in this article is to encourage a narrow agenda for research and practice focused on affirmative action plans for Blacks. Although the study of affirmative action plans for Blacks is important and legitimate, such language use is likely to unnecessarily constrain the attention to the topic by scholars and management practitioners.

It should be noted that it is not only journalists who are guilty of this form of misleading use of language. In a manuscript which I recently reviewed for a highly regarded academic journal in the organization sciences, the title of the manuscript and the introduction of the conceptual framework emphasized managing diversity, while the actual study on which the authors reported examined the effect of awards for quality affirmative action programs and of announcements of discrimination suits on stock performance of firms. In my review I cautioned the authors about the need to avoid using the terms as though they were interchangeable.

A final point to be made here is that while we must acknowledge the distinctiveness of the term diversity, care must also be taken to see that the language of diversity does not, even inadvertently, tend to delegitimize related research interests. For example, despite its excellent content, the title of the book *Beyond Race and Gender* (Thomas, 1991)



suggests to some people that we needn't concern ourselves with these aspects of difference any longer, or that they are somehow less important than they used to be. While a careful reading of the book and discussion with its author suggest that these are not the intended messages, this choice of wording in the title runs the risk of delegitimizing continued attention to race and gender research (and organizational action).

What approach to defining diversity research will avoid both problems identified here? One approach might be to use the label of diversity research when we are addressing multiple dimensions of difference and phenomena which are common across dimensions. For example it seems appropriate to label a paper which addresses gender, race and nationality as 'diversity' research. On the other hand, a paper which compares decision styles of men and women seems to fall within the domain of gender research, or at the very least, should be specified as 'the case of gender diversity'. Certainly there is a need for work on single dimensions of group-identity as well as work which seeks to explicate commonalities across multiple dimensions. To further illustrate what I mean by the latter domain (which I am suggesting here is work on diversity defined generically) I am presently working on a study of group identity, cultural fit and work outcomes. A common element in the study is that members of outgroups tend to experience less favorable fit and outcomes than members of the dominant group. Three different dimensions of difference are being addressed (e.g. gender, racio-ethnicity and work function).

Diversity Operates at Multiple Levels of Analysis

As I have suggested elsewhere, diversity needs to be studied on three levels of analysis—individual, group/inter-group and organizational (Cox, 1993). This is particularly important in order to avoid the tendency for research on diversity-related topics to imply that the burden of change rests solely on individual members of the organization. If diversity is defined as operating only at the individual level then the more systemic inter-group and organizational dynamics related to diversity will be left under-explored and consequently the magnitude of real organizational change diminished.

In the past, a prominent example of this was the 'blame-the-victim' mentality. For example, previous research indicates that members of racio-ethnic minority groups contribute less than majority-group members to group problem-solving discussions (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992). What are the implications of this finding? Clearly it depends on the underlying cause of the behavior. To the extent that personality based or other individual factors (such as low self-confidence in one's ability to offer useful input) are causal, then future research and organizational action must address forms of development targeted to overcoming these personal characteristics. However, to the extent that the causes reside in contextual factors such as the norms about how people get recognized for participation, or source-bias in which contributions from members from

groups with low social status in the society at large are customarily ignored, a very different set of implications arise.

A second reason why we must define the domain of diversity on multiple levels of analysis is that it welcomes the involvement of scholars from a broad range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology and public policy in addition to a variety of business disciplines. This eclecticism is not only necessary in order for the phenomena under study to be accurately and thoroughly explored, but it also facilitates transference of relevant knowledge across fields. The latter is badly needed in the area of diversity research. For example, a point being increasingly recognized by organizational scholars is that membership in groups must be studied not only in a categorical, demographic way but also with measures which tap the extent to which an individual strongly identifies with the subjective culture of the groups (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Cox and Nkomo, 1990; James and Khoo, 1991; Ferdman and Cortes, 1992). What is perhaps less well known by organizational scholars is that substantial literatures which will help inform this work are already developed in the consumer behavior area of marketing (Tse et al., 1988; Stayman and Deshpande, 1989) and in work in sociology on identity salience (McGuire et al., 1978; Okamura, 1981).

The use of language which acknowledges that the effects of diversity operate on multiple levels of analysis is important also because it helps us walk the fine line between treating diversity as nothing more than acknowledging individual difference and reinforcing stereotyping of identity groups. This dilemma is illustrated in the following segment extracted from one of Lennie Copeland's early articles on valuing diversity:

> Joan Green of Quaker Oats points out that all employees are different. In that sense, she says managing diversity is not a new skill. Good managers have always managed with a sensitivity for individual differences. Others maintain that individuals of the same ethnic group share experiences, values, and points of view. Because of their commonality, some say, they can communicate with each other in shorthand and reliably predict how others in their group will respond. (Copeland, 1988: 58)

I believe that the language here creates an unfortunate confusion about the topic of diversity. On the one hand, to assert that diversity simply means acknowledging that 'everybody is different' is to trivialize the topic and imply that no new research agenda or organization change effort is needed. The statement overemphasizes the individuality element of diversity and ignores the vitally important inter-group and organizational context factors that influence the outcome of managing diversity efforts. On the other hand, we cannot claim that members of the same ethnic group share a culture unless we know something about the extent to which they identify with the group in their own self-concept. Many members will not share the norms, values and language of the micro-

culture despite the similarity in a demographic sense. Thus the second part of the quotation tends to overemphasize the group level and ignore individuality. This kind of inattention to language leads to faulty conclusions. In this case the conclusion that: (a) we can assume that people rated as good managers in organizations are also competent in managing diversity; and (b) all members of an identity group can be assumed to strongly embrace the culture of that group.

If writers acknowledge the complexity of the topic of diversity by approaching the work with an awareness that it operates on three levels (even if all three cannot be examined in a given piece of research), this kind of miscommunication can be avoided.

Conclusion

In summary, then, I believe future work on the topic of diversity in organizations will be enhanced if we are careful in our language to communicate that: (1) diversity means the entire workforce and not just members of minority groups; (2) diversity includes multiple dimensions of group-identity but does not undermine contributing lines of research which address important single dimensions of the larger topic; and (3) the effects of diversity on organization behavior occur at the individual, group and organizational levels of analysis. The essence of diversity, and the thing that distinguishes this domain of work from simply recognizing individual difference, is that it requires attention to the inter-group and individual–organization interaction aspects of personal identity.

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