Case Report

Multicultural meritocracy: The synergistic benefits of valuing diversity *and* merit[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations employ diversity initiatives, such as diversity mission statements, in order to effectively recruit and manage a diverse workforce. One approach emphasizes multiculturalism, which focuses on the acknowledgement and celebration of racial diversity. Multiculturalism has been found to produce greater inclusion by racial majorities and increased psychological engagement of racial minorities, but has also been linked to negative outcomes among Whites, from feelings of exclusion to greater stereotyping to perceiving racial discrimination claims as less valid. Another approach—value-in-merit—emphasizes a commitment to equal opportunity and meritocratic outcomes. The value-in-merit approach has been found to alleviate majority members' fear about exclusion but could create a threatening environment for minorities. We propose a hybrid approach—multicultural meritocracy—which combines the value-in-diversity elements of multiculturalism with the equal opportunity components of a value-in-merit ideology. We hypothesized that this integrative presentation would be a more effective approach for organizations than its constituent parts. Five studies demonstrated that the hybrid ideology of multicultural meritocracy limits the negative effects while retaining the positive impacts of the separate approaches. Compared to traditional multiculturalism, multicultural meritocracy reduced stereotype activation and de-legitimization of racial discrimination claims for Whites. Multicultural meritocracy also increased the psychological engagement of *both* racial minorities and Whites. Furthermore, we found that this increased engagement was driven by multicultural meritocracy increasing feelings of inclusion for both groups. Multicultural meritocracy offers an approach to diversity that benefits all members, both majority and minority, of a group.

As organizations face increased racial diversity in their employee pools, they need to find the most effective ways to maximize the gains and minimize the pains associated with increased diversity (Galinsky et al., 2015). Increased racial diversity can produce higher levels of innovation, more novel perspectives and improved performance than racial homogeneity (Barta, Kleiner, & Neuman, 2012; Homan, Van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; Page, 2007). However, increased diversity is also associated with increased conflict, less efficient coordination and can produce worse performance (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004). Accordingly, companies employ diversity structures and initiatives both to attract racially diverse groups of people and to create organizational environments where employees of all different races and ethnicities can work together effectively.

Among the most frequently utilized initiatives are diversity ideologies (Apfelbaum, Stephens, & Reagans, 2016; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). Often embedded in a mission statement, these ideologies represent organizations' approach to diversity and set the stage for the organizational norms and values around diversity. We conducted an exploratory analysis of the top 50 Fortune 500 companies and found that all, without an exception, had diversity initiatives or statements in place in 2016. Given this prevalence in organizations, it remains crucial to investigate how White and minority individuals respond to different types of diversity approaches.

Traditionally, two dominant diversity ideologies have been identified: *Multiculturalism,* with a focus on acknowledging and celebrating racial differences, and *colorblindness,* which focuses on deemphasizing racial differences. A more recently introduced alternative to these ideologies, which we label *value-in-merit,* emphasizes equal opportunity and how individuals can expect uniform treatment and rewards based

on competence regardless of their racial background (Apfelbaum et al., 2016). Interestingly, the existing literature indicates that all three diversity ideologies have clear downsides, which limit their effectiveness in capturing the benefits of diversity. In the current research, we set out to explore whether an integration of the multiculturalism and value-in-merit ideologies—multicultural meritocracy—could produce a more effective ideology for both minorities and Whites.

1. Diversity ideologies

Empirical work on diversity ideologies suggests that multiculturalism is a more effective ideology for intergroup relations than colorblindness (Rattan & Ambady, 2013). Under multiculturalism, Whites report more positive evaluations of out-groups (Verkuyten, 2005), have reduced levels of implicit bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), and show reduced ingroup favoritism tendencies (Curtois & Herman, 2015) than under colorblindness. Minorities report increased psychological engagement in multicultural rather than colorblind organizational contexts (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). By creating a pro-diversity climate, multiculturalism can enhance minorities' leadership self-efficacy and goal-pursuits (Gündemir, Dovidio, Homan, & De Dreu, 2017).

Yet the multicultural ideology is not a panacea since it can produce its own negative outcomes. Multiculturalism can increase Whites' stereotype activation (Wolsko et al., 2000) and increase the desire for minorities to conform to existing stereotypes (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). Under a multicultural mindset, Whites perceive more intergroup differences with racial minorities (Wolsko et al., 2000) and can feel more excluded and threatened (Norton & Sommers, 2011; Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Moreover, research shows that participants perceive the organizations endorsing multiculturalism as fundamentally more fair toward minorities than colorblindness, which can conceal racial discrimination within an organization and delegitimize claims of discrimination (Gündemir & Galinsky, 2017).

Apfelbaum et al. (2016) recently identified an alternative approach that organizations take, which emphasizes the principle of meritocracy, i.e., individuals are hired and promoted based purely on competence. This value-in-merit ideology shows some parallels with the colorblind ideology, as both de-emphasize racial diversity. However, value-in-merit differs from conventional colorblindness by its explicit focus on equal opportunity rather than a tendency to overlook differences. Apfelbaum et al. (2016) found that this value-in-merit approach can, under some circumstances, overcome racial minorities' negative responses to traditional colorblind approaches.

However, solely meritocratic approaches are likely to carry a critical flaw that can undermine their effectiveness. Joshi (2014) proposed that a purely meritocratic approach ignores institutionalized barriers that impede underrepresented groups' career progress and can decrease inclusion of racial minorities in organizations. A fair meritocracy requires a level playing field and minorities could see a focus on meritocracy as ignoring societal bias.

Based on the prior literature, we propose that colorblindness does not serve as an effective strategy because its short-term benefits, like those of stereotype suppression (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Todd & Galinsky, 2012), tend to reverse and rebound in the long-term, yielding higher levels of bias (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008). Although the remaining two diversity approaches appear to be more promising, they each produce negative effects that can counteract their beneficial ones. The question then arises whether it is possible to integrate the best features of these ideologies.

2. Multicultural meritocracy

We propose that integrating multiculturalism with value-in-merit may be an effective way for organizations to approach diversity. We believe that this integrative approach can meet two core needs of individuals in

organizational contexts: belongingness and inclusion needs, on the one hand, and the need for justice and fairness on the other.

First, individuals have a motivation for socially belonging to or being included in groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In organizational settings, minorities are especially sensitive to social inclusion issues (Shore et al., 2011). Multicultural meritocracy's explicit acknowledgement and celebration of diversity, can address minorities' needs for recognition of their identity, increasing their feelings of inclusion. However, a solely multiculturalist approach is associated with feelings of social exclusion in Whites (Plaut et al., 2011), as they may be concerned that "diversity" is only associated with minority and underrepresented groups (Unzueta & Binning, 2010). An explicit inclusion of a commitment to meritocracy into a multicultural approach could reduce Whites' experiences of exclusion and threat by broadening diversity statement's reach to include elements that more universally apply to a variety of employee groups.

Second, individuals have a need for fair treatment by their organizations. An unintended consequence of multicultural approaches is that the sole focus on promoting diversity may be viewed as undermining merit considerations (Walton, Spencer, & Erman, 2013), raising fairness concerns in White perceivers. Procedural fairness over the allocation of valued resources is especially crucial for employees' perceptions of and reactions toward their organizations (Martin & Bennett, 1996). Multicultural meritocracy can help reduce these fairness concerns of White perceivers by making merit an explicit consideration of a diversity framework. For minorities, multicultural meritocracy can be more effective than value-in-merit in addressing fairness needs, since a sole focus on merit may be perceived as ignoring bias and discrimination minority employees may face. Thus, integrating multicultural elements into a meritocracy message could create more favorable outcomes arise through increased fairness perceptions.

3. Overview

We conducted five experiments to investigate how multicultural meritocracy affects well-established effects from previous research. Our hypotheses focused on how the different ideologies address the inclusion and fairness concerns of Whites and of minorities. For Whites, we predicted that multicultural meritocracy would be more effective than multiculturalism because it addresses both their inclusion and fairness needs not met by multiculturalism. For minorities, we predicted that multicultural meritocracy would be more effective than value-in-merit by addressing the inclusion and fairness needs not met by value-in-merit. Thus, our main comparison for Whites was between multicultural meritocracy and multiculturalism, and our main comparison for minorities was between multicultural meritocracy and value-in-merit.

The first two studies focused on whether multicultural meritocracy can reduce some of the negative effects of multiculturalism for Whites by measuring stereotype activation (Experiment 1) and the delegitimization of racial discrimination claims (Experiment 2). Experiment 3 investigated whether multicultural meritocracy would the psychological engagement of minorities compared to the value-in-merit approach (Experiment 3). Studies 4a and 4b explored whether multicultural meritocracy would increase engagement for both Whites and minorities by increasing perceived inclusion and fairness.

We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the main text or the supplementary materials. We determined the minimum number of participants per cell at 53–82 based on small to medium effect sizes (f) = 0.20–0.25, α = 0.05, and power = 0.80 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Across studies, the sample size was not extended after initial analysis.

4. Experiment 1: Whites' stereotype activation and application

Experiment 1 tested the effect of diversity ideologies on stereotype activation in Whites. Pioneering work by Wolsko et al. (2000) found