

# Heterogeneity in the workplace: 'Diversity is very important to us—but not in my team'

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Diverse work teams are highly sought after – in theory. In reality, people tend to prefer team members who are similar to themselves. Credit: The Creative Exchange, Unsplash | CC0

Diversity in the workplace is highly sought in theory, but often still lacking in practice. A new study shows that people tend to favor diversity for others, but prefer to work with people who are as similar to themselves as possible. A team of researchers from the universities of Basel and Koblenz-Landau published their report in the *Journal of*

*Experimental Social Psychology.*

Today, many [large corporations](#) tout the importance of diversity on their websites, but current statistics show that the typical manager still tends to be white and male. Obviously, there is a dissonance between the desire to bring about diversity and corporate reality.

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mariela Jaffé from the Department of Psychology at the University of Basel studied this discrepancy from a social psychology perspective. This involved conducting four studies with a sampling of 605 people in total. The results showed a [significant difference](#) in how people select colleagues for themselves versus for other people.

## **How do people value diversity?**

People have a wide spectrum of opinions concerning diversity. On the one hand, people see value in diversity, which can contribute a variety of perspectives, new ideas and innovative solutions. On the other hand, they assume that it might be difficult to work with someone who has completely different views, speaks a different language, or has a different style of work.

The actual value they attribute to diversity depends on the decision-making perspective. Building on current theories, the researchers have shown that doubts about the practicability of diversity have a greater weight if a person is directly affected. In other words, when a person's own work group is involved, they tend to prefer team members who are similar to themselves, whereas when people make decisions for other people, these reservations play a lesser role. Typically, a person will then put together a more diverse team.

## Consequences of differing preferences

This leads to the conclusion that organizations could become more diverse if hiring and team decisions were not (only) made by those directly affected, but (also) by other people who are not directly involved in the group's daily work later.

"Research shows that people's perception of and the importance they attach to diversity have key implications for people's decision making," explains lead author Dr. Jaffé. "In a next step it would be important to gain a better understanding of the evaluation of [diversity](#) to discuss and resolve concerns about potential disadvantages. This way, people may then be more willing to include dissimilar people in their own teams."

**More information:** Mariela E. Jaffé et al, You should go for diversity, but I'd rather stay with similar others: Social distance modulates the preference for diversity, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103881](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103881)

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