

**BEYOND INFORMATION EXCHANGE:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE BENEFITS OF
RACIAL DIVERSITY FOR GROUP PERFORMANCE**

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the processes by which a group's racial composition affects its performance and the social-cognitive tendencies of its individual members. Drawing on published and unpublished experiments regarding group composition and interracial interaction, this review demonstrates that the information exchange perspective on diversity—in which demographic heterogeneity is expected to translate into informational heterogeneity—is more complicated than some have suggested, and is not wholly responsible for the positive performance effects of racial diversity. Indeed, many of the benefits of diversity can be attributed to the impact of heterogeneous settings on White individuals, as well as to motivational and other non-informational processes.

TO APPEAR IN: E. A. Mannix, M. A. Neale, & K. W. Phillips (Eds.), *Research on Managing Groups and Teams* (Volume 11). Elsevier Science Press.

Beyond Information Exchange:

New Perspectives on the Benefits of Racial Diversity for Group Performance

“Microsoft is a mosaic of women and men of varied backgrounds, races, and religions... Microsoft needs the insight, creativity, and diverse perspectives that a range of employees can bring to the table.”

- Claudette Whiting, General Manager
Global Diversity and Inclusion, Microsoft Corp.

“Collective diversity... [is] essential to good engineering... At a fundamental level, men, women, ethnic minorities, racial minorities, and people with handicaps experience the world differently. Those differences in experience are the ‘gene pool’ from which creativity springs.”

- William A. Wulf, President
National Academy of Engineering

“When any large and identifiable segment of the community is excluded from jury service, the effect is to remove from the jury room qualities of human nature and varieties of human experience, the range of which is unknown and perhaps unknowable.”

- Justice Thurgood Marshall,
U.S. Supreme Court, *Peters v. Kiff* (1972)

“Democrats pride themselves on their diversity. They’re feminists, Hispanics, animal rights activists, union members, homosexuals, and African-Americans. But of course, from that many backgrounds come equally many opinions, which is why they can’t seem to agree on anything.”

- Stephen Colbert,
The Colbert Report

In contemporary America, there is no shortage of public voices championing the importance of racial diversity. From political candidates to college admissions officers, from corporate executives to talk show hosts of dubious sincerity, racial diversity is frequently cited as an essential objective of organizations in our increasingly global and multicultural society.

Diversity is a strength. Being diverse will make us better. Though such endorsements of racial diversity are evident across different types of organizations, the rationale behind them tends to

converge on a similar theme, as demonstrated by the quotations above: Why do organizations benefit from diversity when it comes to decision-making and problem-solving? Because bringing to the table members of heretofore underrepresented racial groups brings to the conversation new perspectives, opinions, and approaches. In short, the assumption underlying these quotations is that a more diverse group demographic produces a more diverse exchange of information.

There is much to like about this information exchange idea endorsed by many contemporary organizations and their leaders. For starters, in justifying the pursuit of racial diversity, such a perspective emphasizes the observable benefits of heterogeneity for group performance as opposed to more ethereal moral or political justifications. Many arguments in favor of diversity-related initiatives focus on remedying past discrimination and ensuring equal access for all individuals. While such objectives are certainly important considerations, their achievement is difficult to assess and they often provoke polarized reactions from parties with entrenched ideological beliefs. To the extent that efforts to increase diversity are predicated on the pursuit of observable benefits for group performance, benchmarks can be assessed and these efforts are likely to become more palatable to a wide range of parties.

Furthermore, the proposition that the benefits of racial diversity are attributable to information exchange is theoretically appealing in that it parallels traditional psychological ideas about the impact of group composition on decision-making. Just as theories concerning decision-making often focus on the mathematical aggregation of individual members' preferences into a group position (e.g., Davis, 1973; Kerr, Davis, Meek, & Rissman, 1975), so, too, does an information exchange perspective account for diversity effects by framing a group decision as a straightforward function of the attitudes of its individual members. Indeed, several

empirical investigations have tested the prediction that the influence of a group's racial composition often derives from changes in the distribution of individual perspectives brought about by increased diversity (see also Antonio et al., 2004; Jackson, 1992; Richard, 2000; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993). More domain-specific findings regarding group decision-making reflect a similar idea. In their seminal investigation of juries, for example, Kalven and Zeisel (1966) concluded that the best way to predict a jury's ultimate verdict is through simple extrapolation of the predeliberation vote preferences of its individual jurors.

The present chapter examines more closely this information exchange perspective. The research literature concerning racial diversity includes many important debates and inconsistencies, perhaps none more prominent than the question of when diversity is likely to predict positive versus negative outcomes. However, extant studies in this domain are also marked by "a tendency to assume rather than assess mediating processes" (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007, p. 519), rendering efforts such as the present evaluation of the information exchange perspective essential for advancing this area of research and shedding light on the big-picture issue of diversity's benefits and costs. The objective of this chapter is not an all-encompassing review of field research regarding organizational diversity; such extensive reviews have been done previously and quite well (e.g., Mannix & Neale, 2005; Milliken & Martins, 1996; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Rather, to further illuminate the processes underlying the effects of diversity, this chapter reviews and presents data derived from experimental investigations of racial heterogeneity, a methodology particularly well-suited for assessing the mediators and moderators of such effects. Furthermore, the present literature review casts a broad net to include investigations of smaller-scale interracial interactions. Despite their obvious potential for overlap and cross-pollination, these two areas of

research—organizational diversity and interracial social interaction—have too infrequently been considered in conjunction with one another.

In more specific terms, the present review identifies some empirical support for the information exchange perspective. But it also indicates that this idea is more complex and nuanced than it appears at first glance—or than many organizational leaders make it out to be—and that information exchange alone is insufficient to account for the impact of racial diversity on group performance. Having already addressed some of the appealing aspects of the information exchange perspective above, the first section below considers some of its potential limitations, both practical and philosophical. The second section reviews a handful of experimental studies that have examined the effects of racial diversity on group performance and on the subjective experiences of individual group members. The third section presents recently published and unpublished empirical data that indicate the major role played by processes beyond simple demographically-dictated information exchange in the beneficial effects of racial diversity. Finally, potentially problematic effects of these same processes for group performance are considered, as are the situational moderators that help determine whether racial diversity has a positive or negative impact on groups.

Limitations of an Information Exchange Perspective

As illustrated by the quotations with which this chapter opened, many members and leaders of contemporary organizations assume that the benefits of racial diversity grow out of the novel contributions made by minority group members. That is, a minority individual is expected to translate into a new perspective brought to the group: Asian American employees might be expected to offer insight into emerging markets in the Pacific Rim; African American employees might be counted on for suggestions for marketing a product to urban consumers. Even when

race-based expectations are not this specific, these quotations capture the more general organizational assumption that racial heterogeneity engenders informational heterogeneity. This equation of racial and informational heterogeneity tends to place the onus for the effects of diversity squarely on the shoulders of individuals from underrepresented racial backgrounds. One obvious problem with this conceptualization is that it implies that there exists a monolithic Asian or Black or Latino or White perspective for any given topic. Within-group variability in attitudes and experiences tends to be greater than between-group differences, but the information exchange perspective exaggerates the latter at the expense of the former.

The limitations of the information exchange perspective transcend issues of political correctness. Belief regarding homogeneity within racial groups—which is not a necessary assumption of the information exchange perspective, but seems to underlie lay conceptualizations of this idea—often places non-White individuals in a no-win situation. If they voice an opinion viewed as consistent with preconceived notions regarding their race—for example, if the sole Black individual on a hiring committee argues a Black candidate—their position may be discounted accordingly—*of course he wants to hire the Black guy*. Arguing for a position contrary to expectation may be problematic as well, as it may place an individual in direct conflict with others of similar racial background, or may be viewed by the group at-large as undermining the very purpose of establishing a diverse demographic in the first place.

To the extent that this conceptualization of diversity is pervasive within an organization, it also represents a potential psychological burden for group members who already experience additional social and emotional pressures by virtue of their minority status. For instance, research has indicated that non-White individuals draw disproportionate attention from fellow members in a group, rendering their performance more scrutinized and leading to distraction and

cognitive deficits during interactions (Lord & Saenz, 1985; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002).

Awareness that one's presence in a group is expected to translate to particular informational contributions may heighten effects such as these. The belief that one is expected to "educate" the rest of the group regarding a particular viewpoint or experience brings about pressures not experienced by White members of the same group. In short, stereotypes based on race have been found to negatively impact a range of cognitive and social performance outcomes (see Steele, 1997), and the information exchange perspective is based on, in large part, stereotypes regarding race and attitude homogeneity.

For these reasons both philosophical and performance-related, this information exchange conceptualization of the benefits of diversity—while popular within organizations—can be problematic. Yet another limitation is more practical: it is simply unrealistic to expect that the advantages of racial diversity result entirely or even principally from the contributions of the relatively small number of non-White individuals in many groups. A consistent finding in the group decision-making literature is that the majority tends to carry the day, and the larger that majority, the more influence it wields in the group (see Levine & Moreland, 1998). While minority influence certainly occurs in some instances, it is the exception rather than the rule (see Moscovici & Lage, 1976): it is difficult to be a member of a minority faction within a group (Allen, 1975; Asch, 1956), but even more difficult to effect group-level change as a member of such a small faction. Nonetheless, even some organizational researchers and theorists have endorsed a strict information exchange explanation for the effects of racial diversity, proposing that "variance in group composition can have a direct positive impact through the increase in the skills, abilities, information, and knowledge that diversity brings, independent of what happens

in the group process” (Williams & O’Reilly, p. 87). This conclusion mirrors closely the sentiments with which this chapter began.

Considered more broadly, however, extant empirical research paints a more complicated picture. Few behavioral scientists would endorse a strictly informational account for the impact of diversity. In fact, even in the initial formulation of social decision scheme theory, Davis (1973) proposed additional explanations for the “majority rules” tendency of group decision-making, concluding that many such decisions exhibit “a considerably more complex social process at work. The best-fitting model suggested a mixture of majority, conformity, and other effects to be involved” (p. 123; see also Levine & Moreland, 1998; Moscovici & Lage, 1976). In a recent review focused on organizational diversity, van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) offered the compatible conclusion that although there exists “some evidence for the processes implied in the information/decision-making perspective... diversity research may benefit from more theoretical as well as empirical attention to the informational processing and decision-making processes that are presumed to drive the positive effects of diversity” (p. 528).

In sum, despite the intuitive appeal of assumptions regarding the breadth of perspectives brought about by racial diversity, several aspects of the information exchange perspective endorsed by many organizational leaders and some empirical researchers remain largely untested. Is the positive impact of a group’s racial composition wholly attributable to the performance of non-White group members? To what extent are non-informational processes also responsible for the benefits of diversity? Under what circumstances can these same processes produce negative group outcomes? Such questions regarding the interpersonal and cognitive processes underlying the influence of racial diversity on group performance merit additional theoretical consideration and empirical answers. More generally, though a growing

empirical literature indicates that there often exists a positive relationship between racial diversity and group and individual performance (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001; Herring, 2006; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Sawyer, Houlette, & Yeagley, 2006), too little published research speaks to the intragroup processes through which such a relationship emerges.

Experimental Investigations of Racial Diversity

A number of empirical investigations have examined the relationship between a group's composition and its performance. In these studies, diversity is often operationalized in terms of heterogeneity of attitude, experience, or expertise (for reviews, see Mannix & Neale, 2005; Moreland, Levine, & Wingert, 1996). A common conclusion in this research is that the negative consequences of diversity—broadly construed—often include decreased group cohesion and morale (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; McCain, O'Reilly, & Pfeifer, 1983; O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989), whereas positive effects are more typically seen in terms of group performance, such as increased creativity, information sharing, and flexibility (e.g., Nemeth, 1995; Phillips, Mannix, Neale, & Gruenfeld, 2004; Triandis, Hall, & Ewen, 1965). In reviewing this literature, some have suggested that this dichotomy of effects of diversity can be accounted for by, on the one hand, the negative effects brought about by processes of social categorization, and on the other, the positive effects of informational processes (e.g., van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

Fewer studies have focused specifically on racial heterogeneity, and of these, only a handful has utilized experimental designs that shed light on the processes by which racial diversity influences performance. In one such study, McLeod and colleagues (1996) asked small groups to complete a brainstorming task in which they were supposed to generate ideas encouraging tourism to the United States. Half of these groups were comprised of all White

participants, and the other half included White, Black, Latino, and Asian participants. Racially diverse groups produced more ideas than the homogeneous groups, and naïve coders rated the diverse groups' ideas as more effective and practical. Despite these apparent performance advantages, however, White participants reported liking their group more when it was all-White as opposed to racially diverse. These findings parallel the more general conclusions above regarding the dichotomy between the performance and morale effects of group diversity; on the surface, they are also consistent with an information exchange perspective, though the study did not directly examine the group processes by which racial composition was influential.

A more recent experiment to examine the impact of racial diversity on both group performance and the subjective perceptions of individual group members was conducted by Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale (2006). In this research, groups of three college students were asked to read through materials regarding a homicide investigation, with unique information given to each member of the group. Half of these triads were all-White, and half consisted of two White students and one Black, Latino, or Asian student. Results indicated that individuals in racially diverse groups perceived the written information given to them to be more novel than did members of racially homogeneous groups. Diverse groups also spent more time discussing the case and were more successful in their identification of the actual culprit, providing further causal evidence of the potential performance benefits of a racially diverse group composition.

Antonio and colleagues (2004) reported similar findings, namely that Whites randomly assigned to have a discussion in a racially diverse group perceived the contributions of fellow group members to be more novel than Whites assigned to an all-White group. This result is particularly compelling given that racial diversity was manipulated by the inclusion of either a White or Black confederate who followed a pre-determined script. In other words, White

participants rated the contributions of a confederate to be more novel when the confederate was Black as opposed to White, even though these contributions were scripted and consistent across conditions. Along with the Phillips et al. (2006) results, this finding suggests that even absent verifiable differences in the informational content across groups of different composition, members of racially diverse groups often *perceive* their fellow members as representing a broader range of opinions and perspectives.

The Antonio et al. (2004) experiment is also noteworthy in that it is a rare study designed to examine the cognitive and psychological processes underlying the effects of racial diversity on performance. Specifically, this experiment explored the possibility that membership in a racially diverse group leads Whites to exhibit thought processes of greater integrative complexity. To test this hypothesis, the researchers asked participants to write pre- and post-discussion essays on their discussion topic. But analyses indicated no statistically significant effects of group composition on the integrative complexity of these essays; the only significant predictors of essay complexity were the opinion diversity within the groups and participants' previous personal contact with racially diverse groups. Though the effect for group diversity was not significant, analysis of pre-discussion essays indicated that Whites wrote slightly more complex essays when they expected a discussion with a racially-diverse group versus an all-White group. This trend, albeit nonsignificant, is noteworthy in that any cognitive effects brought about by the mere expectation of membership in a diverse group obviously cannot be explained in terms of processes of information exchange.

Moving Beyond Information Exchange

As reviewed above, a handful of experiments have examined the causal effects of racial diversity, producing findings that appear consistent with an information exchange perspective.

However, these studies typically shed little light on the actual processes by which a group's racial composition is influential. More recent research addresses this question, and in doing so, supports the conclusion that non-informational mechanisms are also at play in bringing about the potential benefits of diversity (see Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Phillips & Loyd, 2006). One of these experiments is a mock jury simulation conducted by Sommers (2006). In this study—which took place at a county courthouse and recruited participants directly from jury duty—the videorecorded deliberations of all-White and racially-diverse 6-person groups were compared. All mock juries watched the same video summary of a sexual assault trial involving a Black defendant and White victims.

A major finding was that racially-diverse groups—comprised of 4 White and 2 Black individuals—outperformed all-White groups on every objective criterion reported. Admittedly, decision quality is difficult to operationalize in a legal setting, as in many cases there is no unambiguously “right” decision: the true identity of the culprit may never be known and juries are often required to make subjective evaluations that cannot be compared to any type of “gold standard.” But the Sommers (2006) study focused on the deliberation processes of these mock juries, and these analyses supported the conclusion that groups benefited from racial heterogeneity. First, racially diverse juries deliberated longer than did all-White juries. This increased length could be indicative of more thorough, wider-ranging deliberation discussion, or it could imply inefficiencies within the diverse groups. But subsequent analyses indicated that diverse juries discussed more information in their deliberations than did all-White juries, including a tendency to consider a wider range of facts from the case.

Not only did differences emerge in the quantity of information discussed by groups of different compositions, but diverse groups also exhibited superior quality of information

considered compared to all-White groups. Despite the finding that they discussed more information from the trial during deliberations, diverse juries made fewer factually inaccurate statements during this process than did all-White juries. Moreover, factual inaccuracies regarding the case were more likely to be corrected on diverse juries. In addition, in instances when someone on the jury raised a controversial race-related issue—such as racial profiling—diverse groups were more likely to have substantive conversation on this topic. Among all-White groups, on every occasion on which such a topic was broached, other members of the jury made statements minimizing the importance of the issue, explicitly tried to change the topic of discussion, or marginalized the individual in question.

In sum, racially diverse juries in this study had more thorough deliberations, considered a wider range of information, were more factually accurate in their discussion of the case, and were more amenable to the discussion of potentially controversial issues. These are all desirable characteristics for juries to exhibit, and as such, these findings indicate performance benefits of racial diversity. Of course, these findings, as reviewed thus far, are also consistent with a strict information exchange perspective. To the extent that novel perspectives raised by Black jurors in diverse groups are responsible for the influence of group composition, there would be nothing about these data to suggest anything but a traditional information exchange explanation for the findings.

However, analyses indicated that the findings of Sommers (2006) were not wholly attributable to the performance of Black group members. To the contrary, most effects were driven by differences in the performance of Whites on diverse versus all-White juries. Compared to their counterparts in all-White groups, Whites in diverse groups contributed more information during deliberations, were more likely to identify “missing” evidence that they

wished had been presented at trial, and were less likely to make inaccurate statements about the case. Literally speaking, these were informational effects: the information exchanged during the deliberations of diverse juries was different in breadth and quality than that exchanged among all-White juries. But these findings are not consistent with the assumption that the effects of racial diversity are the straightforward results of the new information brought to the table by members of the racial minority. It was not the case that diverse juries outperformed all-White juries because they were uniquely privy to the “Black perspective” on the case at hand.

The findings of Sommers (2006) suggest that a racially diverse group composition has the potential to impact the cognitive and social tendencies of White group members. That Whites in this study raised more case facts and made fewer inaccurate statements in a diverse setting implies that the expectation of deliberating as part of a racially heterogeneous group sometimes leads Whites to process information more thoroughly and thoughtfully. Moreover, perhaps the most striking finding of this study is that predeliberation assessment of mock jurors’ private verdict preferences also yielded differences by group racial composition. Specifically, White jurors aware that they would be on a diverse jury were significantly less likely to believe that the Black defendant was guilty than were Whites on all-White juries, *even before deliberations began*. These findings echo the non-significant pre-discussion effects reported by Antonio et al. (2004), demonstrating not only that Whites are responsible for some of the informational effects of racial heterogeneity, but also that the influence of diversity occurs through non-informational processes as well.

These conclusions are bolstered by two subsequent experiments conducted by Sommers, Warp, and Mahoney (in press). In these studies, White college participants were randomly assigned to membership in an all-White or racially-diverse group comprised of 5-8 students.

Participants were told that they would be engaging in a group discussion concerning a social issue, and that before this discussion, they would need to complete background readings on the topic. Unbeknownst to participants, they were given readings regarding one of two different topics. One was race-relevant—in both studies, affirmative action in college admissions—and the other race-neutral—in one study, community service requirements for high school students, in the other, gay marriage. In order to explore the non-informational processes through which a group's racial composition is influential, a surprise SAT-style reading comprehension test was given to participants after they had completed the readings. The performance of mock jurors in the Sommers (2006) study—contributing more case facts during deliberations, making fewer inaccurate statements—implies the possibility that simply being aware of membership in a diverse group can be sufficient to lead White individuals to exhibit more thorough information processing. By assessing college participants' reading comprehension in anticipation of a group discussion, Sommers et al. (in press) hoped to more directly assess this possibility and to generalize this finding to a non-legal context.

Indeed, the results of Sommers et al. (in press) supported the conclusions that 1) the influence of a group's racial composition is not entirely dependent on the performance of non-White individuals, and 2) such effects are not solely the result of information exchange. Across two studies, White participants who expected to discuss the race-relevant topic of affirmative action with a racially-diverse group performed better on a surprise reading comprehension test than did Whites expecting to discuss affirmative action with an all-White group; no such effects were found for reading comprehension of race-neutral passages. These data constitute compelling evidence that a group's racial composition sometimes influences the information processing tendencies of its individual White members.

Why might such effects occur absent the exchange of information or, for that matter, any social interaction at all? Data from the second study reported by Sommers et al. (in press) indicate that Whites who expected to discuss a race-relevant topic with a diverse group were more likely to have accessible thoughts regarding race than were other White participants. Specifically, Whites in this condition who were given a word completion task completed significantly more word stem fragments to spell words related to the general construct of race (i.e., *black, white, racial, ethnic, color*) than did Whites in other conditions. Moreover, the number of race-related thoughts captured by this implicit measure emerged as a significant mediator of the relationship between membership in a diverse group and improved reading comprehension. In other words, those Whites with increased race-related thought activation in a diverse group were the same individuals who scored higher on the reading comprehension test in anticipation of group discussion.

One explanation for these findings would be that membership in a diverse group leads Whites to experience increased concerns regarding appearing prejudiced (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Plant & Devine, 1998; Sommers & Norton, 2006), concerns which in turn impact information processing style. Previous work on race and attitude change has demonstrated that Whites' desire to guard against prejudice—or serve as “watchdogs” against their own bias—can lead to more thorough processing of information conveyed about a Black target (Sargent & Bradfield, 2004) or by a Black source (Petty, Fleming, & White, 1999; White & Harkins, 1994). It would seem plausible, then, that an impending race-relevant discussion with a diverse group can serve as a salient reminder of this motivation to avoid prejudice (see Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000), thereby leading to comparable effects on information processing.

Another, not mutually exclusive possibility is that Whites assume that a racially heterogeneous group is likely to be heterogeneous in terms of opinion (see Allen & Wilder, 1975; Phillips, 2003; Phillips & Loyd, 2006; Phillips et al., 2004). That is, awareness that they are members of a diverse group may simultaneously increase Whites' race-related thought activation and render essential a close reading of the background information in anticipation of a heated discussion. Indeed, Sommers et al. (in press) reported that the more Whites in diverse groups believed that their discussion would be tense, the greater the race-related thought activation they exhibited beforehand. Simple awareness that they were members of a diverse group seemed to put many White individuals on high alert in terms of heightened concern about being able to justify their own positions and increased expectation of disagreement at the group level.

Admittedly, the anticipatory effects of diversity captured by these experiments are probably not the principal means through which racial heterogeneity influences group performance. Certainly, a great deal of social influence occurs during group discussions and deliberations. But the findings of these investigations (Sommers, 2006; Sommers et al., in press) clearly render untenable the assumption that the influence of racial diversity on group performance is entirely attributable to the informational contributions of non-White members (see also Phillips et al., 2006). And they do so in dramatic fashion: even absent social interaction or exchange of information, awareness of a diverse group composition can be sufficient to influence Whites' cognitive tendencies.

It is worth emphasizing that such processing differences were found only when Whites expected a race-relevant group discussion (i.e., deliberations regarding a Black defendant charged with an interracial assault, discussion of affirmative action and college admissions).

These results should not be interpreted, however, as evidence that racial heterogeneity lacks observable effects in other circumstances. With regard to the Sommers et al. (in press) studies, community service requirements and gay marriage may not be topics as controversial as that of affirmative action; perhaps membership in a diverse group does impact information processing for race-neutral topics that more polarizing or personally relevant for the White individuals in question. More importantly, even if the *anticipatory* effects of racial heterogeneity are limited to race-relevant contexts, the relationship between racial diversity and actual group interactions, discussions, and performance is clearly more general (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001; Gurin, Dey, Gurin, & Hurtado, 2002; McLeod et al., 1996; Sawyer, Houlette, & Yeagley, 2006). Nonetheless, the two lines of investigation reviewed herein are noteworthy in that they demonstrate that a strict information exchange perspective is insufficient to account for the complex effects of racial diversity on group and individual performance (see also Jehn et al., 1999; Phillips & Loyd, 2006).

Downsides of Non-Informational Processes?

The finding that non-informational social influence processes—and, moreover, the cognitive and behavioral tendencies of White individuals in diverse settings—play a major role in determining the influence of racial composition has potentially positive implications for group performance. However, there is little reason to believe that such processes always produce beneficial effects. In fact, a review of research concerning dyadic intergroup interaction suggests that the motivational, normative, and other non-informational pressures that influence interracial interaction quite often lead to negative social and performance outcomes. So whereas it is the case that information exchange alone does not fully account for the impact of racial diversity on groups, expanding the present literature review to consider social psychological investigations of

interracial social interaction leads to the conclusion that it is also true that non-informational forces do not always have the sort of positive effects captured by the Sommers (2006) and Sommers et al. (in press) studies.

Shelton and Richeson (2006) review a wide range of studies in which individuals' interpersonal concerns and social motivations during interracial interaction produce negative outcomes for themselves as well as for their partner. More precisely, their review suggests that Whites in interracial interactions are often motivated by a desire to avoid appearing prejudiced, whereas racial minority individuals are more focused on avoiding poor treatment as a result of the racial bias of others. Though these social concerns during interracial interaction are different for Whites and non-Whites, their effects are often very similar: Whites' preoccupation with appearing prejudiced can lead them to exhibit anxiety and negative affect during an interaction (Plant & Butz, 2006; Shelton, 2003; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998) and to experience a depletion of cognitive resources afterwards (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter 2005); Blacks' vigilance against being victimized by prejudice can lead them to experience anxiety and negative affect (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005; Tropp, 2003), as well as depleted cognitive resources (Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

But what of the effects of such concerns regarding race when it comes to group performance? Most of the studies reviewed by Shelton and Richeson (2006) examined research participants who were asked to have a conversation or other brief social interaction with a partner. Can the concerns, anxieties, and motivations activated by membership in a diverse dyad or group also have deleterious effects for problem solving, decision-making, and other operationalizations of task performance? Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, and Ariely (2006)

addressed this question by examining task performance as well as social outcomes in interactions of interracial and all-White dyads.

In this research, Norton et al. (2006) assigned White participants to complete a photograph identification task with either a White or a Black confederate partner. Participants' task was to identify the target photo held by their partner by asking questions regarding a 32-photo array in front of them. Participants were instructed to ask as few yes/no questions as possible in order to accurately identify the target. The photos in the array varied on a variety of salient dimensions (e.g., hair color, age, clothing), but only three characteristics were varied orthogonally and allowed participants to halve the number of photos remaining: background color (red vs. blue), gender (male vs. female), and race (White vs. Black). As such, any of these three dimensions served as fodder for useful questions in the effort to narrow down the photo array.

Indeed, in all-White dyads, White participants pursued the logical and readily apparent strategy of asking about race in 93% of the trials. However, despite the obvious utility of this strategy, Whites paired with a Black partner only asked about race 64% of the time. In addition to this tendency to avoid asking about race in interracial pairs, Whites who did ask about race typically did so later on in the task when paired with a Black versus White partner. In terms of overall performance, Whites in interracial pairs took significantly more questions to complete the task than did Whites in all-White pairs, indicating a performance decrement in the diverse setting.

Why would Whites avoid asking about race when making use of such questions would facilitate improved performance? The answer appears to reside in the conclusion offered by Richeson and Shelton's (2006) review, namely that these individuals were influenced by their

concerns about appearing prejudiced in an interracial context. In subsequent, unpublished studies, Apfelbaum, Norton and Sommers (2008) have concluded that the behavior of participants in this paradigm reflects a more general tendency of many Whites to attempt to appear colorblind during race-relevant interactions. In the minds of these Whites, this strategic colorblindness serves to protect against the appearance of prejudice: *if I don't even notice racial differences, then how can I be a racist?* The conclusion that such efforts at colorblindness are often strategic in nature is supported by the findings that Whites' performance on this photo identification task is predicted by their personal motivations to avoid the appearance of prejudice, is dramatically influenced by the normative precedent established by a Black partner during the interaction (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008) and emerges developmentally at a stage when children become increasingly sensitive to cultural norms and regulatory concerns (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008).

Ironically, this strategy of failing to acknowledge racial difference in the effort to appear unbiased often leads to negative social implications in addition to decrements in performance. In the studies described above, naïve raters were asked to evaluate the videotaped nonverbal behavior of participants engaging in their photo identification task. Results indicated that those White individuals who avoided asking about race with a Black partner were judged to be less friendly and to have made less eye contact than did Whites who did ask about race (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Norton et al., 2006). These ironic consequences of Whites' efforts to appear nonprejudiced are consistent with findings reviewed above regarding the increases in negative affect and anxiety often observed during interracial interaction (e.g., Plant & Butz, 2006; Shelton, 2003). In addition, the potentially negative effects of strategic colorblindness are not limited to subtle forms of nonverbal behavior. Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008)

reported that Black college students who watched videotape (including sound) of Whites engaging in the photo identification task rated White actors as higher in racial prejudice when they avoided asking about race, suggesting that Whites and Blacks often have diverging attitudes regarding colorblindness and normatively appropriate behavior during interracial interaction more generally. Clearly, such a divergence is ripe with potential for conflict and miscommunication in diverse settings.

Reconciling Disparate Findings

How, then, are we to reconcile these varied findings regarding the influence of motivational and normative (i.e., non-informational) concerns on the outcomes of diverse group problem solving and social interaction? On the one hand, the Sommers (2006) and Sommers et al. (in press) studies indicate that a diverse group composition can have positive effects on the cognitive tendencies of White members and the performance of groups. On the other hand, several studies have documented the often counterproductive nature of individuals' concerns about avoiding prejudice during interracial interactions—concerns that frequently lead to increases in anxiety, negative affect, and cognitive depletion, not to mention decreased task effectiveness. How can we make sense of these results?

One possibility is to consider the nature of the task involved in each study. As mentioned above, many investigations of interracial processes have focused on social interactions (see Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Participants in these studies typically come to a lab to engage in a conversation or interaction with a fellow college student. Little if any premium is placed on performance or other objective outcomes, and participants presumably focus their efforts on making a good impression, or at least avoiding a negative one. In the photo description studies by Apfelbaum, Sommers, Norton, and others, participants were instructed to complete a photo

identification task as efficiently as possible, but no tangible incentives were provided that would have led individuals to forsake social concerns in the pursuit of improved performance; it is quite possible that participants would not have avoided asking about race had there been financial or other attainable rewards on the table. Absent concerns regarding optimizing their performance, White participants in these interaction studies appear to be driven by impression management concerns, a tendency that, ironically, often has negative social and cognitive consequences.

On the other hand, the Sommers (2006) study placed individuals in a situation with a very clear focus on task performance. Participants were recruited during jury duty at a courthouse and were asked to engage in a court-sponsored examination of jury decision-making. It is true that the decisions of these mock jurors carried no practical consequence, but consistent with other realistic jury simulations using community samples (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989), participants appeared quite animated and engaged in the task, which for many of them was the closest they had ever been to serving on a jury. This focus on completing the task in a serious and thorough manner may help account for the positive outcomes of racial diversity in this experiment. Such a conclusion would be consistent with the findings of other studies that have utilized paradigms with a task performance emphasis, many of which have identified positive effects of racial diversity (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001; McLeod et al., 1996; Sawyer et al., 2006).

This analysis conjures a conclusion alluded to earlier in this chapter, namely that the positive effects of racial diversity are often seen in terms of group performance, whereas the negative effects tend to be related to cohesion and morale. This proposition implies that the effects of racial diversity are usually positive when the interaction in question is task- or outcome-focused, but negative when impression management and other social objectives are paramount. The jury provides an illustrative example, as it is a group for which morale is not a

principal consideration and dropout is not an option. A jury is charged with reaching a legally and factually appropriate decision, regardless of hiccups along the way in terms of disagreement and tension. As such, the jury may be precisely the type of group most likely to benefit from racial diversity. Of course, this analysis is largely speculative; true tests of the importance of task focus should be assessed empirically. Future studies could determine, for example, whether the impact of racial diversity varies when the same interaction is alternatively framed as having a social, impression-management-related objective versus an explicit mandate to focus on task effectiveness or an incentive structure that rewards performance.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the differences between, on the one hand, juries and other formal organizational groups, and on the other, more social collectives, are not limited to that of task focus. The paradigm used in the Sommers (2006) mock jury study placed participants in the type of group about which they likely had specific expectations and normative beliefs. Even absent previous personal experience as jurors, participants presumably harbored accessible ideas about how jurors are *supposed* to act, even if some of these ideas were based on non-expert sources such as popular media. Such preconceived notions may have provided reassurance and structure to participants placed in the ambiguous context of a diverse group interaction. Previous research has found, for instance, that when given a script to follow during interracial interaction, Whites often avoid the depleted executive function observed in other interracial settings (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). Expectations about what it means to be part of a jury may have provided similar guidance and structure for Whites in the Sommers (2006) study to fall back on when they were unsure of the best course of action to pursue as part of a diverse group. In more open-ended interactions, however, such normative guideposts are not as readily

available, and Whites in these studies often flounder in their search for the appropriate interpersonal strategies to adopt (e.g., Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008).

But the results that are perhaps the most difficult to reconcile—at first blush, at least—are those regarding the cognitive effects of being in a diverse group. In two studies reviewed herein, Whites' mere membership in a racially diverse group was found to have positive effects on their cognitive tendencies—specifically, with regard to more thorough information processing (Sommers, 2006; Sommers et al., in press). Several studies conducted by Richeson and colleagues, however, have shown that Whites' executive function is often impaired or depleted in the wake of interracial interactions (Richeson et al., 2003; Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson & Trawalter 2005).

Upon closer review, though, these findings are not as incongruent as they seem. Among other differences in the design of these studies is the fact that those experiments that have found evidence of positive cognitive outcomes for racial diversity assessed Whites' cognitive tendencies *before* they interacted with a diverse group, whereas those studies demonstrating depletion assessed cognitive resources *after* an interaction. This raises the provocative possibility that the more effortful information processing exhibited by Whites in anticipation of an interracial discussion could reflect the same cognitive vigilance that often leaves Whites depleted after interracial interaction. This is an empirical question worthy of future investigation, though most experimental investigations of racial diversity continue to focus on relatively brief interaction durations. Examining these interactions over a longer period of time in order to determine the different longer-term trajectories of diverse and homogeneous groups—and their individual members—is clearly a necessary next step in this body of research.

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on exploring the processes through which racial diversity affects group performance and dynamics. Its goal has not been to offer a drastic reconceptualization of how racial diversity should be studied, but rather to broaden theoretical and practical discussions of this topic in several ways. So what are the novel conclusions to be drawn from the present review of experimental investigations of racial diversity? What should organizations—or, perhaps more aptly, those who study organizations—take from these analyses? This final section closes with three specific conclusions based on the review above, all of which present at least some challenge to traditional assumptions underlying the study of diversity and group performance.

One such assumption concerns the processes that predict positive versus negative effects of diversity on group performance. Specifically, in an effort to synthesize and reconcile previous findings, some researchers have proposed a clear dichotomy between processes of social categorization and information/decision-making: “[social categorization theory] would predict that, unless mitigated by some other process, diversity should have negative impact on both group process and performance... Information and decision theories, on the other hand, make the opposite prediction” (Williams & O’Reilly, 1996, p. 90). The first general conclusion derived from the present review is that this dichotomization is not as clear-cut as it might seem at first. That is, *informational and non-informational processes are often observed within the same group, and not all benefits of racial diversity result from informational processes.*

As is the case with most efforts to reconcile a complex research literature, the proposition that informational processes lead to positive diversity effects and social/non-informational processes to negative effects is an oversimplification. The Sommers (2006) and Sommers et al. (in press) studies clearly demonstrate that non-informational processes also produce positive

outcomes for group performance in the decision-making domain. Furthermore, one could argue that research by Apfelbaum, Sommers, and colleagues illustrates that informational processes can produce negative effects for diversity, as Whites in diverse pairs in these studies were less efficient communicators of diagnostic information, which in turn predicted decrements in task performance and negative interpersonal outcomes.

Consideration of these issues leads to the second major conclusion offered by the present review, namely that the *informational effects of racial diversity are not wholly attributable to pre-existing differences in the perspectives of group members of different races*. As illustrated by the opening quotations of this chapter, many organizational assumptions regarding racial diversity are predicated on the idea that the effects of heterogeneity hinge on the novel contributions of racial minority individuals. However, the present review suggests that many of the effects of a diverse group composition are brought about by changes in the behavior of *White* individuals in such settings (see also Phillips et al., 2006). Whether due to Whites' expectations concerning diverse groups, their motivational and normative concerns regarding prejudice, or other factors entirely, this is a provocative finding that merits further investigation.

This conclusion is also one with practical implications. It suggests that White individuals' attitudes are not always obstacles to be overcome in organizational efforts to effectively manage diversity (just as the first conclusion above implies that social categorization processes need not always be feared and avoided at all costs). To the contrary, many Whites seem to harbor attitudes, motivations, and normative concerns that render them likely to process information more deeply and think about issues more carefully in diverse settings. To the extent that empirical data support the hypothesis that a focus on task performance—as opposed to on interpersonal outcomes—facilitates this positive impact of diversity on Whites, training or

interventions that emphasize these generalized benefits may prove useful for generating wider-ranging support for pro-diversity initiatives within organizations.

The third conclusion implied by the present review is that, in analyzing the effects of racial diversity, *organizational researchers would be remiss to ignore the burgeoning experimental literature on interracial social interaction*. To be fair, the same could be said of psychologists who study smaller-scale interracial interaction: they would be well-advised to consider findings from the organizational study of diversity. Casting one's research net more broadly in this manner allows for interesting and informative comparisons to be drawn between literatures that too often exist in isolation from one another. Certainly the processes that underlie dyadic social interactions play a role in group-based task performance and vice versa. Moreover, integration of findings from these two literatures sheds light on some of the contextual factors that determine whether racial diversity exerts positive or negative effects on group and individual outcomes.

The present focus on experimental research by no means indicates that field investigations of diversity are uninformative or outmoded. But there is a strong case to be made that the "tendency to assume rather than assess mediating processes" in organizational research noted by van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007, p. 519) is most easily reversed by incorporating the use of experimental design into the study of racial diversity and group performance. As in any line of inquiry, conclusions will be strongest when based on converging methodologies, and the control afforded to experimental researchers of diversity compliment nicely the realism and external validity of field studies of actual organizations.

In closing, one important caveat in assessing the present chapter is that the vast majority of studies reviewed herein have examined one specific type of racial heterogeneity and one

specific type of homogeneity: predominantly White groups versus all-White groups. Of course, a long-term, exclusive focus on White participants would be quite problematic for diversity research, as for investigations of interracial dyadic interaction (Shelton, 2000; Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Nonetheless, two considerations provide justification for at least beginning such an inquiry by focusing in large part on White participants. First, as detailed throughout this chapter, most hypotheses assume that the effects of racial diversity are attributable to contributions of non-White individuals, meaning that the impact of diversity on Whites is actually underexplored. Second, many debates concerning racial diversity focus on predominantly White settings such as college campuses and corporate boardrooms, rendering practically and theoretically important a better understanding of how racial heterogeneity affects—and even benefits—Whites.

But it is readily apparent that diversity researchers will need to make a concerted effort to move beyond studying predominantly-White and all-White groups. It remains essential for future studies to address questions such as: What are the experiences of minority individuals in diverse settings, and how do those experiences differ depending on the specific racial group membership of the individuals in question? How does a group's racial composition affect the cognition and behavior of non-Whites? Are the presently observed performance tendencies of homogeneous groups limited to all-White compositions or are do they also apply to other groups lacking racial diversity? Clearly, there are myriad new directions for researchers of racial diversity to pursue. The present chapter represents one effort to move beyond the untested assumptions that many individuals and organizations harbor regarding the effects of diversity, but much work remains to be done. In an increasingly multicultural and global society, few empirical questions loom as large and few practical challenges are as important.

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