Members of high-status groups are threatened by pro-diversity organizational messages☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Pro-diversity (vs. neutral) messages seem unfair to whites, not minorities.
- White men underwent a hiring scenario at a pro-diversity (vs. neutral) company.
- We measured cardiovascular threat, discrimination concerns, interview impressions.
- More threat & concerns, worse impressions in pro-diversity (vs. neutral) company
- Findings were not moderated by several individual difference variables.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Members of high-status groups may perceive pro-diversity messages from organizations as threatening to their group's status. Two initial studies ($N = 322$) demonstrate that when imagining applying for a job, whites—and not ethnic/racial minorities—expressed more concerns about being treated unfairly and about anti-white discrimination when the company mentioned (vs. did not mention) its pro-diversity values. In a third experiment, white men ($N = 77$) participated in a hiring simulation. Participants applying to the pro-diversity company exhibited greater cardiovascular threat, expressed more concerns about being discriminated against, and made a poorer impression during the interview relative to white men applying to a neutral company. These effects were not moderated by individual differences in racial identification, racial attitudes, or system fairness beliefs. These findings suggest that high-status identities may be more sensitive to identity threats than commonly assumed, and that this sensitivity is robust to differences in higher-order beliefs and attitudes.

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"*Our diversity makes us a better company, a stronger company, by bringing in fresh ideas, perspectives, experiences and life responsibilities, and by fostering a truly collaborative workplace.*" — (Ford Motor Company, 2014)

1. Introduction

Organizational diversity messages—like the message from Ford Motor Company above—are often designed to be non-controversial, positive, vague, and inclusive (see Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001). Pro-diversity messages have become ubiquitous in the US, appearing on company websites, promotional materials, and recruitment campaigns (Dobbin, 2009). Remarkably, almost no research has examined the effects of these messages on actual or prospective employees. While these messages may have positive implications for lower-status groups such as women and ethnic minorities (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008), their implications for high-status groups (i.e., groups that tend to be favored or advantaged in society, such as whites and men) are less clear. The current research examined how whites respond to imagined and simulated job interviews at companies with or without pro-diversity messages in their recruitment materials. We predicted that white job applicants would be *threatened* when applying to work for a company that promoted diversity, as evidenced by self-reported concerns about unfair and anti-white treatment, cardiovascular reactivity, and impressions conveyed during an interview. See Table 1

2. High-status groups and diversity

American society generally regards the principle of diversity positively (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Yet

Table 1
Correlations between individual difference variables.

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Identity centrality	—						
2. Private regard	.33**	—					
3. Modern racism	−.02	.11	—				
4. Internal motivation	−.29**	−.09	−.12	—			
5. External motivation	.13	−.001	−.15	.05	—		
6. System-justifying beliefs	.21+	.35**	.26*	−.17	−.04***	—	
7. Discrimination experiences	−.04	.02	.06	−.09	.15	.10	—
Mean	3.31	5.66	2.15	5.25	4.22	3.82	3.70
Standard deviation	1.45	1.03	0.59	0.98	1.26	0.89	1.84

Note. All items measured on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales, except Modern Racism (1 *strongly disagree*–5 *strongly agree*).

  + $p < .10$.
  * $p < .05$.
 ** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

several recent lines of research converge to suggest that prospective employees that are members of high-status groups may respond negatively to companies that promote the value of diversity because they see efforts to foster diversity as coming at the expense of individuals such as themselves (e.g., Eibach & Keegan, 2006). Many whites in the U.S. view racism as "zero-sum," in which less bias against minorities means more bias against whites (Norton & Sommers, 2011). And for many whites, perceptions of status gains for minorities lead to increased perceptions of anti-white bias (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Thus, to the extent that diversity messages imply that low-status groups will be treated well (Kaiser et al., 2013), they may also imply that high-status groups will be treated poorly.

White North Americans also tend to respond negatively to the idea of increasingly diverse societies: after learning about increasing (vs. unchanging) demographic diversity, whites show greater fear and anger toward minority groups (Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012), greater implicit and explicit bias against racial and ethnic minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2014), and increased concern with their group's position in society (Danbold & Huo, 2014). These studies suggest that pro-diversity messages may prompt a threat to group-status. In other words, messages emphasizing the importance or presence of diversity may lead members of high-status groups to worry that their status, influence, and position in the hierarchy is under threat. That is, organizational efforts to promote diversity may be seen as a threat to the dominance of traditionally high-status groups.

Additional evidence for the possibility that high-status groups find pro-diversity messages threatening comes from research assessing responses to multicultural ideologies (which emphasize the importance of group differences) versus colorblind ideologies (which downplay the importance of group differences; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000).[1] Although many whites endorse the idea of multiculturalism (e.g., Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007) and some research has found positive effects of priming multicultural ideologies (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), other research suggests that some whites respond to multicultural (vs. colorblind) messages with antagonistic and stereotypic attitudes about minority groups (Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010). Whites also implicitly associate multicultural messages with exclusion more than inclusion (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011), suggesting that high-status groups may feel excluded by organizations with pro-diversity messages.

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[1] Multicultural ideologies are similar to pro-diversity messages in that they both discuss the importance of bringing together people of different backgrounds and experiences. However, it should be noted that most modern organizational diversity messages utilize both multicultural ideologies (e.g., "we should celebrate our differences") and colorblind ideologies (e.g., "at the end of the day, we are all the same").

Within the context of organizations, previous work has demonstrated that the presence (vs. absence) of diversity policies leads whites and men to regard claims of discrimination from minorities and women as less legitimate (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2014; Kaiser et al., 2013). Whether diversity policies also increase the likelihood that high-status groups will perceive more ("reverse") discrimination against their own groups has yet to be examined.

3. Current research

Based on the above research, we hypothesized that organizational messages promoting the value of diversity would be threatening to whites, leading to increased concerns about discrimination and unfair treatment, as well as cardiovascular and behavioral responses consistent with threat. Few studies have examined how whites respond to situations where they feel threatened because of their race. In contrast, many studies have examined how women and minorities respond to situations where they feel vulnerable to being a target of discrimination. These latter studies show that such contexts elicit a host of negative responses consistent with threat, including hypervigilance, avoidance, underperformance, and stress (Mendoza-Denton, Shaw-Taylor, Chen, & Chang, 2009; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005; Steele, 1997; Townsend, Major, Gangi, & Mendes, 2011). The current research investigated whether members of high-status groups show threat in response to a company's assertion that it values diversity. We expected whites applying to (or anticipating applying to) a pro-diversity (vs. neutral) company would report increased concerns about being treated unfairly, and would perceive higher likelihood of discrimination against whites and lower likelihood of discrimination against minorities. In contrast, we predicted that members of lower-status, non-white groups (i.e., Blacks, Latinos) would *not* perceive pro-diversity companies as unfair or biased against whites. We also expected whites participating in a simulated job interview for a pro-diversity (vs. neutral) company to show a physiological threat profile and make a less favorable impression during a job interview.

This research makes several novel and important contributions to the literature. First, previous studies of whites' reactions to diversity have typically manipulated diversity-related information with abstract, general, or decontextualized statements about society (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2014; Outten et al., 2012; Kaiser et al., 2013; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014; Wolsko et al., 2000). In contrast, the current study measured reactions to diversity cues using realistic recruitment materials (Studies 1, 2, & 3) and in the context of an ongoing, realistic, and engaging hiring simulation (Study 3).

Second, most research on whites' reactions to diversity has examined group-level beliefs, including whites' beliefs about and attitudes toward social groups or perceptions of bias against whites as a group (e.g., Morrison et al., 2010; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014; Wolsko et al., 2000). Here, we examined the impact of pro-diversity messages on white job applicants' physiological reactions and nonverbal behavior, as well as their concerns about their own *personal* treatment and outcomes.

Third, in Study 3 we used a novel measure of threat that has been extensively validated in past research—patterns of cardiovascular reactivity (CVR). Cardiovascular measures obtained to assess physiological threat are dominated largely by the automatic activation of distinct physiological systems and are ideal for assessing the motivational state of individuals in demanding and evaluative contexts. Using CVR not only allows us to assess psychological states that are difficult or impossible to measure via self-report, but also allows us to investigate whether pro-diversity messages "get under the skin" to elicit maladaptive cardiovascular profiles among whites in a realistic hiring scenario.

4. Studies 1 & 2

Two initial experiments assessed self-reported responses to recruitment materials from companies that had pro-diversity (vs. neutral)