


COMMENTARY

# Polyculturalism research should develop further before recommending organizational implementation strategies

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Polyculturalism *could* represent an important contribution to *future* organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies, but the polyculturalism research may not be developed enough to contribute to current organizational DEI strategies. Because of the underdeveloped status of the research, “no major criticisms have been raised about polyculturalism at this point” (Valenzuela & Bernardo, 2023, p. 29). This lack of criticism prevents researchers from systematically addressing the limitations of this ideology when developing recommendations for how to successfully integrate polyculturalism into organizational DEI strategies. Consequently, I argue that the literature must be further developed and provide a nonexhaustive list of concerns that should be addressed before researchers recommend the integration of polyculturalism into DEI strategies.

## The current state of the polyculturalism literature provides limited causal evidence related to organizational outcomes

Polyculturalism research is still in its early stages and has shown limited evidence of meaningful causal relationships. Early research showing that endorsement for polyculturalism had a negative relationship with social dominance orientation (SDO) (Rosenthal & Levy, 2012) and a positive relationship with attitudes toward people from other countries (Bernardo et al., 2013), attitudes toward different cultures (Rosenthal et al., 2015), and ethnocultural empathy (Virgona & Kashima, 2021) has relied on cross-sectional questionnaires. Additionally, the ability to draw causal inferences from research that has used time-series data to identify relationships between polyculturalism and outcomes such as sexism (Rosenthal et al., 2014) and intergroup friendships (Rosenthal & Levy, 2016) has been limited by other aspects of research design. Consequently, statements such as “polyculturalism has been shown to increase the willingness to interact with other cultural groups” (Valenzuela & Bernardo, p. 20) are not fully supported by the cited research.

An emerging stream of research has used experimental designs to provide better justification for inferences of causality related to polyculturalism. Research has shown that priming participants with polycultural principles has been associated with a preference for multicultural experiences (Cho et al., 2017) and cross-cultural word associations (Cho et al., 2018). Experimental research, however, has shown limited support for a causal relationship between polyculturalism and meaningful organizational outcomes. Furthermore, research exploring the *antecedents* of endorsement for polyculturalism is necessary in order to develop meaningful recommendations for organizational interventions (Rosenthal & Levy, 2016). Therefore, researchers should look to identify *causal* relationships between polyculturalism and outcomes

that are relevant to organizational DEI goals before recommending that organizations adopt a polycultural approach to DEI.

### **Clarification is needed on polyculturalism and the role of majority groups**

To recognize the challenges associated with justifying the applications of polyculturalism as recommended by Valenzuela and Bernardo, one must consider how endorsement of polyculturalism has been measured in the literature. The predominant measure of endorsement of polyculturalism acknowledges that different ethnic groups have distinguishing qualities, and that different cultures interact with and influence each other, but it makes no mention of majority and minority groups (Rosenthal & Levy, 2012). Therefore, it is difficult to understand why Valenzuela and Bernardo's Table 1 described a polycultural organization as one in which cultural fusion results in minority groups adopting the culture of the majority group.

Moreover, Valenzuela and Bernardo (p. 16) stated that because a polycultural organization celebrates connections across cultures, polycultural organizations can economically benefit from connections such as "using Hispanic knowledge not only to expand the Hispanic market but also to expand into the Asian or Black markets based on their cultural interconnections." This suggestion is notably focused on the connection between different racial and ethnic minority groups. Therefore, despite arguing that polycultural organizations break down the barriers between in-groups and out-groups, Valenzuela and Bernardo appear to have drawn a clear distinction between majority and minority groups when describing the economic rationale for polyculturalism. Why the economic rationale for polyculturalism would incorporate such a distinction is puzzling given that two out of five elements included in Rosenthal and Levy's (2012) widely used polyculturalism measure emphasize that connections between cultures may be unrecognized.

Valenzuela and Bernardo also argued that majority groups may be less resistant to polycultural ideals that emphasize connections than they are to multicultural ideals that emphasize differences. What is missing from this discussion, however, is an understanding of the majority group members' assumptions about connectedness and influence. For example, when responding to Rosenthal and Levy's (2012) polyculturalism scale, how are members of majority groups conceptualizing influence and connections? Are they conceptualizing cross-cultural influence as minority groups influencing other minority groups, minority groups influencing a majority group, a majority group influencing minority groups, or some combination of these outcomes? Without a deeper understanding of these assumptions, it is difficult to understand how members of majority groups will actually respond to organizations emphasizing polycultural ideals. There may be a need for research on the endorsement of polyculturalism that examines these assumptions *before* researchers can effectively advise organizations on how they can incorporate polyculturalism into their DEI efforts.

### **The unintended consequences of incorporating polyculturalism into organizational DEI strategies must be addressed**

Valenzuela and Bernardo's recommendations built upon the perceived limitations and potential divisiveness of multiculturalism. They discussed a variety of overall attitudes and relationships associated with both polyculturalism and multiculturalism, but they provided little discussion as to how these overall outcomes may differ for members of different racial and ethnic groups. Such a discussion is necessary because if a positive overall attitude toward DEI efforts is disproportionately driven by attitudes of the majority group, the implementation of such efforts may have unintended consequences for members of racial and ethnic minority groups.

In two out of four studies, Rosenthal and Levy (2012) found that White survey respondents showed significantly lower levels of support for multiculturalism than racial minorities. In the two

studies where no such effect was reported, a similar effect may have been masked by small sample sizes. Alternatively stated, in sufficiently powered studies, White participants were less likely to agree with statements such as “There are differences between racial and ethnic groups, which are important to recognize,” and “Each ethnic group has its own strengths that can be identified” (Rosenthal & Levy, 2012, p. 16).

These findings are consistent with observations that members of the majority group are sometimes reluctant to discuss issues related to race and ethnicity (DiAngelo, 2018). Extant research has also shown that White Americans, who have historically benefited from social dominance, frequently report higher levels of SDO than racial minorities (e.g., Rosenthal & Levy, 2012; Rosette et al., 2013). As a socially dominant group, White Americans (particularly those who are high on SDO) may be less likely to support recognizing the differences and strengths of other groups because doing so could weaken their position of social dominance. Therefore, shifting emphasis away from a multicultural approach may actually serve to perpetuate an imbalance of social power.

Also, a multicultural approach to DEI would appear to support having some of the uncomfortable conversations for which Valenzuela and Bernardo (pp. 28–29) advocate. Managers and researchers should recognize that although shifting the emphasis of DEI efforts from a multicultural approach (by integrating a polycultural approach) has the potential to increase the comfort level of majority group members, it *may* do so at the expense of minority group members, particularly when such a shift in emphasis is executed poorly. Researchers should carefully consider how organizations can incorporate the benefits of polyculturalism into their DEI strategy without sacrificing the benefits of multiculturalism.

Valenzuela and Bernardo (p. 29) suggested that when discussing discriminatory acts such as slavery and oppression, people should “refrain from creating a sense of ‘victims versus oppressors’ . . . while also focusing on commonalities.” If, when integrating polyculturalism into an organization’s DEI strategy, these types of recommendations are not properly explained to employees, well-meaning members of the majority group may try to identify and discuss connections when no relevant connection truly exists. For example, after hearing of a coworker being denied service due to racial discrimination, a member of the majority group may try to find a commonality by describing a time that they were denied service due to an administrative error.

Experiencing inconvenience due to an administrative error, however, is a false commonality because it does not involve the demeaning experience of racial discrimination. By articulating a false commonality, the coworker would be dismissive of their colleague’s experience, likely having a negative emotional impact and *potentially* contributing to an unspoken conflict. Researchers should work to identify these types of potential unintended consequences and develop recommendations to limit their likelihood of occurring *before* recommending that organizations integrate polyculturalism into their DEI strategies.

Finally, it is important to recognize that in the United States, White men tend to be overrepresented in leadership roles (Obenauer & Kalsher, 2022; Rosette et al., 2008). Therefore, if organizational leaders embrace the idea of prioritizing connections in their DEI strategies, such a change has the potential to be perceived as members of a historically privileged group shifting the emphasis of DEI efforts away from acknowledging and addressing historical inequities. To avoid such an outcome, careful consideration should be given to the messaging around why organizations are integrating polyculturalism into their DEI strategies. More importantly, however, future research should explore how members of historically marginalized groups would *feel about their employers making such a transition in their DEI strategy*.

## Final thoughts

I encourage readers to exercise caution in considering Valenzuela and Bernardo’s guidance that the polycultural organization represents an advancement in DEI strategy. Instead, I suggest that

researchers should work to more extensively develop knowledge related to the causal impacts of integrating polycultural ideology into organizational DEI strategies *before* such implementations are recommended. Once this literature is more thoroughly developed, it *may* be possible to provide meaningful recommendations for successfully integrating polyculturalism into organizational DEI strategies.

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