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FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL DIVERSITY
AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

ANGELA C. HARRISON

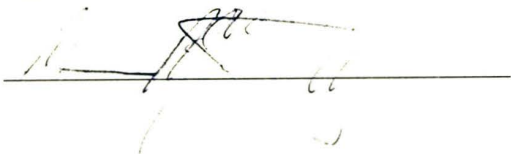
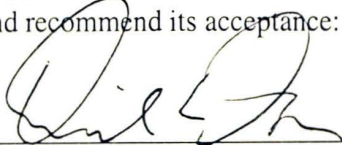
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FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL DIVERSITY AMONG
AFRICAN AMERICANS

A Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

And Research Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Angela C. Harrison

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband,

Robert N. Harrison

for his unconditional love, patience,

and unselfish sacrifices

to make this all possible.

This thesis is also dedicated to my

children, Myranda and Nathalie,

whose love and sweet smiles

gave me strength. To my sisters,

Gail and Carolyn, who I love very much.

Also, to my family

who always gave me encouragement

over the years.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine objective factors that may influence how well diverse a person perceives his work environment. The factors explored include skin color, the number of different races represented in the work group, race percentage of the work group, job tenure, and whether or not the supervisor is of the same race. This is a policy capturing study, thus, forms no specific hypothesis. It used a multiple regression analysis to ascertain which factors contribute to a person's overall perception of racial diversity within the work group.

Collectively, the factors were found to be marginally significant. Upon examining the factors individually, skin color/same race was found to be a significant factor. Additional findings along with specifics are discussed, as well as future research directions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	3
Perceptions and Identities	
Exploratory Factors	
III. METHODOLOGY.....	10
Participants	
Measures	
Procedures	
IV. RESULTS.....	14
V. DISCUSSION.....	16
REFERENCES.....	19
VITA.....	24

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations of Diversity, Same Race, Different Races, Race Percent, and Age.....	14
2. Regression Analysis Summary for Same Race, Different Races, Race Percent, Tenure, and Supervisor Predicting Perceptions of Diversity.....	15

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations, businesses and governments are increasingly becoming aware of diversity matters. Some educational institutions have revised their strategic plan in an effort to accommodate diversity issues. Companies are implementing diversity workshops and other programs (e.g. as Affirmative Action) to address and manage these issues. Researchers have attempted to understand the effects of diversity on organizations (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; Richard, 2000; Doka, 1996; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Sackett, Dubois, & Noe, 1991; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Tsui, & O'Reilly, 1992; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Terpstra, 1997). Although effort has been made in theoretical and research development relating to diversity in organizational behavior, it has not been firmly grounded. As noted by Williams and O'Reilly (1998), 40 years of empirical research relating to the effects of diversity on organizational performance have yielded conflicting results. Nevertheless, diversity remains an eminently important reality and should not be overlooked.

Much of the research on diversity has explored its effects on the organization. While this is of considerable importance, little work has examined the effects of racial/ethnic status on the individual employee in terms of whether or not that person views his work environment to be similar to him. This may possess significance for minorities. Sackett et al (1991) examined male-female differences in performance ratings in nearly 500 work groups across a variety of jobs and organizations. Their findings showed that women received higher performance ratings when the proportion of women in the work group was greater. The implication here is that in workgroups where

members see few similarities between themselves and others within the group, there may be negative consequences. Observable similarities may mitigate negative assumptions, like feelings of discrimination. In the study of equity theory, it is *perceptions* of, rather than actual, inputs and outcomes that cause feelings of inequity (Harder, 1992; Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999). This paper purports to examine factors that may influence an individual's perceptions of racial diversity in the work environment.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Perceptions and Identities

Perceptions are the collection of processes used to arrive at meaningful interpretations of feelings (Nairne, 2000). Perceptions are created through an individual's environment. Various segments of her experiences and surroundings contribute to an overall evaluation. These evaluations are the basis from which feelings or perceptions are drawn.

Research and theory show that there is a pervasive cognitive tendency to react to perceived differences (Sanchez & Brock, 1996; Sackett et al, 1991). Research suggests that these reactions may have negative consequences. We live in a world of differences and these differences are of all types. In view of Williams and O'Reilly's (1998) meta-analytic work, there are several types of diversity relevant to organizations. Society's explanations or definitions of diversity are as varied as the many forms of diversity itself (Mosely, 1997; Jehn et al, 1999). Some reflect differences among people across groups (e.g. personality, cognitive ability, and values), while others are based on group/demographic membership (e.g. race, gender). Demographic classifying is more commonly known as social categorizing.

Social categories usually include gender, age and race/ethnicity (McGrath, Berdahl, & Arrow, 1996). While there are other types of diversity (Harrison et al, 1998), social category diversity is most often the umbrella under which people are referring when speaking in reference to diversity issues (McGrath, et al, 1996). Overt social category characteristics offer an identifiable and key foundation by which individuals can

categorize themselves and others (Tajfel, 1981). Social cognition is thought to be the means by which we categorize.

Social cognition concerns how we perceive and process information about others and ourselves (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Social cognition causes us to scan our environment to make sense out of it. One way we make sense of our surroundings is socially. We identify with certain social categories, known as social identity.

Social identity theory says that one of the things we look for when scanning the environment is how similar we are to other people (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Social identity theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into social categories (Tajfel, 1981). People seem to relate to others who are like themselves. The criteria for these categories are based on prototypical characteristics of category members. For example, Asian Americans group themselves with individuals who have the same physical characteristics as they do.

When groups in organizations form naturally, it is due in part to perceived similarity. For example, females are likely to join a group when they see female members. Likewise, African Americans are likely to join a group where other African Americans are members. Members from the same social network are most willing to congregate as a group (Tajfel, 1981). Therefore, social category diversity is likely to influence group interactions and perceptions by virtue of social identity effects.

Identities and self-presentational behaviors are also the basis on which social acceptance and status are awarded or withdrawn (Hogan & Hogan, 1992). In the context of social interaction and by means of social cognition, others observe us. The amount of acceptance and respect they give us depends on their reactions to us. Therefore, if an

individual perceives himself as a single minority in a group and acceptance and respect are not presented, it is reasonable to predict this will negatively affect the relationship (McCauley, Wright, & Harris, 2000).

Furthermore, persons who believe that they are treated negatively because of their membership in a social category may have different feelings, perceptions and possibly different outcomes than persons who do not. For instances, Phinney (1990) found that minorities who felt they had been treated unfairly tended to have feelings of inadequacy and personal conflict. This may be particularly true for the minority who perceives he is the sole member of the work group belonging to a minority race.

Exploratory Factors

This research represents an exploratory effort to identify factors that may influence individual perceptions of racial diversity. The following section suggests several characteristics relating to the work environment that may affect an individual minority's perceptions of racial diversity.

One factor that could certainly be expected to have an influence on individual perceptions of racial diversity is skin color. A race is a population that can be distinguished from other populations within a group by genetically transmitted physical characteristics (Andreasen, 1998; Mosely, 1997). Each race possesses a unique and distinct collection of genes, making it identifiable by the traits produced from this genetic ensemble. For the most part, it is by physical genetic differences that races are most easily notable and perceived by individuals. Therefore, members of the same race share distinguishing characteristics because they share a common genetic lineage. This is not to say that any one race is pure, in each there can be variation. However, human beings

belonging to a particular ethnic group show a higher frequency of certain characteristic traits than another group. Logically, the largest group sharing common traits would be termed majority, leaving the smaller ones minority.

Typically within the United States, external physical traits are the primary determinant of racial identity both scientifically and in terms of perceptions (Mosely, 1997). Even so, there are other determinants of racial identity. These include biochemical and molecular genetic analyses. However, scientifically, these are found to be consistent within the races. Therefore, external physical traits and characteristics take priority in influencing race identity as well as perceptions.

Another factor that may sway perceptions of racial diversity is the racial composition of an individual's workgroup. The term diversity suggests differences. Therefore, racial diversity might also be explained in terms of how many different races are thought to be present in the workgroup. As noted in the research, this is determined essentially as differences among group members' biological characteristics and physical features (Mosely, 1997). In other words, a racially diverse workgroup could be viewed as containing a variety of races.

A third factor that might influence perceptions of racial diversity is the proportion of individuals in the work group who differ from the majority. In light of the research on diversity, particularly investigations like Sackett et al (1991), group composition or proportion is likely to influence perceptions of diversity. As mentioned previously, racial diversity could be viewed as the degree to which there are members belonging to the different races in a group. Rationally, the group would include individuals similar to each other in terms of race as well as individuals different from each other in terms of race.

Therefore, increasing racial diversity would suggest adding members that are in the minority race(s) to the group. As a result, the closer the ratios are for each race the better racial diversity is for that group. For example, a group consisting of Whites, Blacks and Hispanics in a 3:3:3 ratio might be perceived racially diverse to each individual belonging to that particular group. Because the proportion of each race represented in the group is well balanced, perceptions of racial diversity should be high. Therefore, the greater an individual judges there to be a more proportionate number of individuals similar to him in the group, the higher her perceptions of racial diversity may very well be.

A forth factor that might influence individual perceptions of racial diversity is job tenure. For example, O'Reilly, Caldwell and Barnett's (1989) findings suggest individual differences in tenure among group members impact employee outcomes. More specifically, Harrison et al (1998) hypothesized that time would basically dissipate the effects of overt differences. They reason that time may provide for extensive information to be gathered and exchanged. This in turn can modify initial perceptions. In this instance, a situation that at one time was not viewed as racially diverse may be viewed as more diverse with the passage of time.

Lastly, whether or not the person in leadership belongs to the same race as the individual whose perceptions are being assessed may contribute to how much diversity is perceived to exist in the work group. As a minority, having a person belonging to your race as a supervisor could influence an individual's disposition on racial diversity. When a person of a minority class is recognized as high-status in an organization, perceptions may be impacted.

Support borrowed from the organization mentoring literature may provide indirect support for this contention. Mentors are usually thought of as high-ranking, influential members of the organization who have advanced experience and knowledge (Parker & Kram, 1993). The advanced experience and knowledge along with the influence can be perceived by junior organization members as a way to acquire meaningful support. As a result, protégés may form positive opinions that could dominate their assessment of the environment.

Additionally, Nieva and Gutek (1981) theorized when females are in a small minority, same sex mentors can have a profound influence on female organization members. They further report that because gender-role expectations spill into work-role expectations, it may be perceived by female protégés that female mentors provide more supportive relationships than male mentors provide. Again, this may remove or reduce negative connotations present in the surrounding environment.

As with the mentor-protégé relationship, the supervisor-subordinate relationship is a dyadic one. This paper is interested in factors that may impact the observations one uses to make an interpretation of how well racial diversity is present in the work environment. At the dyad level, there continues to be processes like face-to-face communication, influence, support, possible collaboration and even conflict (Harrison et al, 1998). Therefore, a dyadic relationship may impact employee perceptions and outcomes. Specifically, observing a person of minority status in such a position of influence may favorably affect that employee's perceived amount of racial diversity.

This paper has no specific hypothesis. This is an exploratory research that attempts to determine factors that go into the judgments minorities make when assessing

whether or not their work environment is racially diverse. Although the factors presented here are not an exhaustive list, it appears logical that these factors may in fact contribute to an individual's perceptions of racial diversity.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 95 participants. According to research, blacks and multiracials place greater importance on racial-ethnic issues than whites do (Jaret & Reitzes, 1999). Therefore, the target population and criteria for this study was African American. After examining the data set, several persons did not meet the criteria and consequently were excluded from analysis. After eliminating those who did not identify as African American, 87 participants were left to use for analysis.

Participants used in the study were 33% male and 67% female. The mean age was 36.9 years ($SD = 10.9$). The percentage of participants reporting they had less than a high school diploma was 4.5%, 40.9% reported having a high school diploma, 27.3% reported an associated degree or some college, while 27.2% reported having a four-year degree or more. Since potential recruits were told they should be employed, participation indicated being employed, either full-time or part-time. The mean length of job time reported by participants was 6.8 years ($SD = 6.9$).

Measures

Dependent variable. The following item/question served as the dependent variable in this study: "How racially diverse is your work environment?" The response was recorded on a one to seven (1-7) scale with anchors ranging from agree to disagree. This question appeared on the first of two pages along with questions seeking demographic information. This variable is identified as "Diversity" in the tables below.

Independent variables. The second page of the survey contained five additional questions measuring the independent variables. These questions represented an attempt to identify the factors that may have influenced the individual's overall perceptions of racial diversity. In an effort to assess the earlier mentioned factors, participants were asked the following questions. Beside each question is a statement of the intent of the question along with the label used to identify the question in the tables below.

1. How many people of your race work in your department/group? [This item measures skin color – Same Race]
2. How many different races are represented in your work group? [This item assesses the racial composition of the work group – Diff Races]
3. How many people work in your department/work group? [This item divided into question one represents the proportion/racial percentage of those who differ from the majority – Race %]
4. How long have you worked in your present job? [This item measures the length of time worked or job tenure -- Tenure]
5. Is your supervisor a member of your race? [This item denotes the person in leadership factor -- Supervisor]

In an attempt to minimize the time of participants as a means of encouraging their participation, it was decided to use one-item measures to appraise all variables. There is empirical foundation for this approach (Drolet & Morrison, 2001). Because items within a scale should be correlated, each additional item in a scale provides somewhat less information than the item that preceded it. "Clearly, one or two good items that elicit

appropriate respondent behavior will yield better information than multiple, poorly presented items” (p.199).

Procedures

One research assistant was trained to assist in administering and collecting documents and questionnaires. In an effort to recruit African Americans, participants were enlisted from a local community church. The pastor of the church invited members to participate and gave information on where to report if they decided to partake in the study. Also, signs were posted in various areas as an invitation to participate and to direct potential participants to the designated room in which the research would take place.

After assembling recruits in the research room, the researcher briefly gave an introduction and verbally gave all participants specific details regarding the project. After each person received an informed consent document to keep for his record, he was asked to read it silently. Time was allotted for questions concerning the study. When all had completed reading, participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and used for research purposes only. They were also told that they could cease involvement at any point. Once participants indicated they wished to continue, questionnaires were distributed. All choose to continue with the research.

In order to discourage participants from returning to the first questionnaire after completing the second, the survey was distributed to participants in two pages. To later match for analysis, the first page contained a removable number. The same number was written on the questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete the first page and remove the number. If they wished to proceed, they were given the second page and asked to enter the removed number on that page. It took approximately seven minutes to

complete the survey. This was the only meeting required of participants to conclude the data collection process. Each participant was offered a soda as (s)he left the room.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between diversity, same race, different races, race percent and age are contained in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlations of Diversity, Same Race, Different Races, Race Percent, and Age

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>
1. Diversity	3.34	1.98	1.00					
2. Same Race	5.33	5.48	0.22**	1.00				
3. Diff Races	2.61	2.02	0.10	0.06	1.00			
4. Race %	0.49	0.69	-0.02	0.19*	0.04	1.00		
5. Tenure	6.78	6.90	0.20*	0.16	0.12	-0.02	1.00	
6. Supervisor	--	--	0.18*	0.03	0.07	0.04	-0.01	1.00

Note: Supervisor Mean and SD based on 2 pt scale; 19.5% report supervisor same as them, 80.4% report not the same. ** Indicates significance at $p < .05$, *Indicates significance at $p < .10$

This table shows a significant bivariate relationship between perceptions of diversity and same race, and marginally significant relationships between perceptions of diversity and both tenure and supervisor.

In order to determine the ability of any of the independent variables to predict perceptions of diversity in the presence of the other variables, a regression was used to analyze the data. Results are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

Regression Analysis Summary for Same Race, Different Races, Race Percent, Tenure and Supervisor Predicting Perceptions of Diversity

Effect	Coefficient	Std Error	Std Coef	t	P(2 Tail)
Constant	1.42	0.75	0.00	1.90	0.06
Same Race	0.07	0.04	0.20	1.81	0.07
Diff Races	0.08	0.10	0.09	0.81	0.42
Race %	-0.18	0.30	-0.06	-0.59	0.56
Tenure	0.05	0.03	0.16	1.53	0.13
Supervisor	0.89	0.51	0.18	1.73	0.09

This table shows that while “same race” and “supervisor” were marginally significant predictors of perceptions of diversity, the overall regression was not significant [$p = .066$].

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study was a policy capturing study and its purpose was to investigate specific factors to determine if these factors relate to minorities', particularly African Americans, overall perceptions of racial diversity in the work environment.

A regression analysis was used to determine if same race, different races, race percent, job tenure, or the supervisor being the same race would predict perceptions of racial diversity among African Americans. The overall regression was marginally significant ($p = .066$). Collectively, the independent variables accounted for about 12% of the variance.

However, the bivariate correlation between perceptions of diversity and same race was .22 ($p < .05$). This correlation suggests that as employees see others of the same race, they perceive the workplace to be more diverse. It could be, however, that the relationship between these two variables is not entirely linear. It may be that when employees see others that are the same race as they are, they perceive the environment as diverse but only to a point. After a certain point of seeing individuals of the same race, African Americans may no longer deem the situation as racially diverse. Therefore, a curvilinear relationship may more accurately represent some circumstances. This possibility warrants further investigation.

The bivariate relationship between overall perceptions of racial diversity and job tenure or the length of time a person has worked in the job was marginally significant ($p < .10$). This seems to be consistent with research which suggests that time diminishes possible negative impressions of observable differences (Harrison et al, 1998). It is

thought that time serves as an opportunity to acquire more extensive information which could perhaps allow for a different evaluation.

Whether or not the supervisor is of the same race as the participant was also found to have a marginally significant relationship with perceptions of diversity. Of course, supervisors are higher ranking individuals thought to have advanced experience. Role expectations may move into the work environment, thus, providing more support to the subordinate (Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Kanter, 1977). This might impact appraisals of the environment. If this person is the same race as a minority, he may be viewed to account for a large proportion of the group's diversity.

Again, this study was exploratory in nature. It is however, a start in the proper direction. Despite there being only marginally significant results found, the current study may help to cast some light on factors that influence African Americans' perceptions of racial diversity.

The limitations of this research should be addressed. Perhaps the greatest limitation of the study is the measures by which all variables were assessed. Despite research such as Drolet and Morrison (2001) indicating that one-item measures can effectively educe proper response behavior, it is known that latent constructs are more effectively measured when several items are used to evaluate them. Furthermore, one-item measures cannot produce reliability coefficients. While reliability does not guarantee validity, it sets the upper limits for achieving validity (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). Therefore, researchers for the most part do not recommend one-item measures. Future research should seek measures that contain a minimum number of items so that a calculation of reliability may be computed.

Another limitation of the study includes the small sample size surveyed. The sample size used here contained 87 participants. Of course, the results of any research are more meaningful when the sample size is large enough to generalize to an entire population. Future research should attempt to expand on sample size. In addition, in light of the United States growing in its number of ethnic minorities entering the workplace (Doka, 1996), other minority races should be explored.

Still, a third limitation involves the use of objective measures. The items used as measures in this study were objective in nature. It may be that individuals scan their work environment more subjectively than objectively. Differences in race issues that exist between blacks and whites often stem more from subjectivity than objectivity (Jaret & Reitzes, 1999; Brickson, 2000). This research implies that individuals may base race issues more on feelings than on what actually is. Therefore, subjective measures may more effectively tap the actual construct, "perceptions of racial diversity". Future directions may opt to look at other factors that are less objective and more subjective.

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VITA

Angela Cetoris Harrison was born in Dyersburg, TN on June 17, 1966. She lived with her parents in Ripley TN. She graduated from Ripley High School and then went on to receive her Bachelor of Science Degree with a major in Health Instruction and a minor in Psychology in May, 1990 from Tennessee State University in Nashville TN. She married Robert N. Harrison in May 1986. They have two daughters, Myranda and Nathalie, born in June 1992 and June 1994, respectively. From 1992 – 1996, she worked as a mental health case manager until a serious car accident. After substantial rehabilitation, in January of 1999, she relocated to Clarksville TN. The following June, Angela entered the Graduate School at Austin Peay State University in pursuit of a Master of Arts Degree in Psychology with an Industrial/Organizational concentration. After graduation, she plans to search for a position as a human resource generalist or a consultant.