Diversity: What’s In a Name?

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When I tell folks that I’m teaching a course on diversity at work, I get one of several reactions. Some think it’s a great topic and ask me about the specific areas that I’m going to cover. Others simply roll their eyes because they’ve either been to one too many “voluntary” diversity workshops or they’ve seen the term diversity twisted and turned beyond recognition by administrators where they work. Still others ask me: what does that mean? In my humble opinion, diversity shouldn’t be the much maligned or misunderstood concept that it has become and I-O psychologists can play an instrumental role in changing that.

The New Webster’s Dictionary is not especially helpful as it defines diversity as the state or quality of being diverse. A quick examination of the definition of diverse yields: different; unlike in character or qualities. Although these definitions are not particularly useful, they do provide a starting point. Psychology is based on the study of individual differences, so who is in a better position to clarify the role of diversity at work than I-O psychologists?

I could cite the litany of references that demonstrate that our society is becoming more diverse, but you’ve probably seen them. Suffice it to say that the U.S. workforce today has more racial and ethnic minorities, more aging workers, more people with disabilities, more homosexuals who are out of the closet, and more women than in years past. As a result, diversity training seems to have become an industry unto itself. The omnipresence of diversity training unfortunately means that there is some very good training and some very bad training as well. Poorly conceived training has certainly contributed to the cynicism about and/or misunderstanding of diversity. Confusion about the concept lingers, though, and I-O psychologists are uniquely positioned to help clarify the meaning of the diversity construct. I’m happy to say that SIOP members are very active in this battle, but there is much more to be done.

When people hear the word diversity, several images may come to mind. For some, the mere mention of the word engages thoughts of affirmative action run amok. For others, it may conjure images of the two days of training that would have made Rodney King cringe. Still others may simply think of diversity as something that just doesn’t apply to them because they’re not “one of those people.” Somewhere in the midst of these misconceptions lies
the truth about diversity. As our workforce becomes more diverse, management of that diversity becomes a business imperative that channels potential conflict into positive organizational momentum.

As a person who does diversity research and who teaches introductory I-O, I select texts partially based on the quality of their diversity coverage. However, current introductory I-O textbooks don’t consistently address this social and workplace shift. Some texts barely make a nod to the shift in the diversity of the workforce, but I’m not writing to condemn them. After all, intro text authors have to make tough choices about the topics they can fit into a reasonably sized text. Rather, I’d like to point out a few that do a good job addressing diversity issues, and each takes a different approach.

Landy and Conte (2004) devote an entire module to diversity as part of a chapter on fairness and diversity issues. They really do more than other books to clarify what diversity is and what it isn’t. They differentiate diversity from related concepts such as multiculturalism and multinationalism. They also broaden the view of diversity beyond the traditional view of attributes that are more visible. In a discussion of diversity’s benefits and drawbacks, they outline several models of diversity management. In other sections of the text, they also discuss the role of cultural diversity in performance management, teams, leadership, and training.

Muchinsky (2003), rather than having a specific section on diversity, makes reference in multiple chapters to the influence of diversity on specific subtopics. For instance, in his leadership chapter he discusses the challenges that arise when Japanese and American cultures collide or when women take on leadership roles. In the training chapter, he discusses the growth in cultural diversity training programs. Expanding the definitions of diversity, in the chapter on work teams he discusses the importance of team members filling a variety of roles.

Levy (2003) also discusses diversity as central to the study of I-O psychology. He examines the growth in diversity training and provides examples of corporate leaders in diversity management and training. He also reviews the role of culture in leadership and provides some of the reasons why diversity can no longer be ignored in organizational development.

Intro I-O textbooks have made great strides in presenting the importance of managing diversity to organizations. However, I have trouble finding a good textbook on workplace diversity. There are great books that cover gender at work (Cleveland, Stockdale, & Murphy, 2000), race and culture (Cox, 1993), aging (Birren & Schaie, 2001), sexual orientation (Ellis & Riggle, 1996), and other diversity subtopics, but I haven’t been able to find a comprehensive text that covers all of these issues. There are management texts that come close (Carr-Ruffino, 1999; Gentile, 2000), but they don’t provide the theoretical background based in social psychological research that the topic truly demands. If there is a new psychologically based diversity text out there, I would love to hear about it!
The *Handbook of Industrial, Work, and Organizational Psychology* (Anderson, Ones, Sinangil, & Viswesvaran, 2001) makes a concerted effort to broaden the treatment of I-O topics to account for international perspectives. The editors have done this not only by choosing relevant topics, but also by selecting authors from around the world. Rather than covering diversity-related subtopics per se, they discuss typical I-O topics such as selection, performance appraisal, job satisfaction, and more in light of the cultural differences that exist. The various authors in the volume also discuss how current theories and beliefs may need to be reconsidered when applying them to workers from non-Western cultures.

*TIP* does its part through the publication of *A Matter of Difference*, a regular column that addresses issues of inclusion and diversity in organizations today. Martin Davidson and Bernardo Ferdman have discussed inclusive organizations and how diversity can be cultivated. In the process, they have broadened conceptions of diversity beyond majority–minority thinking to encompass issues of fairness, the subtleties involved, and the actions that individuals and organizations can take. After hosting a session at the annual conference, they have also discussed some of the issues faced by SIOP specifically. In the past 2 years they have taken some important steps in helping to clarify diversity management, even if directed at the SIOP membership, primarily.

I wish I could say that I have the definitive answer to what diversity should mean to the modern organization. Our field can contribute significantly to the clarification of the construct, though. We have a body of research and theory that addresses attitude formation, stereotypes, discrimination, power, communication, relationships, leadership, and more that bear on the dynamics underlying workplace diversity. I would argue, however, that sociology and business researchers have contributed more to the topic than psychologists. That’s not intended to be a condemnation of psychologists, but we can certainly do more.

We are at a point where diversity is recognized as an organizational issue that cannot be ignored. Although some may argue that diversity is the latest management bandwagon (which may also explain some of the cynicism about the topic), the clear social trends underlying it are not going away. I-O psychologists are uniquely positioned to facilitate diversity management such that it leads to positive changes in organizations rather than creating additional obstacles.

As always, if you would like to comment on this article, please feel free to contact me at bachiochip@easternct.edu.

References
