The Influence of CEO and AA Officers Relational Demography

on Organizational Diversity Management

Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on the relational demography literature and leader-member exchange theory, we present several research propositions in which we postulate that demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race) and other individual difference variables (personality, values) of senior organizational members responsible for diversity management will influence the quality of their working relationship, and the implementation and effectiveness of diversity management practices. Specifically, we focus on the Chief Executive Office/Affirmative Action Officer (CEO/AAO) dyad, and explore the independent and joint effects of these characteristics on workplace diversity outcomes. Building on previous work on stigmatization theory, we also explore the potential role of stigmatization and perceived competence/legitimacy in moderating these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach: This is a conceptual paper. We synthesize the literature, and provide propositions for future research.

Findings if paper is empirical: not applicable

Research limitations/implications: This is a conceptual paper, there is no empirical data reported testing the propositions.

Originality/value of the paper: To date, we are not aware of any studies investigating the personal characteristics of CEOs and AAOs and how these characteristics may combine to influence the implementation and effectiveness of workplace diversity management practices. In a similar vein, we contribute to the research literatures on LMX and relational demography by extending the application of these theories to senior leaders in organizations and in relation to the work of CEOs and AAOs.

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Given rapidly expanding levels of demographic diversity in Canada and around the world (Statistics Canada, 2012; Klarsfeld et al., 2016), there is a pressing need to better understand how organizations are responding to and managing workplace diversity. Previous research has documented that affirmative action laws and the business case have been responsible for advancing diversity management in organizations (e.g., Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011; Ng & Burke, 2010). Although institutional forces may pressure organizations to implement diversity management, organizational actors exercise strategic choice on whether and how to implement these practices in order to respond to these pressures (Mighty, 1996, Ng 2008). The form that diversity management and inclusion initiatives take are, to a large degree, voluntary organizational processes that are dependent on their actors (Guillaume et al., 2014). Yet academic research to date has neglected the role of these organizational actors [such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Affirmative Action Officer[[1]](#footnote-1) (AAO)] and their working relationships on the adoption and implementation of diversity management and inclusion practices.

CEOs establish diversity policies and middle-managers (such as AAO’s) execute and implement these practices. Therefore, the dynamics underlying the relationship between CEOs and AAOs may be critical to the success of these initiatives. This paper aims to examine the influence of CEOs and AAOs, and in particular, the independent and joint effects of their personal characteristics on the implementation and effectiveness of workplace diversity practices. We base our propositions in the research literatures on leader-member exchange theory (for recent review, see Bauer & Erdogan, 2016) and relational demography (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989), which suggest that gender and racial similarities between the CEO and AAO may positively impact the AAO’s ability to successfully develop and implement diversity policies. In so doing, we endeavor to advance our understanding of individual difference variables and interpersonal processes that influence how CEOs and AAOs interact and that may contribute to the effective implementation of diversity management practices. In practical terms, results from this research will provide added guidance to organizations on how to foster stronger CEO-AAO relationships and will assist in identifying individuals who may be best suited to leading workplace diversity management initiatives.

*The Role of CEO and AAO Demography in Diversity Management*

Both CEO and AAO demographic characteristics may have a direct effect on the implementation of diversity policies and practices, and, in turn, enhance the employment opportunities and career progression of minorities. For example, according to social categorization theory, individuals establish a sense of social identity from personal attributes such as their demographic characteristics (e.g., Billig & Tajfer, 1973; Di Donato, Ullrich, & Krueger, 2010). Based on these characteristics, individuals may then display more favourable treatment to those who possess similar characteristics to them (i.e., the in-group), due to a shared sense of identity and greater mutual understanding. In this respect, one’s personal attributes can play an important role in determining whether a CEO or AAO will actively support specific workplace initiatives as these characteristics may be intricately linked to their social identity and how they may be inclined to treat individuals who share (or do not share) this identity. For the purposes of the discussion in this paper, we focus on two primary demographic characteristics (gender, race) that are particularly salient and have been shown to influence social identification processes in organizations: gender and race (Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990; Ibarra, 1995). Thus, the “majority group” that we refer to in the paper are those who are white males and the “minority group” is a racial minority (non-white) and/or female.

For most organizations, the CEO is the substantive leader of the firm whose primary strategic functions include: setting the corporate agenda, decision-making, and resource allocation (Cox & Blake, 1991; Harrison & Pelletier, 1997; Menz, 2012). Given their involvement in these activities, CEOs often play a central role in initiating and supporting diversity management efforts. They can facilitate the successful design and implementation of diversity management initiatives by recognizing and responding to the need for change, assisting in setting the agenda for change, and providing appropriate financial, technical, and human resources that support diversity initiatives over the longer term (Cox & Blake, 1991; Gilbert & Ivanevich, 2000). Given the importance of CEOs in diversity management, a compelling research question concerns what types of CEOs are more inclined to actively support workplace diversity efforts. While very little research has examined this question, the literature on self-interest and social categorization theories (e.g., in-group favouritism; Kanter, 1977; Pfeffer, 1983; Sears & Funk, 1991) would also suggest that CEOs from minority groups may be more likely to promote the careers of similar others as a result of a greater tendency to more readily relate to, and work more effectively with, individuals from similar backgrounds. Likewise, Ng (2008) postulates that minority CEOs (e.g., female CEO) may be more sensitive to the need for effective diversity policies and practices and more actively advance such efforts as they often have direct experience encountering and overcoming challenges associated with their minority status. However, it is also possible that some CEOs with minority backgrounds may be less inclined to support diversity. These CEOs may, for example, be more likely to distance themselves from the diversity agenda due to concerns over stigmatization (e.g., Heilman et al., 1998) or perceptions of favouring minority issues over broader, strategic concerns (e.g., Robinson & Dechant, 1997). There is some empirical support for the distancing hypothesis in the gender literature on the Queen Bees syndrome (Derks et al., 2016). ‘Queen Bee’ is a term coined to describe women in senior leadership roles (frequently CEOs) who actively deny that gender has an effect on career progression, and who do not support initiatives to assist women in attaining leadership roles. This phenomenon has been supported in numerous empirical studies (cf. Derks et al., 2016).

Complementing the role of the CEO, AAOs are directly tasked with the responsibility of managing and implementing their organizations’ diversity policies and practices relating to various stakeholders including employees, customers, shareholders, and their local community (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). They are responsible for promoting solutions to gender and diversity issues to CEOs and other top executives, mobilizing resources, and implementing effective organizational policies that support the integration of women and racial minorities (Hastings, 2007; Kalev et al., 2006; Pfeffer et al., 1995). Given the complex and highly symbolic nature of the AAO’s role (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2009), organizations need to be highly selective in appointing individuals to these positions. Most organizations choose AAOs from underrepresented groups because they want to visibly support their claim as diversity leaders (Corporate Leadership Council, 2008). Some of the advantages of adopting this approach include gaining legitimacy with various constituents, enabling the strategic deployment of minority group members, and providing symbolic or political representation at senior levels in the organization (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Sass & Troyer, 1999). Accordingly, consistent with social identity theory and the greater perceive legitimacy of minority leaders who support and implement diversity management initiatives, we propose the following:

*Proposition 1*: The minority status (gender, race) of an organization’s CEO will influence the integration of minorities in the workplace. Specifically, relative to organizations with a CEO from the majority group, organizations with a CEO who is from a minority group will report: (a) a higher level of implementation of diversity practices, and (b) a greater proportion of minority employees throughout the organization.

*Proposition 2*: The minority status (gender, race) of an organization’s AAO will influence the integration of minorities in the workplace. Specifically, relative to organizations with an AAO from the majority group, organizations with an AAO who is from a minority group will report: (a) a higher level of implementation of diversity practices, and (b) a greater proportion of minority employees throughout the organization.

Based on the preceding arguments, the minority status of the CEO and AAO may play a role in determining the implementation and effectiveness of diversity practices in organizations; however, this effect may depend on two key contingency variables: the perceived stigma associated with being a minority group member and the perceived competence of the CEO/AAO (i.e., perceptions of whether they are qualified for the job). Stigmatization theory (Heilman et al., 1992, 1997) suggests that managers who are from a minority group are sometimes perceived to lack the qualifications necessary for effective performance (Duguid, 2009; Kelly, 2007). Minority managers also distance themselves from the Affirmative Action agenda to avoid being seen as favouring minority issues over other strategic concerns. These concerns may, in turn, impede the attainment of organizational diversity goals due to lower performance expectations of the AAO and less support for their efforts to implement diversity policies and practices (Duguid, 2009; Kanter, 1977; Kelly, 2007). Thus, we offer the following exploratory propositions:

*Proposition 3*: Perceptions of stigma associated with being a minority group member on the part of the CEO and AAO will moderate the above effects of minority status, such that a stronger relationship between minority status and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) is expected when CEO and/or AAO perceptions of stigmatization are lower.

*Proposition 4*: Negative perceptions of the competence of the CEO and AAO will moderate the above effects of minority status, such that a weaker relationship between minority status and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) is expected when CEO and AAO’s avoid the stigmatization of Affirmative Action.

*The CEO-AAO Relationship*

The quality of the working relationship between the CEO and AAO can also be a critical determinant of an organization’s overall effectiveness in diversity management. While the CEO can be instrumental in providing appropriate strategic direction and support for diversity management, the AAO is ultimately responsible for designing and implementing effective diversity policies and practices drawing on their knowledge in the area (Corporate Leadership Council, 2008; Hastings, 2007; Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2009). Thus, working in a well-coordinated manner can assist in ensuring that appropriate diversity policies and practices are, in fact, implemented in the organization.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory posits that dyadic role-making processes and reciprocal social exchanges shape the quality of leader-follower relationships. In return for displaying higher levels of loyalty and commitment to their supervisors, subordinates in high LMX relationships receive favourable treatment, including greater access to privileged information, opportunities for career and role enhancement, and increased attention, recognition, and support from their supervisors (Liden et al., 1997; Erdogan & Bauer, 2014). In this regard, a high quality LMX relationship between a CEO and AAO may assist in raising the profile of the AAO and diversity management file in the organization, in turn, garnering more needed resources and support from senior leaders in the organization. Furthermore, due to the enhanced communication quality and behavioural coordination characterizing high LMX relationships (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Yrie et al., 2002), high-quality CEO-AAO relationships may function more effectively through the display of more positive work perceptions and task-related behaviours. Studies have shown that LMX is positively associated with a wide range of attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, ranging from employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and empowerment to task performance and creativity (for reviews see Bauer & Erdogan, 2016; Dulebohn et al., 2013; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Liden et al., 1997). Thus, a high quality CEO-AAO relationship may facilitate more effective implementation of diversity practices through improved work perceptions and performance on the part of the AAO. Very little research, however, has examined the dynamics underlying high-quality LMX relationships at the senior levels of firms or how they affect policy implementation and organization-level outcomes. In this research, we extend research on LMX to the organization level, focusing specifically on how the nature and quality of the CEO-AAO relationship affects the implementation of diversity policies and the attainment of workplace diversity outcomes. Accordingly, we propose the following:

*Proposition 5*: The quality of the CEO-AAO relationship will influence the integration of minorities in the workplace. Specifically, higher levels of LMX (i.e., higher levels of affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect in the relationship) reported by the CEO and AAO in an organization will be associated with (a) a higher level of implementation of diversity practices in the firm, and (b) a greater proportion of minority employees throughout the organization.

*CEO – AAO Similarity*

According to “upper echelons” theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), strategic decisions made by a CEO are often influenced by his/her cognitive and behavioral orientations. Specifically, a CEO’s assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values can affect how s/he perceives and processes information, in turn, shaping the policies and practices that a CEO may choose to implement in an organization. Furthermore, upper echelon theory suggests that a leader’s demographic attributes provide one means of assessing his/her latent cognitive and behavioural tendencies (Hamrick & Mason, 1984). Drawing on this perspective and the literature on relational demography, we propose that CEO-AAO similarity on both “surface-level” and “deeper-level” characteristics will be associated with improved diversity management in the firm.

Tsui and O’Reilly (1989: 403) first coined the term *relational demography* to refer to “the comparative demographic characteristics of members of dyads or groups who are in a position to engage in regular interactions.” The concepts of relational demography are grounded in the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) and propose that differences in demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, and race, can significantly affect interpersonal perceptions and behaviours (Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007; Tsui et al., 1995). Specifically, demographic similarity can facilitate greater trust, psychosocial support, and a greater desire to interact with similar others, owing to shared values, attitudes, and behavioral styles (Byrne, 1971; Geddes & Konrad, 2003; Thomas, 1990; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989). A number of studies have provided evidence supporting the relational demography perspective. Supervisor-subordinate similarity on demographic characteristics, such as race, age, and gender, have been shown to be positively associated with various subordinate work outcomes, including more favourable work perceptions (e.g., satisfaction with one’s supervisor, overall job satisfaction, organizational commitment; lower perceived stress; e.g., Avery et al., 2012; Avery et al., 2008; Chrobot-Mason, 2004; Turban & Jones, 1988; Vecchio & Bullis, 2001; Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997) and heightened job performance (e.g., Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989; Tsui, et al., 2002; Turban & Jones, 1988). Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that one of the primary means through which demographic similarity influences these outcomes is through improved LMX (e.g., Duchon et al., 1986; Green et al., 1996). In their comprehensive meta-analysis of the LMX literature, Gerstner and Day (1997) argue that LMX offers “a lens through which the entire work experience is viewed” (p. 840). In this respect, LMX may mediate the relationship between leader and subordinate individual difference variables and various work outcomes. The mentoring literature also speaks to the effects of relational demography in leader-subordinate relationships. For example, research has shown that same-race and same-gender mentoring tends to result in more positive outcomes for the protégé (e.g., a greater likelihood of promotion, a higher income, and greater career satisfaction and upward mobility; Ragins, 1997). Dreher and Cox (1996) also reported that females and racial minorities are less likely to form relationships with white male mentors, suggesting that cross-race and cross-gender relationships are difficult to form and successfully maintain. Thomas (1990, 1993, 2001) has written extensively about the challenges facing minority protégés when paired with mentors from majority groups. Drawing on this work, we propose the following:

*Proposition 6*: “Surface–level” similarity between the CEO and AAO with respect to their gender and race will influence the level of integration of racial minorities in the workplace. Specifically, relative to organizations in which the CEO and AAO are demographically dissimilar, organizations in which the CEO and AAO are demographically similar will report: (a) a higher quality CEO-AAO relationship (i.e., LMX), (b) a higher level of implementation of diversity practices, and (c) a greater proportion of minority employees throughout the organization.

Furthermore, consistent with our earlier arguments regarding the potential influence of social identity processes, we propose the following:

*Proposition 7:* Minority status (gender, race) will moderate the above effect of surface-level similarity, such that the relationship between demographic similarity and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) will be stronger when both the CEO and AAO are minority group members.

*Proposition 8*: Perceptions of the competence of the CEO and AAO will moderate the above effect of demographic similarity, such that a stronger relationship between demographic similarity and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) is expected when perceptions of the CEO and AAO’s competence is higher.

*Proposition 9*: In dyads in which both the CEO and AAO are minorities, perceptions of stigma associated with being a minority group member on the part of the CEO and AAO will moderate the above effect of demographic similarity, such that a stronger relationship between demographic similarity and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) is expected when CEO and AAO perceptions of stigmatization are lower.

Effects of “Deep-level” Similarity

In a seminal article examining different forms of diversity in work groups, Harrison, Price, and Bell (1998) drew an important distinction between “surface-level” and “deeper-level” diversity. They argue that “surface-level” diversity relates to more visible, directly observable differences between individuals, reflecting characteristics such as age, race, gender, and education levels. Conversely, “deeper-level” diversity concerns less apparent, but often more psychologically important differences, reflecting characteristics such as attitudes, values, and personality traits. These authors postulate that while “surface-level” characteristics may influence interpersonal perceptions and the nature of interactions at initial stages of a relationship, “deeper-level” differences exert a more continuing and enduring influence on interpersonal perceptions and behaviours over time. Research examining the influence of top executive characteristics on firm behavior has almost exclusively focused on “surface-level” characteristics, such as age, race, and gender (e.g., Carter et al., 2010; Hambrick et al., 1993; Hitt & Tyler, 1991; Roberson & Park, 2007). Only a handful of studies (e.g., Hayibor, Agle, Sears, Sonnenfeld, & Ward, 2011; Ng & Sears, 2012; Peterson et al., 2003) have investigated the influence of “deeper-level” attributes of top executives on their behaviour. While some initial research suggests interpersonal similarity on deeper-level constructs may contribute to the development of high functioning leader-subordinate relationships (e.g., Ashkanasy & O’Connor, 1997; Bernerth et al., 2008; Goodwin et al., 2009), the influence of interpersonal similarity on the quality of the CEO-AAO relationship has yet to be explored. Guided by the literature on relational demography and the similarity-attraction paradigm, we propose that CEO-AAO similarity on deeper-level characteristics will facilitate higher-quality LMX through improved dyadic communication, behavioral coordination, and enhanced social integration of the AAO into the senior leadership team. In turn, high levels of LMX enable the AAO greater latitude in decision-making, enhanced resources, and stronger support for implementing effective diversity practices in the organization. Based on the preceding rationale, we submit the following research propositions:

*Proposition 10*: “Deeper-level” similarity (with respect to values, personality, work attitudes) between the CEO and AAO will also influence the level of integration of minorities in the workplace. Specifically, relative to organizations in which the CEO and AAO are dissimilar with respect to their cultural values, personality, and work attitudes, organizations in which the CEO and AAO are similar on these deeper-level characteristics will report: (a) a higher quality CEO-AAO relationship (i.e., LMX), (b) a higher level of implementation of diversity practices, and (c) a greater proportion of minority employees throughout the organization.

*Proposition 11:* Minority status (gender, race) will moderate the above effect of deep-level similarity, such that the relationship between deep-level similarity and both diversity outcomes (implementation of diversity practices and the proportion of minorities in the organization) will be stronger when both the CEO and AAO are minority group members.

*Conclusion*

Drawing on the literature on leader-member exchange theory and relational demography, we propose that CEO and AAO surface and deep-level characteristics independently and jointly influence both the quality of their working relationship, and the implementation and effectiveness of workplace diversity management practices. Despite the central role that CEOs and AAOs play in spearheading diversity management initiatives, we are unaware of any published studies that have explored nature of their working relationship, or the role of individual difference variables in shaping their ability to effectively implement diversity management practices.

Future research should test our propositions, and determine what combination of CEO and AAO characteristics most contribute to the success of diversity management initiatives. This information can then be used to determine which characteristics are most relevant in selecting senior leaders responsible for diversity management. Exploring the personal attributes and process mechanisms that contribute to effective CEO-AAO working relationships, may also assist in identifying how these relationships may be better cultivated to improve the implementation of diversity practices in organizations. As the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, this research will be useful in that the issues that we have addressed are things that organizations can have some amount of control over. Given our proposition on the potential influence of demographic characteristics, individual differences and the relationship quality between the CEO and AAO, our paper calls for greater attention to identification and selection of CEOs and AAOs who can best advance diversity management in organizations.

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1. We use a generic term “AA Officers” to denote the most senior manager who has responsibility for championing and implementing diversity management. Other titles may include Chief Diversity Officer or Employment Equity Officer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)