COMMENTARY

Polyculturalism: Diversity incognito or diversity made irrelevant?

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Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) propose the benefits of adopting a polycultural framework for diversity management in organizations. On the surface, the authors offer a diversity incognito approach, where a commitment to diversity drives organizational practice but is not readily visible or marked by pro-diversity language and labels. It is a seemingly attractive approach, particularly because it could mitigate defensive routines related to the experience of identity threat (Dover et al., 2020; Leslie et al., 2020). However, it also has some real limitations that may short-circuit the goals of diversity management. We discuss the benefits alongside the critical challenges that ultimately limit the use of polyculturalism.

Potential benefits of polyculturalism

Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) present polyculturalism as an advancement upon the predominant ideology of multiculturalism in contemporary diversity management. In doing so, they make two important challenges to multiculturalism. First, multiculturalism seeks to raise awareness of group differences so as to affirm and value them but can have the unintended consequence of accentuating in-groups and out-groups, thus generating defensiveness and, in some cases, backlash. The focus on unique differences can foment "us versus them" divisions that undermine unity, potentially making it more difficult for diverse groups to work toward common goals. We agree this is a challenge that multicultural organizations face, although we question whether these unintended consequences outweigh the documented benefits of multiculturalism (Leslie et al., 2020).

Second, Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) suggest that polyculturalism could ameliorate the first threat by moving us toward connection across differences. This is certainly an important goal in the work of diversity management. Whereas multiculturalism explicitly values differences and implicitly seeks to integrate them into the broader cultural framework, polyculturalism implicitly values differences but explicitly seeks to connect them for the good of the whole. The question is which approach is more effective given our current reality.

Critical challenges of polyculturalism

Although polyculturalism, as defined by Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023), elucidates the challenges inherent in multiculturalism, we argue that the framework introduces other threats that are potentially more detrimental to the aims of diversity management.

If the inherent challenge of multiculturalism is an accentuation of differences, then the Achilles' heel of polyculturalism is a glossing over of differences for the benefit of majority groups. The authors offer a future vision of a "fused culture" that "evolves to become that of the cultural

majority group, which is in turn constantly adopted by the cultural minority group, eventually uniting cultural groups under one common interconnected culture" (p. 19). This idealistic, if not utopian, vision maintains a power imbalance between majority and minority groups. Further, the burden of cultural adoption (what exactly this means is not sufficiently defined by the authors) is placed on the minority group, whereas the passive benefit of transformation is relegated to the majority group. This language is reminiscent of assimilation, the predominant paradigm of many countries, especially the USA, that was repudiated by multiculturalism. Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) acknowledge the similarities between cultural fusion and assimilation (or integration), and we would argue that they do not adequately differentiate cultural fusion in order to demonstrate how it better supports diversity outcomes. The alarm bell has sounded, and we would ask the authors to further develop and define their vision of a "common interconnected culture," its operationalization, and its implications for the lived experiences of minority groups.

Due to this glossing over of differences, polyculturalism also takes our attention off differential outcomes experienced by many minority groups. The recent proliferation of diversity initiatives in organizations is due, not only to the increasing demographic diversity of the workforce, but also to heightened societal awareness of and concern for addressing social injustice. For example, organizations in the United States began to double down on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, including the hiring of diversity officers, launch of strategic diversity plans, and implementation of DEI programs (Gaudiano, 2022). Undoubtedly, some of these efforts are more effective than others, and researchers and practitioners should continue to measure the outcomes of such efforts to ensure effective practice (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). However, we argue that polyculturalism could undermine the pursuit of social justice in diverse organizations and prevent necessary change. A polycultural approach to diversity management is likely to minimize historical and power imbalances, inequities, and inter-group conflict in service of fostering positive connections and unity. As such, we argue that polyculturalism potentially advances what Nkomo et al. (2019) call a "difference-blind ontology of organizational life" (p. 509), a tendency to theorize diversity as a general set of surface- and deep-level individual differences, which then obfuscates the complexity and intersectionality of the identities of the diversity subjects themselves. Evidence also shows that framing diversity efforts in overly broad terms (i.e., "everyone is diverse") can make organizations susceptible to neglecting civil rights issues (Dover et al., 2020). In other words, polycultralism may not be that different from colorblind ideology in practice.

Overall, we value the ideal of collaborative intercultural contact inherent to the polycultural perspective. However, it also seems important to acknowledge that groups and cultures are historically interconnected, not only in a positive sense (as emphasized by the authors) but also in a negative sense. As such, intercultural contact needs to include space for acknowledgment of structural and institutionalized inequities and working across groups to address these issues. The positive vision of polyculturalism is appealing but does not honestly reckon with the complexities of past and present interactions between groups.

A potential alternative

Can we simultaneously affirm the inherent equality of all human beings while also recognizing that we have failed to operationalize this reality and stay the course? We offer a potential pathway toward intercultural equity that is ideologically multicultural and pragmatically inclusive.

In our view, multiculturalism is a more robust framework for working toward social justice by recognizing value in diversity, seeking to understand contemporary experiences of marginalization in the context of historically oppressive systems and power dynamics, and targeting equitable outcomes across groups. The challenge of intergroup conflict, which is the chief complaint of Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023), is not insurmountable. One possible tool for mitigating

intergroup conflict is inclusive leadership, which takes notice of disparities in equity and power (Ferdman, 2020). Specifically, inclusive leaders hold themselves and others accountable for creating an inclusive culture, invite engagement and dialog, model authenticity, foster transparent decision making, understand and engage with resistance, and discuss how inclusion connects to the organizational mission and vision. The capacity to lead inclusively is particularly needed at the managerial level (Dobbin & Kalev, 2021), where engaging with resistance across diverse teams will require leaders to develop a cognitive understanding of diversity, social perceptiveness of team dynamics, and behavioral flexibility (Homan et al., 2020). Inclusive behaviors should also be socialized and normed within the multicultural organization, such that employees at all levels can foster inclusion for themselves and others (Ferdman, 2020).

In conclusion, does polyculturalism increase the benefits of diversity while minimizing its disadvantages? We do not believe so. Although polycultural organizations may seek to do diversity management incognito, they potentially sideline and marginalize this work, derail current progress, or even render it irrelevant. Ultimately, polyculturalism offers a utopian vision of intercultural connectedness, but today's organizations are not positioned to realize the benefits of polyculturalism for all employees. We think that a multicultural approach with a focus on inclusive praxis offers a more promising avenue for maintaining a commitment to equity for all groups, but especially for historically underrepresented and marginalized populations. When greater equity is achieved, a multicultural ideology may no longer be needed. But that time is not yet. For now, diversity scholars and practitioners will need to face the reality of ineffective practices and unintended ill consequences of some diversity initiatives for the sake of progress, moving beyond good intentions to measure and design for greater impact (Zheng, 2023).

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