I recently had a very thought provoking conversation with a graduate student in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology who wondered if belonging to the racioethnic majority (i.e., being White) would somehow obscure the development of the ability to conduct good diversity research. I did my best to reassure the student that it wouldn’t but felt compelled to acknowledge that others might feel differently. That discussion made me think about something seemingly unique to diversity research—the perceived importance of the author’s identity. No other subfield of I-O research seems to have a commonly accepted author prototype accompanying it. For instance, there is no expectation that all personality researchers share any particular characteristic. Furthermore, no one would question the validity of a personality article based on the characteristics of the author. Imagine how comical it would be if someone were to say: “I wouldn’t put too much faith in the findings of this personality article because the author is an introvert.” Fill in race for personality and White for introvert, however, and it becomes a different conversation for some.

This realization brought a number of key questions to mind. For example, why do we often find the author’s identity profile informative when the subject of an article is diversity? Given that we don’t do this in other areas, is the tendency to use this information in this manner appropriate? What impact might it have on researchers’ decisions regarding whether to engage in diversity research? What does this mean for the field of diversity research? The purpose of this column is to attempt to answer these important questions. Although similar issues have been discussed regarding other areas of psychology, such as clinical and counseling (e.g., Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Sue, 1993), no such discussion has taken place concerning I-O. Hopefully, by raising this issue here, it will help to initiate dialogue about the thoughts underlying this tendency and its impact on the study of diversity in organizations, both in I-O and related disciplines.

Why We Care About an Author’s Identity

Although uncommon in any other field of inquiry within I-O psychology, there is a longstanding typecast of the prototypical diversity researcher (Cox, 2004). For instance, in his seminal 1989 article on research on racioethnicity in organizations, which was reprinted in 2004, diversity scholar Taylor Cox con-
cluded that “many still treat it as ‘a minority issue’—that is, a matter relevant only to minority group members” (p. 127). Anecdotally, I vividly recall a conversation I had with a highly prolific researcher who published several influential studies on diversity, though it was by no means his specialty. In response to my inquiry concerning why he seemed to no longer conduct research on the topic, he indicated that he had come to feel inauthentic in his role as a diversity researcher. Perhaps more importantly, he revealed that he seriously questioned whether he—as a White male—could make a legitimate contribution to the diversity literature.

Apparently, many among us have drawn an implicit connection between who we are and what topics we can and should study, at least where diversity is concerned. Those who have done so seem to be implying that no one would study a marginalized group or that group’s perspective if they were not a member of said group. Accordingly, norms have come to exist suggesting that older scholars should study age, racioethnic minorities should study racioethnicity, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered researchers should study sexual orientation, and the like. These norms also lead to assumptions of reciprocal causation, in that people often believe they can tell a lot about a diversity researcher based on the topic they study. For instance, I’ve often found it interesting that many people have assumed David Kravitz, who has extensively researched attitudes on affirmative action, is Black when, in fact, he is not.

In addition, many minority and majority researchers alike wonder (some more openly than others) whether the issues pertaining to marginalized groups truly can be understood by someone who is not a member. Conceptually, this is reminiscent of the popular 1980s saying in the Black community, “It’s a Black thing, you wouldn’t understand.” In our domain, this notion is tantamount to questioning whether a researcher who does not belong to one of these groups is even capable of significantly contributing to our understanding of the issues these individuals face in the workplace.

The irony in the preceding position is that although minority and female authors may be viewed by some as more authentic and legitimate in studying issues of diversity, they are also more likely to be viewed as biased. For instance, Hendrix (2002) devoted an entire article to defending herself against “charges of the absence of objectivity that I experienced as a Black researcher investigating race” (p. 153). On a more personal note, I’ve had students ask what I “hope to prove” as a Black man studying diversity. On the one hand, being a member of a marginalized group implies authenticity in exploring issues of diversity. On the other hand, it is also viewed as something of a conflict of interest in that one’s objectivity may come into question.

**Why This Practice Is Inappropriate**

The argument here is simple and does not require much space to articulate. As diversity scholars, many of us take great pains trying to convince organizations that they should not discriminate on the basis of demographic
characteristics. Though there are many reasons for this (for a discussion of these, see Thomas & Ely, 1996), one we often articulate is that doing so will cause them to miss out on acquiring the services of highly qualified individuals who do not fit the majority prototype. The same logic can be applied here. We cannot expect to attract the best and brightest researchers to study diversity if there are restrictions placed (implied or explicit) on who will be accepted in these roles. Again, how unimaginable is it to think of this practice being extended to any other topic of study? It is no more appropriate to typify types of work as fit for women and minorities in research than it is to do so in organizational settings. Discrimination is discrimination and it is inappropriate in any context.

**Some Thoughts on Its Impact**

So what does this mean for us as a field? There are at least three key implications. First, female and minority researchers may feel pressure (both of internal and external origin) to study diversity. After all, someone’s got to study these issues and many may figure it to be the place of minorities and women to do it. Unfortunately, this type of pigeonholing could lead them to be marginalized by others for studying a relatively undervalued research area (Cox, 2004). It also could lead to women and minorities failing to achieve their scholarly potential if they feel pressured into studying topics about which they are not passionate (yes, there are minorities and women who are not intrinsically interested in studying issues of diversity).

Second, majority researchers may feel pressured not to study diversity because of the common norms against them doing so. Violators of these norms are likely to engender similar reactions to violators of any norm: They make us uncomfortable, are seen as atypical or outcasts, and, consequently, their authenticity may be questioned. Thus, majority scholars studying diversity may find themselves ostracized or rejected, both by majority colleagues who don’t study diversity and minorities and women who do. In fact, Cox (2004, p. 129) found that:

White scholars who seek to pursue research on racioethnic issues are also often discouraged from doing such work through a different form of pressure, which consists of negative reactions from subjects, scholars belonging to minority groups, and even funding institutions who question the White scholars’ legitimacy as researchers on this topic on the basis that they are not minority group members.

Third, the field of diversity, as a whole, suffers. If we are unable to attract our share of the best and brightest of all backgrounds to study diversity, we stand to learn considerably less about our domain than we would otherwise. Certainly, our social identities have an impact on our interests and interpretations, which could impact how we conduct and interpret our research. Nonetheless, no one particular demographic profile has cornered the market on insight into (a) issues faced by traditionally marginalized groups and (b)
how diversity affects key organizational outcomes. Interestingly enough, Cox (2004) suggested researchers form partnerships involving members of majority and minority groups, a notion put forth previously by Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, and Tucker (1980). Not that I believe this is necessarily as important as it may have been nearly 20 years ago when Cox wrote his article, but it serves to illustrate the fact that everyone has the potential to contribute to the diversity literature, irrespective of their identity.

Conclusions

So what are we to do about this dilemma? How do we ensure that issues of authenticity and objectivity are not raised about authors solely on the basis of their identity? I believe the first step is to realize our own role in perpetuating these issues. As individuals who study diversity, we have the power to construct and shape the prototypes commonly associated with diversity research and those who conduct it. For example, we can highlight to our students and colleagues that there are majority and minority, as well as male and female, researchers who do outstanding diversity research. Demonstrating the diversity of researchers’ identities within our field can help to shatter beliefs that author identity determines authenticity.

We also should call into question the notion that scholars who study diversity (particularly minorities) are somehow more susceptible to bias than those investigating other topics. Everyone chooses their research interests, in large part, based on their personal curiosity concerning the subject. Thus, all scholars are likely to have a personal stake in their research, not just those who focus their attention on diversity.

Finally, I think it is of utmost importance that we be vigilant in stressing the importance of diversity research in our everyday interactions. Our objective for doing so is not necessarily to persuade everyone to join us in our pursuits. Rather, if we can convince others of the merits of our work, we stand to help eliminate many of the negative misperceptions about diversity research and make this important arena more accessible to a broader spectrum of researchers.

References


