



## Past, present, and potential future of team diversity research: From compositional diversity to emergent diversity



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### ABSTRACT

We review research in team diversity to take stock of the current state of the science, the trajectory that led to this state, and a potential way forward that would lead to more integrative theory in diversity research. We outline how diversity research has developed into the current state of the science with growing consensus on key mediating processes in the diversity-performance relationship and growing consensus that this relationship is contingent on moderating influences. We see important challenges in moving the field forward in two key areas: first, in integrating diversity research with its emphasis on diversity in relatively stable attributes – *trait diversity* – with research in more state-like composition variables – *state diversity*; second, in integrating research in compositional diversity with research on *emergent diversity* – diversity in team interaction processes and team emergent states. We propose that meeting these challenges will result in more broad-ranging theory that has for instance the potential to bridge research in team diversity and individual-team dissimilarity (relational demography).

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### 1. Introduction

Two interrelated trends have unalterably changed organizational work over the past fifty years. On the one hand, work is increasingly organized in team-based structures, taking advantage of the increased potential of teams to leverage synergies and address complex and dynamic tasks and challenges (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Mathieu, Hollenbeck, van Knippenberg, & Ilgen, in press). On the other hand, demographic changes in the workforce, employee mobility, and growing specialization are rendering societies and organizations more and more heterogeneous (Jackson & Joshi, 2011; Mor Barak & Travis, 2013). These two trends are interrelated insofar as many of the benefits associated with team-based work – the ability to mobilize a greater range of informational resources in pursuit of synergistic benefits to decision making, problem solving, flexibility, creativity, and innovation – in fact call for teams whose members bring diverse knowledge, expertise, information, and perspectives to the table. Thus, team diversity – whether by design or as a consequence of societal change – increasingly is a reality of

organizational life. These developments make an understanding of the effects of team diversity on team performance more relevant than ever before.

To assess where we stand in our understanding of team diversity effects, we provide a review in broad strokes of research on team diversity effects on team process and performance. We do this both with an eye on the historical development of the field and with an eye on the future development of the field. Space constraints make an exhaustive review not feasible, but we can anchor our review on three earlier reviews that build upon each other and allow us to paint a picture of the historic development of team diversity research. The first of these reviews is the seminal review by Williams and O'Reilly (1998) that captured the first 40 years of diversity research in organizational behavior. This review forms something of a watershed in that the work they reviewed was largely characterized by main effect approaches yielding inconsistent results, whereas work after their review increasingly engaged with moderation and mediation in team diversity effects on team performance. The second of the three reviews is van Knippenberg and Schippers' (2007) review that was explicitly pitched to follow up on the Williams and O'Reilly review. This review put a premium on the study of moderation in the team diversity-team performance relationship – a conclusion confirmed by the most comprehensive meta-analysis of the diversity-performance relationship to

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**Table 1**  
Three forms of diversity.

Diversity form	Definition	Examples	Potential causal relation with other forms
Trait diversity	Variation in team member stable characteristics	Gender diversity Personality diversity	Potential cause of state diversity and emergent diversity
State diversity	Variation in team member malleable characteristics defined independently from the team and/or team processes	Distributed information Preference diversity	Potential cause of emergent diversity
Emergent diversity	Variation in team processes and psychological states defined in reference to the team	Diversity of dyadic interactions Diversity (low sharedness) of team cognition	

date (van Dijk, van Engen, & van Knippenberg, 2012). The third review by Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, and West (2015) arguably is the successor of the van Knippenberg and Schippers review. These authors framed their review around van Knippenberg and Schippers' earlier call for a focus on moderation and prioritized moderation evidence in their review of the field. It is also the most recent review of the diversity field at the time of writing. This set-up allows us to present a representative picture of well over 50 years of research on team diversity and team performance culminating in what we propose are two important but so far underrepresented conclusions.

First, team diversity research in practice is the study of what we might call *trait diversity* – diversity in stable characteristics such as demographic background, functional or educational background, or personality. It has drawn little on research on what might be called *state diversity* – differences in more malleable attributes such as decision preferences (Davis, 1973), task-relevant information (Stasser & Titus, 1985), or moods (George, 1996). Variation in such attributes can be treated as a composition variable in that such attributes are defined independently from the team and differences are typically present at the onset of the teamwork. Yet, such attributes are malleable in the sense that they cannot be assumed to stay the same during team interaction. Whereas the streams of research that speak to how such state diversity influences team process and performance are not typically linked to trait diversity research, they hold valuable lessons from which the latter can benefit. Seeing trait diversity as precursor to state diversity is a reasonable jumping off point to integrate insights from the two research traditions into more sophisticated models of team process and performance.

Second, team diversity research has largely neglected the possibility that diversity in team composition may result in diversity in team process and states that are defined in reference to the team (e.g., team cognition; Salas & Fiore, 2004) – what we call “emergent diversity” here. Indeed, there is a longstanding tradition in research in groups and teams (terms we use interchangeably; see also Kozłowski & Bell, 2003) to treat group/team processes as largely homogeneous in the sense that all members experience them and participate in them roughly equally (see, e.g., Ilgen et al., 2005; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Donsbach, & Alliger, 2014; for major reviews of this literature). It is this perspective that thus far has predominantly guided research linking team diversity to team processes (e.g., van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Yet, the recent years have seen a surge of interest in conceptions of team processes as not necessarily homogeneous or homogeneously perceived patterns of member interactions and relations (Crawford & LePine, 2013; Humphrey & Aime, 2014), which is a perspective that we expect to find strong resonance in future team diversity research. Diversity theory and research in particular points to the possibility of heterogeneity in team process, but such heterogeneity need not be uniquely diversity-driven. In that sense, the conclusions from our review have implications for research in groups and teams

more broadly in championing the study of heterogeneity of team process to complement the dominant focus on homogeneous team processes.

To provide an “anchor” for the following review, Table 1 captures these notions of trait, state, and emergent diversity with illustrative examples. Note that the notions of trait, state, and emergent diversity differ from distinctions previously used such as deep-level versus surface-level diversity (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998) and job-related versus demographic diversity (Webber & Donahue, 2001): Trait diversity includes both easily discernable (i.e., surface-level) attributes such as demographics (i.e., demographic diversity) and far less discernable (i.e., deep-level) attributes such as personality, and can also reflect what are typically seen as job-related attributes such as formal education. In a related vein, neither state diversity nor emergent diversity overlaps completely with any of these previously suggested categorizations. Considering how these previous categorizations have not helped much in capturing diversity effects (van Dijk et al., 2012), we see more hope for the distinctions proposed here.

Importantly, a closer look at emergent diversity in team interaction patterns and emergent states also suggests that it pays off for diversity research to look beyond diversity as a team characteristic and to seek greater integration with research in relational demography – individual dissimilarity to the team (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Incorporating insights about how individual members' (dis) similarity to their teammates influences the patterns of emergent diversity that may be observed may help further explain diversity influences on team performance.

## 2. Team diversity, team process, team performance: a review in broad strokes

Team diversity refers to variation among team members on any attribute on which individuals may differ, such as demographic background, functional or educational background, and personality. In principle this could also include diversity on more state-like attributes like cognition and emotions (an issue we revisit later), but in practice the term diversity tends to be largely reserved for relatively stable attributes like demographics, education, functional area, and personality. The vast majority of diversity studies concentrates on diversity in gender, cultural background (including race/ethnicity), age, tenure, functional background, and educational background (van Dijk et al., 2012) – attributes that are stable enough to see them as characteristics individuals bring to the team and that will not change in the course of the teamwork. The question that then arises quite naturally is how team diversity as a team composition variable (an “input” variable; Ilgen et al., 2005) may affect team performance, and, related to that question, which mediating process may explain diversity influences on performance.

We aim to capture the answers as they arose throughout the history of diversity research in broad strokes by focusing on the state of the science at the time of three major reviews of the

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