Diversity in Context: How Organizational Culture Shapes Reactions to Workers with Disabilities and Others Who Are Demographically Different

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Successfully integrating workers with disabilities into their organizations is both a challenge and an opportunity facing managers today. Despite laws and business practices prohibiting discrimination against those with disabilities, people with disabilities are consistently underutilized in organizations. This article applies theories of demographic diversity in organizations to assert that a richer understanding of organizational cultures and their implications for workers with disabilities may shed light on the question of how and why workers with disabilities may be excluded from mainstream work experiences and career progression. The article briefly reviews business arguments that support integration of workers with disabilities into organizations based on their contribution to the overall diversity within the organization, and reviews complications in the research on diversity to date that leave important questions of the potential gains or detriments from increasing this diversity unanswered. The article then goes on to introduce organizational culture as an underinvestigated but likely potent tool in explaining how and when workers who are demographically different, in general, and with disabilities, specifically, may be successfully integrated into an organization’s work force. The article introduces three types of organizational culture: culture of differentiation, culture of unity, and culture of integration. Each is explained in terms of its content and its implications for managing diversity. A discussion of the implications of culture as a primary tool for managing the integration of workers with disabilities concludes the paper. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. workforce is becoming increasingly diverse (Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1993; Johnston & Packer, 1987). What has historically been a workforce composed primarily of native-born, white males has transformed into a heterogeneous mix that includes an increasing proportion of workers with disabilities, women, people of color, older workers, and workers born outside the United States (See, e.g., Harris, 2000; Hattiangadi, 1998; Towers Perrin & Hudson Institute, 1990). The inclusion of more workers with disabilities and more workers who are demographically different from the majority implies noticeable differences among coworkers and has heightened interest in the questions of how such differences between coworkers impact work performance.

As a result of the changes in the U.S. workforce, the subject of, and concern for, diversity in organizations today is ubiquitous. Some argue that effectively managing diversity at work is a business necessity. Others confess they find it a political pain in the neck. The demographic trends in the U.S. workforce make clear, regardless of beliefs about diversity, that recent increases in the representation of women, older persons, those with disabilities, and other minorities in the workforce will continue. These trends have implications at both the organizational and individual levels.

At the organizational level, the changing composition of the workforce offers challenges and opportunities. Research shows that noticeable differences among coworkers are associated with increased staff turnover (Pfeffer & O'Reilly, 1987; Cummings, Zhou & Oldham, 1993) and workgroup conflict (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, & Bourgeois, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), but differences among coworkers also offer great potential benefits to organizations’ product quality, market reputation, and bottom line. That is, diversity can and should benefit the way work gets done, as well as the resulting products of that effort (see, e.g., Helgesen, 1990; Foeman & Pressley, 1987). Yet, a recently completed 5 year study of the impact of diversity on business results found no major advantages or disadvantages for organizational performance from increased diversity in the workforce. The best outcomes, according to these researchers, were the ability to overcome the negative effects of diversity, such as higher staff turnover and greater workplace conflict (Kochan et al., 2003). The finding that organizations can take steps to mitigate the costs of diversity is encouraging, and this prospect will form the foundation for the discussion of organizational cultures within this article.

At the same time, at the individual level, changes in the demographic composition of the workforce should afford individuals previously excluded from working the advantages and opportunities of the career of their choice. Yet, studies show that individuals who are in the minority suffer from greater stereotyping (Kanter, 1977), more negative impressions from their coworkers (Flynn, Chatman, & Spataro, 2001), and fewer performance opportunities (Spangler, Gordon, & Pipkin, 1978). Indeed, in recent studies, more than a third of people with disabilities who are currently employed report they have experienced some form of discrimination based on their disabilities (Harris, 2000).

Overt discrimination in hiring or promotion is illegal. Thus, the persistence of systematic disadvantages for traditionally underrepresented workers, in combination with a general failure among organizations to realize the benefits diversity should afford them, implies an implicit bias against workers who are different from
those in the majority (see, e.g., Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992). That is, a more subtle (and thus potentially more insidious) resistance to increasing minority presence in the workforce may manifest indirectly, out of a reluctance to share power and resources that have been traditionally controlled by the white, male, nondisabled majority. As Anna Duran (n.d.) writes

[A]s a result of any diversity efforts, white males will be required to share valuable resources, rewards, incentives and promotions with a wider range of people than ever before. For some, the reaction may be disappointment, for others, feelings of betrayal and even anger will color their opinions about the fact that the old rules are changing.

Thus resistance to workers who are disabled or who are demographically different, however unintended, may survive the legal end of overt discrimination. Where then will we see continued discrimination? An organization’s latent preferences for certain demographic characteristics or physical or mental abilities may be observable as shared beliefs and expectations about the "type" of person who makes the greatest contribution (see, e.g., Owens, unpublished doctoral dissertation; Ridgeway, 1997). As discussed below, shared values and beliefs among organization members constitute the organization’s culture (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Schein, 1985). The question then becomes, how does an organization’s culture affect the work experiences of employees who are different from the majority?

This article looks at the values that comprise an organization’s culture to advance understanding of when and where incorporation of workers with disabilities and workers who are demographically different may positively impact organizations. A discussion of how to manage these types of diversity necessitates consideration of why one should manage diversity. Thus, the article begins with an assertion of both ethical and business reasons why diversity merits attention beyond the formal, legal interventions to discrimination and equal opportunity that exist. This is followed by a review of existing research approaches to understanding the effects of demographic diversity in organizations and why these approaches have come up short. Based on learning from that review, this article offers a model of the effects of greater diversity among employees in organizations that is based on the content of an organization’s culture. The article concludes with a discussion of research considerations beyond organizational culture.

**WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT?**

Most organizations face externally and internally imposed standards of hiring and promotion, workplace conditions, and, in some cases, training in understanding differences. Why should hiring and promoting disabled workers or workers who are demographically different require further efforts?

For some, fairness is the most compelling reason for diversity to be of concern. Discrimination in employment practices toward employees with disabilities, as well as discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, and physical ability, was outlawed by Congress with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet, analyses of the work and career experiences of members of these protected groups reveal that these legal changes were insufficient to eradicate the systematic differences in experiences and
careers among those who belong to protected groups versus those in the majority. People from traditionally underrepresented groups populate a disproportionate amount of low ranking jobs or unemployed status and have difficulty penetrating the upper echelons of business.

For example, among working age adults with college degrees, 55% of people with disabilities are unemployed, compared with 14% of their counterparts without disabilities (Harris, 2000). Poverty rates among individuals with disabilities are more than 50% higher than those without disabilities. Further, in Fortune 500 firms, women hold 2,140, or 15.7%, of the 13,673 officer positions (Catalyst, 2004); a small subset of these, or 1.6% of the total officer positions in these firms, are held by women of color (Catalyst, 2002). Among Fortune 1000 firms, 41% had at least one African American on their board in 2000; 14% reported having at least one Latino on their board; and 11% reported having a member of Asian descent on their board (Korn/Ferry, 2001). Not every worker who wishes to be employed will be, nor will every employee attain a leadership position in business, but the low rates of employment among the disabled and the lack of diversity at the highest levels of management in organizations prompt questions of fairness.

A second compelling aspect of diversity in organizations has to do with managing costs. When unmanaged, integrating workers with disabilities and workers who are demographically different from the majority adds costs to everyday operational issues (arising from increased turnover and conflict), as well as administrative processes. Most managers already understand the explicit costs of managing diversity, including up to $8 billion annually for diversity training across U.S. organizations, compliance with EEOC guidelines, and defense against violations (e.g., charges of racial discrimination have increased more than 500% in the last decade) (Kochan et al., 2003).

A third argument for the importance of understanding diversity in organizations rests in the unrealized potential offered by the increasingly diverse workforce. Beyond considerations of fairness and cost minimization, organizations have an opportunity to exploit the demographic shifts in the workforce to their own advantage (Kochan et al., 2003; Ely & Thomas, 2001). First, organizations that embrace diversity may enjoy positive reputational effects, for example, on their stock price and recruiting. Additionally, a firm believed to hire and promote the disabled and demographic minorities will attract the highest qualified candidates from all identity groups. Third, as the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, so is the customer base for United States organizations. For example, the more that customers with disabilities perceive a firm to reflect their values and experiences of being disabled, the more likely they are to purchase from it (e.g., Thomas & Ely, 1996). Finally, organizations that embrace diversity will likely be more flexible, creative, and innovative. Research shows that women and minorities exhibit flexible thinking in their approaches to problem solving (Kanter, 1989) and workers who are more different in sex, race, and nationality from others in their organization are more responsive in adjusting their behaviors to fit different situations (Chatman & Spataro, in press). As policies and procedures are broadened, organizations must become fluid and adaptable. Ability to adapt and evolve in a dynamic environment is one of the hallmarks of longevity in an organization. Thus, the opportunities diversity presents are many.
EXISTING RESEARCH ON DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY

Research on demographic diversity has failed thus far to chart a path for managers to follow in managing diversity. Studies have shown that the demographic composition of one’s workgroup affects both attitudes and behaviors in organizations, but the results are difficult to reconcile or apply. For example, differences among coworkers in educational experience have been shown to positively affect creativity and decision quality (see, e.g., Wiersma & Bantel, 1992). At the same time, researchers have found that diversity in age and workplace tenure can reduce communication, social integration, and attachment to the organization and can increase turnover (O’Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989; Tsui et al., 1992). Research that has sought a simple answer to the question of whether diverse groups outperform homogeneous groups has been inconclusive (Jehn et al., 1999; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998). Likewise, answers to the question of whether an individual who is different from the mainstream does better or worse are mixed (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998; Tsui et al., 1992). No clear implications for managing differences among coworkers have emerged.

Various explanations for the divergent array of findings in group diversity and organizational demography research have been advanced and have shed light on this broad set of findings. For example, definitions of “demography” and “diversity” vary across studies (Pelled, 1996; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998); there is a lack of attention—known as a “black box”—to process variables such as conflict and information sharing that may explain how diversity affects group functioning (Lawrence, 1997); and there is a paucity of studies that consider how contextual characteristics such as group cohesion or cultural norms moderate the effects of diversity (see O’Reilly et al., 1989, and Chatman et al., 1998, for exceptions). These explanations are explored in the next sections.

Definitions of Diversity Vary

What, exactly, does diversity mean? Any differences among coworkers? All differences? Which demographic characteristics are considered dimensions of “diversity”, and should disabilities be included under the rubric of “diversity”? Some say sex, race, and ethnicity have commonly been upheld as the primary dimensions of difference among coworkers as they represent traditionally maligned groups (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999), and diversity is only “managed” when individuals from these groups are fully integrated into the workforce at all levels. To lift up other characteristics that represent differences but do not embody the history or large numbers these groups represent may be seen as a disservice to the social and political causes of equality for women, people of color, and immigrants.

Other scholars argue any characteristic by which coworkers consider themselves different from one another is a dimension of diversity. That is, other characteristics, such as physical or mental disabilities, political orientation, marital status, and other less traditional characteristics of diversity represent salient and consequential differences among coworkers and should therefore be considered part of “diversity” (see, e.g., Spataro, 2001). The implication of this second approach is that what
constitutes "diversity" differs across situations. Differences of sex or race may be consequential in one environment whereas differences of physical ability (or disability) or age may be more meaningful in another.

These two different approaches to defining diversity—sticking to the "big three" (i.e., sex, race, and age) versus letting the situation dictate what is important—are both potentially valid. Compelling arguments exist from each perspective. However, for managers who are trying to capitalize on the potential benefits of differences among employees, the latter definition, which acknowledges the possibility that the pool of characteristics that may represent diversity in an organization is broader than sex, race, and age, is both more compelling and quite necessary. Since the goals of managers are not just social justice but also business outcomes, limiting the scope of which differences among workers are legitimate aspects of "diversity" neglects the likelihood that other differences that are salient in the particular work environment may emerge as consequential.

Regardless of the actual demographic composition of an organization or a workgroup—that is, whether the group is comprised of 40-year-old white males or whether it has two African American men, one disabled woman, two Mexican-American women, and one 65-year-old East Indian man—issues of diversity are relevant. Even in seemingly homogenous groups, individuals differentiate themselves, finding dimensions on which to consider themselves similar or different from others in the group (Bales, 1951). It is on the basis of these dimensions—perhaps educational level, or socio-economic status in the group of all white men, perhaps sex, or race, or age in the more obviously diverse group—that in-/out-group distinctions and the biases and conflicts that follow will naturally persist (Turner, 1987). If we pick and choose among what may be valid characteristics of diversity, we overlook meaningful differences that are actively driving behavior. Instead, one can look to the organizational context, and specifically the shared values of the organization, to discover consequential differences among coworkers. As discussed in more depth below, observations of an organization's culture can provide such insight into when and how workers with disabilities will be positively or negatively impacted by attention drawn to their disabilities.

Treating All Differences Similarly

Another explanation for divergent results in diversity research may rest in the way we "treat" various differences among coworkers. One underemphasized aspect of being "different" or working among those who are "different" reflects the actual content of the salient characteristic. Different characteristics have different meanings, expectations, and values associated with them. For example, a worker with a disability is not just "different" from workers who are not disabled. The fact that he or she is a worker with a disability is also inherently meaningful to his or her contribution to the organization. That is, a worker with a physical disability may be expected (correctly or incorrectly) to bring a different perspective and set of life experiences specifically associated with being disabled. Expectations about whether those differences will help or hinder organizational goals will play a role in how nondisabled workers interact with disabled workers. Similarly, with demographic differences, there are expectations about what women offer in organizational
settings, beyond just being “not men,” which shape how others interact with them (see, e.g., Kanter, 1977).

The theoretical underpinnings for much of the existing research on differences among coworkers—including similarity/attraction theories (Byrne, 1971), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and social categorization theory (Turner, 1987)—focus on binary distinctions of similar or different and do not distinguish between differences on one characteristic versus another (e.g. being physically disabled versus being mentally retarded), nor between the different states of a characteristic one possesses (e.g. being a disabled worker among nondisabled coworkers versus being nondisabled among a majority of disabled workers). This emphasis on the mere existence of difference versus the nature of the difference disregards a major factor in determining the experiences of those who are “different” (Spataro, 2001).

**Insufficient Attention to Context**

One additional necessary consideration in an examination of whether differences among coworkers are consequential to a group’s performance has to do with idiosyncratic factors of the situation and people involved. Situations may be classified as either “strong” or “weak” with respect to the extent to which they focus attention on a characteristic where there are differences in a group (see, e.g., Mischel, 1971). To illustrate, in a study of how and when demographic characteristics become salient dimensions of diversity, a male data analyst characterized his job as working on a research project for an all-female research team, whose research focus was female reproductive systems. That situation was strongly focused on gender. It was salient to all present who was “male” and who was “female” (Spataro, 2003).

In contrast, another subject in the same study, this time a worker in a high-technology firm, talked about her role in a business strategy meeting where no one paid attention to personal characteristics. The focus was 100% on structuring a software package to win the customer’s business. It did not matter what kind of person was in the room, as long as they were making a contribution to the business task. In that case, the situation was weak with respect to gender salience. Contexts thus may be analyzed in terms of the content of the norms and values that make certain characteristics salient, and, additionally, on the strength of those cues toward particular characteristics.

In sum, there are many factors that affect how individuals react to working with people who are similar or different from them, including what is salient in the environment, how salient characteristics are valued and perceived, and how the situation is oriented toward the characteristic itself. Contextual factors within organizations have been shown to affect reactions to differences among employees (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Organizational culture is one such contextual factor that can address questions of salience, values, and reactions to diversity.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

An organizational culture is a commonly held set of expectations for how people behave (Martin, 2002; Schein, 1985). Cultures may be observed as a set of norms,
## Table 1. A summary of cultures of diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organizational culture</th>
<th>What is salient?</th>
<th>Differences among characteristics</th>
<th>Social interaction processes</th>
<th>Effects of policy change/social movements</th>
<th>Implications for diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>Characteristics that are valued or rejected by organizational culture</td>
<td>Differences highlighted by power and status distinctions</td>
<td>Directed by resulting power/status structure; self-reinforcing; relationship rather than task-based conflict</td>
<td>Potentially unintended consequences: exacerbate power/status differences associated with characteristics (e.g., “reverse discrimination”; women as protected class)</td>
<td>Discount contributions, reduced opportunities for members of traditionally under-represented groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Common workgroup/team membership instead of demographic differences</td>
<td>Difference between individuals suppressed; de-individuation</td>
<td>Less conflict, unified goals; however, also less creativity, fewer outstanding individuals</td>
<td>Common identity will suppress either their importance or necessity</td>
<td>Less conflict associated with differences; potential value from differences under-realized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Potentially differing (and therefore valued) perspectives more salient than demographic differences</td>
<td>Differences highlighted as potential for valued perspectives, contributions</td>
<td>Focus on task, rather than relationship conflict</td>
<td>Highlight differences, contribute to sense of “diversity”</td>
<td>Meaning of “diversity” shifts from demographic mix to mix of values and perspectives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

or implicit rules of behavior, which reflect the central values of the organization and dictate the appropriateness of attitudes and behaviors (O’Reilly, 1989). An organization’s culture shapes much of what occurs within the organization, including how individuals behave, what people pay attention to, how they respond to different situations, and how they socialize new members and exclude those who do not fit in. At its essence, culture may be viewed as an informal control system. That is, unlike a formal control system, in which specific measured outcomes and performance indicators are monitored explicitly, a culture guides behavior in a more subtle, implicit manner. As informal social control systems may be more potent than formal systems in guiding behavior and socializing employees to a particular manner of behavior and attitude (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996), an organization’s culture is a potentially powerful tool available to managers in affecting how employees respond to coworkers who are different from them.

Cultures of Diversity

Organizational culture can answer questions about a number of factors relevant to managing differences among employees. First, it guides the definition of diversity in any given environment. That is, characteristics that reflect the values embodied in the organizational culture (either in concert with it or in contrast to it) will emerge as salient dimensions of diversity, and differences on these characteristics will be more meaningful than differences on characteristics that are not salient (see, e.g., Spataro & Anderson, 2004). Second, the culture has direct implications for the extent to which organization members emphasize or de-emphasize differences between individuals. Third, as culture prescribes the appropriateness of different behaviors, social interaction processes among individuals who are similar to one another and those who are different from one another will be affected by the culture (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996). Fourth, culture has direct implications for how governmental and organizational policies regarding diversity will be adopted. Fifth, and based on the above, different types of culture have general implications for diversity management overall.

In the following sections, three different types of organizational culture will be reviewed according to these five dimensions: (1) definition of diversity, (2) emphasis on differences, (3) social interaction processes, (4) reactions to policy, and (5) general implications for diversity. They will be addressed in order of frequency: first, culture of differentiation; second, culture of unity; and third, culture of integration. Table 1 provides a summary overview of the three cultures.

Culture of Differentiation

A culture of differentiation is characterized by highly salient inter-individual differences that have significant consequences for group interaction and individual experiences. It is a culture whose content places either positive or negative values on specific personal characteristics, including, potentially, disabilities. That is, for valued characteristics (perhaps sex or education), there is a preferred state (likely the male with a professional degree in these examples), where possession of either
state of the characteristic has power and status implications for the possessor. Those who possess preferred characteristics enjoy more influence and respect among their peers and generally perform better than those without the preferred characteristic.

The focus, in this type of culture, is on the “fit” between the person and the organization, where those who fit garner more informal power and status. In a study of organizations with different cultural value systems, my colleague and I found that in an organization whose content emphasized social considerations over task considerations, a consulting firm in this case, extraverted personalities were valued more than those who were conscientious whereas in an organization where task-focus was more important than social orientation, a telecommunications firm in this case, being conscientious was valued more than being extraverted. Those who possessed the valued characteristics enjoyed more influence and respect among their peers, as well as higher commitment to their organization and better job performance (Spataro & Anderson, 2004). Research on congruence between individuals and the organizations they belong to shows that congruence between personal characteristics and organizational values can be an important determining factor in an individual’s overall success in his or her job—including both performance and satisfaction (Chatman, 1991).

In a culture of differentiation, what matters in terms of reactions to diversity and successful integration of individuals who are different from the majority are the specific values around personal characteristics, including demographic characteristics and physical and mental disabilities. Where do these values come from? Certainly, societal stereotypes and impressions play a role (see, e.g., Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977), but processes within the organization also are at play. The demographic profiles of the influential people in the organization are viewed as ideal or at least preferential, as they are associated with leadership and success in that environment (Owens, unpublished doctoral dissertation). This is likely to be true, even if those characteristics are not what brought the person to power.

First, defining diversity, which characteristics will be salient in a culture of differentiation? Characteristics that serve as bases for individuals’ evaluations of one another emerge as significant (Turner, 1987). Specifically, any characteristic people use to infer expectations about an individual’s contributions to the organization’s goals distinguish that individual from others (Berger et al., 1977). As a result, the set of characteristics included in “diversity” is determined within the organization. Organizational values shape the processes people use to make evaluations, which then determine the salience and consequences of possession of such characteristics. The relevant dimensions of diversity may be different in each organization. For example, in some organizations, the culture may value nondisabled over disabled employees, and in another organizations disabilities may not be salient at all (see, e.g., Spataro, 2001).

Second, what effect do demographic differences have in a culture of differentiation? Differences are consequential and self-reinforcing. The emergent status distinctions that result from demographic differences heighten attention to, and emphasis on, inter-individual differences. When one state of a characteristic is preferred over another, knowledge about who has the desired state and who does not is highly salient (Ridgeway, 1997). The focus in a culture of differentiation is not just on whether or not differences exist, but rather on the nature of those differences, the
content of the characteristics of interest, and what they imply for one’s informal power in the organization.

Third, in a culture of differentiation, expectations about individuals’ contributions develop around the different valued characteristics in the organizations and shape social interaction processes. Individuals with valued characteristics enjoy control over group interaction processes (Bales, 1951; Kelley, 1951). The higher status afforded such individuals is associated with initiating communications more often, getting a greater number of opportunities to participate in group discussions, enjoying increased opportunities to evaluate a group’s output, and having a greater influence over a group’s decisions (Berger & Zelditch, 1985). Further, group members are likely to accept influence from individuals who are valued or considered critical to a group’s success (see, e.g., Crozier, 1964; Fisek, 1974).

Next, how will external or internal policies affect reactions to diversity in a culture of differentiation? Laws and policies directed at protecting people of certain profiles or lifestyles (e.g. affirmative action, ADA, Family-Leave Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) may reinforce and exacerbate the informal dynamics of diversity in this type of culture. That is, intervention that heightens the salience of a characteristic and that signals a need for protection could be assimilated into the culture by negatively affecting the performance expectations of those who possess the “vulnerable” characteristic and thereby lessening their status relative to others. The formal benefits of such policies are clear. The unintended negative consequences of such policies, however, establish a question for future research.

Finally, what does a culture of differentiation imply for diversity in general? This is a particularly important question in the United States, where this is likely the most common type of culture in both business and social environments. In a culture of differentiation, advantages to those who possess desired characteristics will persist and they will be highly consequential. If coming from a traditionally underrepresented group (such as being disabled, or a woman, or a racial minority) is not desired in a particular organization, the contributions of workers from those groups may be discounted. They may experience fewer opportunities to succeed or perform, and they may be cast as followers rather than leaders, at least in the informal social system. This is all true despite the major fault in the logic that tightly couples membership in a specific demographic group with performance or leadership abilities.

An astute manager in a culture of differentiation will need to examine the composition of the in-house labor force and ensure that the culture recognizes as many different represented demographic characteristics as possible. Structural interventions may be required. For example, if the demographic composition of the top tier of the organization’s hierarchy indicates what is valued, then that top tier should reflect multiple demographic characteristics.

Managers also can work within this culture to reverse negative impressions of certain characteristics. If traditionally female qualities, such as being more collaborative and relational, are beneficial to the tasks of the organization, and, therefore, being female is preferred to being male, then managers might try either to separate the qualities of collaborativeness and relational orientation from being female by highlighting males in the organization who exhibit the same qualities, or they may try to cultivate values around traditionally male characteristics, like analytic ability, for certain tasks within the organization. Managing diversity in a culture of
differentiation comes down to managing the value system that guides impressions and, ultimately, performance of work tasks in the organization.

**Culture of Unity**

A second type of organizational culture is one based on shared superordinate identities and the common bonds that are shared by demographically different individuals (e.g., “we are all part of the same organization”), rather than the inter-individual differences that exist. Uniting employees under a common identity to suppress any differences among them that may complicate social interaction is the premise of a culture of unity.

This emphasis on commonality versus individual differences is reflected in a well studied cultural dimension that puts individualism on one pole and collectivism on the opposite pole of the same dimension. Collectivism refers to the extent to which people prioritize collective goals and action over individual achievement and orientation (Triandis, 1995). In collectivistic organizational cultures, cooperation and behavior that show satisfaction from collective accomplishments are highly encouraged and valued (see, e.g., Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Wagner & Moch, 1986). In organizational cultures that emphasize individualism, individual goals are paramount and rewards come from individual achievement. Collectivism emphasizes commonality and unity and therefore has significant implications for managing diversity.

What is salient in a culture of unity? A study of multiple working groups that varied on this dimension of collectivism versus individualism found an antagonism between the salience of group orientation and individual demographic differences, such that demographic differences were less salient as group orientation was higher. The more people focus on the collective, the less noticeable individual differences between members become (Chatman et al., 1998). Thus, it is the common group boundary that is more salient than any specific demographic characteristic or disability.

Further, differences among individuals are suppressed. This may involve a recategorization process. Individuals who are more demographically different from the majority, and therefore considered part of the out-group, are re-cast as in-group members within the common organizational boundary. This recasting has implications for social interaction processes (see, e.g., Turner, 1987; Chatman & Spataro, in press). Generally, perceived differences among individuals depress frequency of interaction, cooperation, and relationship quality (Byrne, 1971; Ibarra, 1992; Tsui et al., 1992). However, in collectivistic or “unified” cultures, even when there are differences among individuals, coworkers interact more, communicate more, and experience less conflict (Chatman et al., 1998). Thus, one would expect fewer complications in social processes from diversity in a culture of unity.

Policy interventions in a culture of unity will have little effect. The strength of a culture of unity will so diminish differences between individuals that the need for (and therefore consequences of) policy implementation and compliance would be small.

What are the general implications for managing diversity in a culture of unity? The exclusion of individual differences from interaction is one of the trade-offs for
managers of the culture of unity. In general, individual goal orientation and achievement will be suppressed, along with individual differences. Depending on the nature of the group’s or organization’s tasks, this may help or hurt performance. If there is high interdependence required for task completion, a collective orientation may benefit accomplishment. If individual creativity or motivation is what success rests on, then the collective orientation may be disadvantageous. For example, if indeed living with a disability provides an employee with a different perspective and different set of life experiences than his or her nondisabled colleagues, focusing on such differences could impede cooperation, as employees focus more on differences between them and less on what they share. A culture of unity that depresses the salience of these differences may improve cooperation among disabled and nondisabled employees and therefore aid cooperation. That same emphasis on unity, however, may lessen the benefit of different perspectives being represented in a brainstorming session, as employees may be reluctant to express ideas that call attention to differences among them.

It is worth noting that the hallmark of a culture of unity is a high level of identification with the organization, a strong sense of unity among organization members, and reliable loyalty and commitment to the organization. All of these benefit the organization beyond just diminishing complications introduced by diversity.

**Culture of Integration**

A third culture of diversity, integration, is focused on valuing differences among coworkers. This type of culture may present the greatest opportunity for managers to successfully integrate differences and maintain peak performance with a diverse workforce. A culture of integration is based on highlighting and seeking out the potential benefits of individual differences, including bringing new insights into product or service development, enhancing group decision quality and creativity, and generally enriching the set of experiences and perspectives that comprise the work environment (see, e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001). The arguments that diversity makes good business sense are predicated on the idea that with disabilities and demographic differences come differences in values, life experiences, and personal styles.

A culture of integration prizes quality improvements from incorporating different perspectives into everyday work processes and tasks. Research on minority influence over group decisions and information sharing in task-based groups indicates the value of bringing different ideas and perspectives to the work table (Nemeth, 1986). Even moderate conflict benefits group productivity when related to task ideas (Jehn, 1995). Creativity and decision-making processes benefit from differences among coworkers (see, e.g., Bantel & Jackson, 1989). If value is placed on being different from the mainstream, the complications of diversity will be fewer, while individual perspectives and motivations are not suppressed.

It should be clear to managers that this is a difficult culture to establish. Humans prefer similarity over differences (Byrne, 1971; Ibarra, 1992). One study of diversity revealed how complicated this can be. The study examined different attitudes toward the organization among members of majority and minority groups. As the minority grew in size and presence in the organization, members of the majority
were less committed to the organization and were more threatened by the diversity (Tsui et al., 1992). Their negative feelings were more intense than those of the minority members. Nonetheless, the opportunities for successfully managing diversity in a culture of integration are immense.

The power differentials associated with characteristics or common group boundaries, not the differences themselves, are salient in a culture of integration. These differences may be on demographic dimensions such as sex or physical disability, or they may be uncorrelated with demographic differences. Visible characteristics are the easiest way to recognize such differences (Pelled, 1996; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). However, the benefits outlined above, and the salience of such differences, will be realized with any differences in experience, outlook, or personal values.

In a culture of integration, differences are preferred and valued. This is in direct contrast to the culture of differentiation, where the content of the characteristic matters more than whether one was similar or different from others on it. Here, the emphasis is on the potential group advantages that accrue with the introduction of “different” group members.

Social interaction involves more conflict in a culture of integration than in a culture of unity, but the conflict is generally based on ideas about how best to complete the task (helpful conflict), rather than interpersonal differences brought on by comparing the value of one group to the value of another (destructive conflict) (see, e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001). Individuating information is more likely to be exchanged in a culture of integration. Classic in-group/out-group distinctions that naturally emerge when there are salient differences among individuals lead to a perceived out-group homogeneity (people like “that” are all the same) (see, e.g., Vanbeselaere, 1988). In a culture of integration, recognition of individual differences within the out-group is more likely to emerge, along with re-categorization on non-demographic dimensions (Turner, 1987).

Policy interventions in a culture of integration draw further attention to differences and the different life experiences of those who come from protected or traditionally under-represented groups. This could serve to recouple individual characteristics with stereotypical perceptions of the characteristics, erasing any contradictory individuating evidence. However, such heightened attention could offer opportunities for members of protected groups to contribute, by reminding members of the majority that workers from under-represented groups do bring different experiences and perspectives to their workgroups.

The implications for diversity in a culture of integration are challenging and encouraging. Successfully implementing a culture of integration requires erasing any power advantages associated with specific characteristics (as in the culture of differentiation) and replacing them with advantages from making a greater contribution by being unique or different. It is necessary in this setting to attribute successes to being different, and not to the subject characteristic of the difference. The success story that “physically abled” and disabled colleagues who work together would tell in a culture of integration would be “it took a difference in perspectives to help us see things a new way,” rather than “the disabled person had the best idea in this situation, so she will probably be the key to success on our next team as well.”

As the culture of integration strikes a balance between recognizing differences and encouraging individual contributions with productive and synergistic work
processes, it represents managers’ greatest opportunity to realize the purported benefits of increasing diversity.

**Implications**

Understanding disabilities in the work place as a dimension of diversity in organizations offers the opportunity to analyze potential reactions to workers with disabilities as a function of organizational cultures. Implications of the typology of organizational cultures presented above exist for managers and workers alike. The norms and values that comprise an organizational culture will either aid or complicate the integration of workers with disabilities into the work force. An organization’s culture will emerge naturally, reflecting patterns of beliefs and values among employees, unless the culture is deliberately shaped by management (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996). A culture of differentiation, where disabled workers are not as valued as nondisabled workers will most likely characterize an emergent, or unmanaged, culture. It is therefore important, especially with respect to successfully integrating workers with disabilities, that managers attend to the value system that underlies the culture, specifically emphasizing the potential benefits and contributions of workers with disabilities. Explicit statements of such values, as well as training sessions cultivating awareness of issues (and nonissues) with employing disabled workers, will help to develop a cultural system that welcomes disabled workers. Further, placement of disabled workers in management and executive positions can help change impressions and expectations of workers with disabilities, lessening power and status differences that are the consequences of preferences for the nondisabled.

For workers with disabilities, the typology presented here highlights the importance of assessing the cultural system at a potential employer. Research into the appropriateness of the job to one’s skills and abilities and the cultural environment and its implications for disabled workers is necessary to maximize the potential for full integration into a work system. Are disabilities salient in the work environment? How do “front-line” representatives of the organization, as well as hiring managers, react to a worker’s disabilities? Are there appropriate work settings and potential accommodation for the special needs of disabled workers? Do disabled workers hold positions of power within the organization? Examining questions such as these can help workers better understand the likelihood of success within a work environment.

**BEYOND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE—ADDITIONAL RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Culture is one of the potent factors affecting organizational life, but it is certainly not the only factor affecting diversity management. First, simple contact among peers helps ameliorate conflicts or biases that may arise because of demographic differences. In a study of workgroups in an international financial services organization, my colleagues and I found that the impressions of demographically different peers with whom study participants had more contact were more favorable than the impressions of equally different peers with whom they had less contact (Flynn
et al., 2001). To the extent there is contact between coworkers who are different, and exchange of individuating information, the complications of diversity may diminish.

The organization’s formal structure or hierarchy may also affect reactions to diversity among employees within it. The more closely tied the formal and informal hierarchies the less room there is for separate power structures to form around demographic characteristics, whereas when organizations are relatively flat or lack a highly structured hierarchy there is opportunity for demographic characteristics and demographic differences among coworkers to emerge as important determinants of influence and value in the organization.

Additionally, the demographic composition of the organization may influence reactions to diversity. Where more differences are present, as when an organization is highly integrated, it may be difficult to establish meaningful in-groups to oppose perceived out-groups, and the complications of diversity may be fewer.

Finally, formally structuring mentorship or stewardship programs for individuals entering the organization, regardless of their demographic profile, may ease the integration process one individual at a time. Association with a senior and respected member of the organization may be what an employee needs to overcome impressions others may form based on his or her demographic profile.

REFERENCES


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