RESPONSE

The Value of Connecting Diversity in Organizations and Cross-Cultural Work Psychology Through Dialogue and Multiplicity

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Abstract
In our focal article (Ferdman & Sagiv, 2012), we suggested that increased dialogue and connection between researchers and practitioners focused on diversity in organizations and those focused on cross-cultural work psychology could be beneficial to growth and advancement in both fields. The thoughtful and intriguing commentaries to the article are heterogeneous both in the topics they focus on and in their relative emphasis on theory versus practice, and in our view support our call for more dialogue. In this response, we address some of the key issues the commentaries stimulated for us, including the notion of integration versus homogenization and the differential role of values in research in each field. We summarize by highlighting, as did many of the commentaries, the importance of multiple and diverse approaches and perspectives, a value consistent with both fields.

In our focal article (Ferdman & Sagiv, 2012), we argued that it would be beneficial to theory, research, and practice in both diversity in organizations and cross-cultural work psychology for the two fields to pay closer attention to each other. As a step in that direction, we offered brief reviews of the main interests and challenges in each field, discussed their commonalities and differences, and gave various examples of how each could benefit from drawing on the perspectives of and the knowledge gained in the other field. In our article, we presented our subjective interpretation of the two fields and did not aim to comprehensively cover all relevant issues. Our goal was to stimulate dialogue and growth in both fields, and in that sense we were gratified by the commentaries we received. The nine commentaries are heterogeneous both in the topics they focus on and in their relative emphasis on theory versus practice; taken together, they raise many intriguing points.

Some of the commentaries aim to further deepen the discussion of issues we raised in the focal article. Thus, for example, Feitosa, Grossman, Coultas, Salazar, and...
Salas (2012) discuss the role of identity as a means to integrate diversity and cross-cultural research, and expand on this issue, drawing on the distinction between surface-level and deep-level diversity. Sawyer and Thoroughgood (2012) as well as Shemla and Meyer (2012) shed more light on the relationships between diversity and culture, arguing for example that although not all sources of diversity reflect cultural differences, it is culture that often gives meaning to and frames these differences. Thus, the meanings of gender identity (Sawyer & Thoroughgood) or religious diversity (Shemla & Meyer) vary cross-culturally.1 Similarly, Sawyer and Thoroughgood (2012) point to the impact of the social context, in light of evidence that the extent to which ethnicity matters in an emerging organizational culture may depend in part on the minority versus majority status of the ethnic groups in question.

Other commentaries introduce issues in diversity and cross-cultural work or their relationship that were not discussed in the focal article, such as the relative hierarchy and appeal of the two fields among scholars (King, Kravitz, McCausland, & Paustian-Underdahl, 2012), the potential dangers of integrating too much or too soon (Prasad, 2012), the development of competency frameworks across the two fields (Butts, Trejo, Parks, & McDonald, 2012), and the construct of subjective diversity (Shemla & Meyer, 2012). Graen, Hui, and Wakabayashi (2012) discuss manager–direct report alliances, illustrating another topic on which more dialogue between the diversity and cross-cultural perspectives would be beneficial.

The value of multiple voices and perspectives is that a more comprehensive and complete view of the two fields can be developed. As various commentaries suggest and as we infer from the range of views expressed, how the fields are defined and circumscribed matters both to researchers and practitioners, and can have tangible implications for individuals and organizations. Yet even defining each field is not simple or without controversy. Some commentators took issue with our definitions and perspectives, and similarly, we found ourselves disagreeing with some of the representations of the fields that were provided. For example, Wilson and Schwabenland (2012) say that “diversity management ... treats ethnicity and race as demographic variables that are fixed and immutable ... and does not explore the social and political influences in identity construction” (p. 365). Although this may be the case in some versions of diversity management, their description is not consistent with our own experience and practice (see, e.g., Ferdman, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2003; Gallegos & Ferdman, 2012) or with other leading work in the field (e.g., on race and ethnicity: Nkomo & Stewart, 2006; Proudfoot & Nkomo, 2006; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010; on gender: Ely & Meyer-son, 2000), which sees identity as contextualized and emergent, as well as subject to multiple social forces. We also disagree with Wilson and Schwabenland’s claim that cross-cultural researchers assume homogeneity within societies. Hofstede (1980, 2001), for example, has been careful to point out that his cultural dimensions are relevant at the societal level and that individual level differences should be studied differently. Schwartz (1999, 2010; Sagiv, Schwartz, & Ariel, 2011) developed two theories of values, one for the societal level and one for the individual level. Although we disagree with the authors on these points, we appreciate their point about deepening the range of diversity that we attend to by expanding our cultural frames of reference.

Finally, some commentaries disagree with ideas presented in the focal article, especially with regard to the nature of
relationships between the diversity and cross-cultural fields and the extent to which the two are similar or different. Interestingly, the commentaries present views that are not only sometimes different than our own but also vary from each other. In the rest of our response, we highlight a few key themes raised by the commentaries and discuss our views about their implications.

Integration Is Not Homogenization

In our focal article, we focused on the characteristics of both diversity in organizations and cross-cultural work psychology and on what each field can learn from the other. We see the two fields as distinct areas differing in many ways, several of which we discussed in our paper. These distinctions are not only worth preserving but can serve to benefit researchers and practitioners in each field. In this sense, we agree with Prasad (2012) on the importance of maintaining “analytical precision” within each field. Indeed, when we consider the nature, goals, and focus of other, related fields, we can better understand and define our own specialty area. Such exposure may lead both researchers and practitioners to refine and sharpen their schemas, concepts, and ideas—or to adjust and modify them. In some cases, researchers and practitioners may also borrow and adapt aspects of the other field for their purposes, in ways that can be mutually beneficial, but without necessarily losing their own focus.

Some of the commentaries—either by arguing against our presumed position or by supporting it—seem to suggest that we advocate more blending between the fields than we actually believe would be helpful or promoted in our article. We found it fascinating that, on the one hand, some of the commentators argued that the two fields are essentially the same and wondered why we tried to maintain “a distinction without a difference” (Lopez & Finkelman, 2012), but others accused us of overshooting by arguing for the premature or unnecessary merging of two fields that are better kept separate (e.g., Prasad, 2012). Such is the prism (and beauty) of diversity, as illustrated by this set of commentaries!

We do not believe in nor did we argue for merging or blending the two fields. Our position on integration draws on theory and research in both diversity and cross-cultural psychology. Work on diversity and particularly the recent focus on inclusion suggest that there is great value in maintaining strong and distinct subgroup identifications while creating a superordinate identity (e.g., Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996; Madera, King, & Hebl, 2012; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Similarly, work on acculturation (Berry, 2001; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989) defines integration as maintaining the identity and distinctiveness of two groups while they function together in one social system. Past research provides evidence for the benefits of this type of acculturation over assimilation or separation (e.g., Berry, 1997). Ongoing dialogue and mutual exchange between the two fields—not total blending or impenetrable boundaries—can lead to such beneficial integration, analogous to the processes that both fields have found to be most useful in the context of diversity and multiculturalism.

Butts et al. (2012) illustrate a useful way of accomplishing this integration with their elaboration on aspects of workplace competencies deriving from both fields. By not completely blending them, this approach allows for consideration not only of competency in navigating cultural themes but also other aspects of diversity, such as awareness of privilege and the dynamics of dominance and subordination, processes that are affected by, yet not commensurate with culture (as Prasad, 2012, also points out). We agree that there are contexts, such as global organizations, in which diversity and cross-cultural psychology can be seen as part of a single continuum (as Lopez & Finkelman, 2012, argue); yet, we must keep in mind that there are other important constructs—such as power—and other perspectives—including cross-culturally varying perceptions of and responses to
diversity (e.g., King et al., 2012; Sawyer & Thoroughgood, 2012)—that would make it less useful to see them this way.

In summary, integration while maintaining differentiation is a key issue in diversity work in organizations. In their commentary, Wilson and Schwabenland (2012) use the term streams, which we find quite apt, in the sense that it usefully keeps the distinctions while allowing for flow into a larger river and division into tributaries. We believe that encounters and mutual learning between the diversity and cross-cultural streams will be most beneficial, whereas assimilation or even a full merger between the two is neither possible nor desirable.

The Value of Dialogue About the Role of Values

The benefits and challenges of the type of integration via dialogue that we advocate were illustrated for us in processing our responses to some of the commentaries, and particularly to King et al.’s (2012) contribution. We found that we could not easily arrive at a unified point of view that satisfied us both; given that, we decided to keep our two voices distinct here as we did in part of the focal article, not only to better communicate our differences but also to illustrate our jointly held point of view regarding the value of dialogue, which can be quite useful to note disagreement without the need to resolve it, and dialogue’s role in learning about ourselves and others. In that sense, we hope we are manifesting our shared value regarding the importance of documenting, respecting, and appreciating both diversity and cross-cultural differences and avoiding homogenization in the context of integration.

The Role of Values (Ferdman)

Cross-cultural research describing and explaining variations in values and attitudes is quite helpful and important, and it provides a substantive basis for describing and understanding diversity beyond an approach grounded solely on social identity or categories (Ferdman, 1992). At the same time, I agree with King et al.’s (2012) position that, in some cases, simply describing cross-cultural differences without also considering the dynamics and processes of cross-cultural interactions in light of these differences or the researchers’ values with regard to cultural variations may be a way of trying to stay neutral in ways that can make it more difficult to engage in effective diversity management. Nevertheless, in this regard King et al. characterize the cross-cultural field in a way that is overgeneralized and ultimately inaccurate, something that I recognized only after multiple conversations with my coauthor Sagiv. For me, this highlights the degree to which, even as a diversity scholar, I am subject to engaging in stereotyping.

Cross-cultural work psychology makes values the subject; it could perhaps do more to consider how research and researchers are themselves influenced by those values. At the same time, those focusing on diversity tend to look at values as providing context yet could do more to consider the role of values in what we study and in applying our theory and research in practice, particularly to the extent that views about and approaches to diversity themselves have a strong cultural component (as Sawyer & Thoroughgood, 2012, argue).

Overall, King et al. (2012) argue that (a) cross-cultural work psychology should better take into account and look at intergroup perceptions (in light of values), (b) diversity management needs to be studied and addressed in a culturally grounded and culturally specific way, and (c) workplace diversity and diversity management are inappropriately often given less attention and may be less “socially acceptable” among organizational scholars than cross-cultural differences. Although I generally agree with each of these points, I also believe that a more nuanced perspective of the two fields is warranted and that it is not particularly helpful to make overly broad generalizations about either field. For example, not all diversity scholars seek to prove that diversity and inclusion
are good or beneficial, and many cross-culturalists (e.g., intercultural trainers) are actively involved in seeking to improve intergroup relations in ways that indeed value multiculturalism and inclusion and in no way can be construed as “value free.” Similarly, scholars and practitioners tend to take varying positions with regard to the appropriateness of valuing particular outcomes, with scholars tending to be more descriptive and practitioners more prescriptive. In a sense then, the issue may be more about the different values of “pure” researchers versus practitioners than the differences between those who focus on diversity or diversity management and those who focus on cross-cultural variations.

In developing this dialogue with Sagiv regarding King et al.’s (2012) contribution and the values orientations of the diversity versus cross-cultural fields, I have come to wonder whether I fully understand the cross-cultural literature, and I realize that I probably have more to learn about its perspective, range, goals, and nuances, as well as its application to the field of diversity. Even though I believe that I have a sophisticated understanding of the cross-cultural field and have written about various aspects of it (e.g., Ferdman, 1992, 1995, 1999), this may not be sufficient. If I am to be consistent with my values as a diversity researcher/practitioner, I need to understand more about a point of view that may be different than mine and with which I may not necessarily agree. In this sense, then, dialogue between the fields provides a powerful means to deepen our understanding (and our “not understanding”; see Gurevitch, 1989) of both ourselves and the other.

**The Role of Values (Sagiv)**

Values affect professional choices such as occupational choice, policy orientation, and decision making (e.g., Adams, Licht, & Sagiv, 2011; Gandal, Roccas, Sagiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005). Like other professionals, researchers are often affected by their personal, organizational, and professional values in their choice of research topics as well as in their attitudes, orientations, and goals. In our focal article we discussed the commonalities and differences in the values that underlie the diversity and cross-cultural fields. We suggested that researchers in both areas are motivated to challenge the Western dominance in work psychology. They thus share the wish to identify, recognize, and give voice to diverse individuals and groups. In that sense, I agree with King et al. (2012) that values matter and cannot be ignored. Diversity and cross-cultural researchers and practitioners, then, are motivated by similar values; neither field is “value free” and both are values driven. The two fields also differ, however.

**Diversity research.** Motivated to give voice to multiple perspectives, researchers in the diversity field typically advocate for inclusion of multiple identities, especially of those less powerful and less privileged, as a means to that end. Diversity researchers and practitioners are therefore often motivated to change attitudes, goals, and values of individuals and organizations to allow for such inclusion. In that sense, the diversity field is not only values driven but also motivated to influence the values of its constituents (e.g., employees, managers, researchers). This is exemplified well in King et al.’s (2012) commentary, which seems to suggest that cross-cultural researchers should change.

**Cross-cultural research.** Although motivated by the same overarching goal—to give voice to multiple perspectives—cross-cultural researchers usually aim to identify and describe such perspectives in a non-judgmental manner. Thus, researchers in this field are not “value free,” but are usually “free” of the aim of changing values, perceptions, or actions that prevail in the societies and organizations that they study. They are committed to give voice to cultural values, beliefs, and practices that they may personally disagree with.
Cross-cultural research identifies cultural commonalities and differences and investigates the complex ways through which cultural dimensions affect individuals, teams, and organizations in perception (e.g., the process of sense making) and action. The knowledge gained by studies done taking this perspective serves to explain some of the findings King et al. (2012) point to and advocate for. Thus, for example, cross-cultural research on cultural dimensions of values serves to explain why cultures differ in their attitudes towards gender equality, why individuals from collectivistic cultures are often less open to diversity training, and how and when cultures differ in their tolerance towards others.

In summary, diversity researchers rely on their values as a means to change others’ values. Cross-cultural researchers, in contrast, rely on the same values to give voice to others—including those who do not share them. As a cross-cultural researcher, I believe both approaches are worthy, and both should be valued and respected.

The Importance of Multiple and Diverse Approaches and Perspectives

To us, the diverse range of commentaries and the multiple perspectives they represent—as well as the voices that are not included—illustrate both the importance of diversity and the role of culture (academic or disciplinary culture in this case) in influencing both what we work on and how we perceive our own work and that of others. By incorporating multiple and diverse voices, we can learn and accomplish more, and hopefully derive better insights and results. Each of us, from our own vantage point, sees only some aspects of the larger picture or puzzle. It is only through the combination and juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and voices that a more complete and complex picture can emerge, a picture that often may be difficult if not impossible for any one observer to absorb fully. In writing our focal article we focused on some parts—those parts that are most central to our professional identities or more congruent with our professional values. Similarly, each of the commentators sees and comments on a different part of the full puzzle (or proverbial elephant). Soliciting and including many voices and views starts to allow for a more nuanced and complete view.

Interestingly, not all voices were represented in the commentaries. Specifically, the set of commentaries does not include much from a cross-cultural perspective. To us, as with diversity and inclusion at work, this in part suggests that solicitation for all voices may not be enough. Ultimately, the exchange of views represented in this set of articles validates for us the value of humility about how much understanding and learning is possible from any single perspective and reinforces our view about the generative value of proactive exchange and connection between the fields of diversity in organizations and cross-cultural work psychology.

References


Ferdman, B. M., & Sagiv, L. (2012). Diversity in organizations and cross-cultural work psychology: What if they were more connected? Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 5, 323–345.


