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THE COLORBLIND CONUNDRUM: WHEN RHETORIC AND BEHAVIOR ARE NOT ALIGNED IN WORKGROUPS

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Abstract

Two models of cultural difference have been promulgated in diversity training and literature resulting in two contrasting rhetorical positions on diversity. Differences are seen, on the one hand, as the cause of problems in the workplace; the solution is to train people to recognize and understand, even appreciate differences. This approach could be called the "learning model" and is represented by a common ideology that "we all learn and grow from our differences". The contrasting view suggests that cultural category recognition is the cause of intercultural conflict; differences are a problem when they evoke the perception of category and set in motion the undesirable outgroup evaluations and stereotyping. In this case, not noticing differences, or "colorblindness," is seen as improving intergroup relations. This study examines the relationship between these two rhetorical models and workgroup interactions. For those in lower level workgroups, positive interactions in diverse workgroups are both associated with Colorblindness and with attitudes that Learning from difference is important. Further, in lower level workgroups, the two rhetorical positions seem to coexist despite their logical inconsistency. Those in higher level workgroups demonstrate little or no relationship between these attitudes and harmonious workgroup interactions, nor do their positions regarding Colorblindness and Learning correlate. Possible explanations for these interesting findings are discussed, including "diversity rhetoric burnout," organizational development models, and workgroup diversity climate.

Cultural differences in the workplace are purported by some to be the cause of much conflict and reduced productivity, while others suggest that diversity holds the potential for greater productivity, customer sensitivity, and improved decision-

making power.   The arguments for these widely differing predictions for a culturally diverse workforce are roughly based on two very different viewpoints about how diversity affects perceptions, attitudes, and consequently, interactions on the job.

<u>Actual Differences</u>

The first camp focuses on actual cultural group differences (as represented in demographic differences) and emphasizes the experience of individuals encountering these differences in interaction (Ferdman, 1992; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). This view presupposes that racioethnic differences (i.e., racial and/or ethnic demographic differences) produce problematic differences in worldview or the expression of views in conversation. The differences are experienced to the degree that individuals adhere to or express themselves as members of a cultural group and that the cultural groups represented in interaction are different enough in orientation or identity to produce such conflict or misunderstanding. Differences are often defined in terms of a variety of dimensions such as individualism/collectivism, instrumental/relational, and high/low context, just to name a few (although most proponents of this view acknowledge intragroup variation) (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1984; Kim & Paulk, 1994; Philips, 1987).   Others have described differences in more descriptive accounts of cultural variability in communication style, meaning, expectations and rules for interaction (Banks, 1987; Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986; Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 1990; Shuter, 1982; Wood, 1986).

 In workgroup settings, it is proposed that these differences may translate to wholesale difficulty in communication and disjointed group processes, particularly if cultural assumptions (whether racioethnic or gender based) about how work should proceed are different (Akinnaso & Ajirotutu, 1982; Fine, 1991; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990; Shaw, 1990).   Following upon the assumption that the differences are the cause of the problems (i.e., disagreements or misunderstandings) the solution suggested for workplace conflict is to train people to understand and value the differences. Once understood, diversity is seen as potentially promoting a variety of ideas and enhanced group problem-solving ability and creativity, and an enhanced sensitivity to a diverse customer base (Cox & Blake, 1991; Grant, 1988). Proponents of this view suggest that training individuals to understand more about culture and gender differences will alleviate the negative responses and support the positive (Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983; Ferdman 1992; Geber, 1990; Loden & Rosener, 1991; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).

<u>Intergroup Perceptions and Categorization Processes</u>

Another theoretical camp focuses not on the differences themselves, but rather on the categorization and subsequent ingroup/outgroup dynamics that occur when

group boundaries are evoked. This sociostructural view suggests that interactions in diverse workgroups are characterized by awareness or salience of the interaction being a between-group encounter (Allport, 1954; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). From this view, intergroup or social level problems are seen to occur either because limited experience with outgroup members leads to dependence on stereotyping in social perception or because group differences are perceived as markers of outgroup membership. Simply put, any evident cues of group membership (e.g., being told one is part of a group, given a label, or noticing physical or language-use differences) is enough for people to notice the outgroup status of the other and establish identity with their own group, perceiving their own group as better than the other (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Condor & Brown, 1988; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Neuberg, 1987)). Added to this dynamic are the historical, social patterns that assign status, institutionalize roles, and link evaluation to group membership (Feagin & Feagin, 1988; Shulman & Darity).

<u>We All Learn from our Differences Versus Colorblindness</u>
Ferdman (1992) summarizes these views and notes the conflicting predictions concerning perceptions of difference. On the one hand, the differences themselves are seen as causing the problem; the solution is to train people to recognize and understand, even appreciate differences. This approach could be called the "learning model" and is represented by a common ideology that "we all learn and grow from our differences". The contrasting view suggests that cultural category recognition is the culprit, and the differences are only a problem if they evoke the perception of category and set in motion the undesirable outgroup evaluations and stereotyping. The solution to this problem is to establish a larger group identity so as to diminish the awareness of cultural categories. This can be done through establishing norms of egalitarianism, setting overarching goals for the group and rewarding as a whole rather than individually.

Commonly referred to as the "colorblind" perspective, this solution depends upon an attitude that people who are culturally different have more in common than not, and can be part of a larger group (e.g., humankind) in which differences are not noticeable and common ideology or goals become more important than demographic differences. For example, in the television series, "Brooklyn Bridge", the adolescent Alan attempts to persuade his Jewish grandmother that he should be allowed to have a Catholic girlfriend by appealing to her reasons for coming to America in the first place: "What happened to 'one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all, Grandma?'" Thus, one of the appeal of the colorblind perspective is the assumption of underlying unity despite differences.

A more extreme version of the colorblindness model denies the differences altogether. "We are really all the same" expresses this viewpoint. Critics of this

point of view suggest that ignoring or claiming not to see cultural differences may cause injustices and suppress the recognition of actual problems related to difference (Brown, 1985; Byrnes & Kiger, 1988; Ferdman, 1988; 1992; Goldberg, 1992). Konrad and Linnehan (1995) found practical support for this criticism. They discovered that companies with "identity-blind" human resource structures (i.e., programs that attempt to achieve fairness in employment, promotion, and developmental opportunity practices by eliminating racioethnic and gender information from decisions) lagged behind the successes of companies with identity-conscious human resource structures in attaining higher employment status for women and people of color.

One of the difficulties in understanding ways to approach healing the conflicts caused, at times, by differences and negative attitudes about differences is that the rhetoric surrounding the proposed solutions seem somewhat disconnected to behavior. For example, Schofield (1986) describes the pervasive norm of colorblindness in a school in which teachers expressly coach children to avoid reference to racioethnicity or differences. Yet, in the same school, the cafeteria is characterized by full-blown segregation at lunch, and there is a wide gap between the grades of children depending on their racioethnicity. Because no one is "allowed" to discuss race, teachers cannot openly recognize the problems, let alone come up with solutions to them.   Hence, programs that may remedy the situation through more culturally consonant learning objectives and methods for the students of color are not even considered (Schofield, 1986).

 Conversely, Ferdman and Cortes (1992) have noted when ethnicity of Hispanic managers is made salient to those who interact with and evaluate them, those evaluations improve over the evaluations made when ethnicity is not factored into the interpretation of behavior. In this case, knowledge of racioethnicity creates more positive perceptions. Given these examples, one might expect that colorblindness might be a detriment to working relationships and performance and awareness of cultural categories a boon. Even so, ingroup/outgroup perceptions have been demonstrated time and again to create negative perceptions of outgroup members and intergroup conflict. Appreciating what can be learned from cultural differences might enhance workgroup interaction, or differences may engender outgroup perceptions and conflict. Thus, it is difficult to predict how colorblindness may affect workgroup interactions.   The relationship among these two rhetorical positions and their respective views of diversity, the learning and colorblindness models, and interactions in workgroups is the focus of this study.

EXAMINING RHETORICAL/BEHAVIORAL CONNECTIONS
A sample of employees was drawn from worksites in which diversity training had been conducted in the effort to improve cultural sensitivity. Employees

purportedly had learned about the importance of valuing diversity in programs that touted the aforementioned "learning model". The workgroups involved in the study were being evaluated on their workgroup interaction relative to diversity, utilizing the Workforce Diversity Questionnaire (WDQ) (Larkey, 1996a). The four dimensions of the WDQ examine theoretically grounded sets of group behavior represented in culturally diverse workgroups. Inclusion, Varied Ideation, Understanding, and Treatment scales measure the cluster of perceived interaction variables comprising the diversity climate of a group and were developed from a theory describing organizational and workgroup climates concerning diversity (Larkey, 1996b). For each dimension, a more positive diversity climate is represented by one pole, (i.e., inclusionary communication practices, understanding of differences) and a negative disposition is represented in the opposite pole (i.e., exclusionary communication practices and misunderstanding).

Of interest in this study was the potential of the learning model attitudes in promoting more harmonious, diversity-friendly interactions in the workgroups; it was expected that groups in which learning was valued would be those groups in which attention to egalitarian interaction, valuing of others' ideas and sensitivity to differences would prevail. Thus, a strong positive correlation was predicted between rhetorical support of the learning model and favorable interactions.

In addition, colorblindness was assessed as the other common rhetorical position taken when addressing diversity issues. In this case, no prediction was made for the effect of colorblind attitudes in the group upon actual group interaction although it was expected that valuing the learning gained from differences would not be not necessarily be associated with colorblindness, or that there might be a small negative correlation. That is, one would expect that members of those workgroups in which differences are acknowledged and valued would not support the colorblind position which denies differences.

Further, the relationship between the attitudes and interactions of interest may be influenced by certain sociostructural factors. McConahay (1986), Gaertner, (1970), and Gaertner and Dovidio (1986) have noted that those who express the most liberal attitudes, particularly among the better educated, supposedly "enlightened" (perhaps, politically correct) population, may also exhibit behaviors that indicate hidden aversive feelings and avoidance of those who are different (despite their favorable responses on scales measuring racism). Such views are promoted in institutions of higher education and through the media, and may be more likely held by those with a higher education level. Thus, those in workgroups with a higher education and income profile, may have less consonance between expressed attitudes and actual experienced behavior in the workgroup. Thus, it was expected that at the higher job levels, workgroups would show less of a relationship between the colorblind and/or learning attitudes and the positive interactions

represented by the WDQ.

METHOD

In addition to the four WDQ scales mentioned above (Inclusion, Varied Ideation, Understanding, and Treatment), scales were developed to reflect attitudes in workgroups for colorblindness and for valuing learning from culturally diverse group members. The workgroup was the level of analysis in the WDQ; questions were phrased to assess overall impressions of workgroup interactions rather than individual behavior. Similarly, the attitude scales were designed to assess workgroup attitudes. This phrasing allowed for an assessment of the group without evoking the defensiveness and self-bias typical of surveys asking questions constructed to evaluate discrimination on a personal level (McConahay, 1986; Crosley, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980). All of the scales (WDQ, Colorblindness, and Learning) were created out of a series of interviews with employees describing their experiences in culturally diverse workgroups (as described in more detail in Larkey, 1996). The series of statements allowed Likert-type responses to a five-point scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. Colorblindness items included: "Peoples' habits or ways of thinking may be different because of their background, but when it comes to working, we're pretty much all the same", "People in our workgroup don't notice cultural or gender differences since we are really all the same," and "People pretty much treat each other the same on the job no matter what their ethnicity is". The Learning scale included the following items: "Differences in style, background and knowledge really help us to find better ways to do things," "When I work with groups with cultural and gender differences, more variety and quality of solutions are produced," and "We all seem to learn and grow from our differences."

Three organizations in the southwestern United States (a consumer products manufacturer/ distributor, a social service agency, and a hospital) administered the questionnaire by sending it to employees with a cover letter asking them to complete and return it to a company representative in a sealed envelope. A total of 1,083 surveys were distributed and 280 (26%) were returned including a balanced representation of ethnicity (e.g., 57% Caucasian, 24% Hispanic, 10% African American and 2% Asian American--representing a higher percentage of minorities than in the population of the area) and gender (55% male). Mean age was 39 years, and the respondents from the high and low job levels (i.e., exempt/non-exempt) were approximately proportional to the ratio in the organization, 24% exempt and 76% non-exempt.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used confirm the factor structure of the WDQ, Colorblind and Learning scales. Testing the internal consistency of the factors and parallelism of items with outside variables was accomplished with the PACKAGE statistical program.   Initially,   item   intercorrelations   and   factor

loadings were produced for all items. Using the deviation matrices for the Spearman and flatness tests to find items with poor internal consistency, scale items were eliminated in iterative runs until a consistent set of factors were obtained. Then parallelism tests were run for two to three sets of factors at a time to see if items correlated similarly from one factor to another. Again, items were eliminated if not parallel with items in outside factors.   Alpha coefficients for the WDQ scales ranged from .72 to .80, for the Learning scale, .69, and for the Colorblindness scale, .68. These alpha levels were considered adequate due to the small number of scale items and the strong internal consistency and parallelism of the scales.

Once factors were confirmed and items selected, scores from the scales were summed and correlations among all the factors were computed. These correlations were then analyzed to examine (a) the relationship between the attitude scales for the workgroups (Colorblindness and Learning) and the workgroup interaction scales of the WDQ, (b) how Colorblindness and Learning relate, and © how these relationships differ according to job level (as a rough estimate of education and/or socioeconomic status).

RESULTS

Correlations among the variables confirmed some of the predictions, yet held several surprises. First, the Colorblind scale was moderately correlated to the WDQ scales, indicating that Colorblindness in the workgroup setting is positively related to positive workgroup interactions such as Inclusion, Varied Ideation, Understanding, and equal Treatment (r = .35, .46, .44., and .46 respectively, all significant correlations). Second, the Learning scale showed mostly small, positive, and non-significant correlations with the behavioral WDQ scales (.13, .14, .09 and .15 respectively) contrary to expectations. Finally, there was only a low, non-significant correlation between the Learning scale and the Colorblind scale (r = .12), while a zero or slightly negative correlation was predicted.

Correlations were then run separately for those in exempt (professional, technical, and managerial jobs) and in non-exempt (labor and trade, and clerical) jobs. Interestingly, there was a wide split between the sets of correlations. For lower level job holders, the correlations were much higher and significant for the Colorblindness and Learning scales with the WDQ scale, and small to moderate for the Colorblindness scale with the Learning scale (see Table One). At the same time, the correlations among these scales were significantly smaller (that is, pairwise tests for overlapping confidence intervals were conducted showing significant differences between correlations of the high and low job level groups) and non-significant for those in higher level jobs.

DISCUSSION

The relationships among the Workforce Diversity Questionnaire (WDQ) scales measuring workgroup interaction favorable to diversity and the attitude scales produce some interesting questions more than they answer questions. The overall correlations between the Learning scales and the WDQ scales are low and positive and the predicted relationships are only somewhat stronger in the lower job level groups. Similarly, the relationship between colorblindness and the WDQ scales is mediated by job level; only those in lower job levels show a relationship between not noticing differences and actual observations of positive workgroup interaction relative to diversity issues. The data for lower level employees makes some sense, and seems to provide evidence for positive effects of the seemingly contradictory pairing of Colorblindness and Learning attitudes on the job.

The results for those in higher level jobs is more difficult to interpret. First, it might be noted that among those with higher level jobs, the lack of a correlation between Colorblindness and Learning is at least more consistent with the lack of logical consonance between the two attitudes. One statement denies difference (or at least claims not to notice) while the other celebrates it. Yet both are popular, coexisting philosophies of diversity in some work settings. Perhaps it is not surprising that those who have most likely received the most input on these issues through training and education have not succumbed to embracing both together, but have rather distinguished for themselves when to choose or reject the rhetorical positions.

Higher level job holders also showed a lack of relationship between each of the attitudinal measures, Colorblindness and Learning, and the WDQ scales assessing positive workgroup interactions. Learning was generally predicted to be related to these interactions (no matter the job level), but was related only slightly, and non-significantly. The highest correlation in this set, .23, was between Learning and the interaction dimension, Varied Ideation. This correlation could easily be explained by the conceptual similarity of the factors--Varied ideation suggests that a variety of ideas are produced and used in the workgroup and is similar to the idea that we can learn from our differences. Even with this similarity, however, the correlation is low. So practically speaking, there is very little relationship evidenced between the idealistic rhetorical position of "learning from our differences" and actual interactions in workgroups that include all participants and allow for expression of differing point of view.

Similarly, the Colorblindness scale show low correlations to the WDQ scales. The highest of these low, non-significant correlations is with the Treatment dimension. Treatment items refer to being *treated* the same, and colorblindness declares that we are the same. It seems that values such as believing we are all the same or that we can learn and grow from our differences, are more rhetorical than

practical in the higher level work setting.

Much work has gone into training our workforces, particularly at the higher levels, to adopt a new way of thinking about diversity. Some of the positive messages that potentially unite people and smooth working relationships may not always be logically consonant with one another, such as the learning and the colorblindness models. As people learn these views and attempt to exercise more positive interactions in the workplace, there may be a learning curve that is individual as well as organizational. Perhaps the lower level employees in the companies sampled had differential access to the training and thus different developmental stages in learning the rhetoric that was in progress. With these lower level, developing employees, differences in progress toward a more idealistic rhetorical position paralleled the development of skills and practice of inclusionary communication and positive diversity climates; those who did not adopt the new philosophies seemed to lag in their ability to promote and enact positive interactions in their workgroups.

In higher level groups, however, the rhetoric may have been around long enough to be less trusted and held in question. Rather than actively learning, developing, and rhetorically espousing values concerning diversity, the ideology may have been more entrenched and separated from behavior at these higher levels. Over-exposure and experiences of negative interactions in the face of insincere rhetoric may have sensitized this group to the messages of the learning and colorblindness model and separated their actions from those values, producing a sort of "diversity rhetoric burn-out."

LIMITATIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

One of the difficulties of working with organizational population samples such as this is that the data are not collected within intact workgroups. Although the intended level of analysis is the workgroup, and the items on the questionnaire address perception of one's workgroup, the data could not be analyzed within workgroups. Although the Learning and Colorblindness scales are phrased to assess the "attitudes" of the group (e.g., "We all seem to..."), it is possible that individuals answer the questions from their own perspective more that an estimated conglomerate of the group. The same issues should be tested more specifically at the workgroup level to examine the means, and more importantly, the standard deviations, within the workgroup responses, and these means used to better interpret the workgroup level correlations.

Unfortunately, low alpha coefficients of some of the scales attenuated the correlations. Correction for this attenuation would produce a slightly different picture, but the more important correction should be made by adding to the scales in future administrations and improving the alpha coefficient.

Also in the examination of workgroup level data, scales could be developed to examine the possibility of diversity rhetoric burn-out such as is hypothesized in the explanation for higher level employees' lack of relationship between rhetoric and behavior. We would gain much from understanding how training shapes thinking and behavior, and when the philosophies espoused do not match behavior. If training programs teach certain values successfully, but wear out for some employees after years of frustration at slow progress, or cynicism about the perceived lack of a problem, we need to understand more about these dynamics and improve our approaches to organizational learning. Further, the developmental model of diversity climates (Cox, 1991; Larkey, 1996b) implies that we need to examine the group context of rhetoric and behavior to more fully understand individuals' beliefs and actions. As groups develop toward more egalitarian values and positive perceptions of difference, the application of idealistic rhetorical positions may provide less power for behavioral change or even unintended consequences.

One of the interesting possibilities suggested by the results is that there is some benefit to the attitude that "we really are all the same *on the job*" and that this may facilitate smoother work relations, particularly among lower level employees. However, colorblindness taken to an extreme has been shown to be a problem for recognizing social inequalities and conflict, and preempts targeted correction (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Schofield, 1986). Perhaps there are two versions of this position, expressed by the same words but arising from different experiences. At work and in some social situations, it may be used rhetorically to smooth and unite, downplay differences, and attempt to find common ground as a strategy for communicating effectively (Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992; Martin, 1993). In the work contexts sampled, it can be assumed that those who responded with Colorblind attitudes do not rigidly follow through on that position--those same respondents indicated that fair treatment of those with differences, and including, valuing and understanding those with different points of view characterized their workgroups, statements that recognize racioethnic and gender differences (Larkey, 1996a). Thus, these respondents were likely using the construct as a smoothing strategy inasmuch as their interactions were more positive. Others may use the statement to announce resentment for the persistence of group-specific programs such as affirmative action and use it as a shorthand for denying unequal treatment. It may be that colorblindness may peacefully coexist with attitudes of acknowledging the positive aspects of diversity as long as noticing differences are not severely suppressed. The we-are-all-the-same view may be effectively applied only when one is trying to sidestep the negative effects of noticing difference, such as prejudice and stereotyping, but not used to ignore existing problems.

At this point, it would be worth a fresh look through a more qualitative data

gathering process--examining how people talk about difference, when they acknowledge it, how they handle the dialectic of difference/commonality. With a more complex definition of colorblindness, it may be found that certain forms of it are helpful, others oppressive. Similarly, it would be important to understand when the attitude of valuing differences and saying one can learn from them is a positive catalyst, and when it is empty rhetoric.

Notes

1.   The PACKAGE program uses both the Spearman and the flatness tests to examine internal consistency of the factors and subsequently tests parallelism of items in each factor with items in other factors. Hunter and Gerbing (1982) suggest using these tests in tandem with examination of item content homogeneity to determine unidimensionality of each factor.

2.   The organizations sampled had provided training for all upper division employees and were only beginning to provide training for selected lower level employees.

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Table
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Correlations Among Colorblindness, Learning and WDQ Scales Showing Differences in Job Level

	Colorblindness		Learning	
WDQ Interaction Scales:	Low Job	Hi Job	Low Job	Hi Job
Inclusion	.43**	0.13	.34**	0.16
Varied Ideation	.57**	0.22	.40**	0.23
Understanding	.56**	0.18	.33**	0.01
Treatment	.63**	0.27	.39**	0.13
Intercorrelation of Attitudes Scales:				
Colorblindness			.32**	0.01

**p < .01 for the correlations. All comparisons between high and low job level correlations are significantly different.