Diversity programs give illusion of corporate fairness, study shows

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Diversity training programs lead people to believe that work environments are fair even when given evidence of hiring, promotion or salary inequities, according to new findings by psychologists at the University of Washington and other universities.

The study also revealed that participants, all of whom were white, were less likely to take discrimination complaints seriously against companies who had diversity programs.

Workplace diversity programs are usually developed by human resource departments to foster a more inclusive environment for employees, but aren't typically tested for their effectiveness. Nonetheless, their existence has been used in courtrooms as evidence that companies treat employees fairly.

"Our fear is that companies may prematurely stop thinking about diversity among their workers because they've credentialed themselves with these programs," said Cheryl Kaiser, lead author and a UW associate professor of psychology. "Our findings suggest that diversity programs can be window dressing – even those that do very little to increase diversity may still be perceived as effective."

Many diversity programs seem rational, she said. "By their design and goals, we're inclined to assume they would be successful. The catch is that since very few are tested for efficacy, these rational assumptions may not actually map onto the reality."

In their study, published in the March issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Kaiser and her coauthors point to a report that examined 1,000 federal civil rights legal decisions and found that "judges increasingly showed deference to organizations' diversity management structures" as "evidence of an organization's compliance with civil rights law."

"Some judges assume that diversity programs effectively address employees' complaints, without questioning whether those programs work," Kaiser said.

She and Brenda Major, a [psychology professor](#) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and their coauthors studied whether diversity programs can simply serve as a cosmetic short-cut that convinces others that companies value diversity and treat employees equally. The researchers used surveys to measure participants' perceptions of companies' fairness toward their minority employees.

The researchers found that a hypothetical company that had a "diversity statement" rather than a "mission statement" led participants to believe the company had treated women and minorities fairly, even when they saw evidence that the company's actual hiring, promotion and salary practices disadvantaged these groups.

For instance, after seeing that women who were identically qualified as men were disproportionately passed over for interviews at a company, participants were less willing to support litigation against the company when they saw that it offered diversity training.

In another part of the study, researchers told participants with corporate management experience to list what their companies do to increase either diversity or environmental sustainability. Participants who thought about their companies' diversity practices took minorities' racism

allegations against the company less seriously than did managers who thought about the environment.

"Diversity structures often increase minorities' and women's sense of belonging within organizations," Major said. "Nonetheless, we think that diversity structures also can create an illusion of fairness in that they impede the ability to detect discrimination and generate a harsher response against members of minority groups who claim to experience discrimination."

The researchers recommend that companies look at their records to see if diversity and mentoring programs have led to changes in the hiring, promotion and retention of women and minorities.

"They can learn more by mining their own data rather than assuming that because a program is there that it works," Kaiser said. "If companies examine diversity-related outcomes, they will be in a better position to recognize diversity approaches that are successful and those that are not."

More information: psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/104/3/504/

Provided by University of Washington

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