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Homan, A.C.; Leslie, L.M.

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Editorial overview: Diversity in organizations – Current insights and future directions

Astrid C. Homan and Lisa M. Leslie

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Astrid C. Homan

University of Amsterdam, Work and Organizational Psychology, PO Box 15919, 1001, NK Amsterdam, the Netherlands

*Corresponding author: Homan, Astrid C.
e-mail: ac.homan@uva.nl



Astrid C. Homan is Professor and Chair of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her research focuses mainly on how to effectively manage diversity in teams and organizations. She also studies norms, deviance, power, and leadership. She is an elected SIOP and APS fellow, and served as Co-Editor of *Organizational Psychology Review* and as Associated Editor at *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Global developments in the last decades have boosted and amplified the importance of research on diversity in organizations. Protests focused on expanding civil and human rights, migration streams, the aging of the workforce, and other trends have resulted in greater diversity in the workplace, including more variety with regard to gender, color, age, national and cultural background, physical and neurological traits, and other characteristics. Due to these societal changes, there is an increasing need to understand how organizations can manage issues associated with diversity, ranging from recruitment and selection to promotion and career development, and from diversity ideologies and cognitions to diversity management and leadership. Understanding the state of the field with regard to these topics is arguably especially important in current times, given the rise of anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) narratives throughout the Western world [e.g., 1,2], resulting in organizations rolling back their DEI initiatives [3]. Within the current Special Issue, we bring together insights on diversity that can aid organizations in obtaining benefits from diversity, while at the same time providing fair and equal opportunities for all.

The literature on diversity in organizations has surged in the last several decades [e.g., 4–6], but has done so in a somewhat fragmented manner. Diversity research has been conducted on a wide variety of topics, but research on the same topic has at times been conducted in different subfields (e.g., organizational versus social psychology [7,8]), and the knowledge and insights from these literature are not always clearly integrated. Our goal in this Special Issue was to bring together recent, cutting-edge research on diversity in organizations and to organize the literature according to five core themes: (1) discrimination, (2) diversity cognitions, (3) diversity in teams, (4) diversity initiatives, and (5) emerging topics. For each theme, we invited experts from different backgrounds to review what we already know, to translate this knowledge to practical tools, and to illuminate what lingering questions and future research directions the field should focus on next.

Lisa M. Leslie

New York University, Stern School of Business, Tisch Hall, 40 W 4th Street, New York, NY, 10012, USA



Lisa M. Leslie is a Professor of Management and Organizations at the Stern School of Business, New York University. She received an A.B. in Social Psychology from Princeton University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the University of Maryland. Her research focuses on diversity in organizations, and specifically understanding why organizational diversity initiatives often produce unintended consequences and what can be done to make them more effective.

Overview of sections and papers

The first section of the Special Issue includes papers on discrimination in the workplace, defined as unequal and unfair treatment of individuals based on their group membership [9,10]. Within this section, the first three papers provide insights on discrimination in the workplace on the basis of the social categories that have received the most research attention. The first paper focuses on racial discrimination, covering its different forms as well as strategies for coping with and reducing it [11]; the second addresses gender discrimination, and specifically the pathways through which both descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes lead to discriminatory treatment [12]; and the third reviews work on perceived age discrimination, detailing its antecedents, consequences, and strategies for mitigating it [13]. In addition to these papers on the nature and sources of discriminatory treatment, this section includes a paper on how individuals with marginalized identities cope with the potential for discriminatory treatment and other threats to their identity [14]. Finally, this section concludes with a paper on discrimination in the specific context of leadership evaluations, discussing how implicit theories of leadership create barriers for members of marginalized groups and how opportunity mindsets might break down these barriers [15]. In all, this section highlights that the causes of discrimination are multifaceted, and that a variety of different approaches are therefore needed to prevent it.

The next section in the Special Issue focuses on how diversity cognitions, which can be broadly defined as beliefs and attitudes regarding how to approach or perceive diversity and its effects [4,16], can be leveraged to prevent discrimination and facilitate other desirable diversity-related outcomes. The first paper focuses on diversity ideologies, which are personal beliefs regarding how diversity should be approached, and reviews work on the well-studied distinction between diversity-blind ideologies (ignoring differences) and diversity-aware ideologies (embracing differences) [17]. The second paper moves from personal to organizational cognitions, by reviewing work on diversity climates, which are beliefs regarding how diversity is approached in an organization, including the degree to which everyone is treated fairly, valued for their input, and included [18]. The third paper similar focuses on cognitions connected to organizations by reviewing work on diversity branding, including the (un)intended consequences of beliefs regarding whether and for what reasons diversity is a valued organizational goal [19]. This section also covers another major theme within diversity cognitions research—perceived inclusion—which is defined as the extent to which individuals believe that their needs for both uniqueness and belongingness are met and has been studied as a property of individual experiences, work units, leaders, and organizational climate [20]. The diversity cognitions section concludes with a paper on mindsets, which reviews work on how cognitions not inherently tied to diversity—specifically possessing a growth mindset (human qualities can change) versus a fixed mindset (human qualities cannot change)—can nevertheless affect motivation to engage in and support diversity initiatives [21]. Across subtopics, a major theme of the papers in this section is that, although they cannot be observed directly, diversity cognitions have significant consequences for diversity-related outcomes.

The third section of the Special Issue shifts from beliefs about diversity to the consequences of diversity itself, and speaks specifically to the effectiveness and management of diversity in team settings. Given that most organizations make use of teamwork and the consequences of diversity are

likely to be directly evident in team settings [22], research on diversity in teams accounts for a large part of the diversity literature. The first paper in this section discusses the processes that explain the potential benefits and detriments of team diversity, as well as the contextual factors shaping which process is most likely to be dominant [23]. The second paper builds on these insights, by stressing the importance of taking into account not only how diverse a team is objectively, but also members' perceptions of the team's diversity, given that perceived diversity may be more proximal in understanding team outcomes [24]. The section on team diversity also covers the special case of top-management teams, which provides a unique team setting in which more macro-contextual factors are relevant to understanding diversity's consequences [25]. Finally, the team diversity section concludes with a paper that reviews recent research on how increasing team gender diversity shapes the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses of members of the majority group, that is, men [26]. Across papers, the section on team diversity highlights that although it is clear that team diversity has implications for team outcomes, the nature of those effects vary considerably across contexts, settings, and outcomes.

The fourth section of the Special Issue shifts focus from the team level to the organizational level by focusing on diversity initiatives, which include a range of policies and practices aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes of members of underrepresented groups. This section begins with an overview of the effectiveness of diversity initiatives, including when and why they are likely to produce both their intended consequences and a variety of detrimental, unintended consequences [27]. The next three papers provide a closer look at diversity initiatives focused on three core elements of human resource management: selection, training, and development. The first of these discusses the implications of different selection systems for both diversity and the validity of the resulting selection decisions [28]; the second covers diversity training and aspects of its implementation that increase the likelihood it will be effective [29]; and the third addresses mentorship as one aspect of employee development that can be used to improve diversity-related outcomes [30]. The diversity initiatives section also covers nudging policies, which are intended to change behavior without limiting choices or changing incentives [31]. Finally, this section concludes with a deeper discussion of the potential downsides of diversity initiatives, and specifically why and when they are likely to evoke resistance [32]. The papers in the diversity initiatives section collectively suggest that diversity initiatives' effectiveness is not necessarily guaranteed, and that these initiatives need to be carefully designed and implemented to achieve their desired effects.

The final section of the special issues includes research on emerging topics. Some of the most recent work on diversity in organizations is advancing a more inclusive research agenda in terms of the characteristics that scholars are focusing on. Therefore, we invited five papers that review research that focuses on marginalized groups that have received comparatively little attention in the literature and detail how their experiences are both similar to that of other groups, as well as how they are unique in terms of struggles, processes, responses, and outcomes. These five papers speak to how individuals with disabilities [33], those who are neurodivergent [34], those identify as LGBTQ + [35], those of comparatively lower social class (i.e., first generation-low income individuals [36]), or those who have a non-standard accent [37], experience biases, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination in the workplace. In addition, a sixth paper focuses on intersectionality, and specifically the notion that it is important to account for the interaction of multiple social categories to fully understand individuals' experiences [38]. Finally, the emergent topics section includes a paper on allyship from the ally's perspective, discussing individual approaches people can take to promoting diversity and how this might influence both proximal and distal outcomes of allies [39]. These emerging topics are by no means exhaustive, but provide a starting point for future research and theorizing.

Overarching themes and future directions

Bringing together these crucial insights into research on diversity provides us with the opportunity to see common goals and themes within and across the different sections. Given the current backlash against DEI, we want to stress statements made by many of our DEI colleagues that it is crucial to understand what DEI means, as well as what are its potential benefits and costs. In terms of the benefits, focusing on DEI provides organizations with the opportunity to ensure fair and equitable procedures for everyone (for recruitment, selection, promotion, career trajectories, etc.) and to obtain the potential benefits of diversity. Incorporating DEI practices might be rightfully driven by moral considerations, but is also justifiable from a business case perspective; focusing on DEI can benefit the bottom line. In terms of the costs, the performance and financial benefits of diversity are not guaranteed, but only emerge under certain conditions [8,22]. Moreover, the perception that DEI initiatives threaten certain groups and individuals from specific backgrounds is pervasive and can cause these initiatives to have detrimental unintended effects [40].

Understanding not only the potential benefits, but also where resistance to and the unintended consequences of DEI come from, is important [27,32]; without a nuanced and comprehensive conversation that includes multiple

perspectives, debates over its usefulness become polarized and difficult to solve. Future research needs to illuminate how to maximize the opportunities associated with diversity and minimize the potential threats [15], as well the conditions under which DEI is likely to be seen as a win–win [41]. The section on diversity cognitions provides excellent ideas on how to approach this issue by stimulating individuals to see diversity in a more positive light [17–21]. The section on diversity interventions can help to understand how to change responses to diversity by using training or nudging techniques [29,31]. Interestingly, the papers on both mentorship and allies suggest that focusing on DEI can stimulate positive outcomes for not only members of marginalized groups, but also for the mentors and allies that support them, and thus speak to win–win solutions [30,39].

Across the sections, the different papers offer varying perspectives on the need for broadening versus narrowing the relevant research topic. Whereas the team diversity literature might significantly benefit from a narrower, less scattered approach [e.g., 23–25], other topics have had a narrower focus, including the literature on marginalized identity management, diversity climate, mindsets, and nudge approaches to diversity initiatives, prompting the relevant authors to call for a broader outlook on the topic at hand [e.g., 14,18,21,31]. The need for broadening is also apparent in the emergent topics section, which highlights the need to study a wider array of marginalized groups and the intersectional effects of multiple social group memberships [33–38]. Whereas narrowing a field might be especially helpful from the standpoint of theoretical refinement (aiming for parsimony in theoretical explanations), practical questions and goals might benefit more from expanding the scope. Given the complexity and nuance associated with diversity in organizations, one-size-fits all solutions are less likely to be effective than solutions that are context-dependent.

A final theme that is evident across the different papers, is that DEI is inherently a multilevel concept, ranging from individual experiences and behaviors to interpersonal and group interactions to more macro organizational and societal contexts. Whereas some papers speak specifically to these issues [e.g., 11,17–20,24,26,28,32], others imply that more research is required to further our understanding with regards to how the nestedness of individuals in teams and teams in organizations (and organizations in society) shapes the development and effectiveness of, and responses to, diversity [e.g., 12,13,19,30]. A related issue is that diversity is in the eye of the self as well as in the eye of the beholder. As such, the question is whether objective diversity is a reality, as it depends on whether it is salient and

perceived by others [24] as well as internalized and/or disclosed [e.g., 14,33–35]. Whether or not diversity is salient or disclosed, is shaped by diversity cognitions and interventions. Future efforts to understand diversity in organizations from multiple levels and perspectives are likely needed to fully understand the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Our goals in editing this special issue were to bring together the most recent work on diversity in organizations, to organize this literature into a set of coherent subtopics, and to generate and inspire future work in this domain. We also hope that bringing this body of work together gives readers an appreciation of the complexity associated with diversity in organizations, including both its benefits and why it is often resisted. A nuanced understanding and critical discussion of the topic is crucial for moving away from the polarized views that currently dominate the popular press and finding ways to foster diversity while ensuring fairness for all groups.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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