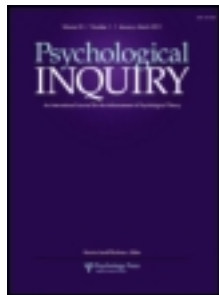


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### Reflection on Diversity Science in Social Psychology

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## Reflection on Diversity Science in Social Psychology

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At Columbia University, I teach a course called The Psychology of Culture and Diversity, a course that my doctoral student Ruth Dittmann and I (and others in my laboratory) spent many years discussing and developing. The first part of the course is relatively straightforward and is considered cultural psychology (Buchtel & Norenzayan, 2008; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). The second part is more challenging and is what Plaut has labeled diversity science. As Plaut (this issue) articulates, a diversity science “will consider how people create, interpret, and maintain group differences among individuals, as well as the psychological and social consequences of these distinctions” (p. 77). One major goal of diversity science is to identify, describe, and examine how concepts such as race and ethnicity are co-constructed in the process of everyday social interactions and are grounded in historically derived ideas and beliefs about difference. In this respect, the Plaut piece is a masterful and important article that carves a space for scholars, particularly in social psychology, to interrogate means of achieving diversity, to create and refine theoretical models, and to explore how these models play out in intergroup interactions in everyday life.

Yet diversity science, as Plaut describes it, needs more. Two areas in particular require further reflection, and that will constitute this commentary. Of the many discussions I have had in my courses around diversity science, there are two recurring issues that students bring up and, although the questions are somewhat unrelated to each other, they strike deeply at the core of what diversity science needs to address in order to continue to grow as a discipline. One question reads, “Are we studying *American* diversity or the study of diversity?” The second question is, in an American context, “Is multiculturalism the ideal for ethnic minorities?” This commentary discusses both issues and describes their implications for diversity science.

### **Part 1: Study of *American* Diversity or Study of Diversity?**

Throughout much of the world, globalization and immigration unite people from ethnically, culturally,

and religiously diverse backgrounds at a pace unprecedented in world history. Given this context, it is unsurprising that immigration continues to be a domestic and international challenge. The turmoil of the French Riots in 2005, for instance, illustrates the dangerous consequences that can result from the unsatisfactory incorporation of immigrants into majority cultures.

American policymakers and media advocating for improved treatment of immigrants worldwide often recommend that other pluralistic societies adopt “American style” approaches to achieving diversity. Some of their recommendations stem from diversity science research. For instance, days after the French riots when European government officials conjectured about how to address aggrieved immigrant communities in France, a *New York Times* article called for an American approach to multiculturalism, stating “the current British government is beginning to sound less like the American champions of multiculturalism and more like the French” (Cowell, 2005).

This American style of multiculturalism is, by and large, a “melting pot” approach, which involves a compromise between retaining parts of one’s cultural heritage and embracing a superordinate American national identity (Fredrickson, 1999; Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994). Such urging of other countries to adopt a melting pot approach overlooks the United States’ unique history including centuries of immigration, a model of citizenship that practices *jus soli* (right of soil) where citizenship is the birthright of anyone born within the territorial boundaries of the state, and a relatively permeable national identity (Brubaker, 1998). This example illustrates a critical lesson for diversity science: If one goal of this discipline is to inform policy, diversity scholars must rigorously examine the context in which diversity science is constituted and the underlying assumptions about “difference” that drive our research.

As Plaut (this issue) cogently argues, a sociocultural analysis of diversity illuminates how historically derived ideas and practices about race, ethnicity, and identity are transmitted and held in place by people and by institutions that manifest in psychological tendencies. A sociocultural analysis of *diversity science* as a *discipline* reveals that the ways in which social

psychologists conceptualize and operationalize diversity is also rooted in historically derived ideas and practices that are held in place by us as scholars and manifest in how we “do diversity science.” Much of the research highlighted in the Plaut article is rooted not only in a Western democratic context but in a uniquely American cultural context where particular concepts related to diversity are privileged over others. Currently rather than asking “why and how difference matters”, as Plaut calls for, we tend to ask “why and how difference . . . from an American perspective . . . matters.”

What are some assumptions and ideas about difference that led to the intertwining of the American cultural context with diversity science? In this commentary we highlight two assumptions. The first assumption is that *each ethnic, cultural and religious group deserves equal recognition, representation, and treatment in a given mainstream institution* (i.e., corporation, school, government). This notion that every group deserves a fair shake is ingrained in American culture, and this idea relates to our faith in the rule of law (e.g., If a store clerk discriminates against me, I have the right to sue the store) and is epitomized in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. It also relates to our assumption that cultural, religious, and ethnic group memberships are distinct from political membership and distinct from citizenship (Brubaker, 1998). Indeed, a large body of work on prejudice is driven by the idea that fairness and equality for all groups regardless of race or ethnicity is deeply ingrained in what it means to be an American; thus Americans show discomfort when their unintentional biases or inequalities in American society are made salient to them (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Jones, Engelman, Campbell, & Turner, 2008). Multicultural frameworks tend to emphasize acknowledging and valuing cultural differences. Egalitarianism between groups is one necessary catalyst to manage a diversity of identities in a given mainstream institution.

The notion that each ethnic, cultural, and religious group deserves equal recognition in a given mainstream institution may not be the key currency in other pluralistic societies, or it may be one among many concepts that guide ways of being. Thus, in other nation states the project of achieving diversity may manifest in different definitions of multiculturalism. As one example, many societies do not have faith in the rule of law; often, they do not trust that members of other ethnic groups empowered by governmental appointments will “do right” by everyone. In such societies, fairness for all cultural groups may be unrealistic when it is necessary to trust members of one’s own clan or ethnic group for protection. In such a pluralistic society it may be the case that *group separatism*, where groups have little or no interaction with each other, is the dominant approach to diversity (Fredrickson, 1999). Alternatively, in societies where ethnic minorities control the

economy there is little pressure on the minority to adjust to the values of the majority, which is how a melting pot approach to diversity is achieved (Chua, 2002). In such a pluralistic society, *ethnic hierarchies* tend to be the dominant approach to diversity (Fredrickson, 1999). Or, one may live in an authoritarian system that derives power from controlling the judiciary and justifying this control by appealing to the common good, which may involve appeals to colorblindness.

In nation states such as these, models of diversity are assuredly rooted in different cultural practices than those identified in Plaut’s call for diversity science, and these have the potential to manifest in distinct psychological tendencies that merit serious empirical inquiry. Interested readers may find our observations intriguing but naïve, yet one merely needs to point to work in cultural psychology where research is conducted in places ranging from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to Bhubaneswar, India, to Baffin Island, Canada (Berry, 1967), to Artvin, Turkey (Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008), to recognize that the future of diversity science lies in applying Plaut’s sociocultural analysis of diversity in countries beyond the United States.

A second and related assumption that Americans hold about difference, one that also connects the American cultural context with diversity science, is the idea that *ethnic identities are relatively permeable and it is therefore possible and ideal to integrate identities or assimilate in a given mainstream institution*. Whether one advocates for one-way assimilation, where the minority integrates themselves into the majority, or a mutual accommodation model (also termed *fusion model* or *two-way assimilation*), a power sharing model that calls for expectations of change on the part of both the minority and the majority (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Plaut, 2002; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000), a permeable identity underlies both constructs. The concept of permeable identities is also ingrained in our culture, driven in part by our history of immigration that Plaut (this issue) discusses and in part by our conceptualization of the American national identity as being primarily ideological (which is permeable) and not ethnic (which is less permeable; Brubaker, 1998). Implicit in our American-ness is the idea that there is a thin ideological glue of similarity that ties people together (i.e., common ingroup identity; Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994).

A diversity science scholar whose thinking is constituted by this idea would advocate for a form of multiculturalism that involves respecting and even emphasizing differences. Of interest, a substantial body of work on multiculturalism described in the Plaut article, including work from our own laboratory (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008), is about different ethnic groups in the United States (African Americans, White Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans) and

about how to successfully incorporate groups who have been historically marginalized into mainstream institutions. Within the United States and other pluralistic societies with permeable national identities (e.g., Canada), multiculturalism can be achieved by emphasizing the value of group differences in lived experiences.

Moreover, Plaut argues that if society is to successfully achieve diversity, "separate but equal" policies and practices are not tenable. But some form of "separate but equal," or group separatism, may indeed be implemented by a multicultural ideal in nation states where people conceptualize identities as relatively less permeable (Fredrickson, 1999). Future research would benefit from unearthing models of diversity in other nations where distinct characteristics of one's national identity are important for their distinguishing qualities. Many national identities have ethnic definitions; in fact, literature on the national identity has revealed factors that may be called self-stereotypes of national identity (Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996; Walduz, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). For instance, one study revealed that Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Greek participants described their national identity in terms of bounded, constrained, nonpermeable personality trait terms, whereas American participants produced sociopolitical terms, such as freedom, social development, and political values (Larsen, Killifer, & Csepeli, 1992).

Our point is that if diversity science is to prosper as a discipline, we need to rigorously examine and test whether and how its current conceptualization is rooted in a uniquely Western, democratic and even uniquely American cultural context. We need to examine how this historical, cultural, and national context drives the topics that are our key currencies (e.g., colorblind vs. multicultural approaches to diversity), the research questions that are asked, the research samples that are selected, and the conclusions drawn from our theory and data. Indeed there are many research scholars whose work is conducted outside of the American context (Hornsey & Hogg, 2002; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, Hamilton, Peng, & Wang, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005), but we suspect that this fruitful work is perceived as being an important extension of the American context in a different location instead of being seen as an opportunity to explore the fundamental premises of these scholars' theoretical diversity frameworks.

Recent research in our laboratory (Ditlmann, Purdie-Vaughns, & Eibach, in press) has begun to tackle the challenge of (a) bridging research on immigration, national identity, and intergroup relations with research on diversity science, and (b) explicitly taking a cross-cultural approach to the study of diversity and identifying a cultural process variable, such as a given conceptualization of national identity. There is a remarkable lack of empirical research exploring

how unique political and historical factors shape national identity and the implications for how citizens conceptualize the treatment of outsiders. In what follows we briefly describe our theoretical framework and research.

Our work is based on the fundamental premise that how a citizen treats an immigrant or outsider in his or her society of settlement is more than a matter of personal preference. Reactions to immigrants often reflect assumptions about national identity—ideas about "us" as citizens and "them" as outsiders—that are collectively shared. Because these assumptions are a product of historical, legal, and cultural forces (Brubaker, 1992; Feldblum, 1997; Fetzer, 2000; Joppke, 1999; Kastoryano, 2002; Sassen, 1999; Soysal, 1994), the concept of national identity can have different meanings and evoke different responses towards immigrants in one national context compared to another. For example, citizens might have different conceptualizations of what their national identity means to them and thus how fully immigrants can and should claim that identity, which is the project of achieving diversity in pluralistic societies.

Our research strategy thus far involves conducting cross-cultural studies among citizens in the United States and Germany. These countries represent large countries of immigration, yet they differ vastly in terms of their conceptualization of nationhood and citizenship (Joppke, 1999). We propose that American national identity is *ideology based* (Ditlmann, Purdie-Vaughns, & Eibach, in press); it is characterized by an endorsement of a core set of transcendent and abstract national values (e.g., freedom, democracy). In contrast, we propose that the content of German national identity is *heritage based*; it is characterized by expression of self-descriptive traits (e.g., personality traits) and cultural traditions.

Accordingly, American citizens may be more likely than German citizens to accept immigrants who *feel* fully integrated into their host country and who endorse its ideology (e.g., "I became a citizen because I genuinely feel like I belong here and believe in its values" vs. "I became a citizen for practical reasons"). Paradoxically, German citizens may be more likely than American citizens to be threatened by an immigrant who lacks ancestral ties and yet, nevertheless, expresses emotional and even ideological closeness to the host country.

To test this reasoning, American and German citizens recruited in public parks in New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States and in Konstanz, Germany, read profiles of an ostensible recent immigrant who expressed either "pragmatic" or "affective" reasons for seeking citizenship. Confirming our hypotheses, American participants were significantly more likely than German participants to exclude an "immigrant" when they were led to believe that he wished to obtain

citizenship for pragmatic rather than affective reasons. The opposite pattern of results was found for German participants.

What are the implications of this research for diversity science? If group members, such as German citizens, perceive that being a citizen is to have particular unique heritage-based traits, then multiculturalism for such individuals means maintaining group distinctiveness. In short, at least initially, do not try to “be like us.” This is not an unsophisticated view of diversity. This does not mean that such individuals do not respect distinct cultural groups. Rather, we suggest this is a legitimate way of conceptualizing multiculturalism that is rooted in a particular historical, cultural and legal context.

## **Part 2: Within an American Context, Is Multiculturalism Truly the Ideal for Ethnic Minorities?**

Much good has come of multiculturalism and ethnic minorities have benefited from institutional policies and practices where diversity is valued, endorsed, and supported (Carbado & Gulati, 2004; McHugh, Nettles, & Gottfredson, 1993). Indeed, as the Plaut (this issue) article describes, multiculturalism tends to appeal more to minority group members, such as African Americans, than to majority group members, such as White Americans (Lambert & Taylor, 1988). Minority group members generally prefer multiculturalist ideologies over assimilationist ideologies, such as colorblindness (Brug & Verkuyten, 2007; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005). Given evidence born out of diversity science that African Americans view multiculturalism more favorably than Whites, one may be tempted to conclude that multiculturalism is unequivocally good for African Americans and colorblindness is unequivocally bad. We think this assumption requires a more critical and nuanced analysis.

One limitation of multiculturalism is that *there are inconsistencies between multiculturalism and the “on the ground” strategies African Americans use to achieve racial equality*. Although African Americans typically prefer multicultural ideologies over colorblind ones (Ryan et al., 2007), they often cope with the possibility of being stigmatized in daily life by using egalitarian, individualist, and colorblind strategies. So a second project of diversity science may be to examine both people’s perceptions of diversity and how people enact diversity throughout their daily lives. Moreover, it is important to develop and test theoretically driven models that allow scholars to move beyond the colorblind/multicultural binary. We offer our work on identity safety as one potential model.

Legal scholar Richard Ford (2005) observed the following about African Americans during the civil

rights era: “Some of the most passionate advocates of colorblindness, strong racial integration, and even assimilation were people of color who truly believed in the moral justice and pragmatic necessity of these goals” (p. 32). Recent empirical research suggests that African Americans continue to combat racism with egalitarian and individualistic strategies, not multicultural ones.

For African Americans, the primary goal in most mainstream institutions is to combat stigmatization and achieve racial equality. Such goals led African Americans to perceive that the way to achieve racial equality was to emphasize egalitarianism (e.g., “Blacks are on equal footing with whites”; Ford, 2005, p. 30), and to advocate for a form of colorblindness that led to successful integration (e.g., “Our skin color will not be a barrier to inclusion”; Lamont & Fleming, 2005; Markus et al., 2000). Sociologist Michele Lamont (Lamont & Aksartova, 2002; Lamont & Fleming, 2005) has found that both elite and working-class African Americans seek to achieve this goal by highlighting their intelligence and competence in the workplace in an effort to demonstrate that racial stereotypes do not apply to them and/or that such stereotypes are unfounded. Although working-class African Americans employ individualistic rhetorical strategies that the elite do not—such as colorblind religious themes (e.g., “We are all Children of God”; Lamont & Aksartova, 2002, p. 10)—both working-class and elite African Americans draw on themes of economic egalitarianism (e.g., “money makes us equal”; Lamont & Aksartova, 2002, p. 10), individualism, and personal competence as rhetorical strategies to resist stigmatization.

African Americans also tend to draw on commonalities between people, as highlighted in sociologist Elijah Anderson’s (1999) research on corporate executives. Anderson outlines the archetype of the successful African American corporate executive: one who feels a strong need to personally believe that their presence in the organization is not due to race, but due to excellence and accomplishments in business. Accordingly, African American corporate executives, particularly those who have successfully integrated into the corporate culture, publicly embrace the meritocratic norms of the company and explicitly project the appearance of colorblindness which produces, Anderson argues, a colorblind self-presentation style in the workplace:

In management, in the various and sundry issues of the corporate world, members of the periphery [e.g., African American corporate executives] like to appear colorblind, indicating that race plays a limited role in their understanding of the social world, but they display some ambivalence in this regard. . . . It is with such ambivalences and reservations that, on a social basis [African American corporate executives] tend to fraternize with both blacks and whites, often believing

they are making little distinction on the basis of skin color, but yet doing so all the while. It is within this context, from this benchmark, that they project a kind of cosmopolitanism ideal. (pp. 12–13)

Similarly, Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, frequently emphasizes how we can reduce racial polarization by focusing on common interests among racial groups in the United States (Obama, 2008; see also Eibach & Purdie-Vaughns, 2009). For instance, he suggested that African Americans can gain more widespread support for the cause of racial justice by “binding our particular grievances . . . to the larger aspirations of all Americans” (p. 264) and that we can “pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family” (pp. 102–103). Such common interest frames promote a colorblind view of society, downplay group differences, and encourage people to focus on shared objectives.

Why might African Americans, from the working class to the White House, express and enact colorblind rhetorical strategies, when colorblindness might at times disadvantage their group? Colorblindness may be an ideology that denies the existence of white privilege and obscures racial inequalities, but it is also an ideology that can be used to advocate for racial equality and race-neutral treatment (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). When it provides a means to promote fair treatment, African Americans may ironically prefer this form of colorblindness over multiculturalism. This reasoning is not without its challenges, namely, the psychic struggle that accompanies enacting colorblindness in the workplace (Anderson, 1999), or disambiguating which form of colorblindness is at play, a process that consumes cognitive resources (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Nevertheless, multiculturalism, in which group identities are highlighted and celebrated, may not provide African Americans the same means to contend with race and racial identity in mainstream settings.

In general, at their best, we assume that diversity ideologies like multiculturalism and colorblindness represent different means of achieving a common goal: equal opportunity and inclusion in mainstream settings for people from all social groups. Neither ideology, however, promotes this goal in a nonproblematic way. Multiculturalism risks reifying social categories—treating people as members of a group first and as individuals second. Colorblindness can deny the reality of people’s group identities and the power of these identities to shape the experiences and outcomes of people from minority groups. Insofar as people wish to be perceived and treated as individuals rather than as group ambassadors, it is important to highlight their individual experiences while still acknowledging the importance of group identity.

Plaut aptly outlines a sociocultural analysis of diversity science. This is important and a much needed

approach to situate diversity within a historical and cultural context. It also weds diversity to achieving racial equality. But if diversity science is to achieve the aims Plaut outlines in her article, including informing policy, then we as scholars in the domain of diversity science are obligated to interrogate multiculturalism with the same vigor that we do colorblindness. We also need to develop and test other theoretically informed approaches to achieving diversity and racial equality.

We aim to shift conversations away from the multiculturalism/colorblindness dichotomy towards a third approach to diversity—what we and others have termed “identity safety” (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Markus et al., 2000; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Like multiculturalism, identity safety explicitly acknowledges that diversity can be a source of value. Unlike multiculturalism, it also emphasizes that people from different social groups and backgrounds can experience the same social contexts in similar ways but that various barriers in mainstream institutions can also prevent them from doing so (Markus et al., 2000; Steele et al., 2002).

In many school and corporate settings, people from different social groups contend with different *identity contingencies*—ways in which their experiences differ as a consequence of numeric under-representation, social hierarchies, explicit and unintended discrimination and stereotypes (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). The goal of identity safety is to systematically identify the identity contingencies unique to each social group in a given setting and mitigate the ways in which identity contingencies undermine some people’s experiences. In an ideal setting, people’s experiences and outcomes would be determined primarily by their individual interests and aptitudes and, where their group identity is relevant, it would be a source of advantage and value, not disadvantage and threat. We call such environments “identity safe.”

Of importance, to reduce negative identity contingencies, it is effective neither to essentialize group identity and differences, as is risked by multiculturalism, nor to ignore the reality of group identity, as is risked by colorblindness. Instead, what is required is a theoretically based, empirical assessment of the ways in which *each* group identity can potentially undermine people’s experiences and of strategies to mitigate such identity contingencies. We argue that identity safety is a viable alternative to both multiculturalism and colorblindness ideologies.

## Note

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