

The Diversity Paradox

2

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INTRODUCTION

The diversity paradox is an organizational emphasis placed upon one potential understanding of diversity which, paradoxically, deemphasizes alternative expressions of individual difference. An organizational focus on representations of gender, for instance, synchronously moves the focus away from sexual orientation; an organizational focus on representations of sexual orientation synchronously moves the focus away from age; and so on. This article explores *the diversity paradox* in more detail, including its background and six primary tenants: fractionated understanding, visible hierarchy, false attainment, neglected representation, diminished alternatives, and potential tokenism. The article concludes with recommendations for both researchers and lay leaders alike whom hope to cultivate healthier organizational milieu.

The diversity paradox is an especially significant phenomenon in today's increasingly diversified society. Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon more salient than within the United States. The percentage of Americans who self-identify as white has been in steep decline for decades, and this diversification is only projected to continue in the coming decades. Today, approximately 60% of those living in the United States identify as white, 17% as Latinx, 12% as black/African American, 5% Asian, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Yet by the year 2055, the percentage white Americans is predicted to decrease by nearly 15 percentage points, resulting in the United States no longer having a single racial/ethnic majority (Pew Research Center, 2016). This trend in increased diversification is mirrored elsewhere as well – fueled by political alliances in the European Union, immigration policies in South America, international trade agreements in North America, and so on (Rice, 2010).

Despite the increased diversity in countries like the United States – or perhaps because of it – issues of racial/ethnic inequality continue to plague our world. This reality is evident whether measured by income inequality (Glazer, 2005), health disparities (Dillon, Roscoe, & Jenkins, 2012), education levels (Closson, 2010), or incarceration rates (Ward, Farrell, & Rousseau, 2009). For these reasons, it is more important than ever for contemporary organizational leaders and scholars to learn how to engage with culturally diverse voices, perceptions, and taken for granted assumptions. The diversity paradox contributes to this need for increased understanding by revealing specific ways that diverse members manage tensions and limitations, thus, holding promise for improved racial/ethnic relations within intercultural contexts, organizations, and society writ large.

BACKGROUND

The diversity paradox first emerged as a theoretical framework during Jenkins' (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c) four-year ethnography of Central Community Church (pseudonym) – an intercultural congregation located in Tampa Bay's urban corridor. In reference to Christian Scriptures that depict a culturally

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diverse body of believers (see Matthew 28:9; Acts 17:26-27; Revelation 7:9, New International Version), Central Community strove to “reflect and impact the specific realities of [its] surrounding community” (Jenkins, 2014a, p. 7). Thus, Central Community actively promoted diversity via church literature, congregational events, and communal outreach efforts. A majority of sermon topics addressed the need for organizational diversity, and the church’s website described itself as “a multi-ethnic community... transforming the world through Jesus Christ” (Central Community, 2015, par. 3).

After 48 months of fieldwork, which yielded over 300 hours of observations, 140 pages of notes, and 30 semi-structured interviews with organizational leaders and members, Jenkins (2014) found Central Community’s organizational emphasis on diversity to have several unintended consequences. Although admirable on the surface, the church’s limited view of diversity as physical representations of racial/ethnic difference was found to paradoxically diminish the opportunity for alternative expressions of individual difference (see Jenkins & Dillon, 2014). Minority members’ attempts to conform to Central Community’s white normative practices unintendedly resulted in forced assimilation and self-disciplining; consequently, the church’s emphasis on cultivating a diverse congregation actually served to limit possibilities of organizational life – a phenomenon hereto referred to as *the diversity paradox*.

The diversity paradox has since been observed in additional contexts across the United States, including both religious and secular organizations. A study by Santis, Graham, and Jenkins (2019) of Central Faith Church in the greater Los Angeles area, for instance, revealed a similar tension surrounding the notion of organizational diversity. Such additional studies not only evidence the diversity paradox’s prevalence, but also its potential to help inform a wide range of religiously and geographically diffuse settings.

PRIMARY TENANTS

The diversity paradox is shown to manifest itself via six interrelated tenants: (1) fractionated understanding, (2) visible hierarchy, (3) false attainment, (4) neglected representation, (5) diminished alternatives, and (6) potential tokenism. First, organizational discourses promote a *fractionated understanding* of what it means to be a diverse organization, resulting in a *visible hierarchy* of difference and the sense of *false attainment* among its leadership. Among organizational members, this false attainment results in *neglected representation* for certain minorities, as well as *diminished alternatives* for organizational life and an increased level of *potential tokenism*. The present section further outlines each of these six tenants in turn.

Fractionated Understanding

The notion of diversity has become a normative reference for many organizational leaders and members when discussing racial, ethnic, and cultural equality. Diversity is exalted by nonprofit and for-profit organizations alike as being a central priority (Bunn & LaCour, 2009), key source of strength (Richard, 2000), and present-future goal (Unzueta & Binning, 2010). As a result, many organizations go out of their way to publicize the value they place upon creating and maintaining diversity via advertisements, job calls, promotional materials, and formal mission statements (Kidder et al., 2004; Kochan et al., 2003). In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) went as far as to declare that “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for the nature” (par. 12).

Despite an increased value and emphasis on diversity, however, its meaning is still not clearly defined among the general public (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Unzueta & Binning, 2009). Such ambiguity affords

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