A multilevel study of the relationships between diversity training, ethnic discrimination and satisfaction in organizations

EDEN B. KING1*, JEREMY F. DAWSON2, DAVID A. KRAVITZ3 AND LISA M. V. GULICK1

1Department of Psychology, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.
2Aston Business School, Aston University, Birmingham, U.K.
3School of Management, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.

Summary

The prevalence of diversity training has not been matched by empirical research on its effectiveness. Among the most notable gaps are an absence of attention to its impact on discrimination and limited consideration of organizational-level factors. Results from employee surveys across 395 healthcare organizations reveal an effect of the extent of diversity training in organizations on ethnic minorities’ experiences of discrimination. In addition, the results demonstrate that the consequences of ethnic discrimination for individuals’ job attitudes are influenced by organizational-level phenomenon. These findings highlight the importance of attending to ethnic discrimination as an outcome of diversity training with implications for employee attitudes. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: diversity; discrimination; diversity training

Introduction

Although civil rights movements have led to genuine social change, racial and ethnic discrimination still occur in organizations. A nationally representative survey of working adults in the U.S. found that ethnic minorities are more than twice as likely as White employees to report experiencing discrimination (Avery, McKay, & Wilson, 2008). In addition, the EEOC (2010) reported that 33,579 complaints of racial discrimination were filed in 2009. Similar problems have been documented in the United Kingdom, where the majority of citizens report that ethnic discrimination is widespread (European Commission, 2007). One common organizational response to the occurrence of discrimination is the institution of diversity training programs (Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Unfortunately, the prevalence of diversity training programs has not yet been matched by empirical research on their effectiveness.

A recent review identified 31 studies that examined the outcomes of diversity training in organizations (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Most of these studies assessed the efficacy of training by measuring trainees’ reactions to training and/or knowledge of or attitudes toward diversity and diverse targets immediately following the training session.
Only half the studies gave any attention to diversity-related skills and behaviors and most of those studies reported trainees’ self-assessments rather than objective measures of their behavior. We argue that a valuable, yet overlooked, outcome of diversity training is its effect on the interpersonal experiences of ethnic minorities. This is in direct alignment with the most commonly reported goal of diversity training, which is changing employee behavior toward socially disadvantaged group members (Bendick, Egan, & Lofhjelm, 2001; see also Chrobot-Mason & Quiñones, 2002). However, almost nothing is known about whether or how diversity training might impact ethnic discrimination.

Understanding whether diversity training can affect discrimination is especially critical given that research has shown that individual experiences of discrimination can affect important outcomes. The costs associated with discrimination range from the financial costs of litigation (Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006) to negative attitudes among employees toward the organization (e.g., dissatisfaction and turnover intentions; Goldman, Slaughter, Schmit, Wiley, & Brooks, 2008; Nunez-Smith et al., 2009; Sanchez & Brock, 1996). Furthermore, Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2007) reported a negative effect of vicarious or indirect exposure to discrimination on job attitudes. However, this work is limited to the individual level of analysis; to our knowledge, there is no research on attitudinal outcomes of discrimination at the level of the organization.

Thus, the current paper examines the effect of diversity training programs on ethnic discrimination. In addition, we consider the implications of organizational ethnic discrimination for individual job satisfaction in organizations that vary with regard to ethnic composition (for a conceptual model, see Figure 1). As such, we contribute to existing literature in three primary ways: (1) by assessing a rarely examined outcome of diversity initiatives that is a primary goal of diversity training (i.e., ethnic discrimination), (2) by examining diversity training as an organizational level phenomenon, and (3) by exploring the distinct effects of individual- and organizational-level variables.

![Figure 1. Hypothesized relations among variables](image_url)
Diversity Training

In general terms, diversity training programs are educational or developmental initiatives that address issues related to variability in employee social identities. Such programs often represent a central component of broader organizational diversity initiatives (Burkart, 1999; Cox, 2001; Kossek, Lobel, & Brown, 2006). Though the design and implementation of diversity training programs vary widely, Bendick et al.’s (2001) survey of diversity trainers suggests that prototypic diversity training programs involve 1 or 2 trainers and 20–30 trainees engaged in educational activity for 4–10 hours. The most frequently reported goal of diversity training was to decrease discrimination (Bendick et al., 2001). Yet, the assessment of diversity training programs rarely incorporates the experience of unequal treatment.

Outcomes of diversity training

Research and practice on training in organizations often utilizes Kirkpatrick’s (1987) typology of training outcomes, which includes reactions, learning, behavior, and results (see also Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993). The same model can be applied to evaluations of diversity training (see Kulik & Roberson, 2008). For example, many assessments require trainees to report their attitudes regarding diversity immediately following the educational experience (e.g., Holladay, Knight, Paige, & Quiñones, 2003; Holladay & Quiñones, 2008; Kearney, Rochlen, & King, 2004). Knowledge-based outcomes typically include awareness (Tan, Morris, & Romero, 1996) and perceived learning (Kracht, 1998). Behavioral outcomes have included self-reported engagement in diversity-supportive behaviors (Armour, Bain, & Rubio, 2004; De Meuse, Hostager, & O’Neill, 2007; Hanover & Cellar, 1998), behavioral intentions (Combs & Luthans, 2007), and judgments regarding fictitious (demographically diverse) job applicants (Holladay & Quiñones, 2008).

Research has only begun to examine the more “distal” (Kulik & Roberson, 2008) implications of diversity training (see Curtis & Dreachslin, 2008). In one study, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) examined the relationship between diversity initiatives and the representation of White and African American men and women in managerial roles. In another study, Ely (2004) considered financial indicators of performance in the banking industry in relation to workforce composition and diversity training.

The results that emerged across these previous studies on diversity training outcomes varied substantially. Survey-based assessments of short-term reactions to training tend to find positive results, whereas studies that use experimental designs, focus on long-term outcomes, or assess self-reported behaviors yield mixed results (see Kulik & Roberson, 2008).

To date, only one study has directly assessed the impact of participation in a diversity training program on discriminatory behaviors (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004). A group of 69 supervisors employed by a county government in the southeastern U.S. who attended an “awareness training” program were compared to a matched control group of 56 managers who did not attend the program. Counter to expectations, coworkers reported that the trained managers engaged in more differential treatment of others based on their cultural membership than did the control managers—a negative effect. This difference was observed only in the responses of minority employees. Subsequent interviews with a subset of trainee coworkers suggested that the trained managers believed they had been assigned to training as punishment due to complaints from their minority colleagues. They resented being singled out and their resentment stimulated their differential treatment of minority employees.

We argue that assessments of diversity training effectiveness must be aligned with its proximal and distal goals (Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Given that the most frequently cited distal goal of training reported by diversity trainers is the improvement of the experiences of individuals from disadvantaged social identity groups, it may be most appropriate to assess precisely this outcome. Here, we conceptualize ethnic discrimination broadly to include all forms of unequal treatment on the basis of race or ethnicity. Whereas diversity training might not relate directly to the
representation of ethnic minorities in managerial roles a year later (Kalev et al., 2006), the awareness and knowledge gained in training (Kulik & Roberson, 2008) should reduce the likelihood that trainees would engage in discriminatory behaviors by enhancing their diversity-related knowledge, skills, self-efficacy (Combs & Luthans, 2007), and motives (Wiethoff, 2004). Thus, the extent to which organizations implement diversity training programs should reduce the likelihood that individuals experience discrimination. Formally,

Hypothesis 1: The per cent of employees who participate in diversity training is negatively associated with the likelihood that individual employees experience ethnic discrimination.

We anticipate that these effects of diversity training on individuals’ experiences of discrimination will be strongest for ethnic minority employees. There are two primary reasons for this expectation. First, employees who are ethnic minorities are more likely to be targets of ethnic discrimination than are majority group members. Indeed, a national survey of over 750 workers determined that Black and Hispanic employees were more likely than White employees to report discrimination (Avery et al., 2008). Thus, there is greater opportunity for change in the experiences of ethnic minorities.

Second, efforts to reduce discrimination or create a more inclusive workplace are more likely to impact the experiences of ethnic minorities than majority group members. The value an organization places on diversity and inclusion has a greater impact on Black and Hispanic employees than on White employees (Avery, McKay, Wilson, & Tomidandel, 2007). In line with this, diversity training programs are generally designed to improve behaviors toward ethnic minorities, rather than majority group members (Galen & Palmer, 1993). Diversity training scholars refer to programs that target “historically excluded demographic groups” (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999), and that help organizations transition from a “corporate culture dominated by white males” (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006) or a “white male club” (Clark, 2003). Thus, discrimination toward ethnic minorities is the behavior most likely to be transformed by diversity training programs. As such,

Hypothesis 2: The negative relationship between the per cent of employees who participate in diversity training and the likelihood that individual employees experience ethnic discrimination is stronger for ethnic minority employees than for White employees.

Outcomes of discrimination

The experience of ethnic discrimination on the job has meaningful consequences for individuals’ attitudes about work. Several theoretical perspectives provide complementary explanations for why personal experiences of discrimination can adversely affect job satisfaction. When individuals experience ethnic discrimination, they may be faced with a disparity between their own values and the values supported and/or tolerated in the organization. This disparity, in turn, might decrease job satisfaction (see Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). Similarly, justice theory and research suggests that employees who perceive injustice in their organizations will be less satisfied with their jobs (Brief, 1998; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). These patterns are consistent with the general principles of social exchange theory, which suggest that actors in a system will modify their attitudes and behaviors to ensure equilibrium in what they give and what they receive (e.g., Levine & White, 1961). Breakdowns in the social exchange relationship due to perceived discrimination may result in modification of attitudes toward the organization. Consistent with this rationale, research has shown that individual perceptions of discrimination are correlated with negative attitudes about work, including decreased job satisfaction (in ethnic minorities; Goldman et al., 2008; Nunez-Smith et al., 2009; Sanchez & Brock, 1996) and increased intentions to quit (among women; Goldenhar, Swanson, Hurrell, Ruder, & Deddens, 1998; King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010). These studies demonstrate that variability in individuals’ perceived discrimination is correlated with inter-individual variability in their attitudes about work. That is,

Hypothesis 3: Personal experience of ethnic discrimination is negatively associated with job satisfaction.
In contrast to a convincing body of evidence regarding the consequences of individuals’ personal experiences of discrimination for their job attitudes (Goldman et al., 2006), previous studies have not yet considered the attitudinal implications of discrimination at the level of the organization. Here we define organizational ethnic discrimination as the proportion of ethnic minority employees within an organization who experience unequal treatment on the basis of race or ethnicity. This is a type of “ambient stimuli” (Hackman, 1992) that saturates the organizational context and influences all its members (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). Supporting the notion that employees might be affected by discrimination of which they are not direct targets, preliminary evidence on gender discrimination (Hafer & Olson, 1993; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004, 2007) suggests that individuals who do not personally experience discrimination also can be affected by its enactment. We reason that the strength of the relationship between the personal experience of discrimination and job satisfaction is influenced by organizational ethnic discrimination.

On the one hand, it could be that negative job attitudes resulting from individual experiences of discrimination are intensified in organizational contexts in which discrimination is rife. In other words, organizational discrimination could exacerbate the effects of individual discrimination. As the proportion of individuals who experience discrimination in an organization increases, so too might perceptions of organizational injustice, incongruence with the values of the organization, or a disrupted social exchange relationship with the organization. In addition, individuals who observe members of their social identity group encounter discrimination may experience bystander stress (Schneider, 1996) as a result of ambivalent emotional reactions. Following this rationale, it is possible that discrimination in organizations may exacerbate the effects of personal discrimination on negative job attitudes.

On the other hand, however, it is possible that organizational discrimination could buffer the negative effects of personal discrimination. According to self-verification theory, individuals interpret their group-based experiences in relation to their personal experiences (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). A central aspect of this theory is that people look for information about their group that confirms their view of themselves. When individuals experience negative treatment, they search for reasons and explanations, and may raise the question, “Is it me, or is it us?” When negative treatment is shared by an identity group, it may (1) provide confirmatory evidence that verifies or validates one’s personal experience and (2) facilitate attributions to group membership rather than controllable personal attributes. A common or shared experience, then, might support in-group comparisons that protect job attitudes. Supporting this logic, research has shown that feeling connected to one’s group can provide some degree of compensation for the negative effects of discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). To the extent that discrimination is common in organizations, it could give rise to opportunities for self-verification and external attributions, thereby providing some protection of employee affective experiences (e.g., moods, emotions, attitudes). Given these alternative rationale we pose competing hypotheses,

**Hypothesis 4a:** The negative relationship between personal experience of ethnic discrimination and job satisfaction strengthens as the extent of organizational ethnic discrimination increases.

**Hypothesis 4b:** The negative relationship between personal experience of ethnic discrimination and job satisfaction weakens as the extent of organizational ethnic discrimination increases.

While the effects of personal discrimination on satisfaction may be buffered by organizational discrimination, the relationship might also be exacerbated by the demographic composition of the organization. Indeed, organizational ethnic composition has been shown to have a meaningful effect on employees’ understanding of their environment (Roberson & Stevens, 2006). Ethnic composition serves as a cue or indicator of the degree to which organizations genuinely value diversity. For example, organizational racial composition was strongly correlated with perceptions of diversity climate in a study of retail banks (Pugh, Dietz, Brief, & Wiley, 2008). This suggests that expectations of inclusive or fair treatment may rise with demographic diversity in organizations. When the perceived promises of equality are broken by personal discrimination, job attitudes are likely threatened. It is also possible that as the representation of minorities in an organization increases, so does the opportunity for negative emotional escalation and contagion (Barsade, 2002) that can result from personal experiences of discrimination.
minorities who experience discrimination are likely to discuss their mistreatment with other members of their ethnic group, thereby spreading its effects. It follows that the negative implications of personal experience of ethnic discrimination may be most severe for those individuals who work in ethnically diverse organizations because employees expect better treatment. Thus,

Hypothesis 5: The negative relationship between personal experience of ethnic discrimination and job satisfaction strengthens as ethnic diversity in the organization increases.

Method

Sample

The National Health Service (NHS) is a publicly-funded body comprising semi-autonomous healthcare providers, including hospitals and community-based providers, and employs over 1.4 million staff in the United Kingdom, including over a million in England alone. As part of its quality assessment program, the NHS of England completes an annual survey of employees. This survey, which includes samples from each of the 395 separate health care organizations in England, is run by the regulatory body (currently called the Care Quality Commission). All organizations must take part in the assessment, using independent survey organizations and a national coordination center to ensure the confidentiality of responses. The primary data for this study came from the 2007 survey, in which 155,922 individuals participated (a response rate of 54 per cent). Within each organization, the number of employees sampled ranged from 108 to 850, depending on the size of the organization, with response rates ranging from 31 to 77 per cent.

The sample was broadly representative of the NHS as a whole in terms of work and demographic characteristics: 80 per cent of the sample were women; 14 per cent were aged under 30, 24 per cent between 31 and 40, 34 per cent between 41 and 50, and 28 per cent over 50; 11 per cent were from a non-White background (which is similar to the UK population as a whole); 38 per cent were nurses, six per cent medical/dental staff, two per cent ambulance staff, 19 per cent other healthcare professionals, 23 per cent administrative or clerical staff, two per cent general managers, four per cent maintenance/ancillary staff, and five per cent from assorted other occupational groups.

At the organizational level, the proportion of non-White respondents ranged from 0 to 60 per cent, with a mean of 13 per cent. Although strongly positively skewed, there was still a reasonable amount of spread, and there were no outliers.

Measures—individual level

Diversity training

Survey respondents indicated on a single dichotomous question whether they had participated in any organization-based training, learning, or development in the area of racial awareness in the previous 12 months. The NHS provides guidance and resources for training to all of its organizations, but the method and content of training varies across organizations.

Ethnic discrimination

All participants indicated on a single dichotomous question whether they had experienced any discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity within their organization in the previous 12 months.
Job satisfaction
Participants indicated the degree to which they were satisfied with seven aspects of their jobs, including recognition, support from immediate manager, support from co-workers, freedom, responsibilities, value of work, and opportunities to use abilities, on a response scale anchored with 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied). These items were based on a subset of Warr, Cook, & Wall’s (1979) job satisfaction scale (adapted for the NHS context), and were highly consistent within individuals ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Minority status
Participants indicated their ethnic group using the response options of “White British,” “White Irish,” “Other White,” “Indian,” “Pakistani,” “Bangladeshi,” “Other Asian,” “Chinese,” “White and Black Caribbean,” “White and Black African,” “White and Asian,” “Any Other Mixed Background,” “Caribbean,” “African,” “Any Other Black Background,” or “Any Other Ethnic Group.” This is the standard classification used in all UK Government surveys, including the Census. Of particular salience to this study is whether or not an employee belongs to the overall “White” category (including White British, White Irish or Other White), or one of the other minority groups. White staff always formed the largest overall category in each organization—even in the few organizations where they did not have an overall majority, there were always substantially more White staff than either Black or Asian staff (the next largest overall categories).

Control variables
Individual level control variables that were included in the multilevel analysis were age, gender, whether the individual was a line manager, and occupational group (classified as nursing, medical/dental, ambulance staff, other healthcare professionals, social care staff, administrative/clerical, general management, maintenance/ancillary staff, and others). These are all commonly used control variables in such analyses, and have been shown to be linked to differences in experiences of healthcare employees in the UK (Healthcare Commission, 2004). Indeed, of particular relevance for the current study is that age and gender may be correlated with experiences of age and gender-based discrimination, respectively, and with attitudes about the organization (e.g., King et al., 2010). Occupational group and managerial roles may be indicative of positional forms of power and status that could influence the experience of discrimination and views of the organization as a whole. Including these control variables helps to isolate the relationships of interest in the current research.

Measures—organizational level
Diversity training
Organizational prevalence of diversity training was calculated as the percentage of respondents within each organization who indicated that they had participated in aforementioned racial awareness training. This operationalization represents an additive model under Chan’s (1998) typology and thus does not require justification for aggregation.

Ethnic discrimination
The aforementioned responses of ethnic minorities to the question of ethnic discrimination were aggregated to the organizational level. Specifically, the number of respondents from non-White backgrounds within each organization who reported that they had experienced ethnic discrimination was divided by the total number of respondents from non-White backgrounds. Whereas the individual level construct applies to both ethnic minorities and non-minorities, our rationale dictates that the organizational construct of interest is the proportion of ethnic minorities in an organization who experience discrimination: This is because of the wide variation in proportion of non-White employees between organizations, combined with the fact that such discrimination is far more likely to occur for these ethnic minorities.
Ethnic composition
A measure of organizational composition that reflected how much of the organization came from minority backgrounds was calculated as the proportion of respondents whose ethnic background was anything other than White British, White Irish, or Other White.

Control variables
In both organizational level and multilevel analysis, we controlled for size of organization (measured as the number of employees), and organization type. We chose to control for organizational size to account for potential differences in the effects of diversity training and discrimination. For example, if 25 per cent of employees in an organization of 50 undergo diversity training (or experience discrimination), the consequences may be more substantial than if 25 per cent of employees in an organization of 500 employees participate in the training (or experience discrimination). There are four major types of healthcare organization types, or “trusts” within the NHS—acute trusts, which are hospitals or local groups of hospitals; primary care trusts, which provide community-based care; mental health trusts, providing care for those with mental health issues or learning disabilities; and ambulance trusts. We chose to control for organization type to adjust for potential differences in the nature of interpersonal relationships and norms in different settings; for example, mental health facilities and acute care hospitals have similar, yet distinct, processes and procedures.

Analysis strategy
The five hypotheses divide into two groups. The first two hypotheses involve organizational-level variables predicting individual-level discrimination, which calls for cross-level analysis. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous in nature, we used Mplus to perform multilevel logistic regression (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). The latter three hypotheses all involve job satisfaction as the criterion, with individual experience of discrimination as the main predictor. We, therefore, used multilevel regression (hierarchical linear modeling) as the method of analysis, with cross-level moderation for hypotheses 4 and 5.

As is typically the case with large-scale surveys, there was a certain amount of missing data. Of the 155,922 respondents to the survey, 134,591 provided data on all the questions used in this study. There was no significant difference between these 134,591 and the others in terms of the main criterion, job satisfaction (mean values of 3.44 and 3.43, respectively), so to ensure a consistent sample between analyses we based all analyses on this subset, representing 86 per cent of the total responses.

Results
Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all focal study variables. For the sake of presentation, variables that are only used as controls are not included here (because of the large number of dummy codes required), but are available on request from the first author. Where a variable is used at both the individual and organizational levels, the mean and standard deviation are given in both forms; intercorrelations below the diagonal refer to the individual level, and above the diagonal to the organizational level.

Hypotheses predicting discrimination
Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel logistic regression analyses used to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. Ethnic composition was included in the model to control for its potential effects on the personal experience of
discrimination. The results for hypothesis 1 fail to reveal a direct link between the degree to which diversity training regarding racial issues was implemented and individual experience of discrimination ($B_{\text{interaction}} = 0.228, p = 0.424$), and thus there is no support for Hypothesis 1. The probable reason for this, however, becomes clear when looking at hypothesis 2. The analysis reveals that there is a significant cross-level interaction between organizational prevalence of diversity training and individual minority status ($B_{\text{interaction}} = 1.721, p < 0.001$), such that the expected negative relationship between training and discrimination occurs for non-White members of staff only. This is displayed graphically in Figure 2. It can be seen that the expected level of ethnic discrimination for majority (White) members of staff remains constant and small (less than one per cent) regardless of the level of diversity training; as these staff account for the vast majority (89 per cent) of staff across the sample, this explains why the direct relationship was not found. However, the effect for minority (non-White) members of staff is clear and substantial. Thus Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Hypotheses predicting job satisfaction

Table 3 shows the results of the multilevel regression analyses used to test Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5. Because there were up to 22 independent variables in the regression equations, the coefficients for 15 background control variables (including 11 dummy variables) are not shown here but are available on request from the authors. These analyses included individual minority status, ethnic composition, diversity training (individual experience and organizational
prevalence), and organizational prevalence of ethnic discrimination in the model so that these could be ruled out as alternative explanations. The numbers shown in the table are estimates of fixed effect coefficients; we also tested the models allowing these coefficients to vary across organizations (i.e., random effects), but this did not affect the results in any substantive way.

Hypothesis 3 is concerned with the direct effect of experiencing discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity on job satisfaction. As expected, there was a significant, large, and negative relationship between experiencing discrimination and job satisfaction \((B = -0.650, p < 0.001)\), so that individuals who experienced such

![Figure 2. The moderating effect of individual minority status on the cross-level link between diversity training and individual experience of discrimination](image)
discrimination had, on average, a job satisfaction score 0.65 lower than those who did not. This compares with a standard deviation across the entire sample of 0.71 for job satisfaction, indicating that this is a substantial effect.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 look at the moderation of this relationship by two organizational level variables: Prevalence of discrimination and ethnic composition. The central columns of Table 3 show tests of these hypotheses separately; however, the final column shows the results of an analysis testing both simultaneously. It can be seen that, except for a small difference in the size of the coefficients, the results are the same whether tested separately or together, so we discuss here the results of the joint test only. It is notable that the signs of the interaction effects are in opposite directions: For organizational prevalence of ethnic discrimination ($B_{interaction} = 0.601, p = 0.012$), the positive coefficient indicates that the negative effect of discrimination is attenuated when the prevalence of discrimination in the organization is higher, i.e., when individual experience of discrimination occurs in a setting where discrimination is more common, there is less of a negative effect—this can be seen in Figure 3. For ethnic composition ($B_{interaction} = -0.281, p = 0.020$), the negative coefficient indicates that in settings where there are more ethnic minority employees, there is a greater negative effect of individually experienced ethnic discrimination on job satisfaction—albeit admittedly a modest one, as can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 3. The moderating effect of organizational prevalence of discrimination on the relationship between individual experience of ethnic discrimination and job satisfaction

Figure 4. The moderating effect of organizational ethnic composition on the relationship between individual experience of ethnic discrimination and job satisfaction
Discussion

Overall, this research suggests that diversity training can have a positive effect on individuals and organizations by reducing the likelihood that ethnic minorities experience discrimination. In addition, the results suggest that the negative consequences of personal experiences of ethnic discrimination depend on the prevalence of organizational discrimination and on ethnic composition. This set of findings has several implications for research and practice.

First, the results suggest that scholars who question the utility of diversity training and education programs may have overlooked a critical outcome: Discrimination. The reduction of discrimination toward ethnically diverse individuals is a primary goal of most diversity training programs (Bendick et al., 2001), yet has been virtually ignored as a measured criterion. Therefore, the design and assessment of diversity training programs must address the issue of discrimination, as the reduction of this behavioral manifestation of prejudice is a worthy and attainable goal for diversity training efforts.

A second theoretical implication of this research is that individuals’ experiences are affected by the combination of personal and organizational ethnic discrimination. Although previous research has demonstrated that individuals’ attitudes about their jobs are affected by their experience of discrimination (e.g., Nunez-Smith et al., 2009; Sanchez & Brock, 1996), the extent to which the pervasiveness of ethnic discrimination is associated with individual levels of satisfaction has not previously been tested. The results suggest that individuals who personally experienced ethnic discrimination were less satisfied than those who did not personally experience ethnic discrimination. Importantly, the pervasiveness of ethnic discrimination in the organization buffered the negative effect of personal discrimination on job satisfaction. These findings could be interpreted to suggest that the psychological processes of self-verification and group identification can help organizations to avoid the consequences of discrimination. An alternative interpretation (that we endorse) is that people are striving to make sense of their experiences at work and will use whatever cues are available to them. When individuals personally experience mistreatment, they will use contextual cues to inform their attributions. Personal discrimination may be particularly detrimental when it happens to ethnic minorities whose experience is not verified through comparison to other ethnic minorities in their organization, and when individuals’ expectations of fair treatment that are shaped by the representation of ethnic minorities in the organization are shattered. Indeed, the results suggest that organizational discrimination buffered and ethnic diversity enhanced the negative effects of personal discrimination on satisfaction. Together, these findings imply that organizations have an opportunity to affect employee attitudes by carefully shaping cues and messages about the degree to which the organization genuinely values diversity.

Third, by articulating a conceptual model linking diversity training to both proximal and distal outcomes, this research begins to address a point raised by Kulik and Roberson (2008, p. 318): “More research needs to directly examine the causal chain linking the learning outcomes resulting from diversity education with other, more distant, organizational outcomes.” The current findings suggest that diversity training can have positive implications for organizational experiences in part through its effects on discrimination. Thus, an important step toward garnering the potential benefits of diversity may be to design diversity programs that reduce discrimination.

The current findings also contribute to understanding of the role of ethnic diversity in affecting organizational processes and outcomes. Evidence on the effects of diversity yield equivocal conclusions; diversity has been linked with positive outcomes such as decision-making and idea generation (Milliken & Martins, 1996), but also with negative outcomes such as increased conflict and decreased cohesion (King, Hebl, & Beal, 2009). In their review of the literature, van Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) advocated a more nuanced approach to understanding the effects of diversity by incorporating meaningful moderators. The results of our research suggest that diversity (as indexed by the ethnic composition of the organization) can affect job experiences by strengthening the effect of discrimination.

In addition to these points, the current research has two additional implications for practice. First, despite evidence that the effects of diversity training are not uniformly positive (e.g., Kalev et al., 2006) and that backlash can occur (Galen & Palmer, 1993; Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Mobley & Payne, 1992), the results imply that diversity training should not be abandoned. Indeed, organizations may benefit from strategically...
instituting such programs. Second, representation of ethnic minorities is not an end state and does not signify achievement of the ultimate goal of diversity training efforts. Continued attention to diversity issues beyond representation is essential and should not be overlooked, especially in organizations that are diverse. As highlighted by our results, steps taken to reduce perceived ethnic discrimination in the workplace are especially important in ethnically diverse organizations.

Despite the strengths of the current design, the findings should be interpreted, and future research developed, in light of its limitations. Participation in diversity training was measured with a single item using a dichotomous response scale. Although this provides a general assessment of rates of participation, it does not allow for more nuanced consideration of the nature of the training. As such, we can only speculate on the mechanisms that account for reduction in ethnic discrimination following diversity training. Recent papers (e.g., Bell & Kravitz, 2008) have called for greater attention to variability within training designs as an important predictor of their efficacy. In line with the findings here, interview responses from a sample of diversity trainers (Bendick et al., 2001) suggested that some of the most critical characteristics of effective diversity training programs include focusing explicitly on individual behavior, addressing discrimination as a general process, and affecting corporate culture. The current research underscores the need to consider ethnic discrimination as an outcome of diversity training, but does not address the issue of training development. Future research should compare the efficacy of different training designs, and should consider additional processes such as improved social networks, organizational climate, and trainee empathy as outcomes of training that might contribute to discrimination and organizational attitudes.

Another limitation of the current study is the measurement of ethnic discrimination. It is difficult to know how well the single item captures the range of encounters that may be associated with bias associated with ethnic discrimination. The subtle biases that seem to typify contemporary ethnic discrimination (see Dipboye & Colella, 2005) may not be represented by this measure, and thus we cannot know whether diversity training affects the nature, or, importantly, the frequency of such experiences.

The focus of this research on the health care industry also limits its generalizability to other types of organizations. On the one hand, health care workers may be more empathetic than other types of trainees. On the other hand, such a high level of empathy would mean there is less room for improvement among health care workers compared to workers in other industries. Another potential challenge to generalizability is non-response bias. Although the overall individual response rate of 54 per cent is quite good, we do not have access to the data needed to compare respondents to non-respondents. On the positive side, this study was unusual in the size of the sample and the ability to explore results at the individual and organizational levels.

Finally, this study is limited in its focus on race-based diversity training and ethnic discrimination and thus its generalizability to other socially disadvantaged groups is unknown. Awareness training for sexual orientation or religious diversity may be met with very different reactions (Kaplan, 2006) given the more ambiguous social norms for treatment of these groups (see Zitek & Hebl, 2007). Future research should address the aspects of training programs that are associated with a wide range of discriminatory experiences over time. The ubiquity of diversity education programs, taken with the persistence of discrimination and its negative consequences for organizations, necessitates continued attention to understanding and strengthening the effect of training on discrimination. Indeed, we believe this study makes important contributions to the field by demonstrating the impact of diversity training on discrimination and by highlighting organizational factors that influence the effects of mistreatment that is not overcome through such programs.

Author biographies

Eden B. King is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at George Mason University. She received her Ph.D. in Industrial Organizational Psychology from Rice University in 2006. Dr. King is pursuing a program of research that
seeks to guide the equitable and effective management of diverse organizations. This research addresses three primary themes: 1) current manifestations of discrimination and barriers to work-life balance in organizations, 2) consequences of such challenges for its targets and their workplaces, and 3) individual and organizational strategies for reducing discrimination and increasing support for families.

Jeremy Dawson is a senior research fellow and Director of the Institute for Health Services Effectiveness at Aston Business School. He has worked on the National Health Service annual staff survey since its inception in 2003. His research interests include team working and human resource management in health care, measurement of work group diversity, probing moderated regression analysis and psychometrics in multilevel research.

David A. Kravitz is Professor of Management at George Mason University. He received his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Illinois–Urbana and subsequently retrained in industrial/organizational psychology at Bowling Green State University. David is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and 2010–2011 Chair of the Gender and Diversity in Organizations division of the Academy of Management. His teaching and research interests center on diversity management, with a special interest on the gap between research and practice.

Lisa M. V. Gulick is completing her Ph.D. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from George Mason University after receiving her M.A. in 2007. She received her B.A. in Psychology, with a minor in Political Science, from the University of Washington in 2001. Her research and applied experiences focus on developing leaders to work effectively in complex global environments both domestically and internationally, designing strategies for accelerating leadership development, improving diversity management practices in organizations, and enhancing cross-cultural selection and training.

References


