Support for diversity in organizations: A theoretical exploration of its origins and offshoots

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Abstract
Despite growth in the presence of workplace diversity and realization that diversity management is important, a great deal remains unknown about the causes and consequences of employees’ level of support for diversity. This is unfortunate because employee support is one of the key determinants of whether diversity is managed effectively or poorly. Accordingly, the present paper develops a theoretical model outlining individual-level antecedents and consequences of employee endorsement of diversity. Moreover, the model also identifies several contextual factors that lead diversity endorsement or opposition to either remain passive or promote behavioral action.

Keywords
diversity in the workplace, employee advocacy, employee activism

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Shifting demographic trends and the globalization of business continue to raise the salience of effective diversity management as an organizational issue. The populations of many industrialized nations are growing older (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001), thereby increasing the amount of age diversity in the workplace. Movements for women’s rights and growing demands for labor have increased the prevalence of female employees. Higher birth and immigration rates among previously underrepresented groups are producing greater racioethnic heterogeneity (Bell, 2007). Moreover, sexual orientation is becoming less taboo in many societies, resulting in heightening awareness of the presence of this type of diversity (Ragins, 2004). Collectively, these changes are forcing a philosophical shift in the formula for global corporate success. Namely,

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if companies are to flourish in today’s ever-diversifying markets, they will have to attract, develop, coordinate, and retain a much broader base of human resources than in previous years.

This growing heterogeneity and the accompanying importance of diversity management have spawned a significant rise in the amount of research attention devoted to workforce diversity. Much of this work has focused on determining the nature of diversity’s effect on team- and organizational-level outcomes. Though the results of this literature are largely mixed (see van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007, for a recent review), recent evidence suggests effects can be quite positive. For instance, Herring (2009) recently observed positive associations between firm-level race and gender diversity and key organizational outcomes such as sales revenue, number of customers, market share, and profitability. It seems, however, that the effect of diversity may be largely contingent upon the level of support it receives within the organization (Gonzalez & DeNisi, 2009; Slater, Wéigand, & Zwirlein, 2009). Opposition (e.g., excluding others on the basis of their social identity, perpetrating discrimination, or manifesting resistance to company efforts designed to create a more equitable playing field for all personnel) increases the likelihood that diversity will detract from organizational productivity and performance by increasing conflict, employee withdrawal, and costly lawsuits (Thomas, 2008). Conversely, behavioral support for diversity (e.g., willfully participating in diversity education initiatives, seeking and opposing any identity-based injustice within the organization, or introducing organizational efforts to improve inclusiveness) enhances the likelihood that diversity will be an asset as opposed to a liability (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Moreover, diversity management commonly entails large-scale organizational change, which may require employee activism to be optimally successful (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that a recent survey of diversity experts (Wentling, 2004) identified employee support for and commitment to diversity as key determinants of the efficacy of organizational diversity initiatives.

Although a few empirical studies have examined predictors of employee support for diversity (e.g., Chen & Hooijberg, 2000; Cunningham & Sartore, 2009) and scholars recently devoted an entire volume to discussing diversity resistance in organizations (Thomas, 2008), current understanding of the antecedents of individual support for diversity remains considerably limited. For instance, most of the research exploring individual differences in diversity support has focused primarily on the impact of demographic group membership (e.g., Hopkins, Hopkins, & Mallette, 2001; Kossek & Zonia, 1993; Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998). Additionally, little (if any) inquiry has examined the possibility of contextual factors encouraging or discouraging the expression of support for diversity. Consequently, the existing literature contains relatively little information regarding (a) which employees are more or less likely to endorse diversity and (b) how organizational environments may facilitate or suppress the propensity for individuals’ level of intrinsic attitudinal support for diversity (i.e., endorsement) to translate into subsequent activism (e.g., diversity championing).

Accordingly, the present research aims to help bridge this chasm in the literature by providing a multilevel theoretical model of antecedents and consequences of employee support for diversity. By diversity, I mean both the literal heterogeneity of organizational members and the organizational policies and procedures needed to support them. To begin, a typology defining the focal variable (i.e., diversity support) is presented. Subsequently, the paper builds on literature pertaining to prejudice, attitudes, and beliefs about diversity to identify individual-level factors predicting diversity endorsement in organizations. This is followed by an extension of trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) to explicate the circumstances under which an employee’s
internal feelings about diversity (i.e., endorsement) may preempt visible employee actions promoting or contesting diversity.

Prior to embarking on the central discussion of this paper, there are a couple of boundary conditions that warrant acknowledgement. First, the study of diversity in the organizational sciences has focused disproportionately on demographics while paying considerably less attention to other ways in which employees may differ from one another (e.g., personality, functional expertise). Likewise, diversity scholars have covered some facets of demographic diversity (i.e., sex, racioethnicity, and age) significantly more than others (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, social class). As a result of these imbalances (see Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003, for a review), there is more theory and evidence to draw upon concerning the more studied demographics in developing the model of diversity support presented here. Second, my model implicitly assumes some degree of homology in the manner that the stipulated relationships operate across the broad spectrum of diversity markers. It should be noted, however, that despite considerable overlap in attitudes toward different types of diversity (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2009), there can be meaningful divergence in the ways people view one form versus another (e.g., Wilson, Moore, McKay, & Avery, 2008). Accordingly, the proposed relations may generalize to less studied forms of diversity and across forms of diversity, but the extent to which this is true is uncertain.

Differentiating diversity endorsement and activism

Before addressing diversity in particular, it is important to consider that an individual’s level of support for any particular construct can vary in terms of both its endorsement (i.e., the extent to which it is attitudinally supported intrinsically) and activism (i.e., the extent to which one’s behaviors support or oppose diversity). For instance, an employee may wholeheartedly sanction the notion that customer satisfaction is important (high endorsement) yet physically do little to ensure that high-quality service is provided (low activism). Alternatively, that same employee could engage in every effort possible to anticipate, meet, and exceed customer expectations (high activism). In the former case, the employee supports customer satisfaction attitudinally, but not behaviorally. Conversely, both the employee’s attitudes and behaviors support customer satisfaction in the latter scenario. In short, support essentially can be represented by a two-level matrix involving endorsement and activism.

Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) drew a somewhat similar conclusion in their discussion of commitment to change in organizations. They recognized that employee commitment to organizational-change interventions could vary in strength and activity. However, they operationalized their measure designed to capture this variance along a single continuum ranging from active resistance (i.e., low strength, high activity) to championing (i.e., high strength, high activity). This assumes strength and activity are relatively collinear, which, as the above example concerning customer satisfaction illustrates, is not necessarily the case. Though the present work also draws a form of strength/activity distinction, here the two are treated as independent.

Accordingly, Figure 1 applies a 2 x 2 typology to diversity by labeling the behaviors (or the lack thereof) falling into each of the four quadrants comprised by the orthogonal endorsement and activism axes. Specifically, the first quadrant involves passive support for diversity. An individual meeting these criteria implicitly values diversity, but this belief is not manifested in the person’s behavior. This is counter to those in the second quadrant, whose attitudes support diversity and they actively engage in behaviors exemplifying this support. The third quadrant depicts passive opposition and captures individuals who oppose diversity attitudinally (i.e., don’t like it), but take no behavioral actions to display this opposition. It is the latter component that differentiates them from those in the fourth quadrant.
The goal of incorporating endorsement and activism into a singular model was twofold. First, it helps to illustrate the practical value of the present research by identifying four common employee positions on diversity issues and, subsequently, explaining how individuals come to fall into one of the four quadrants. This is important because understanding this process could aid practitioners in developing means for addressing the different forms of behavior (or lack thereof) originating from employee endorsement of diversity. Second, it lays the groundwork for the multilevel nature of the remainder of this paper. On the one hand, the individual-level factors that follow can be viewed as determinants of the employee’s position along the endorsement continuum. On the other hand, the contextual-level factors that are discussed influence standing on the other continuum, affecting whether or not employees act on their level of endorsement. See Figure 2 for an illustrative summary of the model.

**Predicting endorsement**

Broadly speaking, there are two general reasons why an employee might endorse or oppose organizational diversity (Klandermans, 2004). The first reason involves self-interest. Individuals often tend to be motivated to maximize their personal outcomes, which could put them either at odds with or in favor of diversity, depending on the nature of their identity. Alternatively, there may be ideological explanations for an employee’s stance on diversity. For instance, research suggests individuals vary in the extent to which they believe intergroup equality is
It naturally follows that those who deem inequality as more justifiable may be less supportive of diversity. There are a number of individual differences that likely relate to one or both of these reasons for endorsing diversity. Here, I consider four such variables: minority status, prejudice, diversity beliefs, and egalitarianism.

**Minority status**

Minority status pertains to the relative level of representation of an employee’s salient demographic group memberships within the organization. For instance, a woman working in a male-dominated organization would be considered a minority. Minority status makes an individual more distinctive because proportional rarity commonly attracts attention to differences (Kanter, 1977). Mathematically, it is the presence of minorities that help to constitute organizational diversity (particularly variety; Harrison & Klein, 2007), as the company would be homogeneous if they were not present. Consequently, minority status may lead employees to interpret support for diversity as support for themselves and endorsing diversity would be in a minority employee’s best interest.

Some empirical evidence proves consistent with this conclusion. Although they have not necessarily attributed it to minority status within an organizational context per se, a number of authors have investigated the possibility that members of groups that are underrepresented in society are more supportive of diversity. For example, several studies have reported that female and racioethnic-minority employees in the United States are more supportive of organizational diversity initiatives than their White male counterparts (e.g., Chen & Hooijberg, 2000; Cundiff, Nadler, & Swan, 2009; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Kossek & Zonia, 1993; Mor Barak et al., 1998; Soni, 2000). Presumably, the societal (and potentially coinciding organizational) underrepresentation of their demographic groups led the women and minorities in those studies to view diversity as personally beneficial. This interpretation is bolstered further by a recent finding indicating that diversity is more commonly associated with minority groups than the majority (Unzueta & Binning, 2010). The preceding logic and this corresponding empirical evidence lead to the following proposition:

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**Figure 2.** The proposed model of causes and consequences of employee diversity endorsement.
Proposition 1: Minority status predicts employee endorsement of diversity such that minorities will be more supportive than those in the majority.

Prejudice

Beyond an individual’s visual identity markers such as sex and racioethnicity, aspects of their belief structure also should influence their diversity endorsement. If a central component of an employee’s identity is the belief that their demographic group is superior to others (i.e., high prejudice), the existence of diversity along this dimension could constitute an identity threat (Major & O’Brien, 2005). The reason for the threat results from the fact that greater diversity often enhances the degree of exposure to outgroup members. Because prejudiced individuals commonly deem dissimilar others inferior (Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004), they would not welcome their presence as coworkers in the organization. In line with the reasoning, one recent examination of diversity activities in business schools (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2006) revealed that leaders who were more aware of racial privilege were more supportive of diversity. Furthermore, Cunningham and Sartore (2009) recently observed that individuals possessing higher levels of racial and sexual prejudice reported engaging in fewer efforts to champion diversity in their organizations (e.g., trying to overcome diversity resistance within the organization). Although championing involves an active manifestation of diversity support, it likely reflects an underlying level of diversity endorsement. As such, this study’s results suggest an inverse relationship between prejudice and diversity endorsement in organizations.

Highly related to prejudice is an individual’s penchant for engaging in interactions with dissimilar others. Recently, scholars have made a number of fruitful efforts to identify this predisposition either by using existing personality constructs (Homan et al., 2008) or by creating attitudinal constructs (e.g., Härter & Fujimoto, 2000; Miville et al., 1999; Phinney, 1992) and competency models (e.g., Ang et al., 2007). For instance, Homan et al. (2008) examined the role of the big five personality characteristic openness to experience (i.e., willingness to consider the unfamiliar; McCrae & Costa, 1987) among those working in diverse teams. Their research indicated that diverse teams stand to benefit from members being higher in this trait.

In introducing a new attitudinal construct, Phinney (1992) defined other-group orientation as an individual’s beliefs about and desires for contact with racioethnically dissimilar others. Likewise, universality diversity orientation (Miville et al., 1999) and openness to dissimilarity (Härter & Fujimoto, 2000) extend this definition to include dissimilarity across demographic categories. Among those more interested in competency models, cultural-intelligence (CQ) researchers defined one facet of CQ (i.e., motivational) as a person’s level of desire to learn about and function effectively across cultural differences (Earley & Ang, 2003). Based on these definitions, it seems that individuals more positively oriented toward dissimilar others (i.e., higher in these constructs and lower in prejudice) would be inclined to view diversity more favorably than homogeneity and, thus, exhibit higher levels of diversity endorsement.

Proposition 2: Prejudice predicts employee level of endorsement of diversity such that those higher in prejudice will be less supportive than those lower in prejudice.

Diversity beliefs

Employees also might support or oppose diversity based on whether they view it as a potential asset or liability for organizations. These viewpoints, which van Knippenberg and Haslam (2003) labeled diversity beliefs, are perspectives concerning the way in which heterogeneity affects group functioning and performance. In essence, they fall somewhere along a continuum...
ranging from the idea that diversity lowers standards, creates conflict, and diminishes performance to the notion that diversity enhances creativity and decision making, thereby heightening performance. It is logical to anticipate a high degree of correspondence between one’s diversity beliefs and level of endorsement, which may cause some to question the conceptual independence of the two constructs. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to envision scenarios wherein the two diverge considerably. For instance, the owner of a small business genuinely might believe that diversity is beneficial for groups, yet oppose diversity in the workplace in favor of nepotism. Alternatively, an executive might doubt the efficacy of diversity, but support it to project and maintain a particular personal or corporate image.

In considering the two distinct components of diversity support, the present discussion argues that diversity beliefs influence an employee’s endorsement of diversity. To the extent that diversity is viewed as a potential source of sustained competitive advantage, endorsement should be more likely than opposition. Conversely, if diversity is perceived to harm an organization’s prospects for success, it is in the employee’s best interest (at least as they perceive it) to oppose diversity. Though I could locate no studies directly testing the notion that diversity beliefs predict diversity endorsement, some degree of support can be inferred from the finding that there is greater correspondence between group diversity and group identification among those who view diversity more positively (van Dick, van Knippenberg, Hägele, Guillaume, & Brodbeck, 2008; van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007). Hence, there should be a positive relationship between diversity beliefs and endorsement.

Proposition 3: Diversity beliefs predict employee endorsement of diversity such that those viewing diversity more positively will be more supportive than those viewing diversity less positively.

Egalitarianism

A somewhat different reason for supporting or opposing diversity comes from an employee’s position on egalitarianism, which pertains to beliefs about the appropriateness of inequality. Generally speaking, the more someone endorses egalitarianism, the more intolerant they tend to be of unequal treatment such as discrimination. Though there are a number of them discussed in the literature, three particularly popular and relevant indicators of egalitarianism are discussed here: social-dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1994), equity sensitivity (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987), and just-world beliefs (Lerner, 1980).

Social-dominance orientation (SDO) ranges from one pole where all groups are seen as equal to the opposite pole where one group is deemed dominant and others inferior (Pratto et al., 1994). Equity sensitivity captures individual tolerance for inequity (Huseman et al., 1987). Like these two, just-world beliefs (JWB) pertain to the extent to which individuals view the status quo (and any inequalities it might contain) as deserved (Lerner, 1980). Those who see hierarchy and inequality as more legitimate (i.e., high in SDO, low in equity sensitivity, or high in JWB) should be more accepting of organizational homogeneity because their ideological principles justify such a scenario. In their estimation, a lack of diversity is warranted because the incumbent members of the represented group are deserving of those positions whereas the absent members of the underrepresented groups are not. Consequently, inegalitarian belief structures are likely to reduce support for or promote opposition to diversity. This logic is supported by a recent finding that individuals higher in SDO are less supportive of organizational diversity than those lower in SDO and this tendency may be exacerbated when economic resources are scarce (King, Knight, & Hebl, 2010).

Proposition 4: Egalitarian beliefs predict employee endorsement of diversity such that
more egalitarian employees will be more supportive than less egalitarian employees.

**Activism as an outcome of diversity endorsement**

Beyond predicting employee endorsement of diversity, it is also important to consider the consequences of this attitudinal support or opposition. Although it is tempting to believe that endorsement will translate directly into behavioral activism or disapproval into behavioral opposition, attitudes are often imperfect predictors of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). One major factor in determining the nature of the diversity endorsement–activism relationship is the context in which the employee is embedded. Recently, organizational scholars (e.g., Johns, 2006) have called for greater consideration of the role of context when studying organizational behavior. The present research adheres to that call by considering how the diversity attitudes of those in an employee’s surroundings might affect the manifestation of the employee’s diversity endorsement.

Employees do not act in a vacuum in the workplace. Quite the contrary, their behaviors are influenced by a number of group-, organizational-, and societal-level phenomena. For instance, levels of peer withdrawal often affect people’s propensity to be absent or tardy (Koslowsky, 2009). This calls into question how situational factors within organizations or the societies that contain them might influence the natural tendency for employees to act on their endorsement of or opposition to diversity. An existing theoretical framework that is useful in answering this question is trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

In looking at the impact of personality factors on job performance, Tett and Burnett (2003) recognized that situational factors often impact whether or not employees behave in a manner consistent with their predispositions. An extravert, for example, might avoid engaging in conversations with coworkers, despite being naturally inclined to do so, if there are strong informal organizational norms prohibiting such behavior. On the one hand, they identified factors that enhance the strength of expected relationships as facilitators. On the other hand, factors that diminish the strength of such relationships were labeled constraints. Applied to the present discussion, it is probable that the beliefs (actual or perceived) of an employee’s coworkers, superiors, and clientele might facilitate or constrain the anticipated positive endorsement–activism linkage by creating normative pressures for the employee to act in a manner condoned by others. Here, I consider the impact of a company’s diversity climate, supervisor beliefs, coworker beliefs, and customer beliefs within this capacity.

**The moderating role of diversity climate**

Diversity climate is a shared sense of how employees are treated with respect to inclusion and fairness (McKay, Avery, & Morris, 2008). In companies with hospitable diversity climates, efforts are made to include all employees in formal and informal processes and bias of any form is minimized. Because such settings emphasize equal employment opportunity, they tend to be more supportive of diversity. For instance, research has shown that there are smaller demographic differences in employee withdrawal, performance, and advancement when diversity climates are perceived as being more hospitable (Avery, McKay, Wilson, & Tonidandel, 2007; Bajdo & Dickson, 2001; McKay, Avery, D. R., & Morris, 2008; McKay, Avery, Tonidandel, et al., 2007).

One potential explanation for this occurrence is that the focus on equal employment opportunity diminishes prospective mistreatment based on demographic group membership. In other words, climates that support diversity probably signal to organizational members that discrimination is inappropriate, thereby reducing the likelihood of its
occurrence. Conversely, climates that do not support diversity may communicate the opposite—namely, that unequal treatment is permissible. Applying the key tenet of trait activation theory, diversity climates could serve as constraints or facilitators of employees’ inclinations to act on their intrinsic endorsement of or opposition to diversity. Individuals should be far more apt to act in manners consistent with their diversity endorsement or opposition if they perceive the organization’s stance on diversity as similar to their own (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Moreover, organizations are more receptive to employee activism when it is in line with organizational values (Bansal, 2003), which should further promote subsequent organizationally aligned (and deter misaligned) employee actions. In essence, this describes a cross-level interaction wherein the link between an employee’s attitude (diversity endorsement; Level 1) and behaviors (diversity activism; Level 1) is moderated by the organization’s diversity climate (Level 2).

Proposition 5: Diversity climate moderates the relationship between diversity endorsement and activism such that there will be greater correspondence between the two when diversity endorsement and diversity climate are consistent (i.e., both are positive or negative).

The moderating role of managerial endorsement

Though employees often use their perceptions of managers’ values as a signal of diversity climate (Herdman & McMillan-Capehart, 2010), there can be considerable divergence between the two. In such instances, employees may look to their superior for cues on how they are to behave with respect to diversity. This is not to say that their personal attitudes become irrelevant, but rather that those of their superior might influence the likelihood that they act on their own. If, for instance, an employee strongly opposes diversity but works for a supervisor who actively endorses it, the employee is unlikely to express his or her opposition for fear of alienating the boss. The converse, however, would also be true in that an avid supporter of diversity might turn a blind eye to discrimination in the presence of a notoriously biased supervisor. Importantly, the employee’s perception of the manager’s level of endorsement is more critical than the manager’s actual beliefs, as only the former is able to influence the employee’s cognitive processes directly.

As the preceding argument suggests, recent empirical evidence indicates that employee diversity-related behavior is influenced by those in positions of authority. It appears as though prejudiced employees are more prone to act on that bias when they have evidence that their superiors hold similar biases (Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000). In fact, when superiors provide directives to focus solely on relevant material, prejudiced individuals do not engage in illegal discrimination (Umphress, Simmons, Boswell, & Triana, 2008). Though no studies have shown managerial advocacy of diversity to facilitate the translation of employee endorsement to activism, such an expectation also seems warranted because the same general psychological process applies (i.e., compliance with the perceived will of one’s superior). This theory and evidence lead to the following proposition:

Proposition 6: Supervisor diversity endorsement (perceived or actual) moderates the relationship between employee diversity endorsement and activism such that there will be greater correspondence between the two when employee and supervisor levels of diversity endorsement are consistent (i.e., both are positive or negative).

The moderating role of coworker endorsement

In addition to superiors and the organization in general, coworkers also exert considerable influence on employee behavior (e.g., Hodson, 1997). If an employee finds herself surrounded
by colleagues who disparage diversity, it seems unlikely that she will outwardly support diversity even if she personally endorses it. In essence, peer pressure may lead employees to speak up if they perceive their views as consistent with others or to remain silent if they perceive grounds for potential conflict (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Cunningham and Sartore (2009) found this to be somewhat true with respect to diversity championing behavior. Although they did not differentiate between endorsement and activism, they did find that employees were less likely to resist diversity and more likely to champion it when they perceived higher levels of support for diversity among their coworkers.

Proposition 7: Coworker diversity endorsement (perceived or actual) moderates the relationship between employee diversity endorsement and activism such that there will be greater correspondence between the two when employee and coworker levels of diversity endorsement are consistent (i.e., both are positive or negative).

The moderating role of customer endorsement

It is also important to recognize that employees are not immune to the beliefs of the customers they serve. In many service-oriented industries, employees spend as much time (if not more) interacting with the company’s clientele as they do with their coworkers and supervisors. This, in conjunction with many organizational initiatives emphasizing the importance of catering to customer desires (e.g., “customer is king” approaches), could make employee behavior particularly susceptible to the influences of their own beliefs about how customers feel about diversity. For example, a retail manager may endorse diversity intrinsically but simultaneously engage in discriminatory hiring or placement practices (antidiversity activism) on the basis of a belief that customers prefer to be assisted by demographically similar salespeople.

Though there is less empirical evidence linking customers to employee diversity behavior, the literature provides some support for this notion. A recent investigation of gender inequity in law firms (Beckman & Phillips, 2005) found that client pressure for female representation had a considerable impact on the promotion patterns of female associates within firms. Specifically, firms promoted a greater proportion of women when their customers expressed a desire to see greater female representation at upper hierarchical levels. Similarly, notions of any customer bias, whether accurate or not, may influence whether employees act on their diversity endorsement. Perceived customer endorsement should censor biased employees from perpetrating discrimination for fear of alienating customers, and facilitate diversity activism among employees who endorse diversity to further ingratiate customers. Conversely, customer opposition to diversity should free biased employees to discriminate (thereby appeasing clientele) and constrain diversity activism among employees inclined to engage in it so as not to offend their customers.

Proposition 8: Customer diversity endorsement (perceived or actual) moderates the relationship between employee diversity endorsement and activism such that there will be greater correspondence between the two when employee and customer levels of diversity endorsement are consistent (i.e., both are positive or negative).

Scholarly and applied implications

Research considerations

The model introduced and described here contains a number of implications for scholarship. First, the model helps to identify the complexity involved in determining whether employees endorse diversity and what (if anything) happens as a result of that
endorsement. Diversity scholars and practitioners alike have recognized the importance of support for diversity if organizational-diversity interventions are to be successful. Resistance and opposition can undermine diversity’s potential to enhance organizational functioning and effectiveness (Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006; Thomas, 2008). Unfortunately, however, not everyone is equally likely to support diversity, as individual identity and belief structures seem to play a key role in determining the extent to which employees endorse diversity.

Equally, if not more, important is the model’s perspective on how employees decide whether or not to act on their level of diversity endorsement. Many might assume that inaction is indicative of indifference, but such an assumption may be erroneous. Like Bowen and Blackmon (2003), in their discussion of how differences of opinion influence employee propensity to vocalize ideas, this model illustrates the potential power of context to permit or prevent open expression of one’s position on diversity. In some instances, this may prove beneficial to the organization, such as when a biased employee elects to act in a non-discriminatory fashion to conform to company and workgroup norms supporting diversity. However, the opposite also may occur in that a potential diversity advocate might remain inactive on the topic to avoid potentially alienating others who hold divergent viewpoints. This implies that organizational-diversity contexts play a significant role in regulating diversity advocacy or opposition that is conceptually similar to that specified in Tett and Burnett’s (2003) trait activation theory.

It should be noted that though the moderators identified in the model pertain primarily to situational factors within the organizational environment, factors outside the organization could have some bearing as well. Before employees join organizations, they are socialized via school and their upbringing to hold certain beliefs. In many instances, these beliefs link certain roles or behaviors to members of a particular demographic group. Given that diversity is more closely tied to minority groups (Unzueta & Binning, 2010), a member of the majority who outwardly advocates diversity is likely to be seen as a deviant engaging in role incongruent behavior. This view is evident in the following quote from a male firefighter (Blank & Slipp, 1994, p. 177): “You can’t imagine the razzing I got when I supported a woman firefighter complaining about unfair treatment. I was called a traitor by more than one guy.” Moreover, a recent study of corporate-diversity officers in the United Kingdom (Kirton & Greene, 2009) found that the majority of their sample was female and the only White male was openly gay. This suggests individuals may come to associate diversity advocacy with minority groups and diversity opposition with the demographic majority. Because individuals are often reluctant to engage in behavior that deviates from that which is expected of them (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), this may cause those who endorse diversity to be more likely to act on their position when their viewpoint is consistent with commonly held expectations for members of their demographic group.

Additionally, though not specified in the model, the contextual factors identified as moderators of the endorsement–activism linkage may influence an individual’s level of endorsement directly. Those in one’s surroundings often have a considerable impact on cognition as well as behavior. Nevertheless, the strength of these factors’ effects on endorsement is likely to depend upon the individual’s susceptibility to external sources of influence (e.g., social desirability, self-monitoring). Likewise, a number of other unnamed factors may influence the strength of the anticipated moderating effect of these contextual factors. For instance, employees who are more embedded in the organization (e.g., those with stronger ties to their customers, coworkers, supervisors, and executives) should be more influenced by their beliefs about how other stakeholders view
diversity. Related to this point, customer endorsements (or perceptions thereof) should have a stronger influence on employees who are more (a) proximal to the organization’s customers or (b) more directly affected by their feedback (i.e., management whose compensation is often tied to customer satisfaction metrics). Another relevant factor is likely to be the employee’s level of conviction to their personal morals (moral identity; Aquino & Reed, 2002), as the actions of those higher in this trait may be influenced more by their own attitudes and less by the attitudes and behaviors of those around them.

One of the more important scholarly needs identified by this model is for theory and research to identify ways for organizations to create the type of environment where individuals feel free to engage in constructive dissention. For instance, the contextual moderators suggest that employees, more or less, will comply with peer pressure when it comes to determining whether or not to act on their diversity endorsement. This illustrates the difficulty for organizations hoping to achieve any meaningful change. If an individual values diversity but believes that those around them (i.e., peers, superiors, and customers) do not, diversity activism and any corresponding organizational change are unlikely. Scholars (e.g., Kahn, 1990) have identified psychological safety (i.e., the ability to show one’s true self without fear of repercussion) as a precondition for employees fully engaging themselves at work. It seems logical that psychological safety also might help to determine whether or not an employee would feel comfortable dissenting from others in expressing support of diversity. Unfortunately, many of the established predictors of psychological safety pertain to others in one’s work environment (e.g., coworker norms, supervisor relations, coworker relations; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Thus, it is imperative that researchers identify organizational tactics that may help enhance psychological safety even in the presence of potential disagreement.

Another prospective avenue researchers may wish to consider is the consequences of inconsistencies between diversity endorsement and activism. When these discrepancies occur within an individual employee, the situation is apt to produce cognitive dissonance because there is divergence between the employee’s attitudes and actions. This dissonance can be psychologically taxing (Elliot & Devine, 1994), which may result in emotional exhaustion and diminished performance. These discrepancies also could have vicarious effects by influencing the attitudes of those who witness them or believe themselves to be witnessing discrepancies. For instance, employees who, through word of mouth or reputation, come to perceive that their superiors endorse diversity may feel betrayed if these individuals fail to act in ways that support diversity or, worse yet, actively oppose it (e.g., discrimination). From the employees’ perspective, such behaviors likely convey a lack of behavioral integrity (i.e., correspondence between word and deed; Simons, 2002), which can detract from trust, perceived justice, commitment, satisfaction, and intentions to remain with the organization (Simons, Friedman, Liu, & Parks, 2007). This conclusion, however, is speculative and requires empirical research to validate it.

Finally, I encourage research to test this model’s generality across the boundary conditions identified toward the beginning of the article. Namely, the processes identified here could apply more strongly to certain types of diversity than others. For instance, I drew most heavily on theory and evidence pertaining to the most studied demographic variables (i.e., sex, age, and racioethnicity). It is easy to envision how the intense emotions involving religion or taboos associated with sexual orientation could create complexities not anticipated here. Furthermore, diversity attitudes (e.g., prejudice) concerning more functional types of diversity are probably considerably less entrenched than those pertaining to demographics. Consequently, it could
prove informative to see tests of this model explicitly examine the type of diversity as a potential moderator of many of the proposed relationships.

Practical considerations

It is also important to acknowledge the implications of this theory for those in applied settings. Given how vital diversity endorsement is to the efficacy of organizational-diversity interventions (Wentling, 2004), understanding its antecedents and consequences is of clear practical importance. The model suggests that employing individuals who endorse diversity is a necessary but insufficient precondition for diversity activism. If companies are to unlock diversity’s potential, they will need employees who endorse diversity and environments that facilitate diversity endorsement leading to action. This highlights the importance of prioritizing diversity throughout organizational human-resource management practices.

With respect to staffing, it is imperative that organizations attempt to attract and select individuals who endorse diversity. One means of doing so could involve using organizational impression management to propagate a corporate employment image as a diversity-friendly employer (Avery & McKay, 2006). Companies that are able to create strong impressions of support for diversity in the minds of jobseekers are likely to entice more applications from those who endorse diversity and fewer from those who oppose it (Brown, Cober, Keeping, & Levy, 2006). Moreover, organizations could seek to assess attitudinal or personality antecedents of diversity endorsement (e.g., motivational CQ, openness to experience) during the selection process, as an individual’s proficiency relating to dissimilar others is clearly job relevant in many of today’s ever-diversifying workplaces. Although it may be impractical to use this information as a stringent selection criterion, it could prove particularly useful both in placement decisions (i.e., identifying those better suited for work in multicultural contexts) and identifying training needs.

Regarding training, prior evidence indicates that a number of the attitudinal antecedents of diversity endorsement are malleable. For instance, one recent study showed diversity beliefs may be influenced positively by information presented in relatively brief training sessions (Homan, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007). Moreover, research on prejudice reduction indicates that explicit (those the individual is aware of) and even implicit (those that are unconscious) biases can be lessened via awareness training (Kulik & Roberson, 2008; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). Thus, newly selected and incumbent employees who may oppose diversity or contribute to an environment perceived as doing so can be trained to diminish the likelihood of them standing in the way of the achievement of organizational-diversity goals.

A final practical implication involves the need for those with performance management responsibilities to take diversity-relevant behavior into consideration when appraising employees. The actions and responses of those in power send strong signals to employees concerning what is and is not considered appropriate behavior (Brief et al., 2000). If employee acts of demographically oriented harassment, bullying, or discrimination go unpunished, it sends a de facto message that such behavior is permissible. Not only does this fail to address the perpetrator’s behavior, but also diminishes the likelihood of others in the work setting engaging in any form of diversity advocacy that might help rectify the situation. Companies that take steps to reprimand this form of misbehavior or go further by actively rewarding desired behaviors (e.g., employees helping dissimilar coworkers and customers) should enjoy benefits in the form of greater employee diversity advocacy. This greater advocacy, in turn, should help to promote the type of environment wherein diversity is embraced and all employees have the opportunity to flourish.
Conclusions
This paper used theory to show how beliefs and identity influence diversity endorsement. It seems that (a) who employees are and (b) how they see the world has a considerable impact on their personal stances on organizational diversity. Understanding these antecedents is important because endorsement varies considerably across individuals (e.g., Mor Barak et al., 1998) and is a key factor in effective diversity management (Wentling, 2004). Thus, the model not only extends current understanding of who is likely to endorse diversity, but also aids practitioners in determining means of identifying individuals more prone to endorse diversity or that require some assistance to see why they should do so.

Additionally, beyond identifying individual precursors of diversity endorsement, the model went on to stipulate how situational factors determine whether employees act on their diversity endorsement. The mere presence of employees who intrinsically support diversity will not, in and of itself, facilitate diversity activism. Likewise, the presence of employees who oppose diversity does not necessarily dictate that demographic discrimination will occur. Through their human-resource management policies and procedures, organizations have a considerable impact on the diversity climates they facilitate and the employees they attract and retain. If they wish to encourage employee diversity activism, it is imperative that they take steps to ensure that the climates, supervisors, and coworkers employees routinely encounter convey that diversity is valued and supported.

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