
**EXAMINING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE:
THE IMPORTANCE
OF RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS**

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The United States of America (USA) and the whole world now face many new challenges. For the last two decades, the reunification of Germany, the restructuring of the former Soviet Union, the formation of the European Union (EU), the adaptation of a “common” currency, the Euro, on January 1, 2002 in 12 European countries involving more than 305 million people with “diverse” cultures, the expansion of EU to 25 countries in 2004 that created an economic superpower (with 415 million people and a \$9 trillion economy), economic developments of Pacific Rim countries, China’s accession to WTO, and the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in late July of 2005 have removed many trade barriers and caused significant changes around the world. The growing integration of the world economy into a single, huge free market increases the intensity of competition.

Organizational scientists and HRM professionals have long been interested in how differences (and similarities) among people influence the way they interact when working together. Over the past several years, however, this interest -- and the body of empirical “diversity research” -- has grown considerably. I suspect there are three reasons for this. One involves the increased use of workgroups and teams in organizations. As people work more closely with each other, sharing activities, goals and outcomes, it becomes more important for us to understand how (or whether) workgroup diversity influences groups and their members. Another reason lies with the significant demographic changes that have occurred in the workforces in many industrial countries; with these, has come the growing recognition among many HRM professionals that managing a demographically diverse workforce has both opportunities *and* challenges. Finally, it seems that interest in demographic diversity has strengthened interest in diversity that is based other, *non-demographic* variables such as personality styles, work attitudes and values.

In writing this editorial I have three objectives. One is to provide a very brief overview of the diversity research literature, highlighting some of the challenges associated with doing this sort of research. Another is to suggest why it is especially important that practicing managers, consultants, and academics work together on this type of research. Finally, I speculate on the potential value of examining workgroup diversity effects within Romanian organizations.

Diversity Research, Diverse Findings

As Mannix and Neale (2005) have recently noted, there are both “optimistic” and “pessimistic” views regarding the effects of workgroup diversity. On the one hand, some practitioners and theorists argue that workgroups will *benefit* from being highly diverse with respect to particular variables. The general argument here is that different types of people may have different perspectives, talents, and skills and, as a result, a highly diverse group may be more insightful and innovative, and, potentially, more productive than a less diverse group. A competing argument is that workgroup members who differ from each other may experience greater intra-group conflict and stress, leading to less desirable outcomes such as lower productivity, reduced work commitment, and lower employee retention rates.

Of course, people differ in all sorts of ways. Hence, group diversity comes in many forms. As mentioned above, researchers have examined diversity with respect to demographic variables such as gender, ethnic background, or age as well as psychological variables such as personality, skills and experiences, work attitudes and values. These forms of diversity have been examined in conjunction with numerous “outcome” measures that might be of interest to human resource managers including: stress and well-being, employee commitment, attendance, and retention, innovation, and productivity / performance. Some of the research examines group-level outcomes; other studies focus on individual-level effects on group members. Further, this research has examined various types of groups including short-term groups assembled in psychology laboratory settings, students doing team-based projects in the university courses, and the “real thing” – actual workgroups or teams carrying out their duties in the workplace. Even amongst the latter, there is wide variation in the kinds of tasks that teams do, the degree to which team members are interdependent and the length of time the team members have worked together. Finally, it is worth noting that, although most diversity research is cross-sectional, there are a few longitudinal studies as well. Clearly, diversity research is characterized by diverse research designs!

Unfortunately, it is also characterized by a diverse set of research results. Indeed, the overall picture painted by the existing diversity research has not produced a very clear set of findings and, hence, is somewhat confusing – for both researchers and practitioners. At one level, of course, it should not

surprise us to learn that such a wide array of diversity variables (e.g., age diversity, work ethic diversity, skill diversity) do not consistently relate to an equally wide variety of outcomes. Encouragingly, although the size of the effects vary considerably across studies, some consensus is emerging about the idea that teams that are diverse with respect to *task-relevant* skills and expertise are more innovative than are less diverse on these variables. What is somewhat surprising, however, is that even within the same diversity/outcome relation, there is inconsistency across studies. Consider, for example, the relation between ethnic diversity and group processes. Some studies report a negative relation between these two, such that more diverse groups experience poorer group processes, while other studies report no effects of ethnic diversity on group processes.

Overall, for the practitioner hoping to receive guidance on how to manage diversity, this kind of inconsistency is somewhat disappointing. Accounting for these inconsistencies in the literature, and making systematic sense of the way in which diversity influences workgroups, is extremely important. Without this, researchers can offer little substantive guidance as how best to design and implement appropriate human resource initiatives aimed at optimizing the impact of workplace diversity.

Although we have learned a lot from studies conducted in lab or classroom “teams”, I suspect the most promising studies in the future will be those conducted with *actual* workgroups/teams in organizations. Below, I highlight some challenges faced by those who do diversity research in organizations and suggest how meeting some of these challenges may help clarify our understanding of workgroup diversity. Further, I argue that this understanding can be greatly enhanced through the development of “research partnerships”. As with much research, published diversity research is typically conducted by academic (university-based) researchers working alone. In my view, true partnerships forged between academics and knowledgeable practitioners who work in the participating organization(s) have many important benefits for this line of research.

Challenges for Diversity Researchers

Measuring group diversity and the “missing persons problem”

To assess a group’s diversity on a particular characteristic (e.g., age), one needs, of course, to

learn how that characteristic is distributed across the various members of the group and to make a calculation based on one of several simple formulae (standard deviation, for example, is often used). A fundamental assumption of each of these formulae is that the calculation is based on information from *all members* of the group, not just *some members* (Allen, Stanley, Williams, & Ross, 2005). Because much diversity research is based on organizational surveys, however, this is not always the case. Indeed, missing data is a “fact of life” with most organizational surveys.

What happens when researchers base the calculation of a diversity index on information from only *some members* of the group? The answer is clear: The diversity index that is calculated is inaccurate. Consider the following simple example involving age and age diversity. Imagine a 4-person group made up of three 25 year olds and one 50 year old. If the 50 year old did not respond to the research survey (and thus, his age data was unavailable), the calculation would be based on the three other group members. Thus, it would *appear* that the group was not at all diverse with respect to age (“age diversity index = 0”), which, obviously, is not accurate. Imagine further, that distortions of this nature happen in several groups within a given study of age diversity...it is easy to see that these distorted age diversity scores could distort then the accuracy with which the researcher estimates the true relation between age diversity and a particular outcome.

Rather than relying exclusively on survey responses, the missing data problem can be addressed by obtaining demographic data from another, more complete source: organizational records. The organization would know that the hypothetical group mentioned above has 4 members and, typically, would know their date of birth or age, thus insuring an accurate age diversity calculation. This very basic measurement issue highlights a simple, but important, reason for involving organizational insiders: they can much more easily obtain basic group data and, hence, can greatly facilitate the calculation of a set of accurate, rather than inaccurate, group diversity indices.

Considerations of context and processes

Under what *conditions* will diversity have particular effects? Some have argued that the effects of diversity may be moderated by the *context* in which the group works and that this might help to explain some of the variation we see across diversity studies. Unfortunately, little systematic attention

has been given to contextual factors. Relevant factors might include the characteristics of the organization in which the group is embedded (e.g., size, sector, degree of organization-level diversity), its internal culture/climate, the nature of the group’s task, or the degree of interdependence among group members. Context could also include culture in the larger “global” sense and, indeed, very little is known about the extent to which diversity effects vary cross-culturally. All of these gaps in our contextual knowledge are worrisome since contextual differences may be critical to the effectiveness of managing diversity initiatives – or, indeed, the need to manage it at all.

How does diversity influence outcomes such as performance, attitudes or retention? Although several possible intervening, or process, variables have been *suggested* (e.g., degree and/or type of communication, conflict, trust, social integration) relatively little research has focused on the processes through which diversity effects occur. This, too, is disappointing because it is exactly this sort of information that could help practitioners design interventions that could enhance on the positive effects of diversity or minimize its negative effects.

Getting information about group context and processes is difficult and may involve frequent and in-depth observation of groups as well as the nuanced understanding of the organization that only an “insider” will have. Again, we see the value of having the participation of research partners who work *within* the organization. Internal research partners have greater knowledge of the contexts in which groups work and the important events and history within the groups. They have greater access to the groups and, quite likely, can facilitate ongoing, longitudinal data collection (which is often critical to studies of process) much better than an outsider could. And, perhaps most critically, internal research partners can provide the external researcher with key insights about how to interpret some of the process and contextual information that is collected.

Consideration of the role of time

Relationships among group members change as time passes. Therefore, the *amount of time* that employees spend together may well influence the effects of group diversity. Indeed, one particularly interesting aspect of this research involves the distinction, discussed by Harrison and colleagues (e.g., Harrison, Price, Gavin & Florey, 2002) between diversity that focuses on “surface”

variables and diversity that is based on “deep” variables. Surface variables are those that are readily detected when you meet a person (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity/race, language); deep variables are those involving underlying characteristics that take *some time* for you to detect (e.g., personality, ability, work values, beliefs). The argument is that differences among coworkers on surface variables might cause some interpersonal difficulties when people are just beginning to know each other -- that is, in the early stages of their work together -- but that these problems reduce substantially over time as they become better acquainted. Deep-level diversity may have little impact on newly created (or “early stage”) teams, because deep-level variables have not yet been detected. Instead, deep-level diversity effects (which are often negative) are likely to occur after the team has been together for some time and may persist over time. Research examining this intriguing possibility is in a relatively early stage and must be studied more, as it may have very important implications for how we design, socialize, and manage short-term vs. longer-term teams. Further, while it provides a hopeful message that any negative effects of surface-level diversity (such as gender or ethnicity) may be temporary, it also suggests that the real challenge for managers may lie in dealing with differences in more deeply-ingrained variables such as work values, beliefs, or behavioral styles.

Once again, the need for research partnerships is highlighted. To conduct surface vs. deep diversity research effectively, longitudinal designs are necessary. It will be important to examine teams over time, to collect data about both surface *and* deep variables, and to accurately record changes in team membership. All of these can be greatly facilitated by researchers from within the organization.

Diversity and the Romanian Workplace

In North America and Western Europe the “managing diversity industry” is alive and well. Much of this focuses on training managers (and their team members) about how to deal with differences. Further, many of these focus primarily on demographic variables. It is not entirely clear, however, that the industry has based these programs on scientific evidence; in part, this may be because research has been somewhat scattered and results have been difficult to synthesize. If we are serious about developing programs to select, socialize, train, and manage diverse teams within the workplace, I would argue that these programs

should be based on research. Further, this research should be conducted within work organizations and by those who are informed by both theory *and* practice.

I am certainly not in a position to assess how (or whether) workplace diversity issues fit into the organizational landscape in Romania. I am neither Romanian nor have spent much time in the country. Indeed, as I have been to Romania only twice (in 1991, for a few weeks, and 2005, for only 10 days), my comments must be viewed as those from an “interested outsider”. For this reason, I am much less aware of the diversity management situation in Romania and leave it to the reader to determine how valuable diversity research in Romanian might be. However, at a general level at least, it seems reasonable to speculate that diversity research is relevant to Romanian organizations and their employees.

As in most countries, Romanian managers are understandably anxious to develop and maintain work groups characterized by membership stability and retention, enthusiasm for the group’s work, high levels of performance, and high levels of employee well-being. Understanding the role that similarities and differences play can help make this happen. Like many countries, Romania has considerable diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, educational levels, and, increasingly, diversity with respect to the blend of “nationals” and “foreign” members of the workforce. As well, recent labour force analyses suggest there is there are large imbalances across age groups within the working population (Vasile, 2004). Furthermore, Romania has a distinct history. Recent changes -- political, social, and economic -- have very likely played a big role in creating diversity with respect to work values and attitudes (“deep-level” variables) where, once, much less diversity may have existed. It is worth speculating that some of these deep-level variables may be inherently linked to demographic variables (e.g., age, generations), leading to some very interesting diversity hypotheses; other deep-level variables are probably independent of demography. Finally, major transitions of the sort Romania is experiencing lead almost inevitably to changes within organizations (e.g., in management styles, employee work attitudes, and perspectives) and this, too, may lead to more diversity within the workplace.

Overall, I am suggesting is that these differences may play an important role in how employees (and the groups they work in) navigate the sometimes perilous waters of the workplace. Further, it seems

to me that those with an interest in human resource management -- both practitioners and researchers -- are ideally suited to examine these issues (in Romania and elsewhere) and that this will be best done when research partnerships are forged between members of both groups.

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