**How Diverse Am I? A Theory of Diversity Identification**

It is all too often the case that organizations do not see the positive outcomes they hope to gain from employing a diverse workforce (e.g., increased job satisfaction; job applicant interest; employee innovation; firm financial performance; Avery, McKay, Tonidandel, Volpone, & Morris, 2012; Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Miller & Triana, 2009; Van Dijk, Meyer, Van Engen, & Loyd, 2017) and instead are confronted with negative outcomes (e.g., increased conflict; lost productivity; low levels of team cohesion; Brief, Umphress, Dietz, Burrows, Butz, & Scholten, 2005; Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007). In the current literature, scholars often assume that there is a problem concerning the management of diversity within the organizations so as scholars and practitioners, we look ‘up’ (i.e., to the organization-level, commonly assessed with higher-level diversity statistics) to address this problem of un-realized diversity potential. In the current study, we suggest that a key reason that organizations may fail to realize the positive outcomes related to diversity, is that scholars rarely look ‘down’ to consider the role of the individual employee in influencing the diversity potential that they bring to the organization. That is, though organizational-level phenomena certainly play a role in how diversity is leveraged in an organization – so, too, do individual employees themselves [(Cha & Roberts, 2019)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?tze1S5). *In the current work, we explore how the individual employee’s perception of themselves as diverse is a key consideration in the ability to leverage their diverse perspective for the firm.*

To elaborate, we propose that the way employees are counted by the organization (as contributing to diversity) may not reflect their personal thoughts. The practice of determining the diversity of a workforce by summarizing statistics that describe key demographic characteristics is common. Management scholars have similarly conceptualized diversity as the level of representation that a particular social group (e.g., women, people of color) has within a work group (e.g., a team, department, organization; Avery et al., 2012; see Gardner & Ryan, 2020 and Tasheva & Hillman, 2018 for exceptions). This practice of relying on demographic statistics and by extension, a summarized understanding of the characteristics of their workforce, creates a foundation for all of an organization’s diversity initiatives that is based on a large assumption. That is, organizations often assume the levels of diversity in their workforce based on these reported or observed demographic characteristics of their employees reflect underlying perceived differences among employees. This fails to consider the idea that these assumptions about their workforce may not match an employee’s view of themselves as diverse.

Indeed, previous scholarship illustrates that group members’ subjective understanding of differences within their group are meaningful (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002; Ormiston, 2016). Moreover, as Cha and Roberts suggest, “it is the employee’s choice to draw (or not to draw) on [their] identity-based strengths” (2019: 242). However, before employees choose to enact their identity so that organizations can realize the positive outcomes associated with diversity, we argue that the employee must first go through a process of diversity identification. Considering diversity from an individual’s perspective using an identification lens has not been considered fully in the literature. As such, the purpose of this work is to present a *theory of diversity identification,* defined asto what extent an individual perceives their multiple identities as diverse*,* to understand when and how an employee enacts their diversity.

We contribute to management scholarship in several ways. Foremost, we examine how diversity can operate at the individual level of analysis. To accomplish this, we first introduce the construct of *diversity identification*, defined as how diverse an individual sees themselves, as determined through an evaluation of their multiple identities. To our knowledge, our work is novel in the way we conceptualize diversity as an individual level phenomenon. We suggest that the construct of diversity identification has potential to highlight the importance of examining how diversity can be considered not only as what is observed but also as something that exists in someone’s mind. This point of view expands extant diversity theory in extending our field’s long-standing assertion that diversity exists in a group, or at a higher level of analysis (the organization).

**Theory of Diversification**

Currently, management scholars almost ubiquitously conceptualize diversity as a unit-level construct such that an individual’s variation on a given attribute (e.g., race) occurs within an entity (e.g., a group, organization) that is higher than the individual employee (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Given that few scholars have considered whether and how individuals view themselves in terms of their personal diversity, the fundamental premise of our arguments is to introduce a multilevel framing of diversity that considers the referent in diversity as the individual while also considering individuals’ personal definitions of diversity. In doing so, we concur with existing work that conceptualizes diversity as a socially-situated phenomenon, yet add to this work by exploring the individual employee’s perception of *themselves* as diverse. Adding these distinguishing elements to the fields’ conceptualization of diversity extends extant work to allow scholars to think about diversity in a broader way that may help organizations realize the potential benefits of an individual’s diversity.

Diversity identification, defined as the extent to which an individual perceives their multiple identities as diverse, is a self-perception that can evolve given changes in societal and proximal contexts. This allows individuals to have a personal take on answering the question “How diverse am I?” that may align with - or differ from - society’s view of who is diverse. A personal definition of who is diverse provides for a range of answers and results in a continuous rather than dichotomous construct. In sum, diversity identification is unique, in that it bridges identity *and* diversity content while also considering the *individual level of reference* that is missing from current theory in this area. Next, we present our theory of diversity identification by presenting the stages of the model to show how employees develop their diversity identification.

In our theory of diversity identification, we consider how employees evaluate the (a) asymmetry and (b) value of their internal multiple identities to influence their level of diversity identification. In incorporating an employee’s multiple identities, we build on previous diversity theory that is increasingly recognizing the complexity of multiple social identities (i.e., multiple, intersected, bicultural, hyphenated identities; e.g., Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; Ramarajan, 2014; Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and the asymmetry of an individual’s multiple and complex identities within extant systems that categorize people based on their demographic characteristics (Clair, Humberd, Rouse, & Jones, in press). In our theory, we consider multiple identities that are both marginalized and non-marginalized to move organizational scholarship closer to understanding the complexity and fluidity of social identities that characterize employees in modern organizations. This approach further contributes to extant theory, as an overwhelming amount of current work in this area limits the scope of theory to the consideration of marginalized identities (e.g., Avery & McKay, 2006), without considering the role of an employee’s non-marginalized identities in diversity and identity-related processes.

**Discussion**

Through this exploration, we expand scholars’ understanding of social sustainability by building theory that works to ensure the long-term survival of the organization. We propose that companies need to develop and reproduce their *diverse* human resources (Ehnert, 2006) and that proper diversity management that is anchored by a new understanding of how we define diversity. In considering the need for organizations to develop and replicate their human resources, we note that a plethora of research has shown that managing diversity in the workforce in an ineffective way will result in employee absenteeism withdrawal (Avery, McKay, Wilson, & Tonidandel, 2007), eventual turnover (McKay et al., 2007) and lowered interest in accepting jobs during the recruitment and selection phase of HRM efforts (Avery, 2003; Avery, Hernandez, & Hebl, 2004; Avery & McKay, 2006). Given that heterogeneity is the new standard among human resources and that diversity will only increase among human resources in workplaces (Toossi, 2012), it is crucial that scholars and understand how organizations can sustain human resources as they face increased demands to define and manage diversity (e.g., Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013; Mor Barak, 2014). Specifically, shifting the focus of diversity management from short term corporate survival (ignoring the need for a diversity definition or creating one that does not incorporate perceptions of individuals) to long-term business success (i.e., building on a diversity definition incorporating identification) ensures the long-term survival of the organization by turning HRM’s focus to developing and reproducing their *diverse* human resources (Wilkinson et al., 2001). As such, in our work we expand scholars’ understanding of how a sustainable HRM[[1]](#footnote-1) perspective can illuminate our understanding of how to position diversity initiatives strategically in organizations.

**References**

Avery, D. R. 2003. Reactions to diversity in recruitment advertising – Are differences black and white? ***Journal of Applied Psychology*,** 88: 672–679.

Avery, D. R., Hernandez, M. & Hebl, M. R. 2004. Who’s watching the race? Racial salience in recruitment advertising. ***Journal of Applied Social Psychology*,** 34(1): 146-161.

Avery, D. R., & McKay, P. F. 2006. Target practice: An organizational impression management approach to attracting minority and female job applicants. ***Personnel Psychology*,** 59: 157-187.

Avery, D. R., McKay, P. F., Tonidandel, S., Volpone, S. D., & Morris, M. A.2012.Is there method to the madness? Examining how racioethnic matching influences retail store productivity*.* ***Personnel Psychology,***65(1):167-199.

Avery, D. R., McKay, P. F., & Wilson, D. C. 2007. Engaging the aging workforce: How age, workgroup age composition, and satisfaction with older and younger coworkers affect employee engagement. ***Journal of Applied Psychology*,** 92(6): 1542-1556.

Brief, A. P., Umphress, E. E., Dietz, J., Burrows, J. W., Butz, R. M., & Scholten, L. 2005. Community matters: Realistic group conflict theory and the impact of diversity. ***Academy of Management Journal,***48:830-844.

Cha, S. E., & Roberts, L. M. 2019. Leveraging minority identities at work: An individual-level framework of the identity mobilization process. [***Organization Science***](https://pubsonline.informs.org/journal/orsc)***,*** *30:* 647-867.

Creary, S. J., Caza, B. B & Roberts, L. M. 2015. Out of the box? How managing a subordinate’s multiple identities affects the quality of a manager-subordinate relationship. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 40: 538-562.

Dezsö, C. L., & Ross, D. G. 2012. Does female representation in top management improve firm performance? A panel data investigation. ***Strategic Management Journal,*** 33: 1072-1089.

Ehnert, I. 2006. Sustainability issues in human in human resource management: Linkages, theoretical approaches, and outlines for an emerging field. In 21st EIASM SHRM Workshop, Aston, Birmingham, March 28 – 29.

Gardner, D. M., & Ryan, A. M. 2020. What’s in it for you? Demographics and self-interest perceptions in diversity promotion. ***Journal of Applied Psychology,***105(9): 1062–1072.

Harrison, D. A. & Klein, K. J. 2007. What's the difference? Diversity constructs as separation, variety, or disparity in organizations. ***Academy of Management Review***, 32(4): 1199-1228.

Harrison, D. A., Price, K. H., & Bell, M. P. 1998. Beyond relational demography: Time and the effects of surface- and deep-level diversity on work group cohesion. ***Academy of Management Journal***, 41(1): 96-107.

Hewlett, S. A., Marshall, M., & Sherbin, L. 2013. How diversity can drive innovation. ***Harvard Business Review***, 91(12): 30.

Homan, A. C., van Knippenberg, D., van Kleef, G. A., & De Dreu, C. K. 2007. Bridging faultlines by valuing diversity: diversity beliefs, information elaboration, and performance in diverse work groups. ***Journal of Applied Psychology*,** 92: 1189-1199.

McKay, P. F., Avery, D. R., Tonidandel, S., Morris, M., Hernandez, M., & Hebl, M. R. 2007. Racial differences in employee retention: Are diversity climate perceptions the key? ***Personnel Psychology*,** 60: 35-62.

Miller, T., & Triana, M. C. 2009. Demographic diversity in the boardroom: Mediators of the board diversity–firm performance relationship. ***Journal of Management Studies,***46: 755-786.

Mor Barak, M. E. 2014. ***Managing diversity: Toward a globally inclusive workplace*** (3rd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ormiston, M. E. 2016. Explaining the link between objective and perceived differences in groups: The role of the belonging and distinctiveness motives. ***Journal of Applied Psychology***, 101(2): 222-236.

Ramarajan, L. 2014. Past, present and future research on multiple identities: Toward an intrapersonal network approach. ***Academy of Management Annals***, 8(1): 589-659.

Roccas, S. & Brewer, M. B. 2002. Social identity complexity. ***Personality and Social Psychology Review***, 6(2): 88-106.

Tasheva, S., & Hillman, A. J. 2018. Integrating diversity at different levels: Multilevel human capital, social capital, and demographic diversity and their implications for team effectiveness. ***Academy of Management Review***, 44: 746-765.

Toossi, M. 2012. Labor force projections to 2020. ***Monthly Labor Review***, 135: 43-64.

[Van Dijk, H., Meyer, B., Van Engen, M., & Loyd, D. L. 2017. Microdynamics in diverse teams: A review and integration of the diversity and stereotyping literatures. ***The Academy of Management Annals***, 11(1): 517–557.](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?7I4ATV)

Wilkinson, A., Hill, M., & Gollan, P. 2001. The sustainability debate. ***International Journal of Operations and Production Management,*** 12: 1492-1502.

**Autobiographical Notes**

**Tiffany Trzebiatowski\***

College of Business, Colorado State University

*e-mail:* [*tiffany.trzebiatowski@colostate.edu*](mailto:tiffany.trzebiatowski@colostate.edu)

Tiffany’s research areas include diversity, discrimination, and identity. Within the diversity field, she studies gender diversity on boards of directors, deep-level diversity in teams, and talent dispersion. Complementing this stream of work are her studies on individual and organizational outcomes of employment discrimination. Finally, she is interested in understanding responses to identity threats and change. Her work on these topics has been published in several peer-reviewed management journals, including *Organization Science*, *Journal of Management*, *Human Resource Management*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*. Tiffany is on the executive committees for the Diversity and Inclusion Theme Committee and Gender and Diversity in Organizations Committee in the Academy of Management. She earned her PhD in Management and Human Resources from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.  She also holds a Master’s degree in Human Resources and Industrial Relations from the University of Minnesota. She holds a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in Management and Human Resources as well as Economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She teaches courses on employment law and human resource management. She has worked in management and human resource roles and also has worked abroad in South Korea. She enjoys rock climbing, swimming, and hiking with her family.

**Sabrina D. Volpone\***

Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado Boulder

*e-mail:* [*sabrina.volpone@colorado.edu*](mailto:sabrina.volpone@colorado.edu)

Dr. Sabrina D. Volpone is an assistant professor in the Organizational Leadership division at the University of Colorado Boulder’s Leeds School of Business. She earned her Ph.D. in Human Resource Management from the Fox School of Business at Temple University.

Dr. Volpone’s research focuses on diversity management and identity management in organizations. Specifically, she uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand how organizations manage their diverse workforces and how diverse individuals flourish through the management of their identities at work. This work focuses on examining the workplace experiences of traditionally under-represented employees, as she has work published in the context of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and immigrant status. Her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as the Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, and Personnel Psychology, among others. This work has been featured by CNN Business, CNBC, U.S. News and World Report, The Boston Globe, and has received international press coverage through the Toronto Star, ABC News Australia, and the London School of Economics. Further, Sabrina has been a part of multiple consulting teams for organizations such as ExxonMobil and Saudi Aramco that maintain a presence atop the Fortune 500 and Fortune Global 500 lists.

*\*Indicates that both authors contributed equally, and that authorship was determined alphabetically.*

1. Sustainable HRM is defined as “human resource strategies and practices intended to enable an organizational goal achievement while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long-lasting calendar time and controlling for… effects on the HR systems on the HR base and thus on the company itself” (Ehnert, 2009: 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)