COMMENTARY

Polyculturalism as a multilevel phenomenon

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Given the growing support for polyculturalism, the proposal by Valenzuela and Bernardo (in press) to study polycultural organizations is valuable and compelling. One problem with this literature as it relates to organizational research, however, is that almost all psychological understanding of polyculturalism to date has focused on *individual-level* beliefs about the interconnections between cultures (e.g., Bernardo et al., 2016; Rosenthal & Levy, 2012). This poses both theoretical and empirical challenges, as multilevel scholars have cautioned against making conclusions about organizational phenomena without properly distinguishing between levels of analysis (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Specifically, taking the logic from studies about polyculturalism in individuals and using it to draw conclusions about the promise of polycultural organizations raises the potential for a *cross-level fallacy*—the assumption that constructs at the organizational level can be fully explained by individual-level variables alone (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

In this commentary, we argue that care must be taken in extrapolating organizational-level proposals from a construct that has been largely construed at the individual level until now. Our goal here is to use multilevel thinking to raise issues and opportunities about polyculturalism in organizations. With this in mind, we offer several multilevel questions for researchers to consider as they further examine polycultural organizations.

What is polyculturalism at the organizational level?

What exactly does it mean for an organization to be polycultural? Though the focal article lays important groundwork, a conceptual definition that is rooted in multilevel theory should consider the unique properties of organizational level constructs. For example, one characteristic common to organizational level variables is that they are "shared" by the lower-level entities (i.e., individual employees) that make up the higher level of analysis (Schneider et al., 2013). Indeed, it is this "sharedness" that gives stability and consistent form to the higher-level construct—and changes the meaning and nature of the construct by making it something wholly different at the organizational level of analysis. In developing a definition, researchers might begin by examining when and how polyculturalism emerges as a shared belief among employees in organizations. Furthermore, there should be a shared perception among employees that the organization supports, rewards, and expects day-to-day behaviors that advance polyculturalism (Schneider et al., 2013). A sample definition, then, might suggest that a polycultural organization is one with both shared beliefs that cultures are dynamic and interconnected and shared perceptions that the organization supports and rewards behaviors that align with polyculturalism.

By more clearly defining what it means for an organization to be polycultural, scholars can then develop measures that are targeted at capturing the specific aspects of the construct that are most

relevant to the organizational context. The existing five-item measure of individual-level polyculturalism (Rosenthal & Levy, 2012) could serve as a foundation to assess organizational-level beliefs. However, it will be necessary to establish that these beliefs and perceptions are shared among organizational members—an endeavor that can be accomplished through interrater agreement estimates (e.g., Schneider et al., 2013). An additional suggestion would be to change the referent in the questions to reflect the organization rather than the individual (van Mierlo et al., 2009) (i.e., "Different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups influence each other" vs. "Employees in my organization believe that different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups influence each other"). There also will be a need to develop items that reflect the policies, practices, norms, and rewards of the organization as they relate to polyculturalism.

How does a polycultural organization emerge?

Research will be needed to develop theory concerning the extent to which polyculturalism emerges as a unique and distinct construct at the organizational level of analysis. Emergence can occur in a top-down or bottom-up way. The focal article proposes that organizational practices (e.g., leadership, training, socialization) will play a key role in creating a polycultural organization, which is suggestive of a top-down process. Yet, a bottom-up pathway also holds promise as an explanatory mechanism. Emergence is a key concept in multilevel theory, as it refers to the phenomenon where a construct at a higher level of analysis (polycultural organization) arises from the interactions among components at lower levels of analysis (individual-level beliefs about polyculturalism) (Kozlowski et al., 2013). Given its focus on dynamism and interconnectedness between cultural groups, we believe that polyculturalism lends itself particularly well to consideration as a construct that holds these emergent properties. As employees with polycultural beliefs interact repeatedly in organizations, particularly in ways that support interconnectedness, we would expect to see increases in both their shared endorsement of and behaviors related to polyculturalism. By taking the emergence process into account, we will be able to develop better and more comprehensive theories of polycultural organizations.

Understanding the emergent properties of a polycultural organization can also help us to identify the antecedent factors that are likely to bring about the conditions that characterize it (Aguinis & Molina-Azorín, 2015). At the organizational level, polyculturalism is likely to emerge through a variety of mechanisms, including the recruitment and retention of diverse employees, the implementation of policies and practices that support cultural diversity, and the development of a culture of inclusion and respect for diverse perspectives. By valuing and promoting diversity and cultural competence at all levels of the organization and giving employees a chance to put these tenets to practice, polyculturalism can become a core value that shapes the behavior and outcomes of the organization as a whole. The focal article provides some excellent ideas, but we recommend that these ideas be considered in the context of theory about emergence.

What are the benefits of a polycultural organization?

The existing evidence on polycultural ideologies at the individual-level of analysis is compelling, with studies demonstrating that those who espouse polyculturalism exhibit more positive intergroup attitudes (Rosenthal & Levy, 2012), lower prejudice (Healy et al., 2017), and more creativity and acceptance of foreign solutions (Cho et al., 2018). However, variables conceptualized at the individual level of analysis can be difficult to link directly to group or organizational outcomes because they may not capture the complex interactions and interdependencies among employees and the broader organizational context. By introducing

the concept of the polycultural organization, the focal article marks an important step toward using our knowledge of diversity ideologies to explain organizational-level outcomes.

The power of conceptualizing polyculturalism at the organizational level—like the power of many organizational-level constructs in general—is that it can serve as a strategic-level mechanism to guide the behavior and decision making of everyone in the organization. To offer an example, polyculturalism can help organizations to better serve diverse markets and customer bases by promoting cultural sensitivity and competence among employees, thereby bolstering customer satisfaction (an organizational-level variable). We also think there is unique opportunity to examine the ways in which team-level polyculturalism influences team-level variables related to cooperation, conflict, and creativity. It has been argued that polyculturalism "encourages dialogue and exchange" (p. 1378; Cho et al., 2018), but this has only been examined at the individual level of analysis. We may observe, for example, that members may be more likely to collectively learn from and cooperate with each other in units with a climate for polyculturalism than in units with a climate for colorblindness or multiculturalism. In short, aligning polyculturalism with dependent variables of interest at the same level of analysis will facilitate the development of testable hypotheses and research questions that are grounded in existing knowledge and are more likely to contribute to the advancement of theory and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Conclusion

We are encouraged by the proposals in the focal article to examine polycultural organizations. However, because most of the evidence in this area exists at the individual level of analysis, we see tremendous opportunities to pursue new theoretical and methodological questions at a higher level of analysis: (a) to clarify the conceptual and operational definitions of polyculturalism at the organizational level, (b) to theoretically and empirically explore the mechanisms through which an organization becomes "polycultural," and (c) to examine the association between diversity ideology at the organizational level and organizational-level outcomes.

Competing interest. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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