A historical perspective on diversity ideologies in the United States: Reflections on human resource management research and practice ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We examine diversity ideologies in the United States across four distinct eras: White supremacy/sanctioned exclusion of racioethnic minorities before the 1960s, the equal opportunity–Civil Rights era of the 1960s, the diversity management/multiculturalism era of the 1980s and 90s, and today's inclusion/post-race era. Our examination provides insight into how changes in societal beliefs and attitudes about non-dominant racioethnic groups and their status and incorporation into society have influenced the trajectory of diversity practice and research. Based on a content analysis of HRM articles published on diversity from 2000 to 2011 and demographic trends, we speculate on the next era of diversity in HRM.

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When human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners use words such as diversity, discrimination, multiculturalism, demography, and inclusion, these terms are often fuzzy in meaning, and vary depending on the geographical, cultural, political, and organizational context. The purpose of this paper is to present a United States historical perspective on racioethnic[2] diversity in the workplace and, specifically HRM researchers' treatment of this topic in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, in order to understand the progression of HRM's approach to diversity unto present day, and to speculate on a future diversity paradigm. We present diversity research and practice from four distinct eras: the White supremacy and the sanctioned exclusion of racioethnic minorities' era before the 1960s, the equal opportunity–Civil Rights era of the 1960s, the diversity management/multiculturalism era of the 1980s and 90s, and today's inclusion/post-race era.

Some would argue that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in the United States was the beginning of the research and practice of diversity in organizations (Nkomo & Stewart, 2006). Yet others point to 1987 and the publication of *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the Twenty-First Century* (Johnston & Packer, 1987). Thomas' 1990 article in the *Harvard Business Review* is viewed as one of the earliest treatments of managing diversity from a practitioner perspective. While the significance of these milestones cannot be denied, from a historical perspective, both assertions are not fully accurate. Issues of difference and employee diversity in the

workplace have a history that predates both events. Our contention is that to contemplate the future of diversity, and to understand the current language used in the discussion of equality in the workplace, it is essential to understand both the historical ontology (i.e. how has diversity been defined and what groups have been included?) and epistemology (i.e. what questions have been asked in the research?). A full understanding requires going beyond chronological evolution. As part of taking stock of the historical perspective of diversity, it is necessary to review the dominant ideologies that have influenced diversity scholarship over this time period in the United States. Specifically, we focus on the concept of *diversity ideology*, that is, societal beliefs and attitudes about non-dominant racioethnic groups, their status, and how they should be incorporated into the society or nation (Hahn, Judd, & Park, 2010; Plaut, 2010b).

1. Importance of context and history

In the last few years, scholars in the field of organizational behavior and HRM have increasingly called for greater attention to context in conducting and reporting research (Johns, 2001). Johns (2001, p. 34) implored researchers to pay attention to substantive and methodological context, which serve as a counterpoint to a focus on a single level of analysis to explain anomalous organizational phenomena. Context refers to stimuli and phenomena that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual, most often at different levels of analysis (Mowday & Sutton, 1993, p. 198). An important aspect of context is history, which has not always been well incorporated into the field of HRM despite a growing recognition of the importance of management history (Wrege, Greenwood, & Hata, 1999). Historical context consists of the political, social, cultural, and economic situations that envelope a particular idea or event. Time and place infuse ideas and events with meaning. The general availability of texts on labor, business, and management history as well as a journal devoted to the latter, the *Journal of Management History*, all provide excellent sources for the incorporation of history in HRM scholarship.

The criticism of ahistoricity can also be made specifically about the study of diversity. Diversity scholars have been relatively silent about the historical roots of racioethnic diversity, failing to acknowledge its genesis in the early days of the industrialization of America. Workplace diversity has been too often positioned as a new occurrence in organizations despite the fact that the history of labor and work in the United States suggests otherwise (cf. Cooke, 2003; Kurowski, 2002). While there are excellent recent reviews of diversity scholarship (e.g., Avery, 2011; Shore et al., 2009), most are ahistorical and do not make explicit linkages to the very early presence of diverse groups in the early 20th century workplace and how this was addressed/managed. To achieve the latter, we employ the concept of *diversity ideology*. The concept of ideology has been used in many different ways and in various disciplines ranging from political ideology to gender ideology. Generally, an ideology refers to a type of belief system (Seliger, 1976). According to Van Dijk (2000, p. 94), ideological belief systems are not only cognitive but also social and are defined for certain social groups. In other words, ideologies are forms of shared, societal cognition that are fluid and dynamic (Van Dijk, 2000).

Drawing from these general views of ideology, we use the term diversity ideology in this paper to refer to societal beliefs and attitudes about non-dominant racioethnic groups, their status, and how they should be incorporated into the society or nation. Reference to diversity ideologies is not new. Deaux, Reid, Martin, and Bikmen (2006) examined the effect of the endorsement of social ideologies that support or undermine the position of one's ethnic group on a person's orientation toward collective action. Social dominance theory has been used in some diversity scholarship to make predictions about the relationship between certain ideologies and identification with a group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Plaut (2002, p. 85) used the term "models of diversity" to make the observation that such models "represent implicit and explicit systems of ideas, meanings and practices that suggest how groups should include and accommodate one another and how to best organize a diverse society." Plaut (2010b) called for diversity scholars to be more explicit in analyzing how these models of diversity help explain current practices and responses to difference.

Our analysis explores how external forces shaped the dominant racial and ethnic ideologies in the United States over the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. We examine how ideological shifts inform the move from condoned, overtly discriminatory HRM practices, to affirmative action and equal opportunity, to multiculturalism and valuing diversity, to inclusion and post-race thinking. As part of this process we name some of the drivers of these ideological changes. To do this we draw upon several theoretical frameworks. Most notably, from a racial perspective, we call on Omi and Winant's (1986, p. 55) racial formation theory in which they argue: "The meaning, transformation, and significance of racial theories are shaped by actual existing race relations in any given historical period." We incorporate Banton's (1987) theorizing that within any given historical period there exists competing racial and ethnic paradigms. But, within a certain period, one particular racial and ethnic theory may dominate. So prevailing racioethnic ideologies provide society with a framework for understanding the meaning of race and ethnicity and serve to guide scholars in terms of the questions addressed in research as well as to guide practitioners in the management of race and ethnicity in the workplace.

We use a variety of evidence drawn from the literature on the evolution of HRM, the history of immigrant and racioethnic workers in the U.S. labor force, management history, and reviews of diversity management scholarship. As well, because consensus has not yet emerged on how to classify the types of diversity research being undertaken in the present era, we report the results of a content analysis of HRM articles published on diversity topics from 2000 to 2011 in the leading six academic HRM journals; this analysis was undertaken to ascertain the current focus of diversity research in the first decade of the 21st century. Finally, looking at national and global demographic and political trends, we speculate on what the next era of diversity in HRM may bring.