

Study: Workplace diversity must include buy-in from whites

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Organizational efforts to create and maintain an inclusive multicultural environment often face resistance by whites, says a University of Michigan researcher.

"Without the support of whites, organizations and educational settings will fail in their attempts to navigate and manage the complexities of diverse work forces and constituencies," said Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, an associate professor of management and organizations at Michigan's Ross School of Business. "In the face of the dramatic projected growth in demographic diversity, such failure could have severe economic, social and political consequences.

"Our research reveals that this resistance can have little to do with prejudice. Instead, it can stem from a basic human need to belong."

Sanchez-Burks, U-M doctoral student Flannery Garnett, Victoria Plaut of the University of California-Berkeley and Laura Buffardi of the Universidad de Deusto in Spain conducted a five-study investigation of [white](#) Americans' perceptions of diversity initiatives both in the workplace and in the classroom.

Their research highlights two cultural ideologies that dominate the American lexicon of diversity: Multiculturalism, which explicitly acknowledges differences among groups and promotes the notion that differences associated with social identities should be valued and; Colorblindness, which emphasizes the sameness of people, that racial

categories should be ignored or avoided and that differences based on social identity should be assimilated into an overarching unifying category.

They found that whites do not perceive multiculturalism as an inclusive ideology the way minorities do. In four of the studies of college students and employees, the researchers show how whites associate multiculturalism with exclusion as opposed to inclusion, but do not show this bias when whites are explicitly included in the conceptualization of multiculturalism.

Moreover, whites are less likely and slower than minorities to associate multiculturalism with their own self-identities and that whites' aversion to multiculturalism varies as a function of an individual's "need to belong."

"Individuals with a high need to belong rated the organization with the multicultural diversity message as less attractive than one espousing a colorblind message," Sanchez-Burks said. "For white individuals with a higher need to belong, an organization espousing a colorblind message may represent a lesser threat to their sense of inclusion than an organization espousing a multicultural message."

In a fifth study of nearly 5,000 employees at a large health care organization, Sanchez-Burks and colleagues found additional evidence that whites are less likely to endorse diversity than minorities and feel less included in their organization's definition of diversity than minorities.

"Organizations' concerted efforts to bolster and embrace diversity through the use of various diversity programs and structures may create the unintended consequence of simultaneously repelling their white constituencies," Sanchez-Burks said. "Without adequate buy-in from

these organizational members, attempts at launching diversity initiatives will likely be met with resistance, especially if a sense of inclusion is not fostered.

"Careful attention should be paid to the inclusion-related processes that help shape support for these efforts. In other words, taking seriously the 'What about me?' question may be crucial in stemming the tide of backlash responses to diversity efforts."

The research by Sanchez-Burks, Garnett and colleagues will appear in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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