

Integrating the Fields of Diversity and Culture: A Focus on Social Identity

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In the focal article, Ferdman and Sagiv (2012) provide a thoughtful review of the fields of diversity and cross-cultural work psychology (CCWP). More importantly, they look for similarities and differences across these fields in order to find the overlap that can connect them. As co-chairs of the SIOP panel they refer to in their discussion, we are pleased to see that a dialogue towards the integration of diversity and CCWP research and practice was successfully initiated. We agree with many of the fruitful ideas put forth by Ferdman and Sagiv and believe that further exploration of them is needed if the fields of diversity and CCWP are to be successfully integrated. In an attempt to further this effort, we expand on the focal article's argument that social identity can be used as the integration point between the two fields. Specifically, we propose that to fully understand the impact of both diversity and culture in team contexts, we must consider

their influence on social identity and in turn, team processes and outcomes drawing from and integrating knowledge from each of these fields.

Integrating Culture and Diversity

There are various attributes that can form the basis of interpersonal differences; one way to categorize them is by classifying diversity as either surface level or deep level (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Specifically, surface-level diversity refers to differences in individual characteristics that are immediately observable, such as gender or race. Deep-level diversity, in contrast, involves characteristics that are less readily observable, such as cultural values, and other individual differences like personality, attitudes, and experiences. In line with this classification system then, cultural differences can be conceptualized as a type of deep-level diversity. That is, from a values perspective, culture is deep level, defined as a set of values that tends to be shared within communities and transmitted over time (Hofstede, 1984; Parsons & Shils, 1951). Thus, diversity is a broad concept within which both cross-cultural differences and observable differences more traditional to diversity research (e.g., gender and race) can be considered. This concept alone illustrates that the fields of diversity and CCWP can be integrated by exploring them as dimensions of single construct,

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This work was supported by funding from the Army Research Office MURI Grant to Dr. Michele Gelfand, Principal Investigator, UMD (W911NF-08-1-014), subcontract to UCF (Z885903). The views expressed in this work are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the organizations with which they are affiliated or their sponsoring institutions or agencies.

within unified conceptual models. Beyond this, however, we explore how adopting this integrated conceptualization can help us better understand social identity, a construct of high relevance and interest to both fields.

Focus on Social Identity

Although there are several differences between diversity and CCWP research (Ferdman & Sagiv), both fields have an interest in understanding how characteristics of individuals within social groups can influence collective processes and outcomes. Research suggests, for example, that people from different cultures often conceptualize constructs, such as teams, in different manners which in turn impacts the way that they behave (e.g., Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001). When individuals from different cultures are brought together in teams, these differences can affect the processes and outcomes of diverse teams (e.g., Cheng, Chua, Morris, & Lee, 2012).

The degree to which these attributes (i.e., surface- and deep-level diversity) are influential, however, may largely depend on the types and strengths of team members’ social identities. Researchers have argued that individuals have multiple cultural identities and that the activation of different identities depends on the situational context (e.g., Chao & Moon, 2005; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). This suggests that team members’ social identities that overlap with one another might be more likely to be activated, thus more likely to feed into subsequent team processes and outcomes.

Following this line of reasoning, we expect that the existence of surface- and deep-level diversity, including culture, will influence the extent to which certain social identities are activated in a given situation. Specifically, diversity in teams can create social cues for individuals, which can activate social identities, and in turn, can shape their interactions, processes, and outcomes. Social identity can thus serve as a foundation for integrating research on

culture and diversity—it can mediate the relationship between diversity and team processes, where surface- and deep-level diversity influence which social identities are activated and, in turn, determines the extent and nature in which diversity plays a role in team processes and outcomes.

Illustrative Scenarios

Consider a team characterized by surface-level differences such as gender diversity and age diversity, as depicted in Table 1. Drawing from faultline theory, which purports that team members’ attributes can create hypothetical dividing lines that split teams into subgroups (Lau & Murnighan, 1998), we might expect that a social identity related to age would be more likely to be activated for member A, to gender for member D, and both would be activated for members B and C as those are the identities that are shared with other members. In turn, members might interact in a manner that is consistent with the identities that have been activated, influencing team processes and outcomes (e.g., if the “young adult” identity is activated, members might interact more informally than if an “occupation” identity were to be activated). It is also possible, however, that being the age-diverse member might sensitize member D to her age, for example, activating her corresponding age to social identity. Furthermore, each of these scenarios will also likely depend on the degree to which each member’s social identity is derived from their gender or age to begin with.

Adding a layer of complexity, we must also consider the role of deep-level diversity. A team can also be characterized by cultural diversity, for example. Through

Table 1. *Example Scenario*

Member	Age	Gender
A	20	M
B	21	F
C	21	F
D	40	F

initial interactions, we might expect that team members' social identities that overlap the most with other members' cultural values will be more likely to be activated than those that overlap less. If five out of six team members are individualistic, but there is an even split between high power distance and low power distance members, for example, it might be more likely that the three members with individualistic and low power distance values will have cross-cutting social identities pertaining to those two cultural values activated versus identities that have the less overlapping values of collectivistic and high power distance. In contrast, for the sole member with collectivistic and high power distance values, his minority status pertaining to collectivism might become more salient than his overlap with other members in power distance, activating his social identity pertaining to collectivism. Again, the degree to which team members derive their identities from each of these cultural values can also play a role. The identities that are activated can then provide a context for how individuals understand and engage in tasks, influencing the way the team interacts and performs.

In every collaborative context, there will likely be some degree of both surface- and deep-level diversity. Although the scenarios described above are complex on their own, they must be considered in combination in order to truly understand the impact of diversity on team processes and outcomes. Further, our discussion, grounded in previous research, illustrates the potentially pivotal role of social identity in determining the impact of diversity in team settings. Thus, we argue that future models of diversity and culture should be bridged together by considering the mediating role of social identity in the relationships between surface- and deep-level diversity, and subsequent team processes, emergent states, and outcomes. In turn, empirical research should follow from these models, providing far-reaching paths for the continued integration of the fields of diversity and CCWP.

Tying It All Together

The aforementioned examples highlight the complexity as well as the innumerable scenarios that can emerge in the workplace from different combinations of attributes. However, our understanding remains nascent regarding the impact of these variables simultaneously. Work on faultlines has started to consider the formation of subgroups beyond the absolute value of diversity (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, 2005), but this effort has been mostly limited to demographic attributes (Thatcher & Patel, 2011). We urge researchers to move towards integration by incorporating multiple diversity categories, particularly deep-level diversity into frameworks of diversity in teams. Furthermore, taking a social identity approach can provide a unifying psychosocial mechanism through which to consider the similarities and differences, operating at both the individual and group levels, within the fields of CCWP and diversity.

In summary, we emphasize the concepts of surface- and deep-level diversity in combination on the activation of social identities as the key to connecting the fields of diversity and cross-cultural work psychology. Thus, we hope this commentary can encourage the fields to move forward in a more complementary manner and to continue to learn from one another.

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